

The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi

Interdisciplinary Perspectives from
Experts on the Ancient Near East,
the Greco-Roman World,
and Modern Astronomy

*edited by Peter Barthel
and George van Kooten*



The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi

Themes in Biblical Narrative Jewish and Christian Traditions

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Wichtig ist daß man nicht aufhört zu fragen.

A. EINSTEIN



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Prologue

Peter Barthel and George van Kooten

The University of Groningen celebrated its 400th Anniversary in 2014. To commemorate that event, a special 3-day colloquium, “The Star of Bethlehem: Historical and Astronomical Perspectives,” was held in October of that year, in Groningen, The Netherlands. The Colloquium was particularly timely, as it was also 400 years ago, in 1614, that Johannes Kepler published his book “De vero anno quo aeternus dei filius humanam naturam in utero benedictae Virginis Mariae assumpsit” on the chronology related to the Star of Bethlehem.

The idea of organizing the colloquium originated with astronomy professor Peter Barthel of the Groningen Kapteyn Astronomical Institute. Often confronted with questions about the nature of the Bethlehem Star, and puzzled by the fact that scholars in the humanities simply assumed the story to be pure fiction, he approached theology professor George van Kooten in 2012 and proposed that they look into the possibility of bringing multidisciplinary experts together to discuss all aspects of the star. Potential participants as well as financial sponsors were approached in 2013. Since they all responded enthusiastically, the colloquium took shape over the course of 2014 and was successfully held on 22–24 October 2014.

Nineteen¹ invited specialists in the fields of (the history of) astronomy, ancient history, religion, society, and culture discussed the various aspects of the star; with two exceptions, their revised papers are contained in this book. Besides these invited specialists, the colloquium was attended by forty-five registered guests. They all took part in the group discussions, which concluded each meeting session and were chaired by the expert moderators Willem Drees, Teije de Jong, David Hughes, George van Kooten, and Peter Barthel. The purpose of this international colloquium was to engage with recent theories on the Star of Bethlehem, such as the astrological Jupiter theory of Michael Molnar, drawing on the expertise of all of the relevant, related fields of ancient astronomy/astrology, ancient history, and religion. The organizers of the colloquium and editors of the present book, Peter Barthel (an expert in astronomy, in particular the astrophysics of active galaxies) and George van Kooten (an expert in theology, in particular New Testament studies), felt that *The Star of Bethlehem* by Michael Molnar,² formerly an astronomer at Rutgers University, had set a scholarly agenda, which needed to be assessed and compared with other theories. They

1 Michael Molnar and Roger Beck were not present; their papers were read in their absence.

2 New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1999.

aimed to accomplish this through the unique, multidisciplinary colloquium, jointly organized by the Institutes of Astronomy and New Testament Studies at the University of Groningen. Molnar's theory is both astronomical and historical: it combines modern astronomical tools to identify what the heavens looked like around the time of the birth of Jesus, but also uses Hellenistic-Roman astrology from the time of Jesus to interpret the relevant events. The Groningen Colloquium brought together, for the very first time, all of the relevant international experts for an open, non-polemical, scholarly discussion. Its aim was not to vindicate or to obliterate Molnar's theory, but rather to learn about the Star of Bethlehem in an interdisciplinary context, keeping focus through engagement with one particular theory, and sharpening the minds while doing so.³

The lead colloquium question was: Were there models in the Augustan era which would make educated people travel from the East to Judea? This was the basic question; additional questions addressed issues such as Matthew's motivation to write the story, Balaam's prophecy, chronology, the role of Herod, and more. In order to set an initial agenda for the colloquium, the organizers asked all speaking participants to comment on Michael Molnar's theory and structured the sessions around the central elements of that theory (Molnar identifies the heliacal rising of Jupiter in conjunction with the Sun, the Moon, and Saturn in the zodiacal sign of Aries the Ram as the "star," astrologically announcing the birth of the King of the Jews in the spring of 6 BCE). As a result, many of the contributions in this book address the Molnar theory, at levels ranging from complete disagreement to qualified agreement. During the meeting, the disciplines of astronomy, theology, ancient history, and ancient culture were exposed to each other, and this exposure proved immensely fruitful. This book consists of seventeen papers written by the invited experts, on the basis of their presentations, and an additional three relevant papers, prepared and submitted at the request of the editors.

The book is structured in five sections. The first section deals with aspects of the history of star theories, highlighting the contributions of Kepler at the beginning of the modern era, of Molnar in recent years, and others as well. The second section deals with the general what, when, and how questions, commenting on various qualifying astronomical phenomena, relevant chronologies, and the relation between ancient astrology and exact sciences.

3 This unique collaboration of astronomers, theologians, and historians of antiquity might be compared to a similar multidisciplinary investigation, namely that of the most famous comet in antiquity, the daylight comet of 44 BCE (see John T. Ramsey and A. Lewis Licht, *The Comet Of 44 BC and Caesar's Funeral Games*, with a foreword by Brian G. Marsden [American Classical Studies vol. 39]; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

The subsequent sections all deal with specific historical contexts of ancient astronomy and astrology. The third section focuses on ancient Near Eastern astronomy, the fourth and fifth on astrology in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, respectively, and the book concludes with papers dealing with the early Christian world and the magi. The leading viewpoints and the main conclusions of the colloquium are summarized in the epilogue.

The co-hosts of the Colloquium were: the Kapteyn Astronomical Institute, the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, and the CRASIS Institute for Culture, Religion, and Society in Greco-Roman Antiquity, all of the University of Groningen. The conference was generously sponsored by the University of Groningen, in particular its Mulerius Fund, as well as the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Netherlands Research School for Astronomy (NOVA), the Leiden Kerkhoven Bosscha Fund (LKBF), the Kapteyn Institute, and the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies.

The editors hope and expect that this book will add to the fascination with the star, but also to knowledge about it. They gratefully acknowledge the contributing authors for their magnificent work. In addition, they acknowledge the invaluable support and contributions of the Groningen University Rector Magnificus Prof. Elmer Sterken; webmasters Khan Asad and Pece Podigachoski; the head custodian and other custodians of the University Academy Building; Powersound company, and in particular Dennis Brokamp; the Franeker excursion tour guide Dr. Arjen Dijkstra; the Franeker Eise Eisinga Museum and Stadsherberg; the Pelstergasthuis Church; The Northern Consort, and in particular its leaders Hanneke Wierenga and Vincent van Ballegooijen; guest speaker Prof. Philiep Bossier; vinologist Derk Bleker; the Bethlehem hamlet monastery/farm owners Nicole Boschman and Arie Jan de Jong; photographer Elmer Spaargaren; colloquium secretary Christa Meijering; and publisher Loes Schouten and production editor Thalien Colenbrander at Brill. Special thanks go to copy- and language-editor, Dr. Alissa Jones Nelson, for a truly outstanding job.

The cover illustration says it all. It shows the so-called “Dream of the Magi” (“Le sommeil des mages”), a twelfth-century sculpture from the master sculptor Gislebertus in the Cathedral of Autun, the city founded as Augustodunum (“Augustusville”) by Emperor Augustus, ca. 12 BCE.⁴ It symbolically captures the issues at stake in this book. Unlike the common English and French titles of this sculpture (now in the cathedral’s Chapter House) suggest, it does not refer

4 Cf. M. Beer, I. Metje, K. Straub, S. Werth, and M. Woelk (eds.), *The Magi: Legend, Art and Cult: Catalogue published for the exhibition at the Museum Schnütgen, Cologne, 25 October 2014–25 January 2015* (München: Hirmer Verlag, 2014), #40, 112–13.

to the episode in Matthew's Gospel about the magi's slumber, in which they, after they have found Jesus, are "warned in a dream not to return to Herod," so that they leave "for their own country by another road" (Matthew 2:12). Rather, the sculptor uses the theme of the magi's sleep to point to another, earlier night in their home country, when an angel awakens them and draws their attention to a star. It is this synthesis of history and artistic, imaginative adaptation of historical motifs that this book explores.



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PART 1

*From Kepler to Molnar—
The History of the Interpretation of the Star*



Kepler's *De Vero Anno* (1614)

Owen Gingerich

In 1979 Ruth Freitag, a bibliographer at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, published a bibliography of 240 books and articles concerned with the Star of Bethlehem. A decade later, she added supplements totaling 110 more items. 25 more years have passed, and the interest in this topic remains unabated. The majority of these publications come from astronomers who, trying to fit the text of Matthew's Gospel into celestial events 2000 years ago, nevertheless look at those celestial events with modern eyes.

It is my task to look at the Star of Bethlehem with neither ancient nor modern eyes, but with the eyes of Johannes Kepler, who published his summary work on this topic in the same year that the University in Groningen was founded. Kepler worked at a transitional time in the history of astronomy, in that observers were just beginning to realize that the heavens were not immutable, as Aristotle had taught, but that real changes could take place in the sky.

For a non-Aristotelian opinion, we can look to the fourth-century church father, John Chrysostom, who had some interesting words here:

Bethlehem's star, remaining on high, did not point out the place, for it was not possible for them [the magi] in this way to ascertain it. Instead it came down and did this thing. For you know that a spot of such small dimensions, being only as much as a shed would occupy, or rather, as much as the body of a little infant would take up, could not possibly be marked out by a star. For by reasons of its immense height, it could not sufficiently distinguish so confined a spot and reveal it to those who were desiring to see it [...] How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down and stood over the very head of the child?¹

Chrysostom, living in an age when stars were identified with angels, imagined that a star had actually come down to earth!

¹ Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 18.

Now before we delve into Kepler's views, let me briefly mention two modern books on the Star of Bethlehem. Dwight Hutchison, in a book titled *The Lion Led the Way*,² has made a serious study of what could have been a messianic Jewish perspective concerning the heavens two millennia ago. Hutchison believes that the magi were heavily influenced by Judaism in several ways. Using computer technology and Babylonian astronomical concepts as well as Jewish names and dates, Hutchison has come to believe that the star was involved in a series of messianic celestial signs. These largely discreet events, seen by the magi while they were in the East, indicated the Messiah's coming. Later, the star unexpectedly became a sign over Bethlehem as well. According to computer simulations, when seen from Bethlehem itself, the star would have been high up toward the zenith for several hours each night, "standing over" the village. For Hutchison, the star thus became a sign concerning the Messiah; it was not a directional indicator. Hutchison believes the magi found the Christ-child not by using the stellar events as a pinpointing index, but by inquiring in the small village of Bethlehem where a young child could be found. I mention this book to demonstrate the elaborate efforts that have been and are being made to connect modern calculations to an ancient text.

The other book is Michael Molnar's, simply titled *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*.³ Molnar has a serious collection of astronomically themed coins, and in attempting to understand the use of the zodiacal constellation Aries on some of the early coins from Antioch, he was led to the astrology of the first centuries, in particular to the horoscopes of emperors during that period. He soon realized that certain phrases in Matthew's Gospel were translations of standard astrological nomenclature, such as "in the east," "went before," and "stood over." He concluded that an imperial planetary configuration on 17 April 6 BCE could have brought magi to Jerusalem in search of someone born at that time. The configuration was ominous—an omen—but not necessarily visually spectacular, and hence a surprise to Herod's court. Molnar concluded that it would have been a memorable event of the time, whether or not the magi found their target. Years later, when Matthew was organizing his gospel to illustrate the kingship of Christ, he could incorporate the story that still stirred memories among the startled old-timers. I like what Molnar has done because it uses historical artifacts—the coins pointing to events in Judea—to reconstruct a historical scenario that could plausibly have happened.

2 Dwight Hutchison, *The Lion Led the Way* (Somerset, KY: independently published, 2013).

3 Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1999).

Let me now turn to Kepler, who in the 1590s had been a divinity student at the university in Tübingen. He was taken by surprise when, in his third and final year, the faculty proposed to send him to teach mathematics (including astronomy) in a provincial high school in Graz in southern Austria. Kepler complained that nothing in his record showed any particular talent for this, and in fact his poorest grade had been in astronomy—an A-. The university senate, however, recorded that he had such an unusual mind that something special could be expected from him.⁴

It was while he was teaching in Graz that he stumbled onto an idea that astounded him for the rest of his life. Kepler was fascinated by the rare conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter, the two slowest moving of the planets that can be seen with the naked eye. Jupiter takes about 12 years to cycle around the sky, which means it catches up with Saturn, which takes approximately 30 years to circumnavigate the zodiac, every 20 years. Twice around the sky for Saturn takes 60 years, and five times around for Jupiter also takes 60 years, so they would be in conjunction once more in the same place in the sky every 60 years. (More accurate numbers for the periods of Jupiter and Saturn are 11.86 and 29.46 years, which means that they don't come back to exactly the same place, but nearly so.)

Kepler was explaining this to his young students with the help of a diagram, shown below. The sides of the pseudo-triangles link the successive conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter. What struck Kepler was the fact that the lines seemed to outline a central circle with exactly half the radius of the larger outer circle of the diagram. The radius of Jupiter's orbit is almost exactly half that of Saturn's orbit. Kepler had always puzzled about how the dimensions of the planetary orbits had been established, and hence he seized upon the idea that geometry itself was the answer. His remarkable conclusions, lying beyond the scope of this essay, were published in his *Mysterium cosmographicum* in 1596, which may be appropriately translated as *The Sacred Mystery of the Cosmos*.

Kepler's basic diagram of the series of Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions, shown here, has a significant modern addition, relevant a decade later. Kepler labeled the signs of the zodiac around the circumference of this diagram, using the medieval symbols. Each zodiacal sign was associated with one of the Aristotelian elements: earth, water, air, or fire. I have marked the three fiery signs with heavy lines, thus outlining the Fiery Trigon. Adjacent to the fiery signs in the clockwise sense are the three watery signs. The position labeled 1

4 Max Caspar, *Kepler* (trans. C. Doris Hellman; New York: Dover, 1993), 44, quoting from a letter of the University Rector dated 4 November 1591. Kepler's grade record is found in section 7.9 in *Johannes Kepler Gesammelte Werke*, Band 19, 317.

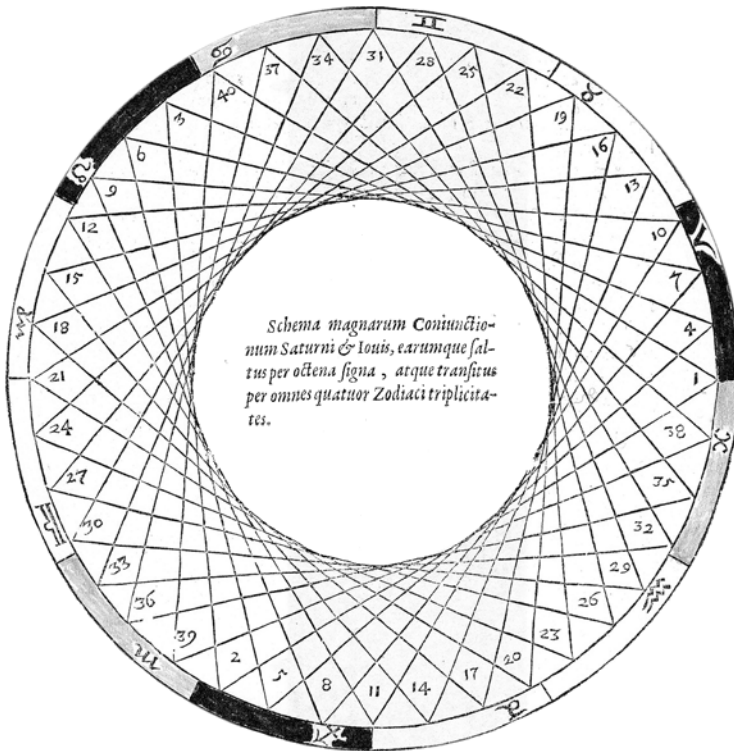


FIGURE 1.1 *Successive positions of the conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter, from Kepler's *Mysterium cosmographicum*. The twelve zodiacal signs form the outer border, with the three fiery signs forming the Fiery Trigon emphasized in black.*

is where the sequence of conjunctions moves from the watery signs into the Fiery Trigon, and every 200 years for 200 years, conjunctions would fall in the fiery signs. These would be followed by 200 years in the earthy signs, 200 more years in the airy signs, and finally 200 years in the watery signs. In other words, here is an 800-year cycle. This will be a powerful motif for what is to follow.

Our scene now shifts to Prague in 1603. Kepler, along with the other Lutheran teachers, had been driven out of Graz; the great observer Tycho Brahe had left Denmark for the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II. Kepler ended up as an assistant to Tycho, and Tycho was arranging with Rudolph for Kepler to be appointed Imperial Mathematician when Tycho unexpectedly died. Kepler had worked for Tycho in residence for only ten months, but he inherited access to all of Tycho's monumental observational records.

Kepler was eagerly watching Jupiter and Saturn in November and early December 1603 as they moved closer and closer together. When these two

planets are at their nearest approach to each other, the phenomenon is called a great conjunction, a once-in-20-years occurrence. Twenty years earlier, in 1583, the conjunction had taken place in Pisces, a watery sign. But now, a score of years later, the union happened on 7 December 1603 in a fiery sign (Sagittarius) for the first time in many centuries. The previous time such a transition into the Fiery Trigon had taken place was approximately 800 years earlier.

In the autumn of 1604, after Jupiter and Saturn had pulled apart by about five degrees, faster-moving Mars arrived on the scene, coming into conjunction with Saturn on 27 September, and then with Jupiter two weeks later. Then, at dawn on 11 October, a very agitated court official came to Kepler with the announcement that he had seen through a gap in the clouds a brilliant new star alongside Jupiter and Mars.⁵ Kepler hesitated to believe the report, and in the days that followed the sky was overcast. Not until 17 October did Kepler see the wonderful spectacle, by which time Mars had moved four degrees past the nova; but eventually, in his book *De stella nova in pede Serpentarii* or “Concerning the New Star in the Foot of the Serpent Bearer,” he would place Mars and Jupiter alongside the new star as they had first been glimpsed (Figure 1.2).

Kepler promptly published a small German tract about the remarkable apparition, but he labored on *De stella nova* for more than a year, finally publishing it in 1606. On the title page (Figure 1.3), the Fiery Trigon gets star billing; the page also indicates that he had brought together several other pieces in this compilation. For Kepler, anything so extraordinary as a brilliant new star alongside the conjoined planets in the very special astrological place could not be an accidental coincidence. Somehow it required a special explanation, and that special explanation would lead Kepler to the chronology of the Star of Bethlehem.

The figure shows the copy of *De stella nova* owned and autographed by the poet John Donne, which I unexpectedly found in the Rylands Library in Manchester, England. Many years after this book was published, in 1619, Donne actually met Kepler, but already in 1610 when he wrote his poem *The First Anniversarie*, Donne must have had *De stella nova* in hand. Reflecting the strong turbulence of change as the Aristotelian philosophy crumbled, he wrote:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sunne is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can wel direct him where to look for it.

⁵ Caspar, *Kepler*, 154.



FIGURE 1.2 *The ecliptic (the path of the Sun and approximate path of the planets) is the complete horizontal line passing through the feet of the Serpent Bearer. The stella nova of 1604 is the bright star in the right foot, designated N. The path of motion for Jupiter is shown by the short horizontal line passing through the nova; that of Saturn is the slightly shorter line to the right, while the longer line connecting the two is the path of Mars. The graphic is from De stella nova, GINGERICH Collection.*

Donne continues:

We thinke the heavens enjoy their Sphericall
 Their round proportion embracing all.
 But yet their various and perplexed course,
 Observ'd in divers ages doth enforce
 Men to finde out so many Eccentrique parts,
 Such divers downe-right lines, such overthwarts
 As disproportion that pure forme. It teares
 The Firmament in eight and forty sheeres,
 And in these constillations then arise
 New starres, and old doe vanish from our eyes.⁶

6 Transcribed from one of seven known copies of the second edition of Donne's *An Anatomy of the World—The First Anniversarie* (1611), in Harvard's Houghton Library.

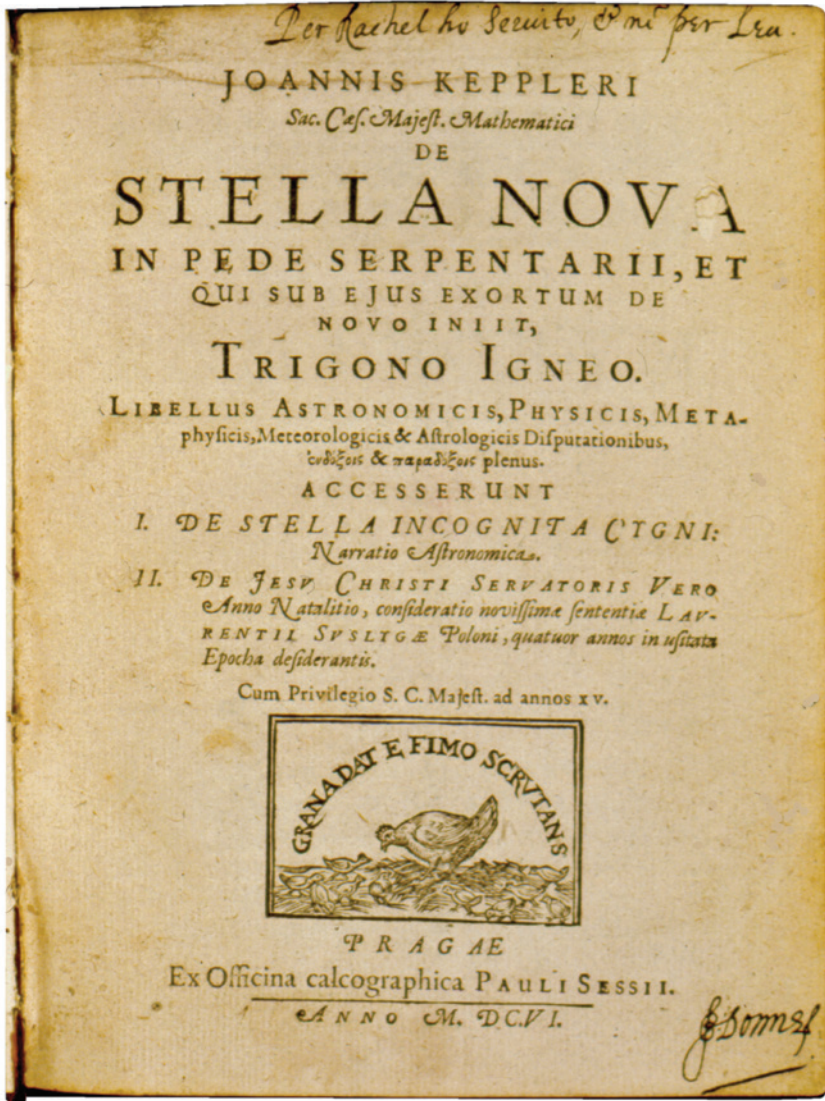


FIGURE 1.3 John Donne's copy of Kepler's *De stella nova*. His autograph is at the lower right. Photograph by Owen Gingerich, courtesy of The Rylands Library, Manchester, England.

Donne's graphic description of the changing philosophical framework includes the specific astronomical observation, "Then arise new stars, and old do vanish from our eyes." Surely this is a direct allusion to the spectacular nova of 1604, described by Kepler in *De stella nova*.

A major part of the manuscript for *De stella nova* survives in the National Library in Vienna, and Figure 1.4 shows perhaps the most memorable spot. The 200-year Fiery Trigon conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn start every 800 years, and here Kepler has mapped them, beginning with the creation of the world and Adam. Also here, 800 years after Rudolph, Kepler asks, "Where will we be then, and will anyone remember us Germans?" This seems to be one of the few places where he implicitly links a nova with the Star of Bethlehem.

One of the sub-treatises that make up *De stella nova* is *De stella tertii honoris in Cygno*, about a possible new star in Cygnus, which turned out to be an erratic variable star, now known as P Cygni. It's interesting that John Donne

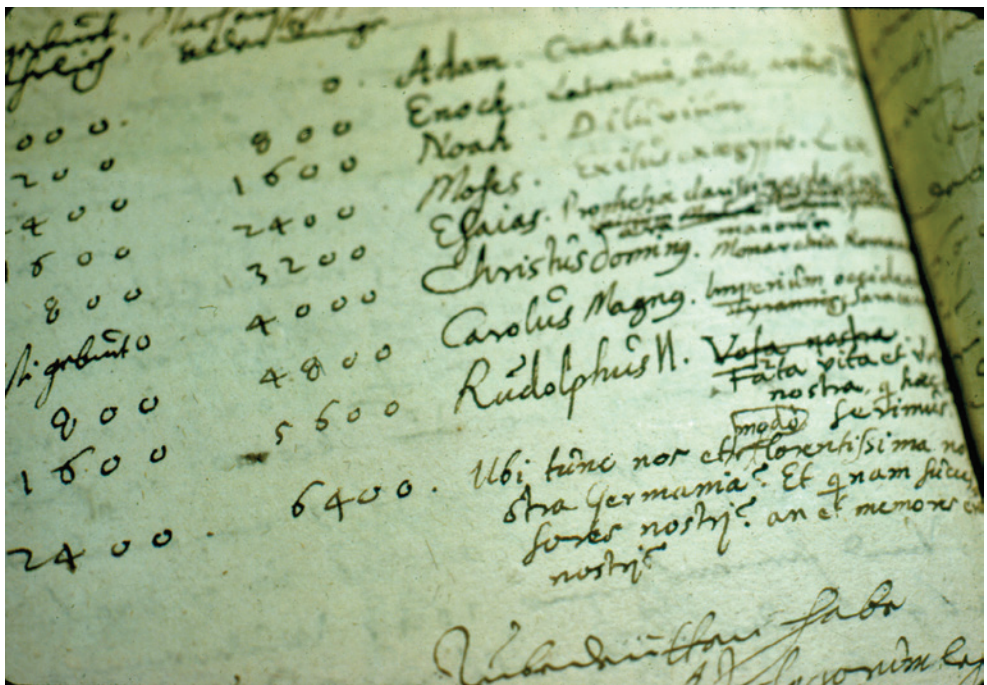


FIGURE 1.4 Kepler's draft for *De stella nova*, in the Manuscript Collection of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Kepler here lists the successive first entries of the great conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter into the Fiery Trigon (every 800 years) and for the next entry in 2400 CE asks, "Will anyone have heard us Germans?" Photograph by Owen Gingerich.

explicitly mentions this in a book he published anonymously in 1611, *Ignatius His Conclave*, where both Kepler and Galileo are mentioned near the beginning. In the margin there is a printed note, *De stella in Cygno*, which is the title of the above-mentioned section of *De stella nova*.

An earlier section had included all of the observations Kepler could find relating to the 1604 nova. In the next section is Kepler's thoughtful analysis of the state of the world in light of the nova's appearance. At first, Kepler became frivolous. It portended, he said, good business for booksellers, because every theologian, philosopher, physician, mathematician, and scholar would have his own ideas and would want to publish them. Innumerable others would wish to know what these men would have to say. Printers and publishers would thrive on the new star.⁷ As Kepler's biographer Max Caspar wrote, "Apart from many essential arguments characteristic of his picture of the world, in Kepler's book about the new star there still flash so many thoughts of an intelligent and ingenious head, there are so many manifestations of a warm heart, that anyone whose mind is not entirely mired in the one-sided thinking of later natural science is happy to follow him and does so with enjoyment."⁸

In 1605, after parts of his *De stella nova* were begun, Kepler spent several weeks looking after family affairs in Styria, the region around Graz, where he stumbled on a tract by Laurentius Suslyga, a Pole. Suslyga argued that Dionysius Exiguus, the sixth-century abbot who had introduced the AD system of reckoning the years, had erred by four years, and that Christ was really born in 4 BCE. In the dedication to this final section of *De stella nova*, the so-called "Chronological Forest," Kepler allowed that he was "wonderfully pleased" by this.⁹ Correcting the four-year error moved the birth of Christ much closer to a great conjunction in 7 BCE. So Kepler began researching the historical record, whose chronology hinged on the death of Herod, which connected with the statement in Matthew 2:1 that Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king.

As a result of his study, Kepler concluded that Jesus was born in 5 BCE, and consequently he calculated the details of the immediately preceding conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 7 BCE. It so happened that the two planets were near opposition with the Sun, which meant they were both about to go into retrograde motion. Faster-moving Jupiter bypassed Saturn, coming into conjunction about a degree north of the slower-moving Saturn. But then they both went into retrograde, so that Jupiter went back past Saturn, creating a second

7 Quoted from M. W. Burke-Gaffney, *Kepler and the Jesuits* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1944), 30.

8 Caspar, *Kepler*, 156.

9 Burke-Gaffney, *Kepler and the Jesuits*, 32.

conjunction, and finally, with the retrogression finished, Jupiter again caught up with Saturn in a third conjunction. In a densely written section in *De stella nova*, Kepler gives the positions of the three conjunctions. Computing these dates and positions accurately is a particularly fraught challenge, because this is a delicate chase problem and a small error in the timing of either or both planets can be easily magnified as to when and where Jupiter catches up with Saturn. Abe Sachs,¹⁰ using the new Tuckerman Tables, found the following dates and positions for the three conjunctions, which I have confirmed:

May 27	Oct 6	Dec 1
Psc 21°	Psc 17°	Psc 15½°

According to Kepler in *De stella nova*, the positions of the conjunctions were:¹¹

June 22	Nov	Dec
Psc 23°	Psc 21°	Psc 17°

Kepler must have been disappointed by these results, because all three conjunctions took place in the astrological sign of Pisces, a watery sign, and not in the Fiery Trigon. However, there were two further conjunctions in 6 BCE, first as Mars caught up with the lethargic Saturn, and then with Jupiter. Kepler is vague about specific dates or positions, but he does mention February near the end of Pisces and March near the beginning of Aries; from the Tuckerman Tables the results are:

10 A. J. Sachs and C. B. F. Walker, "Kepler's View of the Star of Bethlehem and the Babylonian Almanac for 7/6 BC," *Iraq* 46 (1984): 43–51. A century earlier, Charles Pritchard ("On the Conjunctions of the Planets Jupiter and Saturn in the Year BC 7," *Monthly Notices* 16 [1856]: 215–16) had attempted to compute the dates and positions of the conjunctions, which match our values only approximately.

11 It is interesting to see that the dates and positions of the three conjunctions derived from Kepler's *Rudolphine Tables*, published after more than 20 years of additional effort, still match his original positions more closely than the modern positions:

June 27	Aug 22	Dec 31
Psc 23	Psc 213/4	Psc 18

Following the work of Laplace in the 1780s, we understand that there is a 900-year cyclic variation in the periods of Jupiter and Saturn (which was of course unknown to Kepler), which is possibly the principal reason for the discrepancy between Kepler's numbers and the modern calculations.

Saturn–Mars	Jupiter–Mars
20 Feb 6 BCE	5 Mar 6 BCE
Psc 22°	Ari 1½°

Now Kepler had a conjunction just inside the Fiery Trigon! “Therefore,” Kepler wrote, “that great conjunction was more powerful than ours because there were three conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter, whereas today only one.”¹² If you include Mars there are five conjunctions, and the last one does fall in Aries, one of the fiery signs.

Kepler concludes his analysis with a chronological summary:

Therefore, in the Julian year 39 [7 BCE] shortly before that great conjunction, if that star arose at the same time and first shone forth in the very position of the conjunction (as we believe for now), then certainly the Chaldeans, according to their own rules, which are currently extant, were warned by this star about matters of great importance and the universal renewal of the entire world. So, let pass that two year period from the time Herod sought the death of the infants of Bethlehem. Then, once that biennium was over, let the Magi come into Judea to the manger of Christ. That then would have happened in the Julian year 41 [5 BCE]. Now, go and read what the Pole Lorenz Suslyga argues about chronology in his disputation published in the Styrian town of Graz. It is based on weighty arguments from historical accounts (although the astronomer Kepler, when he read the passages where Suslyga argues about the year of the Passion, was so upset that he threw down both the book and his quill and leapt from the table); you will be so persuaded by all those arguments that you will say that Christ Our Lord was born not in the Julian year 45 [1 BCE] but rather in 41. And, you will also say that the star, which had begun to shine two years earlier, occurred right at the moment of the greatest conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the year 39 [7 BCE], and in this respect resembled our modern star. And since the star of old was divinely revealed to the Magi, it gives authority to the contention that God accommodated Himself to the rules of the Magi to this extent, that the star shone forth at that time when the Magi most expected a star. Perhaps also, as has been said, it appeared in that region of the sky to which the eyes of the Magi were chiefly directed because of the close approach of the three planets, as did our modern star.

¹² Kepler, *De stella nova* (vol. 1 of *Johannes Kepler Gesammelte Werke*; Munich: Beck, 1938), 279–80. This is my edited version of a translation made by Prof. James Dobreff; see also Burke-Gaffney, *Kepler and the Jesuits*, 29–30.

While the above computations show that Kepler was essentially right about the phenomenology of the conjunctions (that is, the triple conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter), the actual positions show considerable variance with respect to the modern calculations. Kepler was apparently not using the standard tables of the day, but presumably something of his own. He was actually finessing the whole scheme in which someone particularly memorable was born every 800 years when the location of a great conjunction entered into the Fiery Trigon, because in fact the 7 BCE conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter was the last in the Watery Trigon and not the first in the Fiery Trigon. Only by including the Jupiter-Mars conjunction could he argue for the potency of the Fiery Trigon.

Meanwhile, as he was gradually assembling his *De stella nova*, Kepler had finished writing his most important book, the *Astronomia nova* or “The New Astronomy, Based on Causes, or the Celestial Physics,” in which he demonstrated the elliptical orbit of Mars and the law of areas. Frustratingly, publication was delayed because Tycho Brahe’s heirs still owned the observation books Kepler had used, because Emperor Rudolf had not yet paid the promised price, and they were unhappy that Kepler derived all his results for a heliocentric system and not the hybrid geo-heliocentric system that Tycho had invented. At last those objections were overcome, and the printing began. When the *Astronomia nova* finally went to the printers, Kepler was not about to perjure himself by saying on the title page that it was published “in the year of our Lord 1609,” because that dating would be false. It is AD 1609, but not Anno Domini 1609. As Kepler made explicit, it was *anno aerae Dionysianae*, the Dionysian year 1609. Thus, credit where credit was due: to Dionysius Exiguus, who had missed his target in setting up the AD reckoning.

Kepler’s grand chronological summary was finally assembled in 1614 *De vero anno*, or “The True Year in which the Eternal Son of God assumed Human Nature in the Womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” It was an enlarged Latin translation of his *Bericht vom Geburtsjahr Christi* of the previous year. It begins:

In 1604 in the era of Western Christendom, on October 10, a new star of extreme brilliance and beauty shone forth, whose lovely twinkling light drew unto itself not only the eyes of mankind but also the minds of learned men. For at that time, the superior planets had first gathered in Sagittarius, at the sign of the Fiery Trigon, which marked the beginning of a new eight-hundred-year period. And so, on that very day, the 10th of October, the planet Mars, since it is swifter than the more superior planets, had passed the rearmost of those of superior planets [Saturn] and had recently come into conjunction with the planet Jupiter. And finally, this star, as I call it, was first seen in the very place where Jupiter and Mars

were in conjunction, namely in the 18th degree of Sagittarius; its distance above Mars was equivalent to the distance of Mars above Jupiter, which was exceedingly small.

Anyone who did not see this stupendous portent with his own eyes should imagine that an ardently blazing torch of pure light is being agitated and shaken by tremendous winds; such was the vibration of its light, as the outburst of flames, as the extremely rapid and fiery scintillation!¹³

Once again we see the nova taking center stage, by innuendo a model for the Christmas star, yet without making an explicit connection. The book covered much the same ground as the “Chronological Forest” section of *De stella nova*, but with refutations of some of the critics of his earlier work. Despite the front and center account of the Nova of 1604, there is little about the Star of Bethlehem being a parallel ignition. Yet his dating of the birth of Jesus remains among his most widely accepted contributions. However, when he summed up his greatest works visually on the frontispiece of the *Rudolphine Tables*, he included *Astronomia pars Optica* but not *De stella nova* from the same period.

Still, the *De stella nova* was the principal source book for twentieth-century astronomers who wished to establish what sort of supernova it was that erupted in 1604. The nova was surely the most memorable observation of his lifetime. It kindled his fascination with chronology. Always a puzzle-solver—whether trying to decipher Galileo’s cryptogram that encoded the discovery of sunspots, or figuring out why snowflakes have six-fold symmetry, or speculating how celestial motions would look from the Moon (and writing a pioneering science fiction book about it)—he had a roaming curiosity. He was fascinated by implications, but generally cautious in his speculations. His *De vero anno*, published in the very year the University of Groningen was founded (as mentioned above), reminds us of how immensely our knowledge base has expanded in the intervening four centuries.

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The Historical Basis for the Star of Bethlehem

Michael R. Molnar

Astrological Coins

The subject of the Star of Bethlehem has attracted much attention and produced many theories about what may have appeared in the skies, marking the birth of Jesus, as Christians believe.¹ Details of the purported celestial event given in the New Testament are vague, leaving much room for widely varying ideas. As the star involves Christian faith, there are valid suspicions that explanations may have taken liberties to advance religious beliefs. There are also parts of the account that seem miraculous, defying any natural explanation. As an astronomer, I thought the star was a pious myth until my research in ancient coins revealed a clue to a historical basis underlying this account.

My interest in this biblical account came from studying Roman coins depicting celestial symbols. Figure 2.1 illustrates some of those coins that display the star and crescent moon, symbolic of regal power. Such intriguing coins piqued my interest about their meaning and the story behind their use. Accounts



Augustus Caesar—19 BCE



Mithradates IV of Pontus—Sep/Oct 78 BCE



Juba II of Mauretania—16/17 CE



Nero—City of Ptolemais 66–68 CE

FIGURE 2.1 *Examples of Roman-era coins with astrological symbols. The star and crescent symbol on these refers to the regal powers conferred by a lunar conjunction with either Jupiter or a special bright star. Such propaganda promoting a ruler was commonplace on ancient coins.*

1 Ruth S. Freitag, *The Star of Bethlehem: A List of References* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1979).

from ancient times quickly led me to realize how important astrology was to Romans and to the people of the Middle East. In fact, astrology strongly guided not only cultural matters and religious beliefs but also political events. Romans believed that astrologers were reading the mind of Tyche or Fortuna—the deifications of fate—and they sought to learn how astrology could be used to control and guide their destiny (Tacitus, *Ann* 15, 47–65; and Cassius Dio, 62.24.1). Astrology was indeed a serious matter.

The astrological texts and horoscopes of emperors showed me the basis for astrological predictions reported by various contemporaneous sources. For example, Julius Caesar's demise was timed to the Ides of March when his ancestral star, Venus, heliacal set.² Emperor Domitian, similarly to Emperor Nero, was born with Saturn and Mars in square aspect, meaning he too would lose his inherited throne, and astrologers guided assassins as to when to strike him as he hid in his bedroom.³ Egyptian coins issued during Antoninus Pius' reign revealed that the commencement of the Sothic Cycle was celebrated over a four-year period as the heliacal rising of Sirius (*Sothis* for Egyptians), resynchronized with the Julian calendar.⁴ In the course of this research into ancient astrology on Roman coins, I came across coins that unexpectedly drew my attention to the story about the Star of Bethlehem.

In my seminal *Sky & Telescope* article, "The Coins of Antioch," I explained how Roman coins issued in Antioch in Coele Syria pointed to the story behind the Star of Bethlehem. Those coins, shown in Figure 2.2, depicted Aries the Ram, the zodiacal sign shared by Judea, according to astrologer Claudius Ptolemy. However, none of the popular theories used this zodiacal sign, because they had not considered using ancient astrological sources to analyze the account. Perhaps feelings against astrology steered their work. Those explanations turned out to be modern notions and pious convictions that fly in the face of historicity. With further examination, I became convinced that Aries is where astrologers would have recognized a special portent for the birth

2 Michael R. Molnar, "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: The Ides of March," *The Celator* 8 no. 11 (1994): 6–10. Helical rising and setting is an astrological concept for a planet either emerging or entering the "arc of combustion" around the Sun. It was loosely tied to actual visibility. Astrologers realized that a planet did not always become visible at helical rise, which depended on the inclination with respect to the horizon, so they adopted one angle for all risings. Ptolemy tackled the mathematics of this in the *Almagest* 13.7–10. See Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 87–9.

3 Molnar, "Blood on the Moon in Aquarius: The Assassination of Domitian," *The Celator* 9 no. 5 (1995): 5–12.

4 Molnar, "Sirius Rising: Commemorating the Anniversary of the Sothic Cycle," *SAN: Journal of the Society of Ancient Numismatics* XIX no. 1 (1995): 15–18.



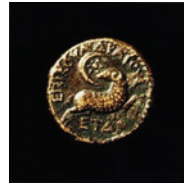
5/6 CE

Quirinius under Augustus



13/14 CE

Silanus under Augustus



55/56 CE

Quadratus under Nero

FIGURE 2.2 *Three early coins issued by the Roman legate in Antioch, which resided in Coele Syria and was ruled by Aries the Ram. Note that during the reign of Nero the single star, indicative of good fortune, was replaced by a very different symbol, the star and crescent moon, which points to claims of regal or imperial powers.*

of the King of the Jews. Moreover, the star would have not been a sky spectacle in the way that modern people expect, but rather something arcane yet very special according to beliefs held during Roman times.⁵

The Matthean Source

The source of the account about the star is Matt 2:1–16. We are told that magi saw a star “in the East” or “at its rising,” revealing the birth of the King of the Jews. The magi tell King Herod about their interpretation of a past celestial event, and now they want to find the child born when the star had been “in the east.” Herod’s advisors point the magi to Bethlehem. There, we are told, the magi find the newborn Jesus and identify him as the star-blessed King of the Jews.

Matthew says the magi are “from the East,” and historians tell us that magi had historical origins in Zoroastrianism in Persia (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.61–80, 7.37).⁶ Whether Roman-era magi still professed the tenets of Zoroastrianism is irrelevant, because magi is a well-documented term used extensively in Roman-era literature to describe astrologers rather than Zoroastrians, when

5 Heinrich G. Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu und die Astrologie*. (Leipzig: J. G. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1911). This work caught my attention after publishing my book. Voigt proposed that the sky for 14 April 6 BCE would have been the focus of astrologers. Unlike most other works on the Star of Bethlehem, Voigt approached the issue from the point of view of ancient astrological practices. Some of his sources extended beyond Greek astrology, but his conclusions are very close to mine.

6 *Magi* is the plural term for *magus*. References to the astrologers in the Matthean account are termed biblical magi.

mentioned in the context of celestial divination.⁷ Roman reports show that magi practiced astrology throughout the Middle East and even within Rome, from where they were frequently exiled for stirring up trouble with their predictions. Astrologers with connections to the Middle East were sometimes also called Chaldeans, another term signifying their profession rather than their ethnicity. Standard classicist studies show that accounts about magi in this context always mean astrologers.⁸ Thus, the biblical magi are astrologers with ties to the Middle East.

The Matthean account is a reconstruction of events occurring some 80 years earlier.⁹ Before these bits of information were finalized into what we now read, they were conveyed by people who were probably uncomfortable with terminology from this pagan practice of celestial divination. It is also likely that some elements of the Matthean account were adjusted to fit preconceived notions and to advance personal beliefs. This produced the mysterious story that we now have and that obscures any natural historical basis. Nevertheless, the reference to “his star” establishes the context: astrology. Thus, any natural historical basis of the account would have to reside in the practices of astrologers in Roman times.

The widespread practice in Roman times was of so-called “Greek astrology”—an amalgamation of Babylonian and Egyptian concepts blended with Greek philosophy and wrapped in a geometrical construction called a horoscope.¹⁰ The development of this astrological practice owes its origin to Greek scholars who followed in the footsteps of Alexander the Great’s conquests of the Middle East in 331 BCE. In my book, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*, I reviewed how Greek astrology replaced Babylonian omen astrology in the Middle East as it spread throughout the Roman Empire.¹¹ We have evidence that Greek astrology was practiced even in distant Persia, which some researchers claim to be the origin of the biblical magi. David Pingree has shown that the Arabic text of the *Carmen Astrologicum* (the *Pentateuch*) of astrologer Dorotheus of Sidon (fl. first century CE) comes down to us from a Pahlavi (Persian) source from the third century CE. The document also has

7 Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Phil. Soc., 1954), 11, 232–240.

8 *Ibid.*, 264.

9 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 27. This *tour de force* explains the origins of these gospels and provides the exegesis and theories behind the accounts.

10 A. Bouché-Leclerq, *L’Astrologie Grecque* (1899; repr., Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1963).

11 Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 36–39.

parts taken from astrologer Vettius Valens of Antioch (ca. 150–175 CE). These Greek astrology works translated to Pahlavi demonstrate the widespread adoption of this form of astrology across cultural lines.¹² Some researchers of the Star of Bethlehem have advocated cuneiform Assyrian sources, Babylonian omen records, or Zoroastrian writings, but those sources are from irrelevant times; thus, they are anachronistic and violate historiographic standards.

Examining the infancy narratives, I noted what others have found, namely that Matthew and Luke have different versions of events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Matthew 2:1–16 provides information about a star, while Luke 2:1–21 is very vague about the “heavenly host.” Moreover, the two accounts point to birth times a dozen years apart. Matthew claims Jesus was born before Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, while Luke places the birth close to the Roman annexation of Judea in 6 CE. Nonetheless, these accounts share a common message about a celestial portent marking the birth of Jesus as King of the Jews. This suggests that something did indeed occur in the sky, which would have attracted the attention of astrologers. Using biblical sources and historical events shown in Figure 2.3, I concluded that the most likely period for the star’s appearance is 8–4 BCE. I also made allowances for estimates by other researchers, expanding this range from 10 BCE to 5 CE, but as it turned out, the year 6 BCE would prove incredibly auspicious for astrologers.¹³

Having studied ancient astrological practices, I concluded that the biblical star had to be the obvious central component of a horoscope fit for a Judean king. Using ancient coins, I focused on a portent that was widely accepted by astrologers as an unmistakable symbol of a royal birth.¹⁴ In “The Coins of Antioch” article, I explained how the star and crescent moon is often depicted on ancient coins for a king or emperor.¹⁵ Some are shown in Figure 2.1. The meaning behind the star and crescent symbolism is usually a close lunar conjunction (appulse) or even a lunar occultation involving Jupiter, which revealed a royal birth, according to astrologers. The moon’s close proximity purportedly intensifies Jupiter’s king-making powers. Of course, other planetary and special “bright star” alignments with the Moon were also symbolized by a star and crescent, but the one involving Jupiter in a person’s horoscope is unquestionably representative of a royal birth.¹⁶ The advantage of using this specific astro-

12 Dorotheus of Sidon, *Carmen Astrologicum* (trans. David Pingree; Abingdon, MD: Astrology Classics Publishers, 2005). Also referred to as *Pentateuch*. See the preface, vii–xii, for a discussion of the Persian adoption of Greek astrology.

13 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 63, fig. 10; 86.

14 *Ibid.*, 15–31, 63–84.

15 Molnar, “The Coins of Antioch,” *Sky & Telescope* 83 no. 1 (1992): 37–39.

16 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 83, 86.

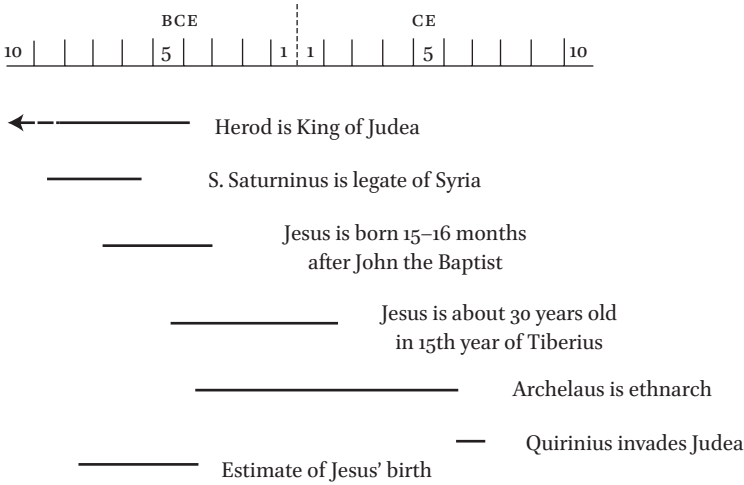


FIGURE 2.3 *Historical benchmarks used to estimate the birth of Jesus point to 8–4 BCE as the most likely period. Some researchers of the star have confused Herod the Great with his son, Herod Archelaus, because of generic references to “Herod.” Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, Augustus Caesar appointed Herod Archelaus “ethnarch” (national leader) of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Roman confidence faded in 6 CE, and Augustus ordered Quirinius to depose Archelaus and place his countries under Roman rule.*

logical event is that I greatly simplified the search for a royal horoscope, for which there are many possible configurations.

Astrology in Roman Life

In “The Coins of Antioch,” I also explained how Roman coins led me to realize where the Star of Bethlehem appeared in the sky. Numismatist George MacDonald concluded from the stylistic iconography that coins bearing Aries the Ram were issued first by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius in Antioch Syria.¹⁷ However, these coins (shown in Figure 2.2) were undated. Quirinius became governor (*legatus*) of Syria in 6 CE, so MacDonald assigned the earliest date

¹⁷ George MacDonald, “The Pseudo-Autonomous Coinage of Antioch,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 4th ser. 4 (1904): 105–35. A much-updated analysis is found in Kevin Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria: Northern Syria, 64 BC–AD 253* (London: Royal Numismatic Society, Special Publication 34, 2004).

as 5–6 CE in the Actian Era.¹⁸ This system of annual dating ran from about September to August. Thus, the coin was not issued in 5 CE before Quirinius' governorship and invasion of Judea, but would have coincided with his appointment in 6 CE. Furthermore, quoting the Book of Luke, which refers to Quirinius as Cyrenius, MacDonald wondered whether these astrological coins had any connection to celestial events in the Lucan account at the time of Quirinius' annexation of Judea.¹⁹

In *The Star of Bethlehem*, I argued for a plausible connection between the Lucan account and Quirinius' coin with Aries the Ram that need only be mentioned here because my theory about the star is independent of this idea.²⁰ The puzzling reference in Luke 2:8 to "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" has produced many explanations ranging from *midrash* to an allusion to King David, the shepherd from Bethlehem. However, the fact that Luke related the birth of Jesus to Quirinius does open the argument for a connection to Quirinius' coins. We know that the Lucan account had its origins in Antioch, where Quirinius resided as the Roman legate (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* III.4.6). His coins depicted what would appear to some people as a sheep under a star, which would indeed raise thoughts of shepherds at night. This raises the possibility that Luke was inspired by the coins circulating in Antioch as he reconstructed the events of several decades earlier.

More importantly, Quirinius' life illustrates perfectly the extent of astrology's impact during those times and helps us understand how astrological coins would have been customary. Well before becoming emperor, Tiberius had a serious falling out with Emperor Augustus Caesar. Tiberius fled to Rhodes in 6 BCE, where he learned astrology under Thrasyllus.²¹ Most Romans predicted a dire fate for Tiberius after he denounced the Roman Emperor. Quirinius, nevertheless, was one the few ranking Romans who dared to visit Tiberius when most Roman travelers shunned him (Tacitus, *Ann.* 3, 23). When Tiberius and Augustus Caesar reconciled their differences in 2 CE, Tiberius returned to Rome with Thrasyllus to run Roman affairs for the aging Augustus. Few people realize that when Quirinius took office in Antioch in 6 CE, a practicing astrologer was influencing policies or even running the Roman Empire, and Quirinius

18 In Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, I referred to the earliest minting of the coin as 5 CE without adequate explanation. This was the Actian Era System of 5–6 CE that ran from about September to August when converted to Julian calendar years. Quirinius would have issued his coins in 6 CE in this calendar system.

19 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 50.

20 *Ibid.*, 120–23.

21 Tiberius' proficiency as an astrologer is well documented. Suetonius, *Tib.*, 10–22; Tacitus, *Ann.* 6, 51 (57); Cassius Dio, 55 9, 5–8.

was his close friend. That astrologer, Tiberius, became emperor in 14 CE and presided in 20 CE over a scandalous trial of Quirinius' ex-wife, Aemilia Lepida. One charge against her was "having conspired through Chaldeans (astrologers) against the house of Caesar" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 3, 23: *quaesitumque per Chaldaeos in dominum Caesaris*). She was found guilty, and Quirinius died the following year. Emperor Tiberius never forgot their friendship and provided a state funeral for Quirinius against the vote of the Roman Senate (Suetonius, *Tib.* 49, 1; Tacitus, *Ann.* 3, 22).

This brief story shows that Romans had various descriptive terms for astrologers. Chaldeans was not a reference to ethnic origins, but rather a widespread term for astrologers, just like magi was in the Matthean account. Most importantly, this story narrates how astrology permeated and controlled Roman life. Thus, it is plausible that the blatant and widespread Roman embracement of astrology was a motivating factor behind the accounts of Matthew and Luke: Citing an astrological portent would surely attract the attention of pagan Romans to the Christian message of the Bible.

No one can say definitively whether Quirinius' association with the astrologers Tiberius and Thrasyllus influenced his selection of Aries the Ram for his coins of Antioch; however, we know that astrology was a huge part of the Roman philosophical and cultural fabric.²² Claudius Ptolemy's (100–168 CE) *Tetrabiblos*, the so-called bible of astrology, used sources attributed to the first century BCE. He assigned Coele Syria, Palestine, Idumea, and Judea to Aries the Ram.²³ Antioch was in Coele Syria, which is probably why Quirinius placed Aries on his coins.²⁴ Most important, Ptolemy's list puts Herod's kingdom under Aries.²⁵ This is where astrologers would have looked for the star announcing the birth of the King of the Jews.

Astrological Portents for Judea

One key to my theory is that Aries the Ram was the sign of King Herod's realm at the estimated time of Jesus' birth.²⁶ Although Judea is not mentioned in

22 Astrology may have been a behind-the-scenes provocation for the Roman invasion of Judea. Jupiter would return again to Aries the Ram in 6 CE, something that astrologer Tiberius would have known with his mentor, Thrasyllus, at his side. Tiberius ran the Roman government for the aging Augustus Caesar and would have been sensitive to rumors of a new king of the Jews, the Messiah in Judea.

23 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 45 f. 26; Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.3.

24 Damascus, also in Coele Syria, placed Aries the Ram on its Roman-era coins.

25 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 47, cf. p. 4 Map 1.

26 Molnar, "The Magi's Star from the Perspective of Ancient Astrological Practices," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 36 (1995): 109–26.

most astrological texts, Ptolemy's reference to it cannot be summarily dismissed just because of the rarity of references to Judea or because there were different assignments by other astrologers. Researchers consider Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* to be a reliable primary source—the foremost resource on ancient astrology. Examination of his geographical list points to its compilation from sources contemporaneous with the reign of King Herod, which underscores its relevance and trustworthiness.²⁷ Undoubtedly, there is no unanimity among the astrological texts regarding assignments of countries to zodiacal signs, but those differences do not mean that Ptolemy was wrong.

There are, nevertheless, other references supporting Ptolemy's assignment of Judea to Aries. For example, astrologer Vettius Valens (ca. 150–175 CE) comes very close by telling us, “Coele Syria and its adjacent lands” fall under the control of Aries (Valens, *Anthology* 1.2). Placing Coele Syria under Aries agrees with Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. Also, Ptolemy's *Geography* and four other primary sources (Diodorus, Polybius, Pliny, and Arrian) place Coele Syria adjacent to Judea, as shown in Figure 2.4 (Diodorus 18.6.3, 61.4; 20.73.2; Polybius 8.17.10–11; Pliny, *Nat.* 5.106–10; Arrian, *Anab.* 2.13.7). Thus, Valens lends support to Ptolemy regarding Aries ruling Judea. I find similar support in the *Astronomica* of Manilius (Manilius, *Astronomica* 4.744–54).

As it turns out, there is a reference to Judea that *proves* Ptolemy correct and demonstrates how I used ancient astrological records to reconstruct historical events. This reference is found in Suetonius' (fl. early second century CE) account: “Astrologers had predicted to Nero that he [would] one day be repudiated. [...] Some of them, however, had promised him the rule of the East, when he was cast off, a few expressly naming the sovereignty of Jerusalem, and several the restitution of all his former fortunes” (Suetonius, *Nero* 40). This passage makes several noteworthy points that require discussion.

First, the prediction about Emperor Nero (37–68 CE) reminds us that astrologers and their patrons did in actuality use horoscopes for political and personal gain, which underscores the importance of astrology. The trouble and madness stemming from illegal access to an emperor's horoscope is well documented by Roman sources.²⁸ Nero's horoscope, in particular, was no secret.²⁹ Descriptions of and commentaries on it come down to us in several

27 Franz Boll, *Studien über Claudius Ptolemäus*. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1894), 181–238. The likely source for this geographical list is the Stoic Posidonius.

28 Cramer (*Astrology in Roman Law*) presents numerous, well-researched primary sources on the influence of astrology in Rome.

29 Otto Neugebauer and H. B. Van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1987), 79, L37.

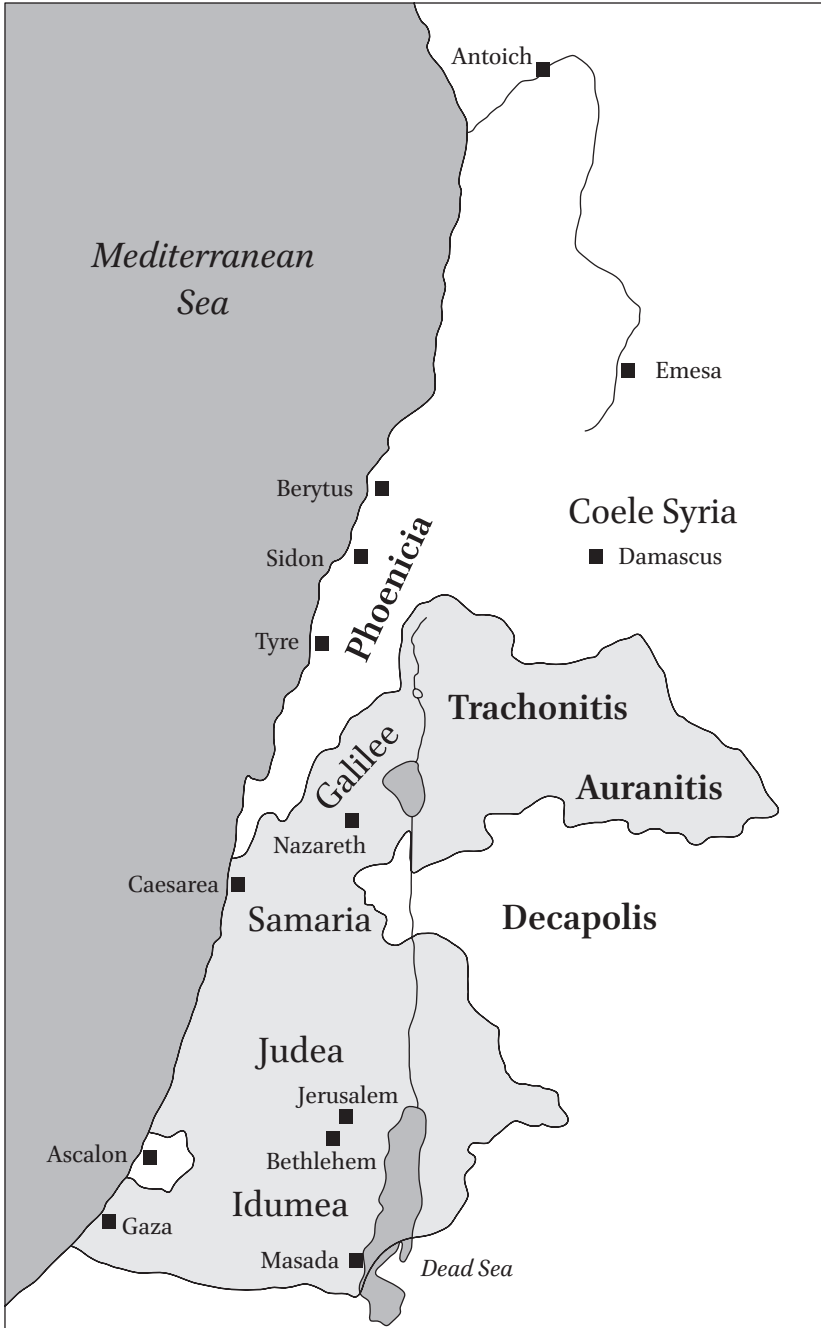


FIGURE 2.4 *The Kingdom of Herod the Great. Antioch lies to the north in Coele Syria, which is adjacent to Herod's kingdom.*

The prediction of Nero losing his inherited throne is due to Mars $\♂$ and Saturn $\♄$ in quartile, namely 90° apart on the zodiacal circle.

“There were some of the ancient scientists who looked concerning the matter of theft ... or something lost ... and [found] where they put the goods from the cardinal point under the Earth [Anti-Midheaven].”

– Dorotheus of Sidon

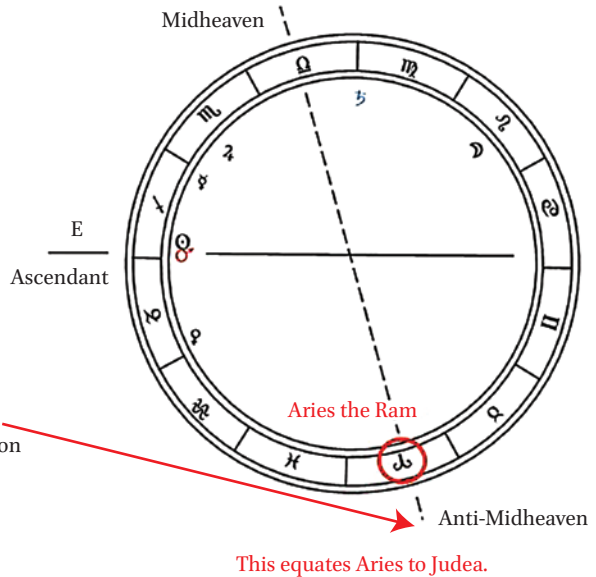


FIGURE 2.5 *Emperor Nero's horoscope explains how astrologers predicted he would lose his inherited throne but possibly recover it in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, symbolized by Aries the Ram $\♈$.*

contemporaneous sources, and it is recreated in Figure 2.5.³⁰ After becoming emperor, Nero was hounded with questions from astrologers about his predicted overthrow, which produced his well-known response detailing how he would live after his dethronement as a humble lyre player—“a simple craft will keep a man from want” (Suetonius, *Nero* 40; cf. Cassius Dio, 63.27.2). We can now understand that Nero was destined to be toppled because of the strong Roman belief in fatalistic astrology.

We also know that Tacitus (Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.2, 11.8) and Cassius Dio (Cassius Dio, 66.19.3, 62 fff) corroborate Suetonius' report of Nero's problems with astrologers. The firm belief in astrological predictions about Nero returning to rule the East even after he died produced three documented sightings of

30 See Suetonius, *Nero* 6 (Robert Graves, Penguin Classics). “Nero was born at Antium on 15 December 37 CE, nine months after Tiberius' death. The sun was rising and his earliest rays touched the newly-born boy almost before he could be laid on the ground. Nero's horoscope at once occasioned many ominous predictions.” These details about Nero's birthplace, date, and time permit us to verify the computational accuracy of the astrological sources. Note how sunrise births were potentially auspicious, as in the case for Augustus Caesar and Hadrian.

Nero. One included a lyre-playing imitator who fooled the king of Parthia.³¹ Moreover, there is evidence that this prediction stirred great fear among Jews and Christians, who saw Nero as the Antimesiah or Antichrist, respectively.³² This reminds us why the Romans would have had a political interest in a new King of the Jews: This person, the Messiah, was prophesied to lead the forces of light against those of darkness, or as some saw it, the Middle East against Rome (Suetonius *Vesp.* 4:5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5:13; Josephus, *JW* 6:6.4).

Next, the story of Nero is another example of the Roman obsession with astrology, and it helps us understand how Roman interest in the Matthean account would have been enormous. In fact, depictions of the biblical magi's visit under their star are found in Roman catacombs.³³ However, the far more important point is that this astrological prophecy about Nero shows which astrological sign some astrologers equated with Judea. According to Suetonius, some astrologers were not specific about where in the East Nero would reign again.³⁴ Nevertheless, Dorotheus of Sidon explains how astrologers would have made that prediction: "There were some of the ancient scientists who looked concerning the matter of theft [...] and [found] where they put the goods from the cardinal point under the Earth [the anti-midheaven or *Imum Caelum*]" (Dorotheus, *Carmen Astrologicum* 5.35.20).³⁵

This procedure for locating lost possessions and inheritances is corroborated by astrologers Firmicus Maternus and Claudius Ptolemy and works in this way.³⁶ Nero's horoscope has Saturn three signs clockwise from Mars—in the words of Firmicus: "Saturn is above in the right square threatening Mars. . . . This combination also predicts loss of paternal inheritance" (Firmicus, *Math.* 6.9.4–5; Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* 4.2).³⁷ Roman emperors were inherited. This means astrologers predicted that Nero would lose his imperial throne in agreement with the account of Suetonius. Astrologers then used the horoscope to predict the country where he could recover his emperorship. That country was identified with the astrological sign located at the anti-midheaven, which is the nadir of the zodiacal circle in the natal horoscope. In Nero's horoscope, Aries

31 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 115.

32 *Ibid.*, 115–16.

33 *Ibid.*, 37 fig.4 shows one example.

34 The astrologers appeared to be unanimous that Nero would lose his paternal inheritance, namely his emperorship.

35 See Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 110–14.

36 *Ibid.*, 112–13.

37 Square aspect means these "maleficent" planets are separated by three zodiacal signs, forming approximately a right angle in a horoscope.

the Ram lies at the anti-midheaven.³⁸ Suetonius said that astrologers claimed that Nero's new throne would be found in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. Therefore, Nero's horoscope links Aries the Ram to Judea, proving Ptolemy correct. This means that astrologers—at least some astrologers—would have been watching Aries the Ram for the birth of a new Judean king.

Convinced that astrologers were monitoring Aries the Ram for the birth of the King of the Jews, I focused on that zodiacal sign as the basis to the Matthean star. In “The Coins of Antioch” article, I explained that an unmistakable regal portent is the closest possible conjunction or appulse between the Moon and Jupiter—an occultation. I reported two dates, 20 March 6 BCE and 17 April 6 BCE, when lunar occultations of Jupiter occurred in Aries the Ram during the anticipated timeframe of Jesus' birth. Astrologers would have believed that these would have intensified the powers of Jupiter for creating a new Judean king. Either could have been related to the star—or maybe neither, as I warned.

We need to keep in mind that occultations could only be predicted to the extent of being likely. Astrologers in Roman times knew about the lunar nodes, where the inclined lunar orbit crossed the center line of the zodiac, and how these crossing points (nodes) precessed, that is, how they moved along the zodiac over the years. When either of the nodes was near a planet, the probability of an occultation was raised, because the Moon would pass very near any planet in this area. In the spring of 6 BCE, a lunar node was in Aries, and thus the presence of Jupiter in Aries signaled the possibility of a lunar occultation of that planet.³⁹ Even if the occultation did not occur, the close conjunction (appulse) would have been important, as Firmicus reminds us: “Jupiter and the Moon in the same sign indicate the greatest good fortune, especially if they are in the same degree. For then they bestow infinite riches and marks of prosperity that the natives are always superior to the parents” (Firmicus, *Math.* 6.23.7).

38 Firmicus (*Math.* 5.1.28) probably refers specifically to Nero's horoscope: “If the descendant is in Cancer ♋, the native will have great trouble from relatives and will be involved in great danger. If the anti-midheaven is in Aries ♈ he will make great mistakes. After trouble, a restful life will be allotted him, but his life will be changeable. At one time he will be on the highest step of honor, the next cast down from his position. The wife and first son will be seriously ill.” This would also confirm that Aries ♈ was indeed in the anti-midheaven of Nero's chart.

39 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 86, 156 f.2. This was the ascending lunar node where the moon's orbit ran to the north of the zodiac.

In the East

Well after “The Coins of Antioch” article was published, I realized how I had overlooked the astrological meaning of *en te anatole*. This is a fundamentally important aspect in Greek astrology, meaning that I should also have searched for a heliacal rising of Jupiter in Aries. This is a once-in-about-twelve-years event in which Jupiter rises 12 degrees before the Sun (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 3.10; Firmicus, *Math.* 2.9.1). This concept stems from Stoic beliefs about the importance of cyclical deaths and rebirths, *ekpyrosis* and *palingenesis*, a fiery death followed by rebirth.⁴⁰ As a planet moved away from the Sun with each day and emerged from the searing rays of the Sun, the planet’s astrological influences burst forth. This “arc of combustion” had a specific angular extent from the Sun for each planet and was not tightly tied to becoming visible.⁴¹ According to astrologers, a planet’s heliacal rising—along with the subsequent days in which it did appear as a morning star—was the most significant period in its procession around the sky, the period in which its astrological influences were greatest. Computer simulations showed that Jupiter had a heliacal rising on 17 April 6 BCE, the same day as one of the lunar occultations of Jupiter in Aries. The odds of this being a random coincidence are extremely remote, and I concluded that this was the date for the star’s appearance.⁴²

The Matthean account also tells us more about the star, which can make it even more enigmatic. Matthew probably struggled with arcane astrological jargon he heard, most likely handed down through several sources, which would explain why the star mysteriously “went before” the biblical magi and “stood over” the child. However, the astrological context of the passage leads us from a miraculous apparition to an explainable natural event.⁴³ Astronomer David Hughes argued that this passage in Matt 2:9 refers to planetary retrograde motion and stationing, an idea that I support.⁴⁴ As the Earth moves in

40 Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law*, 25, 50, 62.

41 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 87–9.

42 Statistical investigations of the lunar occultations of 17 April 6 BCE have been made. See M. M. Dworetzky and S. J. Fossey, “Lunar Occultations of Jupiter and Saturn, and the Star of Bethlehem,” *The Observatory* 118 no. 1142 (1998) 22–24. Their analysis finds the occultation to be “rare,” a conclusion based upon modern astronomy rather than Greek astrology, which, nevertheless, can be seen as reinforcing the importance of that day. Equally important, they verified that this occultation indeed happened.

43 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 89–96. See the previous discussion about the “arc of combustion.”

44 David Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer’s Confirmation* (New York: Walker and Company, 1979). Hughes claims that Pisces was the sign of Judea. This notion is

its orbit, it speeds past Jupiter and produces the illusion that Jupiter halts and reverses its motion against the background stars. Astrologers such as Ptolemy claimed, “For planets when they are [heliacal] rising or *stationary* produce intensification in the events” (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.6).

The Greek verb for “went before” is *proágo*, which can be misinterpreted by someone unfamiliar with its use in an astrological context. Geminus of Rhodes (first century BCE) in fact used this same verb root to describe retrograde motion: “soon they [planets] rush ahead (*proágountai*) of the same [fixed stars], sometimes they stay with the same stars, known [as] what we call stationary.”⁴⁵ There is no doubt that the Matthean account says that the star “stood over” or above the child—a likely description of stationing by a person unfamiliar with astrological terminology.⁴⁶

Astrologers monitored retrograde motion and stationing to confirm important events, which fits perfectly with Matthew’s account. The biblical magi, or any astrologers for that matter, would have understandably “rejoiced” when Jupiter underwent retrograde returning to Aries. There, Jupiter became stationary on 19 December 6 BCE and reigned as the ruler of its trine of Aries ♈, Leo ♌, and Sagittarius ♐.⁴⁷ This was another auspicious event focusing on Judea, although not as impressive as the earlier events of 17 April 6 BCE. In any case, my theory regarding the discovery of the regal conditions of 17 April 6 BCE does not depend on whether researchers accept my explanation of these latter events. Nevertheless, my interpretation presents a believable natural explanation, has a solid historical basis in astrological practices, and reinforces the astrological importance of the star.

There is another part of the Matthean account that also raises a question about the star. Matthew 2:16 claims that Herod ordered the execution of children two years old and younger “in accordance with the time that he had

popular among pious proponents, who see the zodiacal fish as representative of the Christian *ichthys*—an idea that has no historical basis in Greek astrology. See Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 27–30 on Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel and Pisces as an anachronistic theory.

45 Geminus, *Introduction to the Phenomena* (trans. Carolus Manitius; Lepizig: Teubner, 1898), 12:22. This reference is found in *A Greek-English Lexicon* compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1968), 1480: “of the planets in retrograde motion, *get ahead of fixed stars*.” Manitius interpreted this as “rush ahead” in German. In any case, Geminus verifies that the Matthean account used the same verb root for the star’s motion—retrograde motion.

46 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 90–96.

47 Ptolemy (*Tetrabiblos* 2.3) ignored Saturn, which other astrologers recognized as a co-ruler of the trine of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius. In this work, I use the conventions adopted by the majority of astrologers.

learned from the wise men [astrologers].” The evangelist, or more likely his source, must have failed to understand that the threat would be only from those born on an auspicious day (or group of days)—not during a two-year period. Even Jupiter in Aries the Ram lasted only for about a year. For this reason, this part of the Matthean account is problematic.

Some researchers discount the slaughter of the innocents as a myth because the historian Josephus, who chronicled Herod’s deeds in great detail, did not mention this heinous act; thus, they have argued that this story was propaganda fabricated to smear Herod. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that Josephus covered every ruthless deed of Herod. Moreover, using Josephus’ failure to report this is a logical fallacy known as an argument from silence. That is, Josephus did not tell us that the slaughter never happened, which means he gave no corroborative information for us to draw any conclusion.

In the case for my theory I note that this story suggests that the star must have appeared two years earlier, before Herod could have issued this decree. Herod died in 4 BCE, which means that the star would have appeared in 6 BCE or earlier.⁴⁸ This is in line with my theory, but I take a neutral stance on the slaughter of the innocents because my theory does not require its resolution—this is something that biblical scholars and historians can examine further.⁴⁹

The following is a summary of the regal astrological conditions for 17 April 6 BCE, which is drawn in Figure 2.6.⁵⁰

- Jupiter ♃ is the Star of Bethlehem. The king-making planet’s position in Aries ♈ focuses its astrological power on Judea.
- Jupiter’s power is increased as a “ruler” of the trine of Aries ♈, Leo ♌, and Sagittarius ♐. The other two trine rulers, Sun ☉ and Saturn ♄, are also in Aries and increase the power of this trine aspect even more.
- The moon’s close proximity as it occults Jupiter magnifies Jupiter’s power to create kings.
- Jupiter and Saturn “attend” the Sun as regal “spear-bearers” rising immediately before the Sun and protect or guard the Sun around the sky from “attacks” by any maleficent planets, such as Mars. In fact, all of the planets play roles as attending spear-bearers, ensuring a great horoscope.

48 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 205. Some scholars use this to date Jesus’ birth ca. 6 BCE, two years before Herod’s death.

49 It is possible that the two-year-old age is similar to the Roman counting of years: There is no allowance for a zero year, making the children only one year old, which seems reasonable for the time Jupiter would occupy Aries the Ram.

50 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 96–101.

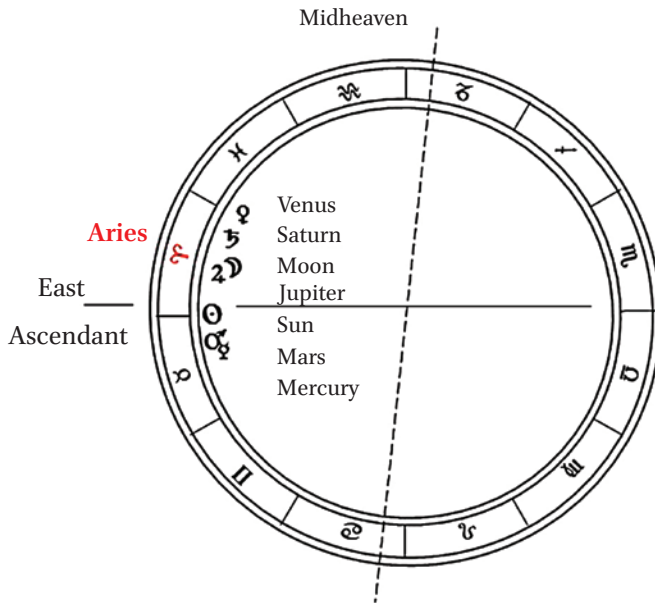


FIGURE 2.6 *The horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE points to a king's birth under Aries the Ram, the zodiacal sign of Judea. The very prominent collection of "planets" around Aries was described as attendants or "spear-bearers" guarding the all-important Sun in its procession along the zodiac. Hidden is the fact that the Moon actually occulted Jupiter close to when it was heliacal rising, namely "in the east."*

- Most important of all, Jupiter is heliacal rising—a condition that Emperor Hadrian almost had as well. On this day, Jupiter's power was at maximum strength to create kings.
- There are two exalted "planets": the Sun ☉ in Aries ♈ and Venus ♀ in Pisces ♉. Roman Emperor Hadrian also had exalted Venus in his imperial horoscope. Two exalted planets point to a truly propitious horoscope by any astrologer's standards.
- There are no destructive planetary aspects (e.g., quartile) involving Mars ♂, Saturn ♄, or Mercury ☿.

Visually, the sky for this date was unimpressive because most of the planets were obscured by the rising Sun. However, for astrologers of Roman times, this list of that day's astrological aspects points to the incredible horoscope of a great king of Judea. Jews, however, did not embrace Greek astrology, which explains Matt 2:3: "When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled,

and all Jerusalem with him.” The Matthean sources reconstructing these events could have known that Jews would be puzzled about missing such an auspicious event focusing on their country. People unfamiliar with astrological practices naturally expect to see something in the sky. Such expectations for celestial spectacles persist nowadays, even more so as we are influenced by graphic media recreations of the nativity. The fact is that Roman-era astrologers used mathematics, not observations, to construct horoscopes. Visual confirmations, however, were needed to verify eclipses and occultations—events that could only be estimated or presumed, not predicted accurately.

Royal Horoscopes

Most modern people cannot appreciate the enormous significance of the arcane concepts in the above list of astrological conditions for 17 April 6 BCE. For comparison, below is the commentary by astrologer Antigonus of Nicaea describing the horoscope of Hadrian (born 24 January 76 CE) and how this horoscope made him Roman Emperor. Figure 2.7 illustrates that horoscope. We should keep in mind that Hadrian was born close to the time when the Matthean account’s report of the star was finalized.

He became emperor, because of the presence of two planets [Jupiter ♃ and the Moon ☾] in the horoscope degree [east horizon], and especially because the Moon was on the Ascendant which corresponds with the horoscope degree, and because Jupiter was about to rise in its morning phase [in the east—heliacal rising] within seven days. And because of [the Moon’s] attendant planets being in their own houses [Pisces ♋] and Mars ♂ in his own triangle [Cancer ♋, Scorpius ♏, Pisces ♋] . . . , while both planets [Venus ♀ and Mars ♂] are close together, and about to rise soon after the Moon. Moreover, the Sun ☉ the cosmos ruler, is also the Moon’s ☾ attendant . . . , and the Sun ☉ himself is in turn attended by Saturn ♄, in his own house [Capricorn ♐] and by Mercury ☿, both of them being in morning rising. It remains to be shown that the Moon too was about to be in conjunctions with a bright fixed star in the twentieth degree.⁵¹ For

51 For bright stars, probably in Hadrian’s horoscope, see Firmicus *Math.* 6.2.3. It is not obvious which star this is. Antigonus mentions a bright star conjunction last because these ranked low in importance. *Math.* 8.16.3 reports: “Cassiopeia rises in the 20 degree of Aquarius.—earn a large income.” Thus, Cassiopeia was probably a “bright star” constellation.

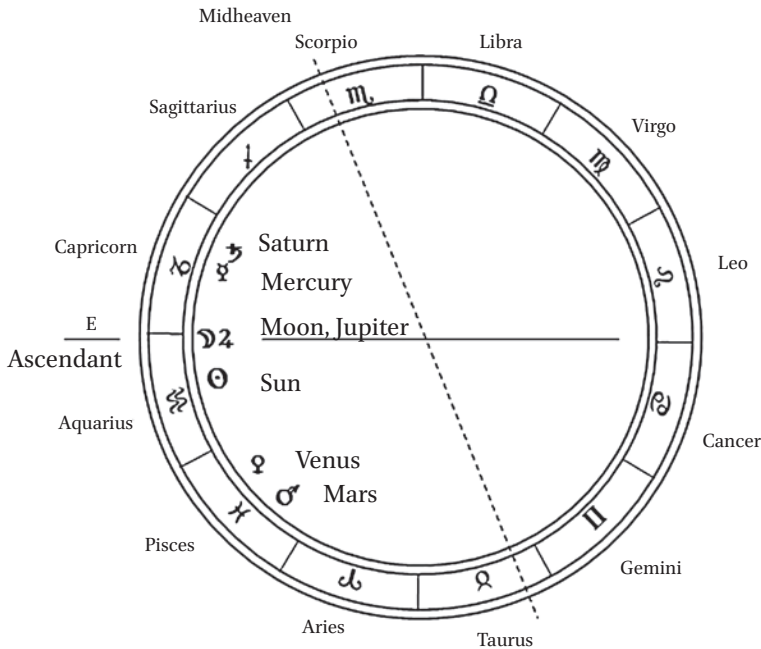


FIGURE 2.7 *The horoscope of Emperor Hadrian for 24 January 76 CE according to astrologer Antigonus of Nicaea. Similarly to the horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE, he points to the importance of the closeness of Jupiter and the Moon, and that Jupiter was almost heliacal rising. He claims the same for Saturn and Mercury. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of attendants protecting the Sun, much like a king in a procession with bodyguards. Like Tiberius, Hadrian was a proficient astrologer, reading horoscopes to identify friends and foes.*

one must not only pay attention to the conjunction of the Moon with the planets, but also the fixed stars.⁵²

Note the significant role that Jupiter ♃ and the Moon ☾ played in the birth of Emperor Hadrian, similarly to the events of 17 April 6 BCE. The fact that Jupiter was about to heliacal rise within seven days was exceedingly important, as was its close proximity to the Moon. Also, the concept of guardian attendance is key: Jupiter ♃, Mercury ☿, and Saturn ♄ preceded the Sun ☉ in its course around the sky. Astrologers said such “spear-bearers” acted as guards or attendants who protected the Sun ☉. Venus ♀ and Mars ♂ closely followed and protected the Moon ☾ from behind, which in turn also protected the

52 Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law*, 169.

Sun ☉. Note that Mars ☿ was alone in its own trine aspect as the sole ruler of its triangle: Cancer ♋, Scorpius ♏, and Pisces ♋. Antigonus also claimed that Saturn ♄ and Mercury ☿ were heliacal rising—or nearly so, like Jupiter—making for a powerful horoscope. These are the kinds of aspects astrologers of Roman times looked for in horoscopes of emperors and kings. The horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE had many of these aspects, and much more: Jupiter was heliacal rising precisely along with the Moon, and all of the planets provided protective attendance. These powerful concepts are nevertheless unappreciated, if not incomprehensible, to modern people who look for celestial pyrotechnics marking the birth of Jesus.

While writing my book, I was asked whether there was any reference to the star in the enormous corpus of ancient astrological sources. There is no better place to look than in a discussion of the birth of divine and immortal persons provided by Firmicus Maternus. He tells us in his *Mathesis* (ca. 334–37 CE) that there were indeed two such persons, but following Roman law, he never reveals their names.⁵³ There are unquestionably two births because Firmicus places Jupiter in two different zodiacal signs, along with some other differing details pointing to two distinct horoscopes:

If Jupiter comes into aspect with the waxing Moon, this will create men of almost divine and immortal nature. This happens when the Moon is moving toward Jupiter. It is difficult to observe this. If Jupiter is in the north and the waxing and full Moon comes into aspect moving from the east (with Jupiter in his own house or exaltation or in signs in which he rejoices), the result is unconquerable generals who govern the whole world. This is especially true if the Sun in his exaltation is in trine aspect to Jupiter. For Jupiter rejoices by day when aspected by the Sun or Saturn, especially if he is in a morning rising (Firmicus, *Math.* 3.3.9).

Firmicus' reference to "unconquerable generals who govern the whole world" is a title held particularly by Augustus Caesar, who was declared divine by the Roman Senate. In the description of the first horoscope, Jupiter is in "the north"—an arcane allusion to Cancer the Crab, the northernmost zodiacal sign, where Jupiter manifests "exalted" powers. Jupiter in Cancer describes the most important feature in Augustus' horoscope for 23 September 63 BCE. In the second horoscope, the Sun has "exalted" powers, and this is only in Aries,

53 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 104–9. See also Molnar, "Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem," *Culture and Cosmos* 3 no. 1 (2003).

where it was on 17 April 6 BCE.⁵⁴ However, we know that the Sun was in Libra for Augustus, so there are undoubtedly two horoscopes. In the second horoscope, Jupiter “in a morning rising” is vernacular for heliacal rising. Moreover, the Moon “moving toward Jupiter” when it is “difficult to observe this” arguably describes the moon’s motion near the Sun on 17 April 6 BCE.

Firmicus’ generalization about “trine aspect” involving Jupiter and the Sun illustrates how truly arcane Greek astrology texts can be. Trine aspect usually means nowadays that the Sun is ~120 degrees from Jupiter, as it would be in another corner of a triangle laid out on the zodiacal circle. In Greek astrology, however, this term means that the planets are in the same trine (triangle) that they rule; they can even be in the same corner of the triangle. For example, Hadrian’s horoscope had Mars alone in the trine it ruled and not ~120 degrees from any planet. This condition is evident in the second horoscope, where Jupiter is heliacal rising (12 degrees from the Sun), which means Jupiter cannot be ~120 degrees from the Sun but only in the same corner (sign) of the zodiacal triangle. Thus, Firmicus can only be referring to the powerful trine condition called “rulers of the trine,” as illustrated in Figure 2.8.⁵⁵ This places Jupiter with the Sun and Saturn in Aries, in agreement with the horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE.

As I see it, Firmicus was expressing his ongoing Christian conversion from paganism. Still, Firmicus said that the first person, Augustus Caesar, was “almost” divine. When he says the second person is “especially” divine, this points to a stronger faith in Jesus. Nevertheless, fellow Roman converts would have noticed the allusion to Augustus Caesar and surely taken issue with Firmicus about that purported divinity. Perhaps Firmicus atoned for his blunder with his second book, *On the Profane Religions*, a Christian rebuttal of paganism.⁵⁶

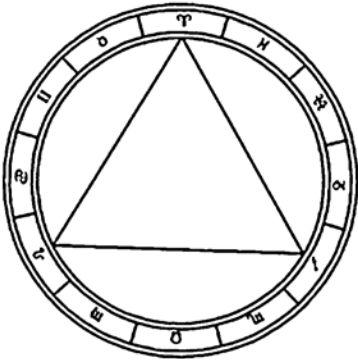
Conclusion

To summarize, these arguments in support of a historical event underlying the Star of Bethlehem account stand on firm ground. I proved that there were astrologers who recognized Aries the Ram as the astrological sign of Judea. Within the expected timeframe of Jesus’ birth, I found two lunar occultations with Jupiter in Aries that produced rare horoscopes fit for a Judean king. Months after publishing those findings, I recognized that one of the

54 Ibid., 135.

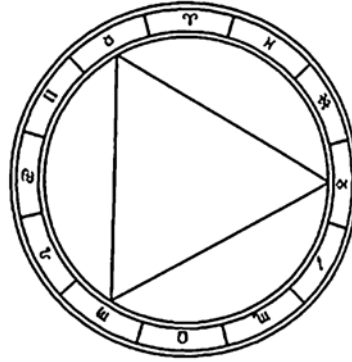
55 Ibid., 69–72, fig. 14. Modern astrologers have changed the meaning of trine aspect.

56 Ibid., 104–5.



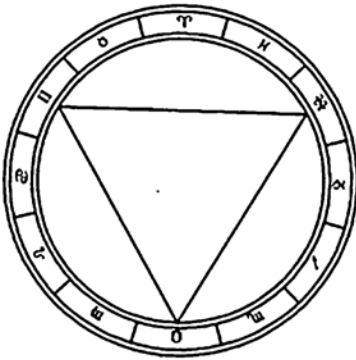
Trine I

Aries, Leo, Sagittarius
 Day Rulers: Sun, Jupiter, Saturn
 Night Rulers: Jupiter, Sun, Saturn



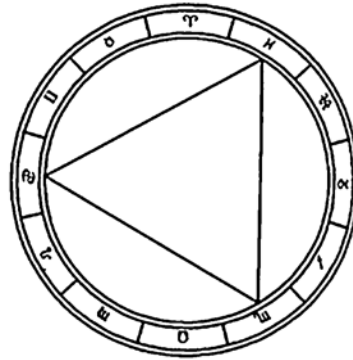
Trine II

Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn
 Day Rulers: Venus, Moon, Mars
 Night Rulers: Moon, Venus, Mars



Trine III

Gemini, Libra, Aquarius
 Day Rulers: Saturn, Mercury, Jupiter
 Night Rulers: Mercury, Saturn, Jupiter



Trine IV

Cancer, Scorpius, Pisces
 Day Rulers: Venus, Mars, Moon
 Night Rulers: Mars, Venus, Moon

FIGURE 2.8 *The Rulers of the Trines.* Generally, three “planets” were allocated to the three zodiacal signs comprising these four triangles. Even one planet occupying its assigned trine fulfilled the scheme for trine aspect—a concept that differs from modern astrology. The relative importance of the rulers changed with day and night. Curiously, Ptolemy dropped Saturn from Trine I, but other astrologers did not. Nevertheless, this omission has little bearing on the horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE, which was truly auspicious for many other reasons.

occultations happened when Jupiter was heliacal rising “in the east”—an incredible concurrence indicating the birth of the King of the Jews. Finally, I uncovered a reference to the star by a pagan astrologer undergoing his conversion to Christianity.

There are a number of details in the Matthean account that I cannot prove, such as whether astrologers did indeed travel from the East and had an audience with King Herod. Neither can I demonstrate that astrologers verified that Jesus was born under this star, as the evangelist and his followers unquestionably believed. There is the possibility that the evangelist presumed Jesus was born under this regal star and that this story involving astrology was intended to draw pagan Romans to the Christian message. Also, I find that the purported miraculous motions of the star and the targeting of births in a two-year period are due to misunderstood astrological jargon, which would be expected from Christians not conversant with astrology or even hesitant to relate a pagan practice to Jesus’ birth.

In fact, much of the trouble associated with theories about the Star of Bethlehem lies in unfamiliarity with astrology as it was practiced during Roman times. Too many astronomers have rushed to judgment with clever ideas that are historically invalid and have no connection to anything resembling astrology, still less Greek astrology.⁵⁷ They and people of faith have tiptoed around the inconvenient astrological basis of the account. Some theories even adjust historical dates to achieve compatibility between the Matthean and Lucan accounts, and some researchers look for answers from irrelevant cultures and anachronistic sources.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, there are some elements in the Matthean account that can be verified. These can only be recognized from the perspective of arcane astrological practices, which explains why so many theories have proven problematic. Specifically, heliacal rising is one of the most important features in a king’s horoscope, and Matthew mentions this aspect twice, underscoring its historical importance in producing a regal horoscope.⁵⁹ Furthermore, there is agreement in the sequence of events. The star had reportedly been “in the east” before the biblical magi went to Herod. After that purported audience, the star “that was in the east” stations auspiciously and receives their

57 Ibid., 15–31. Comets, supernovae, and visual close conjunctions are astronomical theories about the star.

58 Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Pasadena, Calif.: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980); John Mosley, *The Christmas Star* (Los Angeles: Griffith Observatory, 1987).

59 The star “in the east” is mentioned twice, but a third time it is suggested, “when the star appeared.”

praise. We know that Jupiter had its heliacal rising (“in the east”) in Aries on 17 April 6 BCE, moved weeks later into the next zodiacal sign, Taurus, and returned to Aries, the astrological sign of Judea, where it stationed (“stood over”) on 19 December 6 BCE, a secondary reinforcing portent. Thus, the account has this credible timeline element in addition to the astounding horoscope that could indeed have drawn the attention of some astrologers to Judea.

Then there is the Lucan account, which provides a very different story that places the birth of Jesus a dozen years after the Matthean account. There is nothing in this account that helps reconstruct the star of the Matthean account, except that Luke acknowledges a celestial portent accompanying the birth of Jesus. Nevertheless, I believe that Quirinius’ coins may have played a role in the construction of the Lucan account—a theory that merits consideration.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the evidence presented here will have important consequences for Christians and for scholars. People can be assured that there was a historical event underlying the story about the Star of Bethlehem, which may even strengthen the faith of some. However, it was not the visible celestial spectacle modern beliefs expect. For researchers, this work may provide greater understanding of history, ancient practices and culture, and the origins of beliefs about the sky. We can now appreciate how the star would have been spectacular for pagan Romans, who used astrology to guide all aspects of their lives. In any case, I hope that this research will give further support to the study of ancient astrological records, now that their usefulness has been demonstrated by my investigation of the Star of Bethlehem.

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60 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 5–6, 48–55.

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A Critical Look at the History of Interpreting the Star of Bethlehem in Scientific Literature and Biblical Studies

Aaron Adair

For over eighteen hundred years, a considerable number of different authors have reflected on the both the meaning and the being of the Star of Bethlehem (Matt 2:1–12). Speculations about the star come not just from theologians, but also from famous names in the sciences, in particular Johannes Kepler and his work on chronology and astronomy. However, it has been in the last two hundred years that some have sought to explain the star solely in terms of known physics or the interpretation of the movements of the stars and planets, without recourse to the physically impossible. This has not simply been an academic matter; the various hypotheses regarding the star have made their way into evangelizing activities, New Age books,¹ and even science education. Since the 1930s, planetaria have showcased a holiday program that recreates the heavens of two thousand years ago and tries to reveal to audiences what might have been the inspiration for the stories in those ancient skies. The star has also been a subject of debate among planetarium workers, especially when a new hypothesis and chronology was gaining popularity in the 1980s among some planetarium operators.² With the increase in television and web-based educational and information media, the question “What was the Star of Bethlehem?” is now as perennial as the Christmas holiday itself.

After all of these decades, unfortunately there is nothing that appears to be a consensus position among scientists, even regarding what is the best sort of explanation of the star. Theories are plentiful and tend to bifurcate rather than converge as time goes on. Such ideas include (but are not limited to) comets, meteors, novae and supernovae, a single planet rising, the discovery of a new planet or asteroid, the conjunction of planets, and horoscopic interpretations; on the fringes, one can find speculations about the precession of the

1 See *Urantia Book* 122.8.6–7.

2 Jordan R. Marché, II, *Theaters of Time and Space: American Planetaria, 1930–1970* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2005), 69–73, 173.

equinoxes, Planet X, and spacecraft from another world.³ The number of hypotheses is too numerous to consider in detail in this chapter. There are scientists and other interested researchers who believe there was something that happened in the skies close to the time of Jesus' birth; at least a few people trained in astronomy have written against the entire naturalistic star project.⁴ Among past and present planetarium workers, including myself, the star has received the humorous moniker of the 'SoB', in part because, as noted by astronomer Bob Berman, many operators know that the explanations do not actually work, but they at least keep people interested in astronomy and have become a self-perpetuating tradition.⁵

In my previous work on this subject, I have provided a history of these interpretations and some of the historical reasons for their appearances at the beginning of the nineteenth century and their modern currency among scientists and some evangelists.⁶ That history does not necessarily provide arguments for or against naturalistic hypotheses; instead, I have done that elsewhere, demonstrating critical issues with the constellation of proposals.⁷ In this chapter, I will combine these two aspects: the history of scientific explanations of the Star of Bethlehem and the problems they all have when trying to conform to our primary source. Along with these euhemeristic methods,⁸ I will look at the approaches to explaining the story as a literary construct, consider the issues with the major proposals, and propose a new way to address the origins of the legend found in the Gospel of Matthew.

3 The UFO hypothesis may be the most popular naturalistic explanation in the public sphere, given the presence on American television, namely *Ancient Aliens*, along with various books on UFOs and the Bible, including Barry Downing, *The Bible and Flying Saucers* (New York: Avon, 1970).

4 Bob Berman, "On the Christmas Star," *Astronomy* 29 no. 1 (2001): 102; Phil Plait, "Starry, Starry Night," pages 59–67 in *There's Probably No God: The Atheist's Guide to Christmas* (ed. Adriane Sherine; London: Friday Books, 2009); Otto Neugebauer, *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1975), 608; Aaron Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View* (Fareham: Onus Books, 2013).

5 Berman, "On the Christmas Star," 2001; Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 1.

6 Adair, "The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy," *Zygon: Journal of Science & Religion* 47 no. 1 (March 2012): 7–29.

7 Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

8 By euhemerism, I mean taking mythical or otherwise amazing stories and rationalizing them to conform to scientific or historical knowledge, as Euhemerus (fourth century BCE) was said to have done when he presumed the Greek gods were historical kings who were then deified.

The Molnar Thesis

The oldest known attempt to understand the star as a natural object comes from the early nineteenth century, with the suggestion that it was a meteor.⁹ This has proven to be one of the less popular solutions, and it is rarely mentioned except to dismiss it. Other proposals from this period have had a more lasting impression, namely the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE. Other ideas, such as the supernova, only came into the conversation after they were better understood by astronomers around the turn of the twentieth century. For the most part, the various books and articles on the star published throughout the twentieth century would recount the same possibilities with various nuances, sometimes informed by some new discovery, such as when cuneiform tablets of the planetary positions in 7 BCE were uncovered.¹⁰ However, in the 1990s a more novel thesis was introduced in the English-speaking world and was considered groundbreaking.¹¹

For the purposes of this chapter, the greatest focus will be placed on the most sophisticated of the recent attempts to explain the star: that of Michael Molnar and his emphasis on ancient Hellenistic astrology.¹² Inspired by coins from the city of Antioch on the Orontes River, as he explains in his book on the subject of the star, Molnar tried to figure out what sorts of signs in the sky would have been interpreted to mean that a king had been born, that he was Jewish, and that he was worthy enough to inspire worshippers to come from Mesopotamia or Persia and give treasures to the newborn. In particular, Molnar focused on the writings of Claudius Ptolemy to show what zodiacal sign was that of the Jews or Judea as well as what arrangements of the planets were considered the most auspicious. Molnar also reinforces his arguments with statements in various other astrological treatises, namely those of Marcus Manilius, Vettius Valens, and Firmicus Maternus. On top of this, Molnar pays attention to the particulars of the verbiage of the original Greek of the Gospel of Matthew and tries to correlate the terminology in the gospel to that used in

9 Christian Gottlieb Kühnöl, *Evangelium Matthaei* (Leipzig: Barth, 1807), 23.

10 A. J. Sachs and C. B. F. Walker, "Kepler's View of the Star of Bethlehem and the Babylonian Almanac for 7/6 BC," *Iraq* 46 no. 1 (Spring 1984): 43–55.

11 Owen Gingerich, in his blurb on the dust jacket of Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999), says, "[T]his book is the most original and important contribution of the entire twentieth century on the thorny question of how events recorded [in the Gospel] should be interpreted."

12 Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

astrological texts.¹³ This approach is appropriately focused on using ancient sources to determine what a professional sky watcher would have found important rather than what may have been spectacular to a modern astronomer, so methodologically it is superior to many other recent attempts to explore the star and its Zoroastrian interpreters.

While his approach is novel compared to many other endeavors, Molnar's efforts and results are very similar to those of the German biblical scholar Heinrich Voigt from a century ago, in particular the use of the works of the astrologer Ptolemy and the attempt to link certain Greek phrases from the gospel to that of astrological texts.¹⁴ Even the proposed dates for the birth of Jesus, based on horoscopic practice, only differ between Molnar and Voigt by a matter of days. This seems to be because both authors primarily derive their position from Ptolemy, especially his astrological geography. Molnar shows no direct awareness of this earlier work, but that is no detriment to his efforts or conclusions; if anything, two scholars coming to similar conclusions without consultation¹⁵ would provide at least some confidence in the method. However,

13 It is worth noting that Rev 8:13 uses the term midheaven (μεσοθράνημα), the same used in astrological works, and in general many scholars think John of Patmos is using astrological symbolism, though this is much debated. See Tim Hegeudus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 231–60; Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014), 353, 542, 819. That another Christian text from broadly the same period of time also used astrology or its symbolism is thus not initially implausible.

14 Heinrich Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu und die Astrologie: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und chronologische Untersuchung zu der Erzählung von den Weisen aus dem Morgenlande* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1911).

15 While uncertain, there may be a chain of influence between Voigt and Molnar. Voigt was referenced by another German author, the astrophysicist Konradin Ferrari d'Occhieppo, but he is not cited in Hughes' original 1976 article in *Nature* (but he is cited in Hughes' 1979 article); instead, he references another German author, the journalist Werner Keller, about the meaning of certain Greek phrases in the gospel. However, Keller does not cite his source for preferring the meaning of a morning rising of the Star of Bethlehem, and his first edition of *Und die Bibel hat doch recht* in 1955 came before Ferrari d'Occhieppo's first publication on the subject. I have to assume Keller either read Voigt or, more likely, some other German source that had read him. In this way, the idea of the star being in its heliacal rising passed from Voigt to Keller and Ferrari d'Occhieppo independently, and then into the English-speaking world through authors like Hughes (and Ferrari d'Occhieppo, who only published in English in the late 1970s and after). From there, Molnar was likely influenced to come to the sort of conclusion he did about the meaning of the star "in the East/at its rising." See David Hughes, "The Star of Bethlehem," *Nature* 264 (09 Dec 1976): 513–17; Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's Confirmation*

given that a similar result was reached more than eighty years before the publication of Molnar's book, why had it been all but forgotten? It is necessary to understand why the theory did not take hold in academia, why it was received with derision,¹⁶ and why we may have grounds for remaining skeptical of the approach and any future euhemerizations of the gospel story in a similar vein.

The first issue to consider is the very use of a horoscope to predict the birth of someone. The natural method in horoscopic practice is this: a child is born, and then the astrologer uses the time and place of birth to make a prediction regarding the newborn's future or personality. However, Molnar's proposition has the horoscope being cast in order to predict a child's birth. This is a significant reversal of standard astrological practice and lacks historical precedent. What appears to have been done by the magi is more like the practices of the most antiquated Babylonian soothsayers and their omen texts, such as the *Enuma Anu Enlil*, that make predictions based on isolated phenomena such as eclipses rather than considering the entirety of the horoscope. As such, using Hellenistic methods and horoscopes to predict what the magi would have thought about the prognostication of a king's future birth is at best speculative and perhaps specious.

Still, let us consider the results. Molnar produces a horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE, and by citing various passages from Greek and Latin texts on astrology shows how the constructed horoscope could be seen as a powerful, regal nativity. Of particular force was the close approach and even occultation of Jupiter by the Moon. However, the extent to which Hellenistic practices of astral interpretation penetrated Mesopotamia or Persia is uncertain at best,¹⁷ so perhaps ancient Babylonian and Assyrian practices and beliefs remained in vogue. According to these older sources, the occultation was not a sign of the birth of a king, but rather of his death and of civil war in the land. Even the possibility of an occultation caused great fear among ancient scribes, as seen in Assyrian letters.¹⁸ If the same astronomical event could be interpreted so

(New York: Walker and Company, 1979); Werner Keller, *Und die Bibel hat doch recht: Forscher beweisen die historische Wahrheit* (Düsseldorf: Econ-Verl., 1955).

16 Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 464–65.

17 The last cuneiform horoscope comes from the mid-first century BCE and is unlike the Hellenistic versions known from Western texts and sources. See Francesca Rochberg, *Babylonian Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), ix–16.

18 Hermann Hunger and Simo Parpola, "Bedeckungen des Planeten Jupiter durch den Mond," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 29/30 (1983/4): 46–49; Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992), § 100; Ulla Koch-Westenholz, "The Astrological Commentary *Šumma Sin ina tamurtišu* Table 1," pages 149–65 in *La*

radically differently, at the very least we should be uncertain about how this would have been viewed by eastern astrologers. On top of this, Molnar provides no evidence that a lunar occultation was particularly auspicious even in Hellenistic astrology; the understanding of such a conjunction as regal is well supported, but the rarer astronomical event is not. This shows that Molnar's case is more dubious than he expresses in his scholarship.

Uncertainty in interpreting ancient skies is compounded even when focusing solely on Greco-Roman sources for casting horoscopes. Looking at the very same horoscope produced by Molnar, it is possible to find conditions that would not have indicated the birth of a powerful, divine king; it is plausible to find that the nativity is that of a sex slave suffering from both epileptic seizures and elephantiasis.¹⁹ How is it possible to predict both a Jewish king and an unstable, deformed prostitute? The problem is that any horoscope has the potential for an almost unlimited number of possible interpretations. This becomes more complicated when including the various additions to horoscopic methodology, such as the consideration of decans, lunar nodes, the various lots, and more, all of which can add to the list of potentially good or bad natal conditions. Focusing on the good or bad aspects can produce the desired results. There is no denying that Molnar's horoscope has several powerful conditions in it that indicate a prosperous newborn, but one also cannot deny that there are negative aspects, only a few of which are mentioned here. If one did not know whose horoscope this was, it is unlikely that a consensus of astrologers could say what the horoscope predicts, a point highlighted by the history of natal charts created for Jesus since at least the fifteenth century.²⁰ Studies of astrologers bear out the fact that there is a high level of subjective interpretability for a given chart. When under blinded testing conditions, modern

Sciences des Cieux: Sages, Mages, Astrologues (ed. Rika Gyselen; Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1999), 154.

19 Molnar's horoscope has Mercury and Saturn in or near feminine signs, plus the Moon moving away from Venus toward Mercury. See Firmicus, *Mathesis* 3.9.1; 4.13.1–2 on how this leads to one becoming a eunuch or male prostitute. With the Moon moving away from Saturn, Firmicus, *Mathesis* 4.9.6 says this brings on deformities such as elephantiasis. Insanity is expected because the Moon is coming towards the Sun and would be considered in conjunction; see Firmicus, *Mathesis* 4.5.1.

20 Ornella Pompeo Faracovi, *Gli oroscopi di Cristo* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1999); Dieter Koch, *Der Stern von Bethlehem* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Häretischen Blätter, 2006); Max Tschudin, "Das Horoskop von Jesus-Christus—ein Versuch," *Astrologie Heute* 52 (Dec/Jan 1994/5): 8–11; Claude Weiss, "2000 Jahre Jesus Christ," *Astrologie Heute* 52 (Dec/Jan 1994/5): 12–16; Patrice Guinard, "L'étoile de Bethléhem: Un scénario organize par des astrologues," *C.U.R.A.* (2002); available at <http://cura.free.fr/16christ.html>.

astrologers prove that not only do they fail to predict someone's personality using horoscopes any better than chance, but their agreement on the meaning of horoscopes is almost no better than chance.²¹ There does not appear to be any reason why this would have been different two millennia ago, considering that even ancient sources like Ptolemy say that interpreting a horoscope is one of the most difficult things to do in science (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 1.2 (6–7)). There is little a modern historian can say about how a natal chart would have been interpreted without some ancient source telling us what they thought of it—and even then, they may simply be forcing their own knowledge onto the horoscope.

More generally, the use of astrological sources, namely the manuals by the various Hellenistic astrologers, may leave us more confused than informed about what an ancient eastern astrologer would have thought was happening and where it was to happen. Tamsyn Barton has shown how these manuals do not actually tell their readers how to interpret a horoscope,²² while reader-response criticism of Manilius' *Astronomica* reveals how the author was intentionally making it frustrating to work out how forecasts are made from a natal chart.²³ Though ambiguity on its own is taxing to a modern researcher, if the goal is to find a universal belief among the astrologers, the disagreements among and within these sources are infuriating. Again, Barton gives an example of a preserved interpretation of one young man's chart, and it seems to predict everything and its opposite.²⁴ Firmicus also has the same planetary conditions acting in opposite ways in his manual on astrology.²⁵ It seems that the classical diviners would be able to make a chart say whatever was needed at the time. This is true even when there are powerfully auspicious facets to the horoscope. For example, the coronation horoscope of Leontius, a usurper in the Eastern Roman Empire in the late fifth century, had Jupiter and the Sun in the ascendant as excellent conditions, just as in Molnar's horoscope for

21 John McGrew and Richard McFall, "A Scientific Inquiry into the Validity of Astrology," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 4 no. 1 (1990): 75–83; Rob Nanninga, "The Astrotest: A Tough Match for Astrologers," *Correlation* 15 no. 2 (1996): 14–20.

22 Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 114–42.

23 Steven Green, "Arduum ad Astra: The Poetics and Politics of Horoscopic Failure in Manilius' *Astronomica*," pages 120–38 in *Forgotten Stars: Rediscovering Manilius' Astronomica* (eds. Steven Green and Katharina Volk; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

24 Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 132–33.

25 Nicholas Campion, "The Possible Survival of Babylonian Astrology in the Fifth Century CE: A Discussion of Historical Sources," pages 69–92 in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres* (eds. Günther Oestmann, Darrel H. Rutkin, and Kocku von Stuckrad; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 80.

Jesus. Leontius had chosen the specific date and time for his coronation on the advice of his astrologers to maximize his chances of maintaining power. However, after the failure of Leontius to hold the throne, astrologers looked back at the same coronation horoscope and found that its negative aspects were countering its positive ones.²⁶ Even having so promising a natal chart as the one Molnar has devised is no guarantee that anyone in antiquity would have necessarily found it as powerful as Molnar would like to think, because its same conditions could be found to be insufficient depending on what the astrologers wanted to find.

The internal contradictions of any one astrologer and their work or the interpretation of any one horoscope also share the more general lack of conformity in deciding other matters of stellar influences. In particular, consider the astrological geographies found in various Western sources, especially those cited by Molnar, who tries to show that the sign of Aries would have indicated what was to happen to the Jews or those in Judea.²⁷ The clearest source on this is Ptolemy, who states that Aries was the sign that influenced the Holy Land as well as adjacent regions. However, Ptolemy says that the same sign ruled over those in Germania, Britannia, and elsewhere in the northwestern Roman world (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.3 [62, 66, 73–4]); if we were to go by Ptolemy alone,²⁸ we would have no more reason to think the magi would have gone to see the infant Jesus than to see the infant Boudicca decades later, or any Germanic or Gallic warlord close to the alleged time of Jesus' birth. Unfortunately, Molnar does not mention the broader application of Aries to world geography beyond just the Holy Land, an elision he repeats when discussing other sources. Worse is that it is only Ptolemy who mentions Judea in his astrological geography, while others require interpretation, guesswork, and similar avoidance of what other regions such constellations influence, and the best guesses disagree with Molnar's proposal.

For example, the citation of Vettius Valens and his association of Aries with Coele Syria (Valens, *Anthology* 1.2.6) is problematic for Molnar's thesis on

26 Champion, "The Possible Survival of Babylonian Astrology," 77–78; Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 67.

27 The astrological geographies from Western sources are considered in detail by Stephan Heilen in his contribution to this volume; eastern sources are considered by John Steele, also in this volume.

28 Ptolemy is also not using the astrological geography and the signs of the zodiac as a way of predicting events in regions of the world; instead, the zodiac signs are supposed to influence certain lands so their residents have certain characteristics. In the case of Aries over Judea, the sign was supposed to make people there bold, godless, and scheming. See Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.3 (66).

multiple points. The first is that Coele Syria and its adjacent areas are not the Holy Land, nor have these regions historically been considered a coupled pair. The second is that Valens may be forming his system based on the provincial reforms of Septimus Severus, who made northern Syria known as Coele Syria. This imperial designation is contrary to its traditional alias referring to southern Syria or modern-day Lebanon.²⁹ The third is that the region of Phoenicia (influenced by Leo; see Valens, *Anthology* 1.2.10) may better incorporate Judea. This point is supported by looking at the work of the first-century astrologer Manilius, also cited by Molnar for support. Again, Manilius does not mention Judea, and Molnar has to use poetic license to stretch the geography of Manilius in order to make Syria also include the Holy Land. However, the description Manilius provides strongly indicates that it is not Aries that rules over Palestine, but rather Aquarius that influences the lands between Egypt and the city of Tyre, a region Manilius refers to as Phoenicia (Manilius, *Astronomica* 4.620–7, 797–8). Including astrological geographies from Dorotheus of Sidon and Teucor of (Egyptian) Babylon only further demonstrates the level of confusion and contradiction; there was no one astrological geography used in the Hellenistic or Greco-Roman period. With the additional problem that Judea is almost never mentioned in these lists, talk of a ‘constellation of the Jews’ is a notion without basis. The difficulties do not end at this point, because none of these sources tell us what would have been believed by Eastern astrologers, who previously had their own astrological geographies that were far different than those found in extant Hellenistic texts; these Babylonian and Assyrian geographies were fluid and did not mention Judea at all.³⁰ Taken together, all of these points about astrological geographies render Molnar’s claims about Aries as the constellation of the Jews groundless.

The above points show just how difficult it is to know with any certainty what an astrologer, eastern or otherwise, would have thought of a natal chart, or what was the primary influence over a geographical region, when the focus

29 The last datable item in Valens’ work is from 188 CE, and the astrological geography cannot be dated on astronomical grounds. It is thus possible that the final published form of his *Anthology* was influenced by the provincial reforms of the 190s. Considering that Valens mentions Phoenicia, a territory that would likely have included modern-day Lebanon (and ancient Coele Syria), and thus differentiates Coele Syria from its historical placement, it is plausible Valens has reformed his astrological geography to match the forms of the late second century. On the other hand, if Coele Syria in Valens’ geography is the Beqaa Valley, then Phoenicia is a smaller and more particular territory. That would mean Coele Syria should also be restricted in the size of the territory Aries influences and probably not include Judea.

30 This point is addressed by John Steele in this volume.

is on the extant literature. However, this is not the only way Molnar attempts to defend his thesis. Among the sources Molnar cites for establishing a connection between Aries and the Jews, the most famous is the coinage of Antioch. However, the coins themselves give no indication that they have anything to do with Judea, since they have no iconography or text indicative of the region, and only speculation supports Molnar's thesis that Antiochene elites may have minted these coins to commemorate the annexation of the land in 6/7 CE. In his book, Molnar even suggests that the coiners knowingly depicted the Star of Bethlehem.³¹ However, there is a more plausible hypothesis that fits the data at least as well: the sign of Aries stood for the city of Antioch, which is the very thing the earliest coins say on their reverse. This could be because Syria is often connected to Aries in astrological geographies, but the true reason may be more particular to Antiochene history. Late sources suggest that the city was founded at early dawn in late April 300 BCE, and so both the ascendant and the Sun would have been in Aries;³² thus, this constellation was both the horoscopic and the Sun sign of the metropolis. This more plausible hypothesis means that any theories based on the coins of the Syrian city cannot add any evidence toward deducing what sign was associated with Judea, let alone what the Star of Bethlehem was.

Another line of argument is based on the historical report of astrologers to the Emperor Nero regarding his return to power in the East. Molnar tries to use the report from the historian Suetonius along with interrogational astrology to support his thesis. The Neronian birth horoscope had Aries in its anti-midheaven, and it was supposed to be in this sign that lost items, in this case Nero's imperial throne, were to be retrieved. Since the astrologers told Nero he was to return to power in the East, perhaps in Jerusalem, then Aries must be the sign identified with Judea. Molnar's use of Nero's horoscope and the report from Suetonius is discussed by Stephan Heilen in his contribution. As a complement to this analysis, I mention here the point that Suetonius is not considered reliable regarding the account of Nero's astrologers saying he would return to power in Jerusalem.³³ In general, classicists know that Suetonius, while a

31 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 53, 120–21.

32 Malalas, *Chronographia* 8.12. On issues with the date, see Sacha Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity: Empires, States, and Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 243 n. 27.

33 K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary* (Brussels: Latomus, 1978), 247; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and his Caesars* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 63–64; Barry Baldwin, *Suetonius* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1983), 174–80; B. H. Warmington, *Suetonius: Nero* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1977), 76–78.

valuable historical source, is very problematic when writing his later histories of the Caesars, and in particular when writing about Nero. This alone undermines the use of Suetonius in trying to establish Molnar's theory, but other issues equally undercut his efforts.³⁴

One final piece of evidence that Molnar provides for his hypothesis on the horoscope of Jesus is derived from information in an astrological treatise, the *Mathesis* of Firmicus Maternus. Molnar alleges that Firmicus had Jesus' horoscope and was using it as part of the study of what conditions made for undefeatable generals and godlike rulers.³⁵ If true, this would be an amazing confirmation of Molnar's thesis. However, bearing in mind that various sources from the second century onward could not even agree on what year Jesus was born,³⁶ let alone what day, it becomes an amazing claim that Firmicus in

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- 34 The biggest issue with Molnar's analysis was pointed out by Stephan Heilen. While Molnar used Nero's birth chart to determine the place for rediscovering lost goods, the astrological method for answering such questions (interrogational astrology) did not use the natal chart, but rather a chart of the heavens made when the question is asked (or when the event being asked about happened, but this latter case is not what Nero's astrologers could have used, since the lost throne was supposed to be in the future rather than the past). That date or time is not given in any source, nor is it derivable, thus undercutting Molnar's argument, which relies on the precise time of the Nero chart to determine what sign was at the anti-midheaven and in what place to look for the lost throne.
- 35 There exists some precedent in using Firmicus and astronomical calculations, along with historical considerations, to match a horoscope to a famous person, namely Caeionius Rufius Albinus (fourth century), first argued by Theodor Mommsen and then solidly confirmed by Otto Neugebauer, "The Horoscope of Ceionius Rufius Albinus," *American Journal for Philology* 74 no. 4 (1953): 418–20. However, unlike this case, Molnar is not relying on an entire horoscope with all of the planets located in their signs, but rather on a few conditions related particularly to Jupiter and the Moon. One cannot derive plausible dates for the horoscopic conditions Molnar is relying upon, so his project is far more like guesswork and speculation.
- 36 On the issues of chronology, see the chapter by Annette Merz in this volume. To show just how diverse such beliefs were, there is evidence that some Jewish Christians and Jews placed the life of Jesus a century earlier than the chronology found in the canonical Gospels. See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a, 64a, 67, 107b; *Shabbat* 104b; *Sotah* 47a; *Gittin* 56b–57a; Palestinian Talmud, *Hagigah* 2.2; in the Middle Ages, see the *Toledoth Yeshu*. For scholarship on this, see Hugh Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews: A New Translation of the Jewish Life of Jesus (the Toldoth Yeshu), with an Inquiry into the Nature of its Sources and Special Relationship to the Lost Gospel According to the Hebrews* (London: Duckworth, 1937), 101, 122, 146–47; Gerard Mussies, "The Date of Jesus' Birth in Jewish and Samaritan Sources," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 29 no. 4 (1998): 416–37.

the fourth century knew the very hour of his birth. Additionally, it is worth noting that in several places Firmicus discusses what signs predicted that a child would in the future be crucified (Firmicus, *Mathesis* 6.31.58; 8.6.11; 8.17.2; 8.22.3; 8.25.6);³⁷ none of those conditions exist in Molnar's horoscope for Jesus. Considering that Jesus would have been the most famous crucified man, one would think that the details of Jesus' horoscope would appear in these sections of the *Mathesis* as much as would indications of someone being a world ruler or semi-divine. This absence should at least count as some negative evidence. Concerning the suggested positive evidence (to be discussed below), Molnar's staggering conclusion does not appear to be justified, given that many of the conditions of the birth described by Firmicus are not consistent with Molnar's horoscope reconstruction, and some of the features Molnar highlights to support his reconstruction of Jesus' horoscope are unfortunately based on an English translation, with notable deficiencies, rather than on the Latin text itself.

Several of the features in the paragraph Molnar refers to (*Mathesis* 3.3.9) are not consistent with Molnar's other propositions, as follows: Firmicus says that the Moon should be full and waxing, while in Molnar's theory it is new and waning; Firmicus says that the Sun and Moon are in trine aspect, while for Molnar they are in conjunction; Jupiter is not in an exalted sign in Molnar's reconstruction, but in Firmicus' statement this was an important aspect of the nativity. Most of the features fit well into the horoscope of Caesar Augustus, while rather few are held in common with the proposed Jesus horoscope. This leaves little positive evidence for an extraordinary hypothesis. Molnar could protest that only those conditions mentioned by Firmicus that match the Jesus horoscope are worth considering, but this has the logical problem of ignoring contradictory evidence. To substantiate his claims, Molnar at least has to point to features that are not in Augustus' horoscope but are specific to the Jesus nativity and no other, which he attempts to do. Only two conditions in Firmicus' paragraph do not match Augustus' horoscope: the Sun was not in its exaltation in Aries,³⁸ and Jupiter was not in its morning rising, but this cannot

37 The last citation includes the statement that the crucified man would be killed in front of or by the order of the emperor.

38 However, the Latin of Firmicus, *Mathesis* 3.3.9 is ambiguous and has more possibilities. For one, either an exaltation or a sign of rejoicing is sufficient for the condition of the person being an unconquerable leader. Another point is that it is unclear whether the Sun or Jupiter is supposed to be the one in a sign of rejoicing or exaltation. Context suggests it is Jupiter in exaltation, since in two other places in the same paragraph Firmicus mentions Jupiter in its exaltation or sign of rejoicing. Given that Jupiter is in its exaltation (Cancer)

be indicative of Molnar's nativity reconstruction—the Sun in Aries would be true of one in twelve horoscopes, not the distinct one Molnar has for Jesus (see the previous note about translation issues), and Firmicus requires a trine aspect between the Sun and Jupiter, which Molnar does not have for Jesus; and the morning rising of Jupiter could well be in reference to another horoscope Molnar considered, that of Hadrian.³⁹ The paragraph from Firmicus can be completely understood using the two quintessential imperial horoscopes, with nothing left over for the necessary influence of a Jesus horoscope. Conversely, the only detail from Firmicus that would indicate a person who was a divinity requires a waxing Moon; all other details indicate an emperor or a general. The latter is not a likely statement about Jesus, and the former has an astrological condition not met by Molnar's reconstruction (waxing vs. waning Moon). The personal details that would be consistent with Christian beliefs about Jesus do not have the aspects found in Molnar's chart, while the features in that chart consistent with Firmicus' statements have personal characteristics one would not likely associate with Jesus. To support Molnar's conjectures, the personal characteristics and the horoscopic conditions would need to be consistent with the proposed natal chart of Jesus, but this is not the case. There is here no evidence in favor of Molnar's hypothesis,⁴⁰ and if anything evidence against his Jesus horoscope.

Also, Molnar's reliance on English translations of Firmicus' text means that his deductions, namely the meaning of the difficulty of observing Jupiter-Moon movements, are faulty. Molnar takes the statement that it is difficult to observe when the Moon moves toward Jupiter (it is in fact not difficult, as Molnar notes) as an indication of the difficulty of seeing the lunar occultation

in the Augustan horoscope, such an interpretation would make these details consistent with Firmicus' statements and what we know of the birthdate of Augustus, while this is inconsistent with Molnar's Jesus horoscope. Also, the exalted planet is supposed to form a trine aspect between the Sun and Jupiter, which is contrary to Molnar's efforts.

39 Hadrian's horoscope also has Jupiter being attended by the Sun and Saturn in its morning rising, as suggested by Firmicus as a powerful condition. On Hadrian, see Otto Neugebauer and H. B. Van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, 1959), 131.

40 The way Molnar approaches the manufacture of the Jesus horoscope may in part be the problem, showing why he cannot distance it from the horoscopes of the likes of Augustus and Hadrian. When looking for auspicious signs of regal births, the major sources used by Molnar (as well as Greco-Roman astrologers) were the charts of Augustus and Hadrian. This means that finding the conditions of Hadrian's natal chart in the Jesus horoscope, and then finding that those conditions are good portents in astrological treatises as confirmation of the reconstructed Jesus horoscope, is viciously circular.

in the early morning, a centerpiece of the proposed Jesus horoscope. Ignoring the fact that this is merely a speculative leap, there is a significant issue with the reading of this passage. Rather, what Firmicus says is that it is difficult to calculate or determine whether there is a conjunction of Jupiter with the wind of a waxing Moon.⁴¹ Wind isn't even mentioned in the quoted English translation of the text, and what this means requires interpretation. From the context of the paragraph concerning the latitude of Jupiter and the Moon (whether they are north or south), it seems Firmicus is using the winds as a synonym for latitudinal direction.⁴² This interpretation would also make sense of how it is difficult to ascertain whether Jupiter is in conjunction with the wind of the waxing Moon, because latitudinal information is usually not as easy to calculate or have on hand in astronomical tables as longitudinal information; instead, Firmicus seems to advise that the latitude be observed directly (see previous note). As such, there is nothing in the passage regarding something being difficult to observe that is not in fact difficult to do. Instead of referencing Molnar's morning lunar occultation (which Firmicus does not even hint at), it is an issue of computing or looking up lunar and Jovian latitudes. This passage from Firmicus cannot support the larger thesis by Molnar, as none of the details can be shown to be inconsistent with the Augustan/Hadrian horoscopes and conforming to the Jesus horoscope.

In summary, this short appraisal of Molnar's deductions shows that the main lines of evidence he uses to determine what sign classical astrologers thought indicated Judea or the Jewish people are problematic, and his attempts to find evidence to substantiate his horoscopic deductions are equally unsound, but this is hardly sufficient for a complete evaluation of his work. However, other issues, especially philological (see below), make the edifice of the Star of Bethlehem as explained by horoscopy exceedingly unstable, even if done again by another researcher. Along with the disregard for the reversal of how horoscopy works (predicting a child's future from a birth chart rather than predicting from a chart a child's birth), the fact that the results of supposedly

41 *Et si coniunctionem cum vento Lunae crescentis exceperit, divinae atque immortalis paene substantiae homines procreabit. Oportet autem semper eum, si sic Iuppiter fuerit collocatus, quo vento currens Luna ad eum feratur; difficile enim ista ratio colligetur* (from the Teubner 1897 critical edition). The first time the word *eum* (him/it) is used seems out of place, but Teubner (p. 108) suggests it is the direct object of the missing or elided term *observare* or something similar. Taking this seriously, the text says that it is always best to try to observe the conjunction of Jupiter with the wind of the waxing Moon, because it is otherwise difficult to know or calculate.

42 James Herschel Holden, *Julius Firmicus Maternus: Mathesis* (Tempe, AZ: American Federation of Astrologers, 2011), 103 n. 6.

auspicious findings are no better than equivocal and the sources on the astrological geographies are contradictory leads us down a foggy path or to a dead end (or both). In either case, finding the Star of Bethlehem this way is fruitless.

Two Centuries of Other Astronomical Theories of the Star of Bethlehem

Molnar's thesis is hardly the only one that has received wide consideration, and there have been about two hundred years of this sort of speculation. There are numerous other hypotheses, but I will only draw attention to the most popular and to those of historical note. While they need to be considered and critiqued in their own right before determining their historical value in explaining the star, they are methodologically inferior to the approach Molnar has taken in most respects. These speculations about interpretations of novel astronomical events are better than Molnar's approach in that they are in the tradition of universal astrology rather than natal/genethliological astrology, so they at least have the potential to speak to how ancient sky gazers would have predicted great events or the coming of great people into the world. However, while knowing what heavenly bodies were in the sky close to the time of Jesus' birth is relatively simple (with some exceptions), modern speculations often do not heavily rely on ancient sources to understand how these proposed signs would have been interpreted, something Molnar has done rather well. I noted above that astrologers, whether past or present, have little ability to agree on the meaning of a given horoscope, so having a modern astronomer predict what an ancient astrologer would have thought without reliance on Greek or Latin texts becomes a multiplicative factor on top of how unconfident we must be in any estimate of what ancient sky watchers would have thought about a given conjunction of the planets. Still, these various hypotheses are a part of the history of how the star was interpreted and will be briefly considered here.

Perhaps the most famous suggestion for the Star of Bethlehem is the conjunction(s) of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE in the sign of Pisces. The idea is attributed to Kepler in his chronological book from 1614, but the idea both preceded and followed him. The association between the birth of Jesus and these so-called great conjunctions goes back to Abu Mashar in the eleventh century, and a different great conjunction in Leo was first proposed by Masha'allah in the eighth or ninth century.⁴³ That the star was one of these conjunctions, or

43 E. S. Kennedy and David Pingree, *The Astrological History of Masha'allah* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), especially p. 72.

perhaps the planet Jupiter in conjunction, was not proposed until much later by Bishop Friedrich Mütter in the 1820s. For Kepler, the star was a different object than the planets and was miraculous in nature.⁴⁴ More recently, David Hughes has promoted the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE as the best explanation for the star (with Jupiter as the star itself),⁴⁵ and it remains a common hypothesis in planetarium shows during the Christmas season. The most serious issues particular to this thesis are that the astrological theory of great conjunctions, and hence the importance of these Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions, did not come about until centuries later;⁴⁶ also, according to the theory of great conjunctions, it was supposed to be the first conjunction of these planets in a fiery sign that signaled a great change in the world, which is the reason Masha'allah chose the conjunction of 26 BCE in Leo, a fiery sign. In addition, there is no ancient evidence that suggests Pisces was associated with the Jews⁴⁷ (a problem that ancient astrological geographies only make worse, as seen above) or that conjunctions in a certain sign indicated a ruler for a particular part of the world, and thus there is no link between such conjunctions and the belief in the birth of a specifically Jewish king. Hughes and others suggest looking at the movements of these planets in mythological terms, such as Jupiter/Zeus taking power from Saturn/Kronos, and projecting this onto Semitic mythology and then onto Jewish messianism;⁴⁸ there is no indication that anyone in antiquity looked at the planets in this way, especially surprising when this would have required a grand comeuppance every 20 years when the planets met and yet it went unrecorded.

Another major proposal is that the star was a comet, namely one seen in 5 BCE and recorded in Chinese records. The most recent attempt to justify this

44 Concerning Kepler in general, as well as his relation to the Star of Bethlehem, see the chapter by Owen Gingerich in this volume. On Kepler, Abu Mashar, and Mütter, see Adair, "The Star of Christ," 9, 11–14.

45 Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem*. See also Hughes' contribution to this volume.

46 David Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," *Isis* 54 no. 2 (1963): 229–46; Pingree, "Historical Horoscopes," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82 no. 4 (Oct–Dec 1962): 487–502.

47 The oldest source that makes this connection comes from a fifteenth-century rabbi, but even at this time, rabbis argued about what was the sign of the Jews. See Azariah dei Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes* (trans. Joanna Weinberg; Yale: Yale University Press, 2001), 548–50 for some Renaissance analysis of this very question and the diversity of views among European Jewish elites.

48 Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 186–87. Also note that there is no Semitic evidence that Marduk/Baal or El were violent rival powers in heaven similar to Zeus and Kronos, as Hughes and his source have supposed.

comes from Colin Humphreys,⁴⁹ and the greatest difficulty with this idea is the almost universal belief in ancient records that comets were terrible omens; the very few exceptions to the rule⁵⁰ cannot build a case for saying that the 5 BCE comet was seen as auspicious. While conceivably possible, there is no sound argument provided as to why such a comet would have been seen as auspicious, though the great conjunctions of 7 BCE are often referenced as a way to interpret this comet favorably. In other words, the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn are a sign of important things to come, and then the comet acts as some sort of confirmation. This means the comet hypothesis suffers the same weaknesses as the proposal of Münter and Hughes, along with additional liabilities, so it is an inherently less plausible interpretation of what would have been considered portentous for Jewish kings. Humphreys's philological arguments in favor of comets being able to 'go before' and 'stand over' locales are also problematic,⁵¹ but the same can be said of all other theories (see below). This already makes the comet hypothesis weaker than planetary explanations.

Novae, on the other hand, as promoted by Mark Kidger,⁵² cannot be proven to have been seen at the time fitting the chronology of the Gospel of Matthew. Neither Eastern nor Western records indicate any candidate novae just before the death of King Herod and thus before the birth of Jesus,⁵³ but advocates for the nova hypothesis try to assert otherwise. The claims regarding what is found in Korean records of comets in 5 and 4 BCE are problematic, in particular the claim that the tailless comet in 4 BCE mentioned in late Korean annals is from the Chinese record of a 5 BCE comet with a tail. First, the 5 BCE object is clearly said to have had a tail and thus cannot be a nova; second, the two objects are at least twenty degrees apart in the sky according to the records, an impossibility if they are both the same immobile nova; third, the 4 BCE object is recorded

49 Colin Humphreys, "The Star of Bethlehem—a Comet in 5 BC—and the Date of the Birth of the Christ," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32 (1991): 389–407.

50 On my count, there are only two known cases where a comet was historically seen as a positive omen in the classical Mediterranean world: the comet of Julius Caesar after his death, and the comets in the years of the birth and ascension of Mithridates VI. On the other hand, in Eastern records from antiquity up into the Islamic age, I have found no examples of comets as auspicious.

51 Already noted by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, "The Star of Bethlehem—A New Explanation—Stationary Point of a Planet," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 33 (1992): 363–74, especially 368.

52 Mark Kidger, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

53 Bradley Schaefer (in this volume) appraises modern proposals of novae as seen around the time of Jesus' birth.

by the Chinese as well and makes the entire line of argument baseless—this last fact is not addressed by Kidger, though it was pointed out in the scientific literature twenty years earlier.⁵⁴ Furthermore, ancient evidence provides no grounds to show that novae would have been viewed positively rather than as another form of the evil comet. As in the case of comets, outside support is needed to find astrological importance, and Kidger relies on the 7 BCE conjunctions, which are already sufficiently problematic (see above).

The last major hypothesis to mention is a popular one, though not among historians: the extraterrestrial vessel or UFO thesis. Given advanced alien technology, a craft could be seen and move about in such a way as to fit the description of the star found in the gospel, though why the object is referred to as something stellar rather than as a ship remains unexplained. We also have to speculate as to why the magi would follow such a craft or think they needed to go to Judea to find a child, other than perhaps communication with the magi, as seen in some derivative sources (i.e., *The Revelation of the Magi*). While the idea has been discussed by UFO contactees, by various authors on ET visitations, and in the infamous American television series *Ancient Aliens*, the UFO Star of Bethlehem had been seriously proposed by a religious scholar, Rev. Barry Downing,⁵⁵ as a means of circumventing the demythologizing project of theologians such as Rudolph Bultmann. Given that there is no solid evidence for the existence of such extraterrestrial beings or their ability to travel the vast depths of space, let alone any reason why they would hover over a particular town in Palestine to bedevil the locals and secular powers, it is not a much better proposal than the traditional, miraculous one. Its only advantage is that it is physically possible.

While including UFOs in scholarly discussion as a possible explanation for strange events is normally inappropriate, the proposal itself is indicative of a general trend seen in modern research into miraculous stories of the past. It is a part of the rationalization of ancient stories, perhaps the easiest form of modern euhemerization, since extraterrestrials can do just about anything with their superior machinery. Alien interventions have the problem of incredibly low plausibility, but they act in the same way as astronomical theories of the star: they move a seemingly unrealistic event from the realm of the impossible into that of the possible, as something explicable and real. The rationalization of amazing stories from the Bible was a popular scholarly position in the early nineteenth century because it avoided the cognitive dissonance of

54 Christopher Cullen, "Can we Find the Star of Bethlehem in Far Eastern Records?" *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 20 (1979): 153–59.

55 Downing, *The Bible and Flying Saucers*, 134.

the perfect clockwork universe of God and the miracles of the Old and New Testaments, even if they used implausible readings of the text or historically far-fetched adaptations; the similarity in reasoning and method to UFO explanations has been noted by the biblical scholar Robert M. Price.⁵⁶ This general rationalization approach seems to be particularly attractive to the contemporary mindset,⁵⁷ not just of scientists but of the populace as well, and a fuller explanation for this would require a sociological approach rather than a purely historical one, which is worthy of its own line of research. For now, this will be left aside to consider the historical question of using modern science to answer the question at hand about the Star of Bethlehem.

Literal Meaning and Literary Meaning

If science is to explain the star, it is necessary to focus on the actual text in question. Up to this point, the various hypotheses about the star have been reached in the absence of the description found in the Gospel of Matthew, besides the general facts of its auspicious nature and its indicating the birth of a newborn king of the Jews. The details from the Greek text are the crucible for any proposal to explain the star. Since the early nineteenth century, there have been various attempts to either reanalyze the grammar and vocabulary of the pericope or take the language of the author less literally, or often some combination of the two. The advantage of taking the story less literally is that it allows greater freedom to include astronomical solutions regarding what the star was; the disadvantage is that the strategy is a double-edged sword, in that if the story is taken so loosely as to allow for an astronomical event to explain the miraculous star, we risk creating a modern myth rather than explaining an old one, and such looseness makes it impossible to choose among various astronomical hypotheses. There is a need to constrain the reading of the text, otherwise we ignore the intent of the author and substitute our own; the best way to proceed is to compare the language used by the author of the gospel with how the terminology is used elsewhere in the gospel and the New Testament or how it is used by contemporary sources. Any reconstruction of

56 Robert M. Price, *Night of the Living Savior* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2013), 44–45.

57 However, this phenomenon is not limited to the modern era, since it also appears in the speculations of Euhemerus and other educated persons in antiquity, as noted above; however, there is not as much evidence to show that these ideas had currency in the general populace prior to the modern era.

the star needs to then show how phrases such as “went before” and “stood over” could have been understood by someone in the first century, and whether they were ever used to describe astronomical motions. A number of the contributors to this volume have done just that, so my efforts here are partially to summarize and partially to highlight the issues involved in the philological analysis of the portrayal of the star.

One aspect of the description of the star is how it was seen either “in the east” or, more probably, “at its rising,” using the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (Matt 2:2, 9).⁵⁸ Molnar argues that this phrase is actually a technical one from astrological literature, indicating that the star was at a heliacal rising. Again, this was suggested before by Voigt, and the claim seems to originate with him. However, it was in his own time that Voigt’s suggestion was called naïve by Franz Boll,⁵⁹ the premier authority of the early twentieth century on Hellenistic astrology. Sources such as Geminus of Rhodes from the first century specify that the proper term for a heliacal rising was ἐπιτολή (*Isagoge* 13) or that some additional term needed to be added to ἀνατολή in order to specify a heliacal rather than a general rising,⁶⁰ though ἀνατολή on its own could be used by someone who was not being careful with their terminology.⁶¹ Lacking specificity, the use of ἀνατολή as found in the gospel does not seem to suggest ancient scientific verbiage. The particular phrase using ἀνατολή and the preposition ἐν is rare in extant Greek texts and makes a refined interpretation difficult, but one case from Ptolemy suggests it could indicate a star’s first rising from the eastern horizon in the morning, hence indicating a morning star.⁶² In addition to pure philology, consider that the gospel narrative has Herod interrogate the magi about the exact time of the appearance of the star. This also suggests that the star made its first appearance when rising, which again

58 Considering the meaning of this phrase, see the contributions in this volume by Stephan Heilen and Antonio Panaino.

59 Franz Boll, “Der Stern der Weisen,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentlich Wissenschaft* 18 no. 1/2 (1917): 40–48.

60 Cf. Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie grecque* (Paris : Leroux, 1899), 111 n. 3.

61 Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 202.

62 See Johan Ludvig Heiberg, ed., *Claudii Ptolemaei syntaxis mathematica* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1898–1903), part 2, p. 595, translated in G. J. Toomer, *Ptolemy’s Almagest* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1984), 639. See also Astrologica, *De Sole et Luna*, vol. 12, 107 l. 20; Hephaestion, *Apotelesmatica* 1, 228 l. 8; Manetho, *Apotelesmatica*, book 2 l. pinax 7 speaks of certain planets that are strengthened when rising or setting with the Sun, a context made clearer in Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 1.8 (22), where a heliacal rising is meant (according to the Loeb translation notes) and repeated by the astrologer with greater precision in 3.11 (144).

suggests a morning rising, as it had not been visible before then.⁶³ Such a deduction⁶⁴ is surprising and intriguing, because there is also the coincidence of the mention of the morning star elsewhere in the Christian canon, namely in Rev 2:28 and 22:16, and in 2 Pet 1:19. This will be considered later in this chapter. Nonetheless, on the point of astronomy and the star, there is no serious difficulty in the idea that a star or planet could fit the description “rising.” The phrase can only exclude objects such as the northern stars, which do not rise above or set below the horizon as experienced by a ground-based observer; conversely, a star researcher should not exclude hypotheses that lack a heliacal rising based on this phrase alone.

In contrast, it is Matt 2:9 that gives the greatest trouble for any naturalistic hypothesis for the star—προήγγεν αὐτοὺς ἕως ἑλθῶν ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον. In context and read literally by all commentators up to modern times, this says that the star led the magi south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and then stopped and hovered over the home of the holy family. This was a supernatural object in the minds of all ancient believers, and this view was only argued against with rationalizations of biblical stories beginning in the nineteenth century in an effort to defend the historicity and authority of the Bible. In turn, these early attempts were countered by David Strauss in the 1830s and led to the end of this sort of practice in biblical studies. Strauss also spent much time addressing the arguments for some physically possible reading of the star, showing that the text did not support any of the proposed suppositions.⁶⁵ In his influential work on the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, Raymond Brown stated that even astronomers do not take everything in the Gospel of Matthew’s account literally; in an earlier edition of his monograph on the natal stories, he stated that no astronomical objects fit the description.⁶⁶

However, it was in Brown’s time that astronomers tried to align the vocabulary of the gospel with that of astronomy and astrology. Molnar’s work in

63 Courtney Roberts, *The Star of the Magi: The Mystery that Heralded the Coming of Christ* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2007), 122, citing email conversations with two translators of Greek astrological texts, Robert Schmidt and Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, on the meaning of the language used by Matthew with respect to the star.

64 Email correspondence with Stephan Heilen and Antonio Panaino has made me cautious, and I note that the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ is too ambiguous to argue specifically for a morning rising. Only by comparison to similar phrases (referenced above) and the contextual points from the gospel do I think I can make a plausible case for a morning star, but I must admit that it is impossible to be certain on this point.

65 David Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835), 220–53.

66 Raymond E. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 36, 176, 188, 190, 612–13.

particular falls into this type of argument, claiming that the various terms refer to the retrograde motion and stations of the planets as they move through, and stop in, the zodiac.⁶⁷ Other authors may do the same without direct reference to the Greek vocabulary of the gospel, in part because modern astronomers are not fluent in that language; when they do, their lack of knowledge becomes apparent and embarrassing.⁶⁸ The direct link between exact astronomical terms and Matthew's text is unlikely to work, as shown in a review of Molnar's book by New Testament textual critic J. Neville Birdsall,⁶⁹ while Stephan Heilen (in this volume) provides the most thorough appraisal, which agrees that Molnar's philology is faulty. I concur with these assessments that the vocabulary of the gospel is distinct from the generally used verbiage of astronomical and astrological treatises, and there appears to be no analogous use of the terms found in the gospel and those required by modern astronomers.

Conversely, the way Matthew uses the vocabulary strongly indicates that he has something preternatural in mind. For example, the phrase about how the star "stood over where the child was" (ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον) uses ἐπάνω followed by the genitive; this construction is used multiple times in the gospel, in all cases indicating that something is directly on top of the object or hovering above it. For example, the angel at the empty tomb sat *upon* the stone door that had been rolled away (Matt 28:2); the sign on the cross was *above* Jesus (Matt 27:37) and certainly not at some astronomical height. Numerous examples from the New Testament can be provided, while this construction never finds its way into astrological or astronomical texts to refer to stars in the sky above geographical locations, instead using the preposition ὑπέρ when speaking of stars above the earth (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.5 [76]; cf. Josephus,

67 Even if we ignore issues of philology, the proposal that the star underwent retrograde motion and reached its station during the night the magi were observing the star on their way to Bethlehem is impossible. The naked eye cannot differentiate the change from retrograde to station in a matter of hours, and the trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem—the period when the star is “going before” and “standing over”—would not have taken more than about two hours, even travelling at mere walking speed. Nor was it possible to predict the time of the station with the level of precision needed to fit the narrative of the gospel story.

68 Kidger (*The Star of Bethelhem*, 289) tried to convert the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ to the plural form, but he used the nominative case instead of the dative and invented a definite article. Worse, Gustav Teres (*The Bible and Astronomy: The Magi and the Star in the Gospel* [Oslo: Solum-Forlag, 2002], 20) created his own conjugation, the “aorist imperfect,” which is both imaginary and logically impossible, by conjoining two different tenses.

69 Owen Gingerich, Michael Hoskin, David W. Hughes, and J. Neville Birdsall, “Review Symposium,” *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 33 (2002): 386–94, especially p. 392.

JW 6.5.3). Later sources such as the *Protoevangelium of James* and one textual variant of the Gospel of Matthew (Codex Bezae)⁷⁰ use the same grammatical construct to place the star over Jesus' head (while the star is in a cave, as seen in these non-canonical gospel stories). Given this, it seems futile to continue to claim that the gospel author is trying to explain something with astrological or astronomical terminology, especially given that the star pericope had been interpreted for centuries as supernatural.⁷¹

The language of the first evangelist would seem to exclude any explanation from the natural sciences, and this should have forced modern readers to ponder not what actually happened around the birth of Christ, but rather what Matthew was trying to tell his audience in the first place. All of the above observations have been made without addressing two points that ought to be considered before trying to align the skies with the narrative: what type of story is the author trying to tell—that is, what is the genre—and whether the events are even plausibly historical. Since the late eighteenth century, there has been skepticism regarding the stories of the Gospels, and the first person we know of to doubt the nativity account of the star was Hermann Samuel Reimarus in his posthumously circulated fragments. It was in response to critics like Reimarus that we see the first attempts to explain the star, along with all of the other apparent miracles of the Bible, as interpreted in rationalized ways consistent with natural law, preserving the historical plausibility of the tales. Many of these efforts to explain the supernatural tales, including the star, were counteracted in 1835 by the young David Friedrich Strauss, who argued that many of the stories found in the Gospels are “*mythus*” and so must be seen as symbolic narrative and not history.⁷² While not all of Strauss's arguments have been adopted by modern scholars, the general consensus has been that many

70 Reuben Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus: Matthew* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995), 17.

71 During the conference, Schaefer suggested that, even assuming the tale of the star to be fiction, a hypothesis such as Molnar's could explain the tale—for instance, if a later Christian consulted (or was) an astrologer and back-calculated what would have been auspicious at the time of Jesus' birth. This would then enter into the Matthean narrative, perhaps in a distorted fashion. A similar idea was suggested in Thorndike (*History of Magic and Experimental Science* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–58], vol. 1, 471–72), that the early Christians attempted to give Jesus a regal horoscope, but they were so uneducated that they botched the project. Since the language of the gospel narrative indicates a literally miraculous object, we would need to follow Thorndike and insult the author's intelligence to make the hypothesis work. This is an implausible means to explain the tale, considering the obvious education of the author and his literary skill.

72 Adair, “The Star of Christ.”

of the stories told about Jesus were written not with history but rather with theology in mind, and so the tales must be analyzed critically. With respect to the star, no credentialed scholar has published in peer-reviewed works in favor of any naturalistic hypothesis in over half a century, and skepticism largely prevails with respect to the question of whether there is anything historical behind the apparent legend.

The issues with the Gospels and ascertaining the historical Jesus cannot all be addressed here, and Annette Merz's contribution to this volume is necessary for background, but several features indicate that the story of the star in particular is not historical. The pericope is surrounded by other amazing tales of angels and virgin births—in addition to the physically impossible movements of the star. The author provides no evidence that he is using some reliable historical source or method. Considering the fact that the author of Matthew is using the Gospel of Mark as a source, and that earlier gospel is already full of spectacular tales, Matthew's embellishments become all the stranger if one assumes that he was recording what he believed actually happened ca. 33 CE, let alone ca. 6 BCE, with no identifiable sources.⁷³ If the author of the gospel is trying to be a historian, he is neither a careful nor a critical one and must be classed below Suetonius at his worst—this is just one indication that Matthew is not even making an attempt at doing history or recording what was supposed to have really happened. A continuous narrative with marvelous elements and no indication to the reader of how the author knows what is happening is far more consistent with fictional tales, be they epics, novels, or some other related genre.

Returning to the story in question, the very historical context in which the birth narrative places itself is dubious. The biblical magi, who would have been members of the caste of Zoroastrian priests, have no motivation to come to worship a Jewish king or messiah. After all, they were priests of a completely different religion and had their own concept of a savior figure. The fact that later inscriptions show that the magi happily persecuted both Jews and

73 By the time the Gospel of Matthew was composed, no witness to the birth of Jesus was likely to have been alive. Traditionally, Joseph was dead before the ministry of Jesus, and Mary only appears momentarily in Acts 1:14 and otherwise in legendary works; she would also likely have been dead by the time of the composition of the gospels. At best, this leaves some oral tradition, but that can only be an assumption, one that is not evident, given the differences between Matthew and Luke's nativity stories. There is not likely to have been any historically reliable source that Matthew had access to concerning the birth of Jesus, assuming he had any source at all.

Christians,⁷⁴ indicating there was no reverence for the Hebraic faith, is in contradiction to the idea that members of this priestly order ever traveled to worship a newborn Jewish religious figure. The only narrative motivation from the gospel is the appearance of the star, but the author seems to be following the false belief that the magi were astrologers; in actual fact, Hellenistic astrology did not become an accepted practice among Zoroastrian religious leaders until centuries later.⁷⁵ All of this is already in contradiction to what we know from history. Concerning the magi, Antonio Panaino and Ab de Jong in this volume provide necessary information indicating that it is not possible to call the magi ‘astrologers’, let alone Hellenistic ones.

Additionally, the tale we are told ought to have been recorded for multiple reasons. According to the Gospel of Matthew, King Herod had infants in Bethlehem murdered in order to root out the escaping Christ-child, something he did in part because of what he was told by the magi. The appearance and announcements of the magi in Jerusalem were supposed to have put the entire city in great fear (Matt 2:3), and yet the events of the slaughter of the innocents go unrecorded outside of the gospel and derivative literature. Even more problematic is that the coming of the magi should have been an international affair involving the most powerful empires in the region. Magi were a part of the Persian government, having a role as king-makers in their own land.⁷⁶ Had they come to a Roman-controlled territory to declare someone else its king, usurping not just the authority of Herod the Great but also of Caesar Augustus, there should have been a diplomatic showdown or even a war between the Roman and Persian empires, as there were when similar disputes over who was to control the satellite country of Armenia came up between the ancient

74 S. A. Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1993), 34; Mary Boyce, ed., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 112–113; P. Gignoux, “L’Inscription de Kartir à Sar Mashad,” *Journal Asiatique* 256 (1968): 387–418.

75 *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 2, 258–59; Mussies, “Some Astrological Presuppositions of Matthew 2: Oriental, Classical and Rabbinical Parallels,” pages 25–44 in *Aspects of Religious Contact and Conflict in the Ancient World* (ed. Pieter Willem van der Horst; Utrecht: Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid Universiteit Utrecht, 1995), 28–37; Albert De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 397–98; Robert Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 147–65, 369, 377f, 400f, 410–11; Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 238.

76 Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 113–14.

superpowers.⁷⁷ But again, this Judean incident received no mention in any historical accounts of the period, an implausible silence in the record.⁷⁸

Even comparing the story with the records of other Christians shows how problematic the tale is as history. No independent account of the Star of Bethlehem exists in all of the Christian sources we have. The other canonical version of the birth of Jesus comes from the Gospel of Luke, and it contains well-known contradictions of the Matthean version of events, most notably the time of Jesus' birth. In Matthew, Jesus is born before the death of Herod the Great in 5/4 BCE, while in Luke he is born during the census of Quirinius in 6/7 CE, a disparity of at least a decade. Luke recalls none of the major details of the star legend, including the magi, the escape to Egypt and return to the Holy Land, the slaughter of the innocents, or anything that would even have suggested that Jesus' birth would have been noticed by or threatening to local rulers such as Herod. This situation is even worse if Luke knew the Matthean Gospel, but considering that this question would require addressing the literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels, an exploration that cannot be adequately undertaken here.⁷⁹

77 For example, when Persia tried to install their desired king in Armenia against Roman wishes, this led to a war during Nero's reign. See Tacitus, *Annals* 13; Dio, *Roman History* 62; Suetonius, *Nero* 57. For an earlier case that almost came to war but was avoided through diplomatic means, see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.96–105; Tacitus, *Annals* 2.58; Suetonius, *Caligula* 41.3; *Vitellius* 2.4; Dio, *Roman History* 59.27.3–4.

78 Often the argument from silence is said to be invalid, but this is not quite true. Rather, it needs to be in a particular form to be valid and useful. Namely, the silence has to be unexpected if the event had taken place; that is, one would expect someone to have written about something if it had been the type of event that would have caught people's attention. For example, entering a room and not seeing an elephant inside is good evidence that there is no such animal there, because if there were an elephant in the room, you would certainly have seen it; conversely, if you never went in to look, then the failure to see an elephant is not evidence that there was not an elephant inside the room. On the other hand, if you enter the room and do not see a flea, it is not strong evidence that there is no flea in the room, because it would be hard to observe; not seeing the flea is almost expected, whether or not there is such an insect in the room. On the proper use of the argument from silence, see Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2012), 117–19. In the case of interest here, a war or major diplomatic commotion should have been expected if Persian magi came to say that another person was the king of Judea, a Roman territory. That no evidence of this exists is highly unexpected, and this makes for a very strong argument from silence.

79 The most popular belief among biblical scholars is that Matthew and Luke share a common source of sayings called Q, and otherwise the two gospels are independent of

The haunting silence of the historical record with regard to an event that would have rocked the Roman world, the inconsistencies of what we know of the peoples involved, the contradictions with other Christian narratives, combined with the question of how reliable a source the gospel authors are, all make it impossible to believe that this story is based on events from the time of Jesus' birth. Just as importantly for addressing the question of historicity, it is necessary to see how well such a tale conforms to legendary motifs expected of any super-man from this time and place. When compared to other tales of heroic figures, along with literary practices of the time, it seems that the hypothesis of legend- or myth-making is the far more plausible alternative. The birth story of Jesus conforms particularly well to the archetypal legends of the births of heroes. Concerning one specific case, there is strong conformity to the birth narrative of Moses (especially in variants of the story, such as one found in Josephus' history of the Jews), the most obvious connection being between Pharaoh's attempt to kill the infant Moses and Herod's attempt to kill baby Jesus, with both despots killing many innocent babies to try to get at the prophesied leader of the Jews (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2.9, §§ 2–3). The genre markers at this point mean we should place the stories of the birth of Christ in the same category as the stories of the birth of Perseus, Heracles, Zoroaster, Romulus, and Moses (especially in the expansion by Josephus), among others, something that has been recognized for at least a century.⁸⁰ For most folklorists, the stories of Jesus' birth are a part of the general paradigm for the birth of a hero and are inherently not historical.

Now that it has been shown what category of story the Star of Bethlehem falls into, the remaining task is to determine the particular model used by the author of the gospel in crafting his story. As with the astronomical theories, there are a number of proposals for the source or influence that was particular to the star legend as we have it. One is related to a historical event with a real star in the heavens, along with magi and kings, but from a different time and place. The suggestion concerns the appearance of a comet in 66 CE and the celebrations of the new king of Armenia, Tiridates. His procession to Rome,

each other. The nativity stories are thus unknown to each other. However, arguments such as that by Mark Goodacre (*The Case Against Q* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002]) seem persuasive to me, e.g., that Luke used Matthew as a source and there was no Q document. Nonetheless, the answer to the Synoptic question is not the determinate for answering the question of the historicity of the Star of Bethlehem.

80 Robert A. Segal, *In Quest of the Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially 188–89.

where he received his crown from Nero, included magi in his entourage.⁸¹ The story, including a new king, a star, magi, and the phrase used by Roman historians that he returned to his land by another route (Dio, *Roman History* 63.7; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 30.6; cf. Matt 2:12), is all rather suggestive.

However, there are some significant issues with viewing the procession of Tiridates as the source of the Matthean tale. On a methodological point, most scholars who adopt this hypothesis are not using the approaches of mimesis criticism, so they lack the best working theoretical foundation for literary influence or imitation. One of the points of consideration is perhaps one that is obvious without studying mimesis: Would the audience of Matthew's Gospel, decades after the time of Nero, have known about the comet and Armenian procession, especially how the return route differed from the original path? This does not seem likely, especially since none of the ancient historians connected the comet with Tiridates; Suetonius, for example, mentions the comet after the episode with Tiridates was over (Suetonius, *Nero* 36.1). There is nothing that indicates the comet functioned as a sign of the king, let alone as a heavenly guide. The magi in the Tiridates episode seem incidental, while in the Matthean story they are instrumental; why Matthew would have put so much emphasis on these figures is unknown. When it comes to interpretability, it is not at all clear why Matthew would try to model Jesus after the Armenian king who was coming to Nero to become in effect the emperor's puppet. While this hypothesis is proposed in some studies of the nativity, it is not the most popular one in biblical studies.

The particular literary influence on the story of the star most often considered by biblical scholars is the prophecy of Balaam from Num 24:17—a star will rise out of Jacob, and a scepter out of Israel.⁸² This verse had been used to identify or prophesy the coming messiah in multiple sources, most notably in the Dead Sea Scrolls and for the revolt of Simon bar Kokhba in the 130s CE.⁸³ Early Christian commentators also cited the Numbers passage when considering the gospel account of the star (Justin, *Dial.* 106, 126.1).⁸⁴ This was made all the more

81 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 611. See also the contribution by Roger Beck in this volume.

82 David Instone-Brewer, "Balaam—Laban as the Key to the Old Testament Quotations of Matthew 2," pages 207–27 in *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (eds. Daniel Gurtner and John Nolland; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); Martin Dibelius, *Botschaft und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), I p. 42 n. 68; David Sim, "The Magi: Gentiles or Jews?" *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 55 no. 4 (1999): 990–96.

83 See the chapter in this volume by Helen Jacobus on this topic.

84 See also the chapter by Darrell Hannah in this volume.

natural because the rising star in Num 24:17 is using the same root word that talks of the Star of Bethlehem seen “at its rising.” Along with this, scholars point to Isa 60, where it says kings will come to a rising light in Israel and bear gifts of gold and frankincense, and magi were said to be almost kings by the Christian writer Tertullian (Tertullian, *Contra Marcion* 3.13). For the ancient reader familiar with the Old Testament, it would have been clear that Matthew is indicating that Jesus was king and messiah, conforming to eschatological hopes. This line of investigation is more in line with what is known about Jewish literary techniques (cf. *midrash, persherim*) and so has strong advantages over the proposal of the 66 CE comet and Armenian procession.

While the Balaam prophecy is widely pointed to as explaining the star pericope, a number of scholars have noted its limitations in fully explaining the story.⁸⁵ While not a complete list of potential grievances, here are several issues with the Balaam prophecy as the best (or at least complete) explanation for the Star of Bethlehem. First is the uncharacteristic lack of a citation of the prophecy by Matthew, who otherwise declares how such-and-such event or detail was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In the nativity story alone, the author of Matthew has five citations of the Old Testament. A missing citation for the star prophecy is hard to explain if it is simply derived from Num 24:17. Second, besides the one common verbal root, there is rather little linguistic connection between the Greek version of the Hebrew passage and the gospel story, such as how the star is supposed to rise out of Jacob; especially noteworthy is that there is no indication in either the Hebrew or the Greek of Num 24:17 that the star moves and guides anyone.⁸⁶ More important is this third point: the star in Num 24:17 is supposed to be the king or anointed one himself, not his homing beacon, as has been true in many other Jewish interpretations of the same prophecy. The change of this detail in Matthew is hard to explain, supposing the author was primarily basing the tale on the prophecy of Balaam;

85 In his chapter in this volume, George van Kooten examines the quality of the Balaam prophecy as a complete explanation, and comparison should be made with the chapters by Helen Jacobus and Darrell Hannah, also in this volume. For some of the previous scholarship on this issue, see Tobias Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” pages 233–46 in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (eds. George van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten; Leiden: Brill, 2008); David Senior, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 45; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 131; Mussies “Some Astrological Presuppositions,” 26–27.

86 At this point, one could suggest a connection with the pillar of fire from the stories of the Jews wandering in the desert, but there is rather little linguistic connection between the LXX descriptions of the pillar and Matthew’s star.

it is apparently so hard to explain that I have found no attempt by a biblical scholar to provide a reason. Fourth is the problem with Balaam himself, if the magi are supposed to stand in for him. In both Jewish and Christian sources, Balaam was not a respected figure and was supposed to have led the Israelites astray (cf. Rev 2:14, 2 Pet 2:15, Jude 1:11). The common explanation is that the magi are supposed to be successors of Balaam, and Philo of Alexandria says that Balaam was a magus (Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 1.276).⁸⁷ However, there is no indication of scorn towards the magi in the gospel, as if they were Balaamites; instead, they are portrayed in a positive light as reverent figures, in contrast to the Jewish leadership. The magi's very purpose in the narrative is to show how faithful Gentiles came to the Lord while Jewish elites failed to see the light; if anything, Balaam is a better thematic fit for Herod and the scribes. Fifth then is an issue with the magi: they are never mentioned in the Numbers prophecy, and their only mention in the Old Testament is in LXX Daniel, a book that has nothing to do with guiding stars or Balaam. While one ancient source says that Balaam was a magus (Philo of Alexandria, in a derogatory manner), would a reader think of Balaam when seeing the term 'magi' instead of the magi mentioned in the stories of Daniel? Unfortunately this does not seem probable. The sixth problem is more tangential: the issue of the last gift of the magi, the myrrh. This lacks a proof-text to explain it, as the other gifts could be explained by reference to Isa 60, and it should be just as symbolically important as the other two gifts. Myrrh is also a product for the embalming of corpses, so it fits more with a story about Jesus' death than his birth. Perhaps this is a hint at an earlier source of the story (see the next section).

While none of these problems is necessarily a deathblow to the hypothesis that the star legend had its genesis in Num 24:17, it does suggest that perhaps other sources should be considered, including Gentile ones. There seems to be a dearth of Jewish legends of stars acting as guides, but there are several cases of just that in Greek and Roman tales. For example, Strauss proposed that the leading Star of Aeneas as found in the epic of Virgil helped the gospel author craft his narrative, a possibility reiterated by others through the years,

87 However, in 1.92 Philo also refers to Egyptian priests with the same term, so his vocabulary is looser than most others at this point; he does not limit the term to the Persian religious order, but uses it as a synonym for wizards and others who perform magical arts. It certainly means that Philo is not connecting Balaam with Zoroastrian magi, but rather with general diviners or magicians—a belittling term. It would not be a valid deduction from Philo's words that he or anyone else in the first century thought the Persian magi were the descendants of Balaam.

including Boll and Brown.⁸⁸ More recently, I have tried to put this theory on stronger grounds and in the matrix of determining literary influences.⁸⁹ In particular, features that suggest a mimetic use of the Latin tale include: the Star of Aeneas was said to be at rooftop level; it guided him from the East to his new kingdom in the West; and according to other Latin sources, the star was the morning star (*lucifer*).⁹⁰ This parallels the Matthean star that stops at rooftop level in Bethlehem, led the magi from the East to the newborn king in the West, and is said to be seen at its rising and potentially its morning rising. The stories of Aeneas, particularly through Virgil, were a major cultural touchstone for the Roman world; additionally, Virgil used the imagery of the comet seen at the funeral games of Julius Caesar, and the same comet (though called a star) was used by Augustus in his own iconography and propaganda to show his divine right to rule as the adopted son of a deified man.⁹¹ The adaptation of the guiding star myth to the story of the Star of Bethlehem makes for a significant theological message, one where a star directs the faithful to the true Son of God.⁹² Combining the Balaam star prophecy with the epic of Aeneas seems to explain more of the details of the Matthean narrative while conforming to the literary practices of the era. However, such a proposal still fails to explain why it was specifically the magi of the East who follow the star as opposed to the Chaldeans/Babylonians, so even this hypothesis cannot be said to be a complete explanation.

Still, there is not as much certainty on this literary approach as may be desired, and it certainly lacks the precision that a scientist would find

88 Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.687–711. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 248; Boll, “Der Stern der Weisen,” 47; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 170. In addition to the Star of Aeneas, it was said that a star led Timoleon to Sicily for his military exploits. See Plutarch, *Timoleon* 8; Diodorus 16.66.3.

89 Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 118–19.

90 Servius, *In Virgillii Aeneidos* 1.382; Michael Paschalis, *Virgil's Aeneid: Semantic Relations and Proper Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94–95.

91 Mary Frances Williams, “The *Sidus Iulium*, the Divinity of Men, and the Golden Age in Virgil's *Aeneid*,” *Leeds International Classical Studies* 2 no. 1 (2003): 1–29.

92 More recently, Dennis R. MacDonald (*Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015]) argues for many literary allusions to the Latin poet in the Gospel of Luke, including the nativity. MacDonald is building on his prior work, showing how the epics of Homer were a notable influence on the gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark. Chris Shea (“Imitating Imitation: Vergil, Homer, and Acts 10:1–11:18,” pages 37–59 in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* [eds. Jo-Ann Brant, Charles Hedricks, Chris Shea; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005]) previously argued for the influence of Virgil on Luke-Acts. Unfortunately, there is not as much scholarship on the question of Matthean allusions to Latin sources.

attractive—this may be in part why astronomers are more enticed by physical explanations. On the one hand, scientific accuracy and attention to detail are quintessential to what makes science successful; on the other hand, a literary work cannot have the same strictness as an experimental measurement, and the creative fluidity of meaning is the hallmark of art, though not with unbounded interpretability, as it must still fall within the cultural matrix that produced it or else it could not be understood by its original audience. Besides, scientific explanations have failed to match the text of the gospel with any precision. Still, the explorations of the literary matrix for the tale are likely to be debated for years to come. The main issue is that each proposal can explain some of the details well, others less so, and many hypotheses appear on balance to explain the narrative just as well as another. While I find the Balaam prophecy combined with the Star of Aeneas to be the best explanation to date, further scrutiny may locate a better candidate. Moreover, a complete explanation may need to incorporate the answer to yet another important question: what prior source or sources did the first evangelist use when he was crafting his narrative?

An Earlier Star Source?

To finish considering the narrative as we have it, one final question concerns the pre-Matthean form of the tale. Given the literary nature of the story, it is possible that the entire thing was invented by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, and this hypothesis could not easily be dismissed, were it not for the fact that there are other sources linking Jesus with a celestial light. Moreover, the notion of the star as a morning star may indicate that there was some prior version of the story, though perhaps very different from what is seen in the legend of the Star of Bethlehem. One indication is the Star Hymn found in one of the letters of the second-century bishop and martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, to the Ephesians. In *Eph* 19.2–3, we are told of a brilliant star with all other stars forming a chorus around it. The context indicates that the star here was not a homing device to find Jesus but was in fact Christ,⁹³ and this star seems to occur at the time of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, given that Ignatius said

93 H. F. Stander, "The Starhymn in the Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians (19:2–3)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 43 no. 3 (Sept 1989): 209–14, especially 213; Charles Thomas Brown, *The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 29; Peder Borgen *Paul Preaches Circumcision and Pleases Men and Other Essays on Christian Origins* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1983), 160.

the birth of Jesus was kept secret (*Eph* 19.1). The star is brilliant, has a chorus of other stars singing, and all the powers and principalities are made aware of the blazing Messiah.⁹⁴ For this and other reasons, many scholars have concluded that the hymn is not dependent on the Matthean natal account, though there may be a common source involved.⁹⁵

The Jesus-as-star belief is also reflected in *Rev* 2:28 and 22:16, and in *2 Pet* 1:19, where Jesus is called the morning star. The vocabulary used by Revelation, *2 Peter*, and *Matthew* is different in each case, but they nonetheless appear to be homologous and suggest a common belief or source. The meaning of the title ‘morning star’, particularly in Revelation, is indefinite, even though the most common suggestion is a citation of *Num* 24:17.⁹⁶ While the Balaam prophecy from Numbers may be in the background, it fails to explain why the star is specifically the *morning* star. Answering this question requires additional research and consensus-building.

Part of that future research should look at other Jewish and Gentile notions of what was important with respect to the morning star. For example, the Sumerian goddess Inanna and her Babylonian counterpart, Ishtar, were associated with the planet Venus, a morning star. These goddesses were also

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- 94 This point may be more controversial, since most will think Ignatius is talking about the same tale of Jesus’ birth, but the star-at-resurrection/ascension is the only conclusion that is consistent with Ignatius’ own statements. Moreover, the Star Hymn appears to be closely related to the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the descent and ascent of Jesus through the heavens. See Robert G. Hall, “Astonishment in the Firmament: The Worship of Jesus and Soteriology in Ignatius and the *Ascension of Isaiah*,” pages 148–55 in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (eds. Carey Newman, James Davila, and Gladys Lewis; Leiden: Brill, 1999); Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 320–22.
- 95 Helmut Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 60–61; J. Smit Sibinga, “Ignatius and Matthew,” *Novum Testamentum* 8 no. 2 (Apr–Oct 1966): 263–83; Christine Trevett, “Approaching Matthew from the Second Century: The Under-Used Ignatian Correspondence,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (1984): 59–67; David Wenham, *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 233–68, 369–403; Robert Miller, *Born Divine: The Birth of Jesus & Other Sons of God* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), 103; Brown, *The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch*, 28–29; William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 9; Wolf-Dietrich Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit Vor Irenäus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 73–96.
- 96 Koester, *Revelation*, 302; Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 226.

dying-and-rising beings, as their consorts probably also were,⁹⁷ creating a further parallel with the Christian resurrection figure of Jesus Christ. In Jewish sources, another figure directly connected with the morning star is the angel seen in the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, written broadly in the same time period as the gospels. There the angel is seen coming from the sky around the morning star; unfortunately, I have found no scholarly literature to explain this detail. On the other hand, one last Christian source to consider is the pregnant woman clothed with the Sun and standing on the Moon, as found in Rev 12. This symbolic vision has attracted considerable amounts of scholarly explanation; these often cite Leto giving birth to Apollo,⁹⁸ but perhaps another explanation is better. Much of the symbolism may come from interpreting Psalm 110 (LXX 109), where the King of the Jews is (re)born as a son of God from the womb of dawn; in the Septuagint, the king is said to be born “before the morning star.”

In the primary Greek translation of the Old Testament, there are two mentions of the morning star as a singular being: in Psalm 109:3 and Isaiah 14:12.⁹⁹ The latter concerns the destruction of the Babylonian king, and it became a part of the origin story of the fall of Satan from heaven (cf. Luke 10:18). The psalm, on the other hand, appears to be a part of the coronation of a Jewish king (along with Ps 2),¹⁰⁰ and thus provides a better potential grounding for the angelic or divine symbolism of the morning star in Jewish and early Christian literature. The psalm is widely cited in the gospels (cf. Matt 22:44 and par.) and other early Christian texts, and the Melchizedek Scroll from the Dead Sea (11Q13) appears to adapt the themes of Ps 110.¹⁰¹ This psalm is also heavily used by the author of Hebrews for exegetical purposes, especially in com-

97 Trygve Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Internat., 2001). The cult of Ishtar and her consort, Tammuz, was known to Christians, including how Tammuz died and was resurrected, as seen in *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.12; Origen, *Selecta in Ezechielen*, in Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus: series graeca* 13.800. See also Jer 7:18, 44:15–26; and Ezek 8:14 for references to the cult in the Hebrew Bible.

98 Koester, *Revelation*, 126, 528, 545, 555–56.

99 Sirach 50:5–6 also mentions the priest as being like the morning star, but this book is not a part of the Protestant Old Testament, though it is a part of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canons.

100 John Day, *Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 12, 92, 99–101.

101 Gard Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek: Scribal Activity of Second Temple Times in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 208–9; Devorah Dimant, *History, Ideology and Bible Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 499–504.

paring Jesus to a supernatural version of Melchizedek like that found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the course of this exegesis (Heb 7:14), there is an allusion to the Balaam prophecy of Num 24:17. Evidently the author or his community had in mind some way of combining Ps 110 (LXX 109) with Num 24:17 in the *peshet* methods used by Jewish religious figures of the time, including the author of Hebrews.

If so, this may explain why the star was associated with the morning, but there are further textual issues to consider. The Hebrew of Ps 110:3 as found in the Masoretic Text (MT) is ambiguous and perhaps corrupted in transmission, but it seems to say the king was born from the womb of the morning; the main Greek version (LXX 109:3) has the king born before the morning star. Including other known Greek versions and at least one Aramaic *targum* (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 65.4.5–7; Targum Jonathan), there are numerous variants, so this will make deductions based on this verse uncertain. However, if one takes the psalm in its Hebrew form along with the star prophecy of Balaam, then the king (as a star) is born from the womb of the morning, and thus the king is the morning star (cf. Isa 14:12). This *peshet* I am proposing seems to exist already in the background of Heb 7, as argued above, and perhaps it can help explain the details of the angel in *Joseph and Aseneth* 14. The brilliant figure in that Jewish novel is said to control a heavenly army and bring salvation. Like the divine Melchizedek figure who is central to salvation and to what appears to be a war in heaven in 11Q13,¹⁰² perhaps the angel who emerges from near the morning star¹⁰³ is high in the celestial realm, runs an army of God, and brings salvation to the faithful. It thus becomes plausible that he is the result of an exegesis of Ps 110. With no other explanations in the literature (as best as I can find), a Christian or perhaps pre-Christian *peshet* that combined Ps 110:3 and Num 24:17 seems a profitable way of exploring and explaining this enigmatic narrative.

Returning to Christian literature, this *peshet* explanation has the advantage of elucidating two features in Revelation. The woman clothed with the Sun in Rev 12 is giving birth to a son, and the author alludes to Ps 2:9 (cf. Rev 12:5) in detailing that the male child is to rule with an iron rod. If the author is combining the two primary coronation psalms (Pss 2 and 110), then the imagery follows; the woman clothed with the Sun is referring to how the king being born

102 Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 208–9.

103 In *Joseph and Aseneth* 14:2, at the end of her prayer, Aseneth sees the morning star and says it is a messenger (ἄγγελος), and then the angel appears before her. This implies the star and the angel are the same entity.

comes from the womb of the dawn (Ps 110:3).¹⁰⁴ It is also worth comparing this to the statements in the older work of Ben Sirah, where the high priest is leaving the holy of holies (“exit[ing] the house of the veil”), presumably on the Day of Atonement, and he is said to be like the morning star in the midst of a cloud, along with lunar and solar imagery (Sirach 50:5–6; cf. *Test. Levi* 18.2–3). The pregnant woman in Rev 12 is revealed after the heavenly temple is opened and the true ark of the covenant is seen, and Rev 12 also contains solar and lunar imagery; thus, modeling the birth (or rebirth) of Jesus on this passage would again suggest that he was the morning star.

Moreover, at another point (Rev 2:26–8) the author clearly cites Ps 2:9 and then speaks of giving the morning star to faithful Christians. Taken on its own, it is hard to explain why the star is mentioned here, though a rod is also a part of the star prophecy of Balaam and is mentioned in Ps 2:9. However, if this is another case of the author of Revelation combining Pss 2 and 110, then the text is more coherently integrated. Again, LXX Ps 109:3 speaks of the morning star, and MT Ps 110:3 combined with Num 24:17 says that the king is the morning star. Using Ps 110 can help explain two pieces of Revelation that have been uncertain and debated for decades: the woman of Rev 12 and Jesus as the morning star.¹⁰⁵

So far, this is a speculative line of investigation, but the power of just one plausible and meagerly evidenced *peshet* could explain numerous details in Christian literature. If my suggestion is correct, there is now a broad explanation for why Jesus was given this otherwise unexplained title of ‘morning star’. While not the most commonly used title for Christ, it is nonetheless found in at least two diverse sources, Revelation and 2 Peter, which have not been suggested as being literarily linked. This would indicate a common prior source, one that may exist at the time of the composition of Hebrews (or earlier), since the author of that anonymous document seems to combine Ps 110 and Num 24:17. With the morning star probably appearing in the Matthean account of Jesus’ birth¹⁰⁶ (along with the Star Hymn of Ignatius, though it is only said to be

104 Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 60.

105 Note, however, that the argument here does not explain the details of Jesus as the bright, morning star in Rev 22:16. That requires additional explanation, especially as it has some peculiar grammar. On that point and perhaps how it connects to other morning star deities, see Michael Moore, “Jesus Christ: ‘Superstar’: (Revelation xxii 16b),” *Novum Testamentum* 24 no. 1 (1982): 82–91.

106 One feature of these other mentions of Jesus-as-star is that they seem to suppose Jesus is in his resurrection state; this contrasts significantly with the Matthean tale, where the star is clearly at Jesus’ birth. Then again, Matthew already seems to be hinting at Jesus’ death and resurrection because of the gift of myrrh, an item primarily used on the dead.

a bright star, cf. Rev 22:16), this looks to be a common exegetical core that goes back to early Christianity. If so, then the story of the Star of Bethlehem would be conclusively shown to have never had a basis in astronomy or astrology, but rather to be a scriptural exegesis already extant when Matthew crafted his own, non-astronomical tale.

All of this is suggestive of a prior belief about Jesus as the morning star hiding behind the narrative of Matthew's story of the Star of Bethlehem. This could be a fruitful avenue of research, one that I am currently undertaking. Assuming the deductions mentioned above hold up under analysis, there is still the question of how this became the story found in the Gospel of Matthew. There is plenty of evidence to be considered before the consensus of biblical scholars on the origins of Matthew's story is likely to need to be changed. While the astronomical explanations for the star have thus far failed to be convincing or to explain the details of the Gospel of Matthew, this new approach will likely be more rewarding, though it is uncertain at the moment whether it will demonstrate a prior source for the legend of the Star of Bethlehem, and the literary debate concerning the story will likely continue for some time.¹⁰⁷ In the process, other mysteries of Jewish and Christian literature may be explained. Only time, rather than the heavens, will tell.

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Cf. John 19:39; Irenaeus, *Ad. Her.* 3.9.2. Perhaps Matthew has also used the star knowing it came from the resurrection myths of Jesus.

107 Note, however, that even if there is a prior source for Matthew's story, the form of the tale found in the gospel is very much the creation of its author, and it must be interpretable in its own right to its original audience. This makes the previous literary explanations for the tale necessary to explain the current form of the narrative, whether or not there is a prior source. It is important to note that there is no contradiction between there being some prior tale of Jesus as a star and Matthew's story of the Star of Bethlehem conforming to literary tropes and mimesis, such as the transformation of the Star of Aeneas legend (see above).

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An Astronomical and Historical Evaluation of Molnar's Solution

Bradley E. Schaefer

Four Classes of Answers

People have long wondered about the nature of the Star of Bethlehem. All of the attempted explanations can be categorized as one of the following: a pious fable, an astronomical event, a miracle, or an astrological horoscope.

A pious fable is a story invented with no basis in fact or evidence, imagined in order to satisfy or illustrate the inventor's faith. In the case of the star, the pious story-maker was presumably a devout Christian, likely recently converted shortly before the Gospel of Matthew was written. In this case, the entire story of the star, the magi, and their visit to King Herod and to Bethlehem is completely imaginary, with the magi and the star being nonexistent. Indeed, we already know that the star story has been the origin of many pious fables, including the number and names of the magi as well as the story of the Little Drummer Boy. This explanation for the star is favored by Bible-skeptics who seek to find factual or historical errors in anything related to the Bible.

The star as an astronomical event is a real happening up in the sky. The idea is that some presumably spectacular celestial light show was interpreted as the star and motivated the magi to make the trip to Judea. This class of star explanations includes a variety of specific answers, covering most of the phenomena visible to the unaided eye (plus some too faint to be visible to anyone), both real and imagined. This category of star answers is favored by astronomers, simply because it is all they can discuss. Thus, the common Christmas shows at planetariums worldwide only talk about the astronomical answers because they have the ability to uniquely illustrate the proposals, and because laypersons can readily understand the claims. This class of answers is also favored by Christian apologists, in an attempt to provide a rational basis for their faith. Finally, this category is also the nearly exclusive concern of academic discussions of the star.

The star could be a miracle, in which the deity worked outside conventional physics and astronomy so as to create a light in the sky that was seen and reported as the star. Within the framework of Christianity, this is a very

plausible answer, because many miracles were occurring at nearly the same time and place (e.g., the virgin birth), while the importance of the event is an important reason to invoke a miracle. While I did not conduct a formal survey, I expect that this miracle answer is the predominant belief of lay Christians worldwide.

The astrological horoscope answer is the idea that the star is a report ultimately based on a configuration of planets resulting in a regal horoscope related to Christ's birth. Critically, this answer does not require a biblical literalist interpretation of the story in Matthew, so the astrological horoscope explanation can be correct regardless of whether the magi were hellenized astrologers or whether they even existed. Up until 1999, scholars had essentially ignored the astrological aspects of the nativity story in Matthew. Before 1999, Michael Molnar had been systematically applying knowledge of ancient astrology to the historical study of ancient kings around the Mediterranean and the Middle East. With this strong basis for understanding the real practices of ancient astrologers, Molnar¹ provided the first look at the nativity story from an astrological perspective, and he has identified a convincing case that the star was a regal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE. Our conference in Groningen was explicitly an interdisciplinary and nondenominational study and popularization of Molnar's explanation.

Astronomical Answers

The astronomical class of explanations all feature some specific celestial event that is perceived to be sufficiently spectacular that it might have attracted the attention of the magi, sending them to Judea. This class of answers is possible only because modern astronomers can know the details of the ancient skies with remarkable accuracy. That is, the positions and characteristics of the Sun, the Moon, the planets, comets, and meteor showers are confidently known to a high degree of accuracy even many millennia ago, while historical records (such as those from China) alert us to various transient events. With this sure knowledge, many astronomers have cast backwards in time to the first decade BCE, looking for something spectacular enough to be considered the star.

Modern astronomers and historians have found many celestial events that they consider spectacular enough to be the star; see Table 4.1 for a partial listing of these. Some of the items in the table exist only as speculation. Most previous scholarly discussions, most popular books, and all Christmas shows at planetariums merely feature some subset of this list, often with one possibility selected as the best.

¹ *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

TABLE 4.1 *Claimed astronomical 'stars'*

★	12 BCE	Halley's Comet
★	9 & 6 BCE	Uranus passing by Saturn and Venus
★	8 BCE	Jupiter/Mars/Saturn conjunction
★	7 BCE	Jupiter/Saturn triple conjunction
★	6 BCE	Lunar occultations of Jupiter and Saturn
★	5 BCE	Stationary points of Jupiter
★	5 BCE	Hypernova in the Andromeda Galaxy
★	5 BCE	Chinese comet
★	5 BCE	Chinese nova or recurrent nova (DO Aql)
★	4 BCE	'Supernova'
★	4 BCE	Chinese 'nova'
★	4 & 2 BCE	Two Supernovae
★	2 BCE	Venus/Jupiter occultation

The long list of possibilities is striking in that there is no real way to distinguish among them. That is, there is no significant evidential basis for selecting any one possibility as being better or worse than other events on the list. This is illustrated by the fact that popular books and scholarly articles all select different events from this list as their favored explanation for the star.

Critically, we realize that only one (or none) of the events listed in Table 4.1 can be the real star, which means that 12 (or 13) of the claims must be wrong. With almost all of these claims being certainly incorrect, and with no way to distinguish among these astronomical answers, we further realize that there is no possibility to achieve any useful level of confidence for any such astronomical answer.

Why are there so many spectacular astronomical events, all crowded into the critical decade? The reason is that all decades are crowded with spectacular astronomical events. I have presented detailed statistics elsewhere,² concluding that every decade has an average of 12 spectacular astronomical events, and in these publications I present many examples from past decades. To make this point with regard to living memory, I have compiled a partial list of astronomical events from the decade 2000–2009 that were considered

² "Confluences of Astronomical Spectacles," *Archaeoastronomy* 11 (1989): 91–99; "The Astronomical Situation Around the Year 1000," in *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change 950–1050* (ed. R. Landes, A. Gow, and D. C. Van Meter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 329–35.

TABLE 4.2 *Spectacular astronomical events for the 2000–2009 decade*

★	2000 & 2001	Great Leonid meteor storms
★	2000, 2004	'End-of-World' planetary conjunctions
★	2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009	Seven <i>total</i> solar eclipses
★	2007	Great Comet McNaught
★	2000 & 2001	Millennium change
★	2000, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2003, 2004, 2004, 2007, 2007, 2008	Ten <i>total</i> lunar eclipses
★	2003	<i>Total</i> Lunar & Solar eclipses during Ramadan
★	2002, ...	'Super-Mars' and its echoes

spectacular enough to attract media attention (see Table 4.2). Two millennia from now, historians could look back and select any of these events as being important for the people of the time. With this plethora of events to choose from, it becomes a Rorschach test for the star identifier. More generally, the sky is always filled with spectacular events, so prophets and historians can always select something useful to blame, warn, or alert their flocks. With every decade including many real (and imagined) spectacular astronomical events, it is no surprise that the period from 12 BCE to 2 BCE has more than a dozen.

The general class of astronomical answers has always had problems with a variety of aspects of the nativity narrative. In particular, the astronomical answers have never provided adequate answers to the following three questions: (1) Why did the magi see the star in the east and then travel west? (2) Why did they travel first to Jerusalem instead of to Bethlehem? (3) Why did no one in Jerusalem see the spectacular star?

Many astronomical answers have strong refutations. Let me first highlight the challenges to a claim that appeared in a book by M. Kidger.³ His idea is that the star was a recurrent nova that appeared in 5 BCE, as reported by the Chinese, with this particular nova erupting again as Nova Aquilae 1925

3 *The Star of Bethlehem, an Astronomer's View* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

(designated DO Aql). One simple refutation of this theory is that the Chinese reported the 5 BCE event as a “broom star” (with the 4 BCE event labeled as a “fuzzy star”), so it was certainly a comet and not a nova of any type. Two other definitive refutations of this theory require some modern astronomical knowledge of DO Aql. I am the world's leading expert on DO Aql, the designation of novae that really are recurrent novae, and I have even made DO Aql into the prototype of my ‘F class’ slow novae.⁴ Based on this work, we know with very high confidence that DO Aql is a slow nova with a low-mass white dwarf that recurs only in a very long cycle, longer than a million years, so it certainly did not have an eruption in 5 BCE.⁵ Furthermore, DO Aql erupted to a magnitude of only 8.5 in 1925 (which is barely visible through binoculars), and any prior eruption could not have achieved the required brightness (claimed to be $V=0$ magnitude by Kidger) without using supernova-like energies that would have completely destroyed the system.

Many of the other astronomical explanations have refutations that are equally convincing. Let me list here a brief version of each of these: (1) The first astronomical answer is that of Kepler, in which he thought that a triple conjunction spawned a supernova. However, modern astronomers know that there is no such connection between apparent planet positions and distant supernovae. (2) The Venus-Jupiter occultation might have been very rare and spectacular for a modern astronomer, but it occurred in 2 BCE, while Herod certainly died in early 4 BCE. (3) Supernovae and novae have been claimed to appear in 5 BCE or 4 BCE, based on the Chinese reports, but both of these are certainly not supernovae or novae because the Chinese reports call the transients a “broom star” and a “fuzzy star.” (4) The star is frequently attributed to a comet, either one of the Chinese comets or the Halley's Comet return in 12 BCE. However, comets are universally feared as evil omens⁶ and thus have no chance of being considered the star. (5) Meteors are occasionally pointed to as the star, but meteors are also universally feared⁷ and thus have no chance of inspiring the star. (6) Lunar and solar eclipses are also universally feared.⁸

4 Schaefer, “The Star of Bethlehem is *Not* the Nova DO Aquilae (Nor Any Other Nova, Supernova, or Comet).” *The Observatory* 133 (2013): 227–31; R. J. Strope, B. E. Schaefer, and A. A. Henden, “Catalog of 93 Nova Light Curves: Classification and Properties,” *Astronomical Journal* 140 (2010): 34–62; A. Pagnotta and B. E. Schaefer, “Identifying and Quantifying Recurrent Novae Masquerading as Classical Novae,” *Astrophysical Journal* 788 (2014): 164.

5 Schaefer, “The Star of Bethlehem is *Not* the Nova DO Aquilae.”

6 Schaefer, “Comets That Changed the World,” *Sky & Telescope* 93 no. 5 (1997): 46–50.

7 Schaefer, “Meteors That Changed the World,” *Sky & Telescope* 96 no. 6 (1998): 68–73.

8 Schaefer, “Lunar Eclipses That Changed the World,” *Sky & Telescope* 84 (1992): 639–42; Schaefer, “Solar Eclipses That Changed the World,” *Sky & Telescope* 87 no. 5 (1994): 36–39.

(7) The possibility of a ‘hypernova’ (i.e., an extreme supernova creating a gamma-ray burst) in the Andromeda Galaxy is refuted because such events cannot become bright enough to have been recognized by the magi.

In his book, Molnar gives a general refutation of most astronomical answers. His point is that the only people whose impressions of the star matter are the magi, and the magi were taken by the Greeks of the time to be astrologers, not astronomers; all of the spectacular astronomical events were meaningless to and unnoticed by ancient astrologers. In particular, astrologers did not study the sky in any modern sense, and so they were not likely to have even seen any supernovae, novae, or comets. Astrologers had no place or symbol in their horoscopes for comets, meteors, occultations, novae, supernovae, hypernovae, Uranus, or any other spectacular astronomical event that would impress modern astronomers. Ancient astrologers had no interpretation for triple conjunctions, occultations, meteors, or any other astronomical spectacles. Molnar’s point is that we know quite well what would have interested ancient astrologers, what would have been considered useful and thus interpreted by ancient astrologers (e.g., from Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*), and all of the spectacular astronomical events were completely irrelevant to the magi. This holds true whether the magi were historical personages or a Greek idealization of the magi as astrologers. With all of the astronomical answers thus unrecognized by ancient astrologers, we can be sure that all the astronomical answers are wrong.

In summary, strong arguments have been made that astronomical explanations are incorrect, both specifically and also in general. Nevertheless, it is likely that one or another astronomical answer will be highlighted in future works by astronomers (because specific and evocative models are made), by planetariums (because astronomical stars make for simple answers in a traditional show), by future apologists (because some naturalistic explanation is required by their philosophy), and by laypeople (because they have been brought up believing these claims). As scholars, we can read the above and realize that the astronomical answers are dead, but we should also realize that sociological forces and inertia mean that a long time will pass before the death notice is widely acknowledged.

The Astrological Solution

Molnar’s book presented an astrological solution for the star. This book was the culmination of a decade-long series of scholarly studies of ancient astrology, as applied to a wide variety of kings throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. Thus Molnar has written papers on the horoscopes of Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus, Domitian, Mithridates, and many more. These articles all

treat astrology as a real historical force, and they all take ancient astrology from the original sources (e.g., Ptolemy, Firmicus). Molnar's articles all appeared in an obscure (but top-quality) numismatic journal called *The Celator*⁹ and are now essentially unavailable. I had been following Molnar's work in *The Celator* for many years before his book on the star appeared, and I had already been impressed both by the quality of his work and by the need to reject my old bias against the historical applications of astrology. Indeed, I suspect that the reason Molnar's work appeared only in a small-circulation, niche journal was because of the mainstream contempt for astrology.

A substantial reason why no one had previously come up with an astrological solution is simply that modern astronomers and scholars of many types have a aversion to astrology. This contempt has meant that astrology and its effects are ignored and shunned by most scholars. Those few scholars who seriously study astrology have produced small amounts of excellent work over the past century, but the work has always been disregarded and sidelined by most scholars. This contempt is completely misguided for historians. Astrology has zero effectiveness as a predictive science, but this is irrelevant to the fact that astrology has been a real force acting on people and history. The general historical community should remove astrology from its blind spot.

Molnar's astrological solution starts by considering what would be important to an ancient astrologer. (Critically, this might be either to the historical magi of the ancient Near East or to the idealized magi as pictured by Greeks around the time of the gospel writer.) The primary tool and instrument of astrologers is the horoscope, a schematic positioning of the planets (including the Sun and the Moon) within the zodiac and within the sky for a given time and place. A natal horoscope is for the time and place of the birth of a child, with the horoscope telling the character and future of the child. Matthew reports that the star tells the astrologers about the date, place, character, and future of the birth of a child. That is, the star tells the astrologers about the birth of a very great king to be born in Judea, and that is exactly what a natal

9 Molnar, "Trajan's Celestial Omen," *The Celator* 7 no. 2 (1993): 38–39; "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: The Solar Eclipse of 120 BC," *The Celator* 7 no. 4 (1993): 16–22; "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: Tarpeia and the Omina Lunae," *The Celator* 7 no. 8 (1993): 36–42; "The Case for Astrologic Roman Coins," *The Celator* 7 no. 11 (1993): 43–47; "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: Capricorn," *The Celator* 8 no. 4 (1994): 6–15; "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: The Ides of March," *The Celator* 8 no. 11 (1994): 6–10; "Blood on the Moon in Aquarius: The Assassination of Domitian," *The Celator* 9 no. 5 (1995): 6–12; "Astrological Omens Commemorated on Roman Coins: Clues to Caesar's Fortune," *The Celator* 10 no. 3 (1996): 14–19; "Mithridates Used Comets on Coins as a Propaganda Device," *The Celator* 11 no. 6 (1997): 6–8.

horoscope does. It seems to be beyond coincidence that the star in Matthew tells the ancient astrologers exactly what a natal horoscope would have told ancient astrologers. Thus, Molnar concludes that the star was actually the report of a natal horoscope.

Suddenly, we have a good rationale for how the star operates. Prior astronomical answers always had trouble explaining why the magi went to Judea and why they were expecting the birth of a great king. Prior pious fable explanations and miracle answers could include such details for no good reason. Now, Molnar's astrological solution provides a natural explanation of how the magi knew that a very great king would have been born on a particular day in Judea.

Molnar goes further, searching through time for a regal horoscope pointing to Judea. From his earlier work—based on Firmicus, Ptolemy, Antigonus, Valens, and Manilius—he knows what points to a regal horoscope and what will emphasize regal aspects. He also knows what points to Judea, with the closest geographical astrology list at that time being Ptolemy's, in which the sign Aries is associated with Judea.¹⁰ With this knowledge, Molnar recognized that the date 17 April 6 BCE had an impressive regal horoscope, indicating the birth of a very great king in Judea. The regal omens pile on each other, emphasizing the greatness of the king, while most of the key planets are in Aries, hence pointing to Judea. Table 4.3 gives a list of the key aspects of the 17 April 6 BCE natal horoscope.

TABLE 4.3 *Regal aspects of the 17 April 6 BCE horoscope*

★	Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn are in trine
★	Sun at Exaltation
★	Venus at Exaltation
★	Jupiter in Aries
★	Jupiter at heliacal rise with the Moon
★	Jupiter and Saturn in attendance before Sun

10 Molnar has two further arguments connecting Aries and Judea in the first century CE, based on coins of Antioch as well as the horoscope of Nero, but I judge these to be weaker than the straight statement in the *Tetrabiblos*.

Molnar's astrological solution provides easy and natural explanations for the three questions that are so hard for astronomers to answer:

- (1) Why did the magi see the star "in the east" and then go west? The term "in the east" is a technical astrological phrase, meaning what we now refer to as a heliacal rising. Helical risings of planets happen on a particular day about once a year and would be visible, if anyone looked, low on the eastern horizon at dawn. Ancient astrologers would not have looked at the dawn skies, but on their horoscopes they would have seen the heliacal rising. Such a heliacal rising event does have significance for ancient astrology, and it would be part of a larger pattern. This pattern would point to the province of Judea. So the meaning of the passage in Matthew is that they have seen the star at its helical rising and then gone to the capital of Judea.
- (2) The astrological solution also provides a fast and easy explanation for why the magi first went to Jerusalem instead of to Bethlehem. The reason is that ancient astrology could only specify the country or province. The regal horoscope pointed to Judea, so the magi went to the capital of Judea and asked around, and this is exactly what Matthew says they do. For an analogy, suppose that some soothsayer in Germany had wanted to attend our conference in Groningen, but only knew from the omens that it was in the Netherlands; then they would most likely travel to the capital of the Netherlands and ask around until someone told them to go to Groningen.
- (3) Why did no one in Jerusalem see the star? Many spectacular astronomical events would be hard to miss, but the Jews in Jerusalem had little knowledge or practice of astrology, and the special patterns of the planets can only be recognized through the eyes of an astrologer looking at their positions on a horoscope. Important parts of the pattern can include planets close to the Sun or in daytime (hence invisible to the naked eye) or planets separated in trines (integral multiples of 120° , something that the uninitiated would never spot). So of course no one in Jerusalem would have seen the arcane astrological pattern up in the sky.

Let me make an estimate of the frequency of such regal horoscopes pointing to Judea. Jupiter is at its heliacal rise (12° from the Sun) once each year, and this occurs in Aries on average once every twelve years. The Sun will not also be in Aries around $12/30=40\%$ of the time, so the long-term average for having both the Sun and the heliacally rising Jupiter in Aries is once every 20 years.

On these days, the Moon will be within 1.5 days of conjunction with the heliacally rising Jupiter around 10% of the time, making the average rate for such events once every ~200 years. With the Sun in the western $18/30=60\%$ of Aries, Venus will be at exaltation in Pisces for roughly one-fifth of these occasions, making for a long-term average of once per ~1000 years. For the aspects of the 17 April 6 BCE horoscope, Saturn must also be in Aries (to be in trine with Jupiter and in attendance before the Sun), and this happens one time out twelve, for a rate of once every ~12,000 years. If we further require that the planets Mars and Mercury do not have negative portents (e.g., being in quartile with the Sun), we get a frequency of once every $\gg 12,000$ years.¹¹ Molnar points out that this idealized calculation has the substantial problem that it calculates the frequency for only one configuration (Jupiter/Sun/Saturn in Aries, the Moon in conjunction with Jupiter at its heliacal rise, and Venus in Pisces), whereas other very rare configurations might also have produced a regal horoscope for Judea of comparable power. For example, with a weakening due to Saturn not being in attendance before the Sun, Saturn might have been in Leo or Sagittarius and still been in the trine, and this is twice as frequent as the case calculated. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know the number and nature of the planet configurations that would be adequate to inspire a report of a regal horoscope of sufficient power. Nevertheless, it is clear that the astrological requirements for a horoscope indicating the birth of a very great king in Judea are realized only once over many centuries. Historically, the horoscope for the star is a very rare event, happening only one day out of something like a millennium or so. This is the reason that the magi were inspired to travel to the west, or at least the reason that inspired a latter-day Greek omen-seeker to recognize the star horoscope.

At our conference, I was asked about the accuracy of the calculations and the date of the heliacal rise of Jupiter. For such issues, I have an extensive and definitive knowledge based on both theory and observation.¹² As shown in Figure 4.1, all of the planets (i.e., everything in Molnar's horoscope) are tightly clustered around the Sun. At dawn on the morning of 17 April 6 BCE, Jupiter was 12.4° from the Sun, changing at the rate of one degree per day. The

11 Similar conclusions have been reached by M. M. Dworetzky and S. J. Fossey, "Lunar Occultations of Jupiter and Saturn, and the Star of Bethlehem," *The Observatory* 118 (1998): 22–24.

12 See, for example, Schaefer, "Heliacal Rise Phenomena," *Journal for the History of Astronomy, Archaeoastronomy Supplement*, 18 no. 11 (1987): S19–S33; Schaefer, "Astronomy and the Limits of Vision," *Vistas in Astronomy* 36 (1993): 311; L. E. Doggett and B. E. Schaefer, "Lunar Crescent Visibility," *Icarus* 107 (1994): 388.

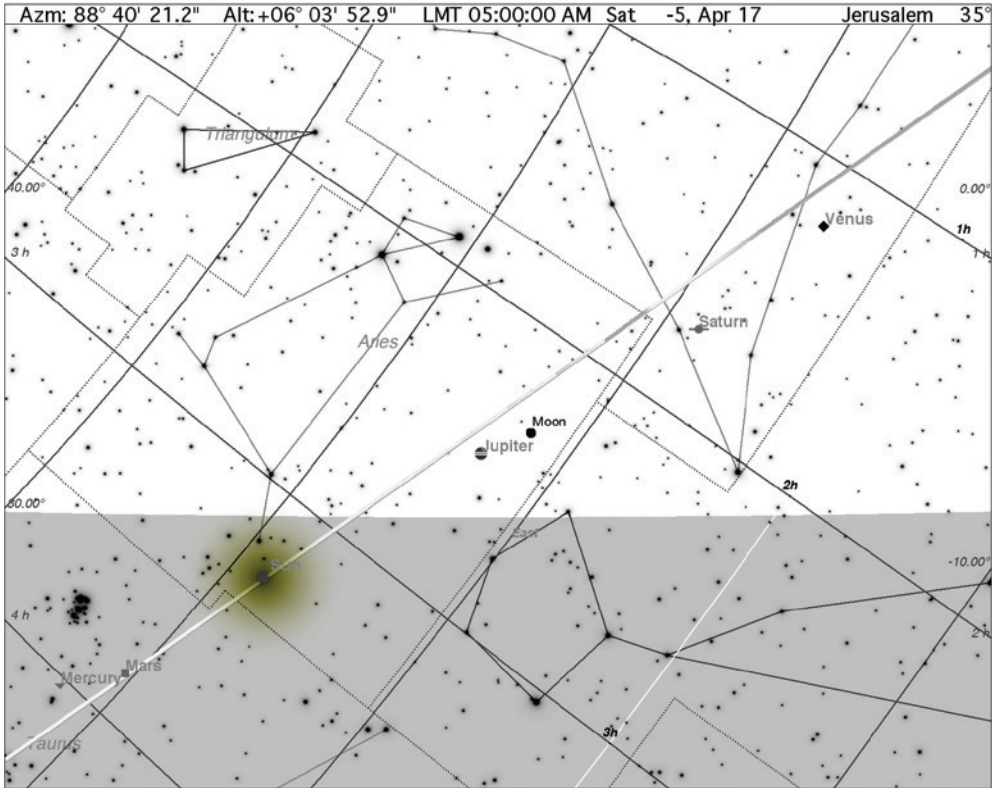


FIGURE 4.1 *The dawn sky on 17 April 6 BCE from Jerusalem. Molnar's astrological solution points out that the Star of Bethlehem is the natal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE. This figure gives the positions of the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the stars for 03:00 UT for that morning, as viewed from Jerusalem. The figure was made using Voyager software, which I have checked against the latest highly accurate ephemerides (including the definitive JPL Horizons) to have an accuracy of a few arc-seconds. The grey region on the bottom is the sky below the nominal horizon. The nearly diagonal line is the ecliptic. From lower left to upper right along the ecliptic, the planets are Mercury (just below the Pleiades), Mars, the Sun (in Aries), Jupiter (in Aries at its heliacal rise), the thin crescent Moon (fast approaching Jupiter for an unobservable occultation from Jerusalem in the middle of the day), Saturn (in the sign of Aries, but in the modern constellation of Pisces), and Venus (at exaltation in Pisces). At this time, Jupiter is 12.4° away from the Sun, with this changing by 1.0° throughout the day. Thus, by the astrological criterion for heliacal rising as given by Ptolemy, Jupiter was at its heliacal rise on 17 April 6 BCE.*

astronomers and astrologers of the time could probably have calculated these positions to an accuracy of around one degree. Ptolemy gives the criterion for Jupiter's heliacal rise as a separation of 12° in ecliptic longitude from the Sun. So the magi would have taken 17 April 6 BCE, or possibly the day before or after, as the date of Jupiter's heliacal rise. As to the (irrelevant) further question regarding the date of the actual first visibility of Jupiter, the sharp angle of the ecliptic with respect to the horizon at that time of year means Jupiter has a low altitude (6.2° with no refraction) above the Sun, which means that my best estimate for the date of first visibility is 17 or 18 April. This calculation is based on my accurate knowledge of the extinction coefficients in ancient Jerusalem in springtime,¹³ where the typical variations in the haziness of the atmosphere mean an uncertainty factor of a day or two. Even though my visibility dates coincide with Molnar's date (within the uncertainty factor of 1–2 days), the visibility date is irrelevant because the magi (or some later Greek astrologer) would have used the dates from the astrological criterion.

At our conference, a variety of questions and problems were raised, to which I would like to provide answers: (1) The historical magi were not hellenized astrologers, as several speakers emphasized, but this is not required for Molnar's solution. The reason is that the gospel writer was a hellenized person, and the Greeks of the time idealized Eastern mystics as what they called 'magi', and the gospel description is made from the perspective of the gospel writer, with the corresponding terminology. Just because the gospel writer calls them magi does not mean that they correspond to what modern historians refer to as magi. (2) Various speakers showed that a wide variety of geographical astrology lists do not point to Judea as being associated with Aries. Clearly the sign of Judea is not a constant, but most of the citations at the conference were of lists long before the time of Jesus. It is not relevant whether the first list, or any early list, does or does not have Judea identified with any sign. What matters is the list closest in time to the 6 BCE event (or perhaps closest to the time of the gospel writer), and that is the list given in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. The *Tetrabiblos* explicitly lists Aries as the sign of Judea. (3) Various people on the Internet have characterized Molnar's solution as being just one of the aspects in Table 4.3 and then belittled his explanation. However, the regal horoscope involves many items that together result in an impressive omen. It is wrong to pick out one aspect in isolation. (4) Once during the conference and many times on the Internet, people have claimed that the lunar occultation of the heliacally

13 Schaefer, "Lunar Visibility and the Crucifixion," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 31 (1990): 53–67; Schaefer, "The Latitude of the Observer of the Almagest Star Catalog," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 32 (2001): 1–42.

rising Jupiter was non-existent, non-observable, or non-calculable by the magi. It is true that the occultation did occur, that it was unobservable because it happened during the daytime (even though it was high in the sky), and that the conjunction/occultation distinction could not have been calculated by the magi. However, this is all irrelevant because ancient astrology makes no distinction between a conjunction and an occultation.

In summary, Molnar's book has provided a solution regarding the nature of the Star of Bethlehem, and this solution has provided good explanations that were impossible based on prior answers.

The Historicity of the Other Parts of the Nativity Story

Molnar's astrological solution tells us about the origin of the star, but it does not tell us about the historicity of the other parts of the nativity story in Matthew. To illustrate this, let me present two completely different scenarios, in both of which the star in Matthew comes from the natal horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE. (1) The first scenario has a group to the east of Jerusalem, whom the gospel writer calls magi, recognizing the natal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE, travelling to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, worshiping at the feet of the Christ-child, and returning home by a different route. This scenario is what is expected by pious Christians who interpret the Bible literally. (2) The second scenario has some unknown Greek person, probably around 70 CE, seeking a celestial omen for the birth of a great king, spotting the horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE, recognizing this as an impressive regal horoscope, and inventing a pious fable about the magi. As Molnar's long work in *The Celator* demonstrates, it is characteristic of the Greeks of the time to seek and give importance to celestial omens associated with the birth of all of the great kings. It is inevitable that people would be casting back in time to the birth of Christ, seeking omens in the sky, and they would have found the regal horoscope. In this scenario, the magi and their visit would have been invented, with no basis in historical fact other than that which the gospel writer includes to lend realism to the story. However, the star itself would still have been taken from the 17 April 6 BCE natal horoscope, with full historicity. This scenario is perfectly suitable for people of all religions, for historians, and for Bible-skeptics as well as for pious Christians who are not biblical literalists.

These two scenarios are extremes, with a continuum of possibilities in between (see Figure 4.2). The star story could have been transmitted to the gospel writer by divine or angelic inspiration; it could have come from Mary (who would have been a direct witness) to early converts and hence to the

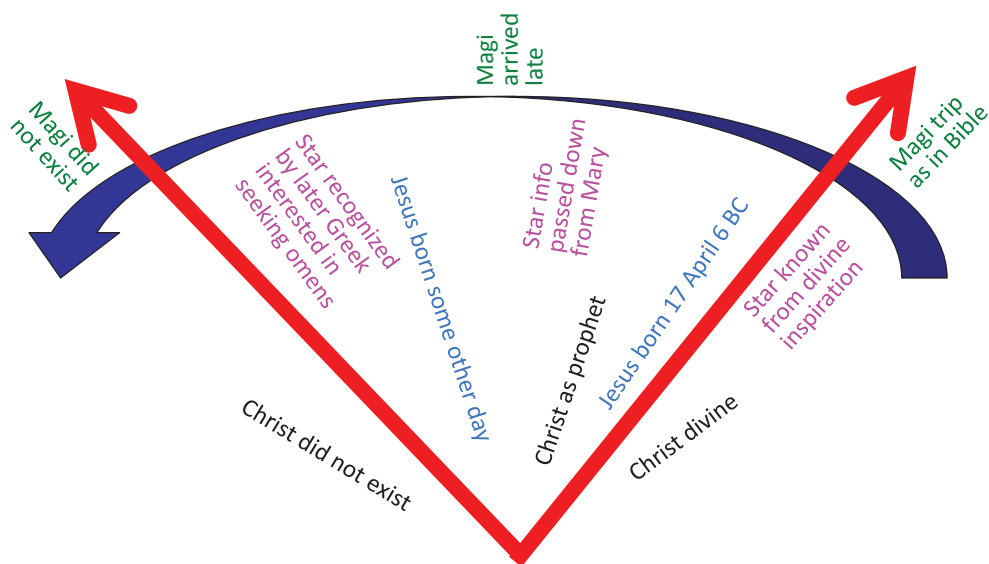


FIGURE 4.2 Molnar has identified the star, but the other elements remain unknown. Molnar's astrological solution (the star as the natal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE) does not say anything about the other elements of the biblical nativity story. There is a continuum of possibilities, all consistent with Molnar's discovery. The range extends from a biblical-literalist view, with everything exactly as stated in the Bible (with the arrow pointing to the right in the figure), all the way to a historical solution, in which a latter-day Greek seeking omens for the birth of a great king spotted the 17 April 6 BCE natal horoscope and invented the elements involving the trip of the magi (with the arrow pointing to the left in the figure). Thus, Molnar's solution is perfectly fine if the magi were not hellenized astrologers, if the magi were hellenized astrologers, if the magi were three in number of any name, or if the magi were non-existent. In all of these cases, the real historicity of the star remains intact. According to Molnar's solution, Jesus' birth might or might not have been on 17 April 6 BCE. Likewise, the magi might have arrived in Bethlehem on 17 April 6 BCE, or they might have been months late. According to Molnar's solution, Christ might have been divine, a mere prophet, or non-existent. With these possibilities, the reader is free to turn the pointer to their favored scenario, all with the star originating as a natal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE.

gospel writer; it could have been told to the gospel writer by the latter-day Greek omen-seeker who recognized the 17 April 6 BCE horoscope. The magi might have made their trip as described in the Gospel of Matthew, might have arrived late, or might not have existed. The magi might have been the magi known to historians, or they might have been idealizations of hellenized astrologers, as was common among Greeks at the time of the gospel writer. The magi might have arrived at the manger on 17 April 6 BCE, or they might have discovered the horoscope only retrospectively and arrived in Bethlehem months after Jesus' birth. The historicity of the star originating with the natal

horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE says nothing about the historicity of the rest of the Bible, nor indeed does it say anything about the divinity of Jesus.

A very wide range of possibilities exist in the astrological solution, all of which include the star originating as a historical report of the 17 April 6 BCE natal horoscope. This range of possibilities easily fits around the preconceptions of biblical-literalist and non-biblical-literalist Christians, Christians of all denominations, devout members of all religions, agnostics, Bible-skeptics, and atheists.

Overview and Conclusions

The astronomical answers are dead, based on both specific refutations of individual claims and the general realization that any spectacular astronomical event would have been meaningless for ancient astrologers.

The pious fable answer might still be correct, especially as an explanation for the magi aspect of the nativity story. Independent of one's predisposition to believe or not to believe in this possibility, it is rather hard to prove or disprove the pious fable hypothesis. Nevertheless, a story invented independently of astrology is rather unlikely to have included an astrological technical term (i.e., "in the east" for "heliacal rise") or to have included exactly the information that astrologers would derive from a natal horoscope (time, place, and country of a child's birth as well as character and future of the child). A story invented independently of any knowledge of the 17 April 6 BCE horoscope is very unlikely, because it cannot explain the coincidence of such a rare and powerful regal horoscope in the spring of a year soon before the death of Herod. While a pious fable might be possible, scholars reject this solution as having no evidence in its favor, and as explaining none of the details or "coincidences."

A miracle answer is always possible. One speaker at the conference argued that the events in Matthew had a low probability of occurring simultaneously, but this is exactly the requirement for such events to be considered a miracle. If one believed in miracles, one would nevertheless shy away from viewing the star as a miracle, because that would require the deity to be deceitful in setting up the miracle while also having such perfect evidence for the star as the 6 BCE horoscope. Thus pious Christians join with Christian apologists, Christians who believe in the historicity of the Bible, and non-Christians in rejecting the miracle answer. For historians and other scholars, the key point is that the possibility of a miracle has zero positive evidence.

In sharp contrast to the other possibilities, Molnar's astrological solution has many strong arguments in its favor (see the summary in Table 4.4). Finally, we have in his solution simple and natural explanations for the operation of the

TABLE 4.4 *Molnar's astrological solution is strong*

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- ★ Natal horoscopes are the tools of ancient astrologers, they tell only the birth/date/place/future of a child, with this being exactly the information that the star tells the ancient astrologers in the nativity story.
 - ★ The Matthean account of the star contains an astrological technical term, with “in the east” meaning the “heliacal rise.”
 - ★ The horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE has impressive regal portents.
 - ★ The horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE points to Judea.
 - ★ The natal horoscope points to a date that is perfect for the tight restrictions on other grounds, i.e., that the birth of Jesus occurred in the springtime and in a year shortly before Herod's death in 4 BCE.
 - ★ High-potency horoscopes are very rare, so it is very improbable that such would appear in the springtime of a year soon before the death of Herod, unless there is some causal connection.
 - ★ This explains how the star could point to the birth of a child and to Judea.
 - ★ This explains why the magi saw a star “in the east,” yet went to the west.
 - ★ This explains why the magi first went to the capital of Judea, not to Bethlehem.
 - ★ This explains why no one in Jerusalem saw the star.
-

star. Moreover, the indicated birthdate is just what we would independently expect (i.e., in the springtime of a year shortly before Herod's death in 4 BCE). The astrological solution is dictated because a horoscope is the only thing that would interest the magi, and a natal horoscope would tell the ancient astrologers exactly what the star tells the magi in the second chapter of Matthew.

Up until the time of Kepler, the miracle answer was the default solution to explain the star. For the next four centuries, scholarly conclusions on the nature of the star have settled on one of the various astronomical answers. Now, with the new millennium, Molnar has finally provided a convincing answer, as convincing as any such historical question permits. Our conference in Groningen has been a popularization and a celebration of the new paradigm that has swept the field. Molnar's astrological solution is now the leading, default explanation for the star. With reasonable confidence, we now know that the Star of Bethlehem originated as a report of the natal horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE.

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Astronomical Thoughts on the Star of Bethlehem

David W. Hughes

Modern interpretations of the Star of Bethlehem fall into three general categories, which can be referred to as miraculous, puff, and reality. The miraculous is the easiest to comprehend and requires little thought. If the ‘star’ was a miracle, it can do anything. It can whisper into the ears of the magi, at the appropriate time, telling them where to go, what to take with them, and what to expect when they arrive at their destination. The miraculous star can then lead them by the hand on their journey, and on arrival can hover over the rooftop of the relevant natal stable.¹ Here we might follow that famous American Ellen Gould White (nee Harmon; 1827–1915), who was one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In her book on the life of Jesus, *The Desire of Ages* (first published 1889 and still in print), she identifies the star as “a distant company of angels.” St. Remigius (ca. 437–533 CE), Bishop of Reims, suggested that the star was non-astronomical but was actually “the Holy Spirit: He who descended on the baptized Lord as a dove, appearing to the Magi as a star.” Similar sentiments were expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas and St John Chrysostom and are widely held today by members of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Scientifically we then have very little to say about this star. If it was a miracle, astronomical science and observations just do not come into the discussion.

Category two is the puff. The suggestion here is that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew made it up. In this context, theologians might refer to the story as a *midrash*,² but this essentially means the same thing. A recent supporter of the *midrash* hypothesis is Paffenroth who stated, “[T]he star is not therefore a lie or merely a piece of pious propaganda. It is a *midrash* in the sense that it is a story that reveals what the author of Matthew’s gospel feels is the truth about a man whose story he is telling, this Jesus whom Matthew and subsequent generations of believers have proclaimed as the Christ.”³

1 See, for example, Kim Paffenroth, “The Star of Bethlehem Casts Light on its Modern Interpreters,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 34 (1993): 449–60.

2 See Herman Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984).

3 Paffenroth, “The Star of Bethlehem.”

It is widely accepted that the author of Matthew was a hellenized Jew, a scribe, and an expert on Jewish law. He was writing between 80 and 90 CE. The author was not an eyewitness of the actual events of the life of Jesus and was not the Galilean apostle and tax collector. We will simply use 'Matthew' to refer to the author in what follows. The author of the gospel is thought to have used three sources: Mark's gospel, M (a collection of Matthean sayings), and Q (Quelle). He is writing for a second generation of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians (possibly in Antioch, Syria),⁴ who had been shocked by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE and awed by the visit of King Tiridates I and his accompanying wise men to Emperor Nero in 66 CE, as well as by the sight of Halley's Comet in the same year. He is trying to underline the conviction of that community, and others, that Jesus is much more than a prophet and is actually the long-awaited messiah, the Son of God, one who arose from the dead. The star helps in the first of these endeavors. Matthew's star thus joins a host of other fascinating, historic stars and comets that were thought to foretell the births and deaths of heroes, kings, and emperors. We might compare it to the journeys of Timoleon to Sicily and Aeneas to Italy. Bowman stresses similarities with the birth of Moses.⁵

Here the star, the magi, the gifts, the slaughter of the innocents, and the flight to Egypt were all the products of a fertile imagination aiming to convince a Jewish audience that Jesus was the lord, the messiah, the savior they had all been waiting for. Following Psalm 19:1 ("The heavens are telling the glory of God"),⁶ what better herald could there be of the Son of God than a star in the sky? Here again, Renan does not mention the star at all,⁷ which is "an extremely loud and eloquent silence," to quote Paffenroth.⁸

As in the miracle case above, if Matthew made it up, then there is little the astronomy community can contribute. We might criticize him for not going far enough and telling us what type of star he was imagining. We might criticize him for not telling us exactly when and where in the sky this imagined celestial object occurred, or how bright it was, or how long he suggested it lasted, or exactly what astrological interpretation he thought might be appropriate. But

4 See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977).

5 John Bowman, *Samaritan Documents: Relating to their History, Religion and Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1977).

6 All quotations from the Bible in this chapter use the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

7 E. Renan, *La Vie de Jesus* (Berlin: Springer, 1863).

8 Paffenroth, "The Star of Bethlehem."

if we are convinced that the Star of Bethlehem is just an advertising gimmick, any subsequent astronomical thought is nugatory.

But if it was an invention, why did Matthew omit one of his favorite phrases, “that it should be fulfilled,” an expression he used twelve times (1:22, 2:15, 2:17, 2:23, 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, 13:35, 21:4, 26:54–56, and 27:9)? He could easily have linked his fictitious star to the Old Testament prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17 (“a star shall come out of Jacob”). Matthew, more than the other gospel writers, linked the earthly life of Jesus with prophecies in the Old Testament and their fulfillment. The magi (Matt 2:1–12) have links to Psalm 72:11, the three gifts to Isaiah 60:6; the flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13–23) echoes Hosea 11:1, and the slaughter of the innocents, Jeremiah 31:15. We must also ask why Matthew invented such an ordinary star, or one that had such similarities to an actual celestial occurrence. If Matthew invented the star, what else did he invent? Is his whole gospel full of mistruths? I do not think so. To me, the Gospel of Matthew rings true. All of it. There again, coming from an astronomer intent on finding a real star, we might be justified in following the late Mandy Rice-Davies—“Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?”

When it comes to the story of the star, the magi, the slaughter, and the flight, many follow Adair:

[T]he fact that no source independent of Matthew mentions this story is inexplicable if it really happened, but this silence is exactly what is expected if it never happened . . . [T]he magi were not interested in astrology or a Jewish king or savior, and our only record for the tale comes from a figure (the author of the Gospel of Matthew) of unknown provenance with unknown sources using terrible historical methodology and relating a story that is filled with the physically impossible.⁹

Ignoring our worries about the probity of the Matthean account, we move on to category three, reality. Here there was a ‘star’, up there in the sky, in the celestial realm. Now astronomers are in business. Their endeavors, however, might not go uncriticized. Some are convinced that there should be no interaction between science and religion, and that science and religion occupy completely separate territories. Some of these people go further in encouraging the participants in each endeavor to keep their respective noses out of each other’s business. “The Bible tells you how to go to heaven and not how heaven goes” is a Galilean proposition I was often confronted with when my book was published in 1979.

9 Aaron Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View* (Fareham: Onus Books, 2013), 116.

I am, however, convinced that astronomers should have an opinion about the Star of Bethlehem. It is, next to the Sun, the most famous and most illustrated star in the heavens. Modern astronomers are serious scientists adept at searching for celestial bodies and investigating their characteristics. If the Star of Bethlehem was real, astronomers should help establish its identity. In this endeavor, they will turn to theological, classical, and historical colleagues for help.

An appropriate first question could be: When should astronomers look? Here we encounter our first problem. Confronted with biblical references to the Lucan census, the death of Herod, the return from Egypt, and Jesus' age when he started his ministry, astronomers are presented with a timespan that extends from early 8 to late 1 BCE. This window is far too large. Eight years! Many astronomical things happen in eight years. Comets and novae appear, planets mass and come into conjunction, and occultations and eclipses happen. Over the course of these eight years, any astronomer could produce a long list of possible candidates for the Star of Bethlehem. It would be so much easier if this time window could be shrunk. So much could be ruled out if our theological, classical, and historical colleagues said (for example), "It has to be 7 BCE, no other year would do." It would be even better if this timespan could be further refined. A year is still a long time. We could strive for better, and try to recognize the month of the birth. Considering shepherds in the fields, the feasts of the Jewish year, full inns, and the life of John the Baptist, what if our triumvirate of theological, classical, and historical colleagues insisted on, say, September? The astronomical search would be much sharpened if we knew both the month and the year. As an astronomer, confronted daily with many quantities measured to commendable accuracy, I am still baffled that today's historians cannot agree to within a day or so as to the time of the death of Herod the Great!

The second question is: Where should astronomers look in the sky? Here our triumvirate of helpers rely strongly on the astrological practices of the relevant communities of the time period. The star clearly had a significant message for the magi. Its interpretation in terms of a king of the Jews in Judea must have relied on a significant astrological event in a significant constellation. There are 88 constellations in the sky. Should astronomers be asked to search them all? Or might astronomers rely on the understanding of Babylonian or Persian (say) contemporary astrology, insisting that only the constellations of Pisces or Aries would fit the bill? Narrowing down the area of investigation would be very helpful. Our understanding of the relevant geographical astrology needs to be improved.

The third question is: What should present-day astronomers be looking for? In this enquiry, Matthew could hardly be less helpful. He just said 'star'; there is no descriptive adjective. If only we had a helpful clue! Fixed, hairy, new, wandering, varying, bright, amazing, zenithal—an adjective, in fact any adjective, would have helped. And are we right in assuming that the dearth of adjectival adornment means that the Matthean star had to be ordinary, unexceptional, and easily overlooked?

The Relevant Clues Concerning the Real Star of Bethlehem

As an astronomer endeavoring to identify the 'real' Star of Bethlehem, one finds oneself dealing with a very limited and somewhat conflicting series of clues, most of which are open to more than one interpretation. It is informative to list these clues in order of importance. Needless to say, the ordering of this list certainly colors one's final choice of 'star', and I am certain that the ordering of these clues differs considerably depending on whose astronomical theory is being promoted. Notice that I use the word 'clue' as opposed to the word 'fact'. In the light of what I said above, I do not think we can be certain about any real scientific facts concerning the star.

The biblical Star of Bethlehem, which supposedly heralded the birth of Jesus Christ, the Christian Messiah, is only mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter two. It is not in Luke or in any other gospel. It is not in any of the contemporary secular histories. Additionally, the nativity stories seem to have been added, somewhat belatedly, as a prelude to both Luke and Matthew. The main message of the Gospels rightly concerns the baptism and ministry of Jesus, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his expected return. Details of the birth were deemed to be of little importance at the time. If only we had been informed as to the year, month, and day of the birth of Jesus, the task of identifying the relevant star would be so much easier.

The birth of Jesus is mentioned only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The emphasis of these two gospels is completely different. The second chapter of Luke describes a somewhat peculiar Roman census/taxation system, a journey from Nazareth (where the holy family were living at the time of the annunciation), an over-booked inn in Bethlehem, a manger, a visitation of shepherds from the nearby fields on the night of the birth, the subsequent circumcision of the baby boy, the purification of the mother in Jerusalem, Simeon's blessing of Jesus (Luke 2:30), and a journey home to Galilee. Matthew, on the other hand, has the family living in a house in Bethlehem, a star, Herod, magi, gifts,

the slaughter of the innocents, a flight to Egypt, and a relocation to Nazareth in the first year of the reign of Archelaus.¹⁰

Matthew's gospel message is unembellished. I believe that the Star of Bethlehem actually existed, and that astronomical historians will enjoy searching for it for many years to come. I admit that even though we have been looking for it for 2000 years, we have no candidate that is unassailably the best. In what follows, I turn aside from doubting Matthew and embrace his veracity. Even though he might have been writing about something that occurred around a hundred years before he put pen to parchment, from now on we will assume that the star was a real, celestial, astronomical object. It is our job to find out which star it was and why it was regarded as being so special.

The Clues as to the Date of the Birth of Jesus and the Star of Bethlehem

The relevant timeframe is extremely important. Needless to say, the narrower this is, the better. We need two dates: an early one before which it would have been impossible for the star to occur, and a later one after which we can rule out all consideration of celestial apparitions.

Unfortunately we cannot take today's festive calendar as a guide. Dating Jesus' birth to 25 December 1 BCE, with the new baby being about one week old on 1 January 1 CE, is far too simplistic and incorrect. The present December festivities are tied up with the early Christian community hijacking the pagan winter solstice feast of *dies natalis solis invicti* for the celebration of the birthday of Christ. This first occurred around 336 CE. The 1 BCE birth year is also problematic, and Dionysius Exiguus was considerably in error when, in 525 CE, he based his new calendrical year numbering system on that fiduciary year.¹¹

Both of the nativity gospels, Matt 2:23 and Luke 1:5, agree that the birth occurred when Herod the Great was the Roman client king of Judea. We are thus interested in the date of Herod's death in Jericho. Here we hit a snag, because two dates are mentioned by historians. The more traditional date is 1 BCE; others follow Josephus, who placed the time of death between a lunar eclipse that took place on 13 March 4 BCE and the feast of Passover in that year. Once we establish the date of Herod's death, we must go back around four years to establish the birthdate of Jesus in order for this to fit in with the

10 Remember that Hos 11:1 says, "out of Egypt I called my son." The despot Archelaus ruled Judah for six years after the death of Herod the Great—he was then deposed. The more benign Herod Antipas was made ruler of Galilee, and so the holy family went there.

11 See *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 3 (1908), 724; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1983), 280.

slaughter of the innocents¹² and the two years or so in which the holy family were in Egypt, sheltering from the tyrant's wrath. This places the birth of Jesus somewhere between 8 and 4 BCE.¹³ Note in passing that it was Herod who identified the King of the Jews who the magi were seeking, with Christ the expected Messiah (see Matt 2:4).

We now move to the Gospel of Luke and try to date the Lukan census. The Roman Monumentum Ancyranum of Caesar Augustus dates this to 746/747 *ab urbe condita*, i.e., 8/7 BCE. To quote Adair, "Luke is the only Gospel author that even puts on the mantel of a historian."¹⁴ Staying with Luke, we can move to the start of Jesus' ministry: "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph, son of Heli" (Luke 3:23). According to Luke 3:1, John the Baptist began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (29 CE), and Jesus began his ministry shortly thereafter. Most theologians think that Jesus ministered for about three and a half years. If we know the date of the crucifixion we can then date the birth. Most modern scholars favour 7 April 30 CE as the date of the crucifixion, but others are more in favour of 3 April 33 CE.

It is commonly agreed that Luke's shepherds visited Jesus on the night of the birth, but the magi came along some time later. Some suggest that Luke 2:8, with shepherds "living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night," points towards lambing time in the early spring or round-up time in late autumn. It is most unlikely that the shepherds would have been in the fields in a cold and rainy Judean December, as would be the case if our present date for the celebration of Jesus' birth corresponding to the historical date. That Jesus was six months younger than John the Baptist (Luke 1:36) underlines an early Christian and Muslim tradition suggesting that Jesus was born in the autumn, on the day after the Jewish Sabbath.

The word 'child' in Matt 2:9–10 differs from 'baby' and is taken to mean an infant who is still suckling. This means that the visit of the magi could have occurred anytime in the first three years of Jesus' life. The Herodian slaughter of the innocents intimates that Jesus had to be under two years old. Many also insist that the magi did not arrive until Jesus was older than six weeks, in order to allow for the circumcision eight days after his birth (Luke 2:21) and his

12 The children would have been two years old and under according to Matt 2:16; but see Jonathan Pearce (*The Nativity: A Critical Examination* [Fareham: Onus Books, 2012]), who casts doubt on the authenticity of this account.

13 Here we are taking into account the fact that Herod could have died in either 1 or 4 BCE.

14 Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 20.

presentation in the temple after the forty days of Mary's uncleanness were over (Lev 12:1–8).

Many think that John the Baptist was born on 15th day of the first month of the Jewish year, Nisan, at about the time of Passover. Jesus was born six months later, around the 15th day of Tishran. This is during the Feast of Tabernacles, which could explain why the inn in Bethlehem was full.¹⁵

The Clues as to the Form of the Star

The short answer here is that there are no clues about the form of the star. The word 'star' in Matthew chapter two is not blessed with an adjective. In Matthew, 'star' is used only four times, and on three of those occasions it is plain and unadorned. On the fourth occasion it is preceded by a possessive pronoun, which we will discuss below. The lack of an adjective means that interpreters of the Star of Bethlehem have felt free to introduce adjectives at will. In ancient times, the word 'star' was a generic term for any astronomical object. The star in question could be fixed (perhaps one of the constellation-defining stars), wandering (a planet, i.e., Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, or Saturn), new (a nova or supernova), hairy (a comet, either a long-period, Halley-type comet or a short-period comet), variable (perhaps a Mira-type), or shooting (a meteor). There is nothing in Matthew that restricts our choice between these options.

The omission of an adjective means that Matthew not only gives no information about the form of the star, he also gives no indication as to its brightness. This (somewhat unintentionally) predisposes some researchers to expect something ordinary, unspectacular, and un-newsworthy, something that could have been easily overlooked by the non-specialist astronomer and/or astrologer of the time. The supposed ordinariness of the Matthean star is often supported by the fact that Herod and all of Jerusalem were "frightened" when the magi told them about the new king and about the star that was the king's herald (Matt 2:3). This is often interpreted as indicating that the star was so unexceptional that the Jerusalem court had not noticed it. It is clear from Matt 2:7 that Herod had no idea when the star had appeared, so we can again assume that it was so insignificant that it had gone unnoticed. Does this rule out bright comets and unexpected supernovae? The short answer is yes.

15 See Lev 23:24; <http://www.ucg.org/holidays-and-holy-days/when-was-jesus-christ-born/>; see also W. Burke-Gaffney, "Kepler and the Star of Bethlehem," *Journal of the Royal Society Canada* 31 (1937): 47–25.

Matthew 2:7 is somewhat problematic, because it cannot be assumed that the Jewish people at that time were indifferent to astrology.¹⁶ If the star was real, the chances of it being noticed in Jerusalem would have been high. It is also somewhat out of character for the despotic Herod not to send spies to follow the magi on their short journey to Bethlehem. To sit back and rely on them to return with the news is not what one would expect. To quote Molnar: “It is odd that the magi told a king about the birth of another king without expecting serious repercussions.”¹⁷

Human reporters unfortunately have a tendency to embellish and exaggerate stories as time passes. This is exactly what happened with the Star of Bethlehem. Around 80–90 CE, Matthew wrote about an ordinary star, but this soon changed. The star brightened in later writings. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria, in his *Epistle to the Ephesians* (Chapter 19) in about 98–117 CE, discusses a star whose “light was beyond description and its newness caused astonishment; all the other stars with the Sun and the Moon gathered in chorus around the star, but it far exceeded them in its light.” The *Protoevangelium of St James*, (17:21) written after 150 CE, describes how “an indescribably great star shone among these stars and dimmed them, so that they no longer shone.”

The Clue Provided by the Possessive Pronoun “His”

There is one important exception to Matthew’s dearth of stellar adjectives, and this occurs when the star is first mentioned in Matt 2:2. After travelling to Jerusalem, the magi say to Herod, “We observed his star.” This is an extremely important clue. It is *his* star, not just any old star. Whatever the star was, it had some extremely important messages for the magi. There was something in the sky that told them three things, the crux of which can be summed up as: (i) new king, (ii) Jewish, and (iii) birth. What the magi saw when they were observing the sky in their own country told them *what* had happened, *where* it had happened, and *when* it had happened. As we will see below, this celestial message is much more likely to be associated with planetary movements than with random events, such as the appearance of a comet or a new star. The latter are unpredictable and thus astrologically confusing. The magi were most likely extremely competent astronomer/astrologers, whose job was to predict where planets would be in the near future. They could foretell the temporal approach of the planetary message indicating (i) a new king, (ii) that the new king would

16 See, for example, Lester Ness, *Written in the Stars: Ancient Zodiac Mosaics* (Warren Center, PA: Marco Polo Monographs, 1999).

17 Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 14.

be Jewish, and (iii) when his birthday would be, and then they could be very happy when their predictions turned out to be true.

The importance of the observed and predicted celestial message was sufficient for the magi to procure three gifts and travel a considerable distance from their home in the East. What they saw/predicted told them to go to the Jewish capital Jerusalem in Judea, not Damascus in Syria or Memphis in Egypt. Notice also that they went first to Jerusalem and not to Bethlehem, the actual birthplace of Jesus; so we are not dealing with a celestial guide that is accurate to the nearest village or (expecting even greater precision) to the specific house, cave, stable, or manger. Notice also that this lack of precision caused the subsequent problems associated with the slaughter of the innocents and the flight to Egypt. If the magi had travelled to Bethlehem the same way as they departed from Bethlehem, the nativity story would be different and less bloody.

It is also reasonable to suggest that the celestial sign (“his star”) told them when to go. They interpreted the celestial occurrence in terms of an actual birthdate and could subsequently decide to arrive on the night of the birth of Jesus, or a month later, or two months later, or a year later. And they knew what to expect when they got there: a new king of the Jews, not a new castle, or a port, or the expected messiah. They were expecting a new earthly monarch, a successor to Herod the Great. It took Herod’s suggestion and much subsequent Christian theological and quasi-historical shenanigans to associate the visit of the magi with the christological moment—the instant that a baby born in Bethlehem became the Son of God and thus the long-awaited messiah. The magi were visiting the new king of the Jews; they had no idea about the preceding angelic annunciation (Luke 1:26–39).

Notice also that we are talking about an unnumbered band of eastern magi, not the subsequently named and beatified “Three Kings of the Orient”—who, in the eyes of later Christians, were the first Gentiles to fall down and worship the new messiah. Their subsequent beatification and promotion to royalty was mainly due to later Christians pandering to Psalms 68:29 and 72:10, as well as Isaiah 49:7 and 60:3, 10. None of these later additions have anything to do with the original Star of Bethlehem.

Visits by ambassadorial magi bearing gifts and paying homage were not unusual in those days. The association of stars with kings and new rulers was quite commonplace at the time (see Numbers 24:17) and could easily have influenced the writer of Matthew and the invention of his *midrash*, as suggested above.

With the “his star” clue, we have to step deeply into the realms of astrology, and here we hit another snag. We might be able to read quite a bit about present-day astrology. We can also go back to the Jewish astrology of the tenth

century CE, and even the Greek Ptolemaic astrology of the second century CE, but we know very little about the astrology of the magi. Whatever specific Star of Bethlehem is chosen, it has to satisfy the astrological criteria of what, where, and when. Each of these specific factors is important. Let us first take the issue of where. The magi were most likely Zoroastrian astrologers. One can imagine their brand of astrology having each of the twelve signs of the zodiac associated with a different near-neighbouring country: Pisces = Judea, Aries = Syria, etc. Occurrences in each celestial constellation thus corresponded to events in the specific associated country. This clue is vitally important, because the magi clearly knew where to go—Jerusalem. What they saw in the sky indicated the place to visit. We might conjecture that the star occurred in only one constellation. Thus the message was unambiguous. This might occur in the case of (for instance) a planetary conjunction, a lunar occultation, or a nova, but it would be more difficult to square with a comet. Comets move quickly across the sky, and a typical naked-eye comet will cross quite a few constellations during its apparition.¹⁸ Planets such as Jupiter, (which moves around the celestial zodiac in about 12 years) and Saturn (which has a sidereal period of 29.5 years) are extremely appropriate as indicators of where the event might have occurred. Jupiter stays one year in each zodiacal constellation, and Saturn stays about three. Thus geographical astrology relevant to “his star” is important. It narrows the search field considerably.

When it comes to the question of what, here again the magi were unambiguous. They had seen something that indicated a new Jewish king had been born. It was this fact that worried Herod the Great. Herod wanted to know when “his star” had been seen and where this new “king” was. Herod had five wives and ten children already, each ready to take over his whole kingdom or a part of it. There was Antipas, Archelaus, Antipater, Alexander, Aristobulus, and Philip, among others—heirs aplenty. Perhaps he thought the magi were indicating a completely new family of rulers. When it comes to the Star of Bethlehem, we must look for something that astrologically indicates a new king.

Let us also consider the timing. The “his star” clue above clearly indicates that the magi thought they knew exactly when this new king had been born. They had a specific day in mind, and they were in no rush. The homage they were going to pay to this new ruler would be acceptable any time in the first

18 David W. Hughes (“Edmund Halley: His Interest in Comets,” in *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: A Longer View of Newton and Halley* [ed. Norman J. W. Thrower; Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990], 324–72, Fig 17.12) shows that the visual track of Halley’s Comet at each apparition over the last 2000 years typically travelled a celestial distance of around ten hours of right ascension, i.e., about five constellations.

few years of his life. They did not have to travel from their homeland in undue haste, or take inappropriate risks by crossing inhospitable deserts rather than travelling along well-used caravan routes. This birthdate was of considerable interest to Herod. Matthew 2:7 states, "Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared." an enquiry that led subsequently to the slaughter of the innocents. Notice that the magi told Herod they had first seen the star "at its rising" (*en te anatole*, Matt 2:2). This is taken by many to indicate a heliacal rising in the predawn eastern sky (a suggestion that was first put forward by Heinrich Voigt in 1911). Was this heliacal rising closely associated with the time of birth? Or did the magi's astrology favour the slightly later achronical rising? Note, however, that Roberts follows Boll and argues that this heliacal rising interpretation is bogus.¹⁹ With a heliacal rising, the planet is perhaps fifteen to twenty degrees to the west of the Sun. As such, the planet rises in the east, only to be speedily dimmed by the brightening sky and the Sun's dawning. Note also that the stipulation of a heliacal rising rules out objects in the considerable circular area of the celestial sphere centered on the North Celestial Pole, an area that is always above the horizon and does not rise or set.

The Clue Associated with "Went Before" and "Stood Over"

Matthew 2:9 provides a real astronomical stumbling block. In this verse, we read that "there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was." Stars are not usually referred to as being "ahead." The huge distance between them and the Earth makes this unlikely. Some researchers take "ahead" to mean "in the direction of Bethlehem, on the horizon" i.e., south (as seen from Jerusalem). Here, at the specific time of day when the magi left Herod and Jerusalem, the Star of Bethlehem was in the low southern sky, indicating where Bethlehem was. However, any star moves speedily across the sky due to the diurnal spin of the Earth. In fact, these stars in the southern sky are moving east to west, not in the required direction, which, for that specific journey, is north to south. Also, this stellar direction-pointer was completely unnecessary. The magi had been told that Jesus was in Bethlehem, ten kilometers south of Jerusalem. The prediction in Micah 5:2 ("But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.") had been pointed out to the

19 Courtney Roberts, *The Star of the Magi: The Mystery that Heralded the Coming of Christ* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: The Career Press, 2007); cf. Franz Boll, "Der Stern der Weisen," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentlich Wissenschaft* 18 (1917): 40–48.

magi. (Notice that in the King James Version of the Bible, the terms “go before” and “stood over” replace the terms “ahead” and “stopped over,” and are equally as problematic from an astronomical standpoint.)

The literal interpretation of the phrase “stopped over” indicates a star that essentially points to the stable/house/cave in Bethlehem where Jesus and his parents were at the time of the magi’s visit, just like a modern satellite navigation system. This precision is surely unnecessary. 2000 years ago, in the small town of Bethlehem, there would have been about ten boy children born per year. If we then factor in the number of boys who had been visited by a cacophony of shepherds at their nativity and had a mother who was a virgin (and who, in the eyes of many of the Jewish folk living in the town, had had a child out of wedlock—think of the gossip!), finding the holy family would have been a piece of cake. Indicating a specific dwelling would remove the star from the celestial realm to a hovering distance a few tens of meters above the ground. If this was the case, when Herod’s soldiers turned up to slaughter the innocents a few days later, why was the specific house not pointed out by parents who were hoping to save their own children?²⁰

Some interpreters take the phrase “stopped over” to mean “in the zenith”—directly overhead. Astronomically this introduces a distinct restriction. Stars that pass through the zenith have the same celestial declination as the geographical latitude of the location. Bethlehem is 32.7365° N. Other researchers take Matt 2:9 as absolute truth. Here the star has to physically be ahead (or ‘go before’) and stand over. It has to lead the way. This interpretation moves us from the realm of scientific astronomy into the realm of miracles. The Star of Bethlehem then enters walking on water, feeding the five thousand, infecting swine, and turning water into wine territory.²¹

Let us be critical. If “his star” was a miraculous ball-lightening-like apparition, leading the magi by the hand from their hometown, why did they have to divert to Jerusalem and see Herod? Any miraculous star could have easily taken the magi straight to Bethlehem. There was a good road bypassing Jerusalem. In fact, it is exactly the road the magi allegedly used to go home after they had visited the holy family.²² The “ahead,” “went before,” and “stood over” clues are

20 See Dwight Hutchison, *The Lion Led the Way* (St. Paul-Trois-Châteaux, France: Hutchison, 2014), 18.

21 See also Robert M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam: North-Holland 1952).

22 Twenty years ago I went to St. Theodosius, a monastery founded in 476 CE, 12 kilometers east of Bethlehem, where the magi allegedly spent the first night after leaving Bethlehem, having been warned in a dream not to go back by the same route.

uncomfortable. Anyone putting forward an astronomical explanation has to seriously downgrade them to second class. On the other hand, Sten Odenwald suggests that the phrase “went before” refers to the retrograde motion of the planet’s observed path across the sky near opposition, whereas the phrase “stopped over,” “stood over” refers to the last of the two stationary points in the planet’s path.²³

The Clue Concerning the Duration of the Star

Two key questions in this context concern the length of time the star was visible in the sky and whether it had just one period of visibility or was actually seen twice, disappearing in between. Consider Matt 2: 9–10: “When they had heard the king, they set out; and there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” They had seen the star in their home country (the East) and they saw it as they left Jerusalem. Did they see it again when they left Jerusalem, or had it been visible over the whole interval of time? What period of time is required to cover the stellar observation, the trip preparation, the journey, and the visit with Herod?

One problem here is that we do not know where the magi lived. Let us start by taking a reasonable guess—thinking back to the Jewish exile under Nebuchadnezzar, let us speculate that the magi lived in Mesopotamia, on the banks of the River Euphrates. They see “his star” in the sky and then have to obtain the gifts; collect the horses, servants, and camels; and make their way to Jerusalem, some 880 kilometers away. There are two obvious routes. One is the hazardous trip directly across the Arabian Desert. This could take, at a rush, about two weeks. The other, more sensible approach would be to go around the Fertile Crescent—up the Euphrates, across to the Mediterranean, and then down into Judea. The journey length has now increased to around 1300 kilometers, and the time to about a month, but there is no rush. Astrologically, if they knew where to go, it is reasonable to suppose that they also knew what to expect and when to expect it. The magi were convinced that they knew the birthdate of Jesus, and the specific date of paying homage was relatively unimportant.

Upon leaving Jerusalem, they see the star. We are not told whether the star has been visible every night since they left their homeland or whether the star they had seen a few weeks to a month or so before had disappeared, only to reappear again. We are told that it is the same star. But why were they “overwhelmed with joy”? If the star had been visible all the time, what engenders

23 Available online at: <http://www.astronomycafe.net/qadir/q341.html>.

the overwhelming joy of Matthew 2:10? Maybe it was a comet that was seen first on its way into perihelion and then reappears again afterwards, having passed around the Sun. Unfortunately, here the magi had no means of judging whether it was the same object. The details of cometary orbits were only established in 1687, when Isaac Newton sorted out the orbit of the great comet of 1680. Maybe it was a double or triple planetary conjunction, the first event seen in their home country and the next in the conjunction sequence then happening after they left Jerusalem. Here we have something the magi were capable of predicting (since astronomy was one of their specialties), and having their planetary prediction confirmed might have given them overwhelming joy. We will return to this below. For now, let me stress the point about “the same star.” The star they saw when they were in their home country and the star they saw when they left Jerusalem were one and the same. You cannot get away with a planetary conjunction for the first stellar apparition and then a comet or nova for the second. It is also not easy to envisage this ‘two-star’ scenario being two comets or two novae. It could be one planetary conjunction followed by another, or a planetary conjunction followed by an achronical rising or a stationary point.

The Rarity of the Event

That the magi took the trouble to acquire the gifts and then undertook a time-consuming and arduous journey all the way to Jerusalem leads us to surmise that the star’s circumstances were uncommon. Regular astronomical events such as the stunning evening and morning appearances of Venus, the zodiacal light, annual meteor showers, occasional fireballs, and lunar occultations of Jupiter are surely so commonplace and unremarkable that they would not normally encourage magi to buy gifts and travel long distances (halfway across their known world). The possibility that common, well-known events were the Star of Bethlehem would have the magi yo-yoing back and forth across or around the Arabian Desert (the desert to the east of Jerusalem) every year or so. The star we are looking for is something unusual, at the very least, a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Magi

“Wise men” are the words used in both the New Revised Standard and the King James versions of the Bible. A common suggestion is that they were Zoroastrian priests, people competent in star watching. These priests/astrologers were employed by the court to cast horoscopes and interpret the movements of the planets against the celestial background. We have every reason to be convinced that they could have accurately predicted, for example, the

triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces in 7 BCE. To within a week or so, they could predict the timing of the heliacal and achronical risings, the timing of the planetary stationary points, and the timings of the specific conjunctions. There would have been no surprises. Every future action based on planetary calculations could be planned in advance.

One of the first artistic depictions of magi is in the seventh-century mosaic at the Basilica of Saint Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy. Here they are in Persian dress, there are only three, and they have been named and beatified.

The phrase “from the east” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν), or more literally “from the rising [of the Sun],” is the only information Matthew provides about the region from which they came. The traditional consensus is that the magi were Babylonians, Persians, or Jews from Yemen. There is an Armenian tradition identifying the “Magi of Bethlehem” as Balthasar of Arabia, Melchior of Persia, and Gaspar of India. Bible historian Chuck Missler has also written about this tradition. The historian John of Hildesheim relates a tradition in the ancient Silk Road city of Taxila (near Islamabad in Pakistan) that one of the magi passed through the city on his way to Bethlehem.²⁴

The magi did not need to see the star twice. In the case of the Star of Bethlehem being a planetary triple conjunction, it is possible that their “exceedingly great joy” (κῆν) or then being “overwhelmed with joy” (Νῆσν) was due to their prediction of a second and third conjunction being observationally proved true. The achronical rising Tuesday 15 September 7 BCE is at the mid-point of the period of visibility for both Jupiter and Saturn, the time interval when they are far enough away from the Sun in the sky to be easily visible at some time during the night. Both planets could have been easily seen during the five-and-a-half months before 15 September 7 BCE and for the five-and-a-half months afterwards. As the magi travelled, it would have been the planetary separation that interested them. Many records of planetary observations and predictions as to planetary positions in subsequent decades are found on clay tablets, the British Museum having an extensive collection.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of the magi’s geographic and regal astrology is extremely limited. An accurate understanding of their views would be extremely useful and would help us discriminate between Star of Bethlehem candidates. If, for example, we could convince ourselves that the only constellation relevant to Jewish events and Judea was Pisces, this would rule out comets in Capricornus and Aquila, novae in Andromeda, and lunar occultations in Aries; we could save ourselves much time. Likewise, if we had a detailed

24 For a discussion of the relationship between the Jewish people and the Persian magi, see, for example, Roberts, *The Star of the Magi*.

knowledge of the magi's astrology, we could then discriminate between the 'messages' of planets, comets, and novae. The title "the child who has been born king of the Jews" automatically suggests a potential transfer of power from an old king to a new king. The potential transfer of power suggests two astronomical players, one 'old' and one 'new', one having power (the planet Saturn for example) and one receiving power (the planet Jupiter). Maybe the appearance of a comet meant less; I wish we knew what the magi thought about comets. The same goes for novae. Maybe novae were such rarely noticed occurrences that there was little astrological 'baggage' associated with them. Maybe the only important astrological messengers of the time were generated by the well-known planets.

Stars of Bethlehem

Over the last 2000 years, many possible candidates for the role of the Star of Bethlehem have been suggested, both in the literature and in artistic representation. In the following section, I will review these suggestions.

Comets

The association of comets with the Star of Bethlehem started very early on in the investigation of the possible physicality and reality of the star. Origen Adamantius (ca. 184–253 CE), the Alexandrian biblical exegete, was one of the first people to theorize this. In his *Contra Celsium* he writes, "We think that the star which appeared in the east was a new star and not like any of the ordinary ones, neither of the fixed sphere nor of those in the lower spheres, but it is to be classed with the comets which occasionally occur, or meteors, or bearded or jar-shaped stars, or any such name by which the Greeks may like to describe their different forms." Note that the "fixed sphere," in a rather Eudoxian fashion, refers to the stars in the constellations of the celestial sphere, and the "stars in the lower spheres" are the wandering planets. The term 'meteor' hints at occurrences in the Earth's atmosphere, such as aurorae, shooting stars, lightning, haloes, and general meteorological phenomena. Origen's 'cometary' suggestion was widely adopted by subsequent artists, a famous example being the naturalistic comet in Giotto di Bondone's nativity fresco in the Arena Chapel in Padua, painted about 1303–1306 CE.²⁵

25 See also the works of Francesco d'Antonio, Antonio Busca, Gentile da Fabriano, Juan de Flandes, Bartolomeo de Giovanni, Pol de Limbourg, Stanislaw Lubieniecki, Jean de Saint-Igny, and Andrea Mantegna, among others.

In the context of the “his star” clue mentioned above, we must consider the astrological significance of comets at the time. Bright, naked-eye comets are seen about every decade. Nothing has changed in this regard over time. They are usually either in the western evening sky or the eastern morning sky, so they are in a constellation that is 25° to 90° each side of the Sun. Naked-eye comets were unexpected, startling, feared, unwelcome, and widely regarded as malefic.²⁶ They were also thought to be of astrological significance, and the Chinese astronomers and court (for example) regarded them as message-bearing celestial ambassadors; as such, astronomers were employed to keep very careful records of the positions, movement, duration, and appearances of all of the comets they saw. In Chinese astrology, comets represented karmic retribution and were thought to be indicators of bad government and unjust ruling. The Babylonian view also associated comets with the four ‘Ds’—doom, disease, disasters, and the death of leaders.

About the time that the Gospel of Matthew was being written, the great comet of 79 CE was thought (retrospectively) to be a warning of both the death of the Emperor Vespasian and the eruption of Vesuvius. Marcus Manilius, the Roman astrologer, blamed most things on comets: “Heaven in pity is sending upon Earth tokens of impending doom.”²⁷ Blighted crops, plagues, wars, insurrections, and even family feuds were caused by comets.²⁸ The appearance of Halley’s Comet in 66 CE was thought by Flavius Josephus to indicate the fall of Jerusalem. Some think that Matthew related Halley’s Comet to the Star of Bethlehem.²⁹ The Greeks linked comets to bad weather, high winds, and drought. This was mainly Aristotle’s fault.³⁰ He regarded comets as sublunary, meteorological phenomena. They were supposedly made of vapours, which were emitted by erupting volcanoes and by violent earthquakes. These vapours would then rise up to the top of the atmosphere, where they were ignited due to friction with the rotating celestial spheres, thus producing a comet. Astrologically this was quickly turned around, so that the order of disastrous events—such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes—became reversed,

26 See, for example, Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Comet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); and Donald K. Yeomans, *Comets: A Chronological History of Observation, Science, Myth and Folklore* (New York: Wiley Science Editions, 1991).

27 *Astronomica*, book 1, line 884 (trans. G. P. Gould; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

28 See Ian Ridpath, *A Comet Called Halley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

29 See W. E. Phipps, “The Magi and Halley’s Comet,” *Theology Today* 43 (1986): 88.

30 See T. Heidarzadeh, *A History of Physical Theories of Comets from Aristotle to Whipple* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2008).

and comets, instead of being caused by disasters, actually caused the disasters themselves. The medieval monk and astrologer Eilmer of Malmesbury regarded comets as a “source of the tears of many mothers.”³¹

One of the problems of a comet being the Star of Bethlehem is that the birth of a new Jewish king (Matt 2:2) is surely good news and not bad. Where is the doom, disease, death, and disaster in the birth of Jesus? One of the points in favour of the cometary explanation is the term “stood over” in Matt 2:9 (ΚΙΥ). This expression was used by contemporary historians, such as Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, 54.29) and Josephus (*Jewish War*, 6.5.3), when they described comets as “standing over” specific cities.

At the time of the birth of Jesus, no positive distinction was made between comets and novae, and we rely on early Chinese diary records to list these. Object Number 61 in the Ho Peng-Yoke list was Halley’s Comet.³² This was seen in 12 BCE, as a *po-hsing* (a comet without a tail). 12 BCE is too early to be a credible Star of Bethlehem. The same can be said for Object Number 62, a *po* comet seen at She Thi and Ta Chio (Bootes, Acturus) in the year 10 BCE. Object Number 63 was recorded over 70 days, between 9 March and 6 April 5 BCE, and was termed a *sui-hsing* (a comet with a tail). It was seen in Capricornus near the asterism *Ch’ien-niu* (Right Ascension 20.25 hr, declination 15°). As no details are given regarding the motion of this object over the 70-day period, Clark et al. take it to be a nova, and the long duration of its visibility is taken to indicate that it was bright.³³ Needless to say, a naked-eye comet—which would have been close to the Sun in the inner solar system at the time—would have typically moved across two or three constellations during a period of 70 days. Object Number 64, a comet (*po-hsing*), was seen in April 4 BCE near Ho-Ku in Aquila (R. A. 19.6 hr, dec. +8°). Details of its duration are not given, so this comet was probably faint and short-lived. Ho Peng Yoke’s Object Number 65, a comet seen in December 13 CE, is far too late to be the Star of Bethlehem.

There are two problems when it comes to the two objects that were seen in the relevant Star of Bethlehem time period, the 5 BCE *sui-hsing* in Capricornus and the 4 BCE *po-hsing* in Aquila. First, some have suggested that the 4 BCE report was actually a mis-description of the 5 BCE object, and that we should

31 See, for example, Amédée Guillemin, *The World of Comets* (London, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Riverton, 1877), 25.

32 Peng-Yoke Ho, “Ancient and Mediaeval Observations of Comets and Novae in Chinese Sources,” *Vistas in Astronomy* 5 (1962): 127–225.

33 D. H. Clark, J. H. Parkinson, and F. R. Stephenson, “An Astronomical Re-appraisal of the Star of Bethlehem—A Nova in 5 BC,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 18 (1977): 443–49.

actually only be discussing one observation instead of two. Cullen convincingly shows that there are two completely different objects.³⁴ Surely the distance between the two celestial positions (about 25° apart) is too great for a mistake to be made by the competent far-eastern observers. The second problem concerns the description of the objects. It is not absolutely clear whether the Chinese were recording a comet or a nova; no mention is made of movement against the celestial background. Thus Humphreys is convinced that the 5 BCE Capricornus body was a comet,³⁵ whereas Clark, Parkinson, and Stephenson are convinced that the same object was a nova.³⁶

It is worth pointing out that in an astrological context, neither Capricornus nor Aquila has anything to do with Judea. The sight of a moving, bright, unexpected comet would give the magi little predictive indication of what was being foretold, where to go, and what to expect. In modern astrology, the suggested time of the major influence of a comet is coincident with its date of perihelion passage. Prior to the late-seventeenth century, no one had any idea when this was. Comet orbits were a mystery. It is also worth pointing out that the period of visibility of a typical naked-eye comet is usually less than a few weeks. The 70 days mentioned above is, however, time enough for the magi's journey. It is also worth noting that bright comets are not uncommon; there is at least one every ten to fifteen years, so it would be somewhat inconvenient if the magi had to embark on a diplomatic mission every time a bright comet came along.

The big snag with comets and novae as predictive tools is that they were unexpected and random in those days. The astrology of comets is associated with the constellations that they appear in, as well as the form and direction of their tails. For the Jewish Jesus, Capricornus and Aquila seem to be irrelevant. Novae and comets brighten and then decay. They are not seen twice, as the Star of Bethlehem was. Comets are usually only seen as naked-eye objects after they have passed the Sun. It is a rather unusual comet that is seen both on its way into the Sun and again on its way out. For such an unusual case, we have had to wait for Isaac Newton, in his *Principia* published in 1687, to show that the Great Comet of 1680 was seen on both occasions. Prior to that date, a double observation (pre- and post-perihelion) was taken to be two completely different comets.

34 Christopher Cullen, "Can We Find the Star of Bethlehem in Far Eastern Records?" *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 20 (1977): 153–59.

35 Colin Humphreys, "The Star of Bethlehem—A Comet in 5 BC—and the Date of the Birth of Christ," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32 (1991): 389–497; Humphreys, "The Star of Bethlehem," *Science and Christian Belief* 5 (1993): 83–101.

36 Clark et al., "An Astronomical Re-appraisal."

Thus the “exceedingly great joy / overwhelmed with joy” of the magi, a joy that is often taken to indicate that one of their celestial predictions had come true, and perhaps that the same object had been seen twice, does not apply to comets or novae. Additionally, the 5 BCE comet, seen over the course of 70 days, should be reasonably bright at maximum visibility, and it is then difficult to explain why Herod and his court had not seen it and were taken by surprise by the magi’s visit.³⁷

Stars as Possible Stars of Bethlehem

Some researchers have suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was a nova—a new star—and that the 5 BCE Capricornus object was a nova.³⁸ One problem here is that novae, by their very nature, have no back-history. They appear completely unexpectedly and thus have very limited astrological significance. Also, a nova does not brighten twice in a short time interval, so the second apparition on leaving Jerusalem, the one that gave the magi feelings of “joy,” cannot be explained.

The nova-supernova possibility ticks the ‘rarity’ box (see Table 5.1). Astrologically, novae have been taken to signify ‘breakthroughs’. Much was made, for example, of the global paradigm shift towards heliocentricity around the time when Tycho Brahe saw his nova in 1572. After that appearance, the Aristotelian view that the heavens never change became discounted.

Another stellar candidate was introduced to the debate by Frank Tipler, who decided that the word ‘star’ in Matthew’s gospel meant exactly what it said—a star.³⁹ He also insisted (unlike everyone else) that the phrase “stood over” in the KJV also means what it says—the star went through the zenith at Bethlehem. He was thus looking for a star that had a declination of $31^{\circ} 43'$ some 2000 years ago. M31, the Andromeda Galaxy, was at that declination. A supernova in Andromeda would fit the bill.

Kidger went further than the theory of ‘any’ nova or supernova and specifically selected the nova Δ Aquilae.⁴⁰ Schaefer strongly disagreed, stressing

37 Nevertheless, a convincing proponent of the hypothesis that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet is Humphreys (see note 34).

38 See, for example, Clark et al., “An Astronomical Re-appraisal;” Mark Kidger, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer’s View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Bradley E. Schaefer, “The Star of Bethlehem is Not the Nova Δ Aquilae (Nor Any Other Nova Supernova, or Comet),” *The Observatory* 133 (2013): 227–31.

39 F. J. Tipler, “The Star of Bethlehem: A Tyoe-Ia/Ic Supernova in the Andromeda Galaxy,” *The Observatory* 125 (2005): 168–74.

40 Kidger, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

TABLE 5.1 *Famous naked-eye 'new stars' recorded throughout history*⁴¹

Date	Constellation	Apparent magnitude at maximum
2241 BCE (?)		
352 BCE (?)		
4 BCE	Aquila	
185 CE	Centaurus	-4
369 (?)		
386	Sagittarius	+1.5
393	Scorpius	-0
437 (?)	Gemini	
827?	Scorpius / Ophiuchus	-10
902?	Cassiopeia	0
1006	Lupus	-7.5
1054	Taurus	-6 (Crab Nebula)
1181	Cassiopeia	0
1203	Scorpius	0
1230 (?)	Aquila	
1572	Cassiopeia	4 (Tycho's supernova, 15 months)
1592 (?)	Cetus	
1604	Ophiuchus	-2.5 (Kepler's supernova)
1680	Cassiopeia	+5
1987	Dorado	+2.9

that DO Aql was an ordinary nova and not a recurrent one.⁴² As its 'explosion' timescale was over a million years, its 1925 eruption would not have been preceded by another one a mere 2000 years previously. Additionally, DO Aql only brightened to an apparent magnitude of around 8.5 mag, so it would have been invisible to the magi. Schaefer also stressed that the astrology of the day allowed for little meaningful interpretation of the random, unexpected apparition of a nova, supernova, or comet.

Planets as Possible Stars of Bethlehem

Planets have a huge advantage in this context because they come with a great deal of astrological 'baggage'. Additionally, a time interval as extensive as 9-1

⁴¹ See http://messier.seds.org/more/mw_sn.html.

⁴² Schaefer, "The Star of Bethlehem."

BCE (or, being conservative, 8–4 BCE) is time aplenty for the known planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) to get up to lots of astrologically significant massings, conjunctions, risings, and stationary points. Maybe one of these was sufficiently rare and relevant to be the Star of Bethlehem.

Uranus

This planet was discovered accidentally by William Herschel on 13 March 1781, from his home in Bath. However, Banos suggested that the magi discovered Uranus in 6 BCE, in the constellation of Pisces.⁴³ There are obviously two problems here. The first is astrological. What does Uranus tell them? No one had seen it before. It has no astrological message, apart from Pisces, which may have indicated Judea. And Uranus stays rooted in Pisces for about seven years, a twelfth of its sidereal period. The second problem is, if they did discover it, why was this discovery then hushed up? Venus passed close to Uranus in 6 BCE, which may have aided the discovery process.⁴⁴

Jupiter—Saturn Conjunctions

Kennedy and Pingree noted that an eighth-century CE astrological world history by Masha'allah, based on earlier Babylonian and Iranian ideas, stressed the role of Jupiter/Saturn 'great' conjunctions as heralds of important religious and political events.⁴⁵ This view is supported by Seymour⁴⁶ and by Roberts, who wrote, "From its Persian beginnings, the use of the Jupiter-Saturn cycles as a chronological infrastructure for the ebb and flow of human history spread throughout the later Islamic astrology, which was then imported wholesale into medieval Europe."⁴⁷ The interval between these conjunctions varies from 18 years and 10 months to 20 years and 7.5 months, due to the eccentricities of the respective orbits. Jupiter, with its orbital period of 11.86 years, typically spends one year in each successive zodiacal constellation and overtakes the slower Saturn. The time interval between each conjunction is such that the next conjunction constellation is just under 120° to the west (i.e., to the right) of the previous one around the zodiac. Astrologers regard this as significant. Notice that they also associate each zodiacal constellation with an 'element';

43 George Banos, "Was the Star of Bethlehem the Planet Uranus?" *Astronomy Quarterly* 3 (1979): 165–68.

44 It also passed close to Saturn in 9 BCE.

45 E. S. Kennedy and D. Pingree, *The Astrological History of Masha'allah* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

46 Percy Seymour, *The Birth of Christ: Exploding the Myth* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd, 1998).

47 Roberts, *The Star of the Magi*, 143.

thus we have Aries (fire), Taurus (earth), Gemini (air), Cancer (water), Leo (fire), Virgo (earth), Libra (air), Scorpio (water), Sagittarius (fire), Capricorn (earth), Aquarius (air), and Pisces (water).

Triple or 'greatest' conjunctions involve the Earth as well. Here Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn have to be not only on the same side of the solar system, they also have to have a difference of heliocentric longitude of less than 30° .⁴⁸ In this situation, both Jupiter and Saturn are very close to opposition, so from Earth they are both seen going around their retrograde loops at about the same time. Seen from the Sun, the Earth has to be in about the same celestial zodiacal constellation as Jupiter and Saturn. Thus triple conjunctions are typically twelve times rarer than great conjunctions—every 160 years on average. In a triple conjunction, the two planets Jupiter and Saturn appear to come close to each other three times (see Table 5.2).

In the table above, notice that the interval between the first and last conjunction of a triple conjunction is between 6.2 and 6.8 months.

Considering the time interval between 1000 BCE to 3000 CE, triple conjunctions have occurred or will occur in the following years and constellations: 563 BCE (Taurus), 522 BCE (Virgo), 146 BCE (Cancer), 7 BCE (Pisces), 333 CE (Libra), 452 CE (Libra), 710 CE (Cancer), 1008 CE (Virgo), 1306 CE (Scorpio/Libra boundary), 1425 CE (Scorpio), 1683 CE (Leo), 1821 CE (Aries), 1940 CE (Taurus),

TABLE 5.2 *Recent Jupiter/Saturn Triple Conjunctions*

Year	Date	Separation (degrees)	Constellation
1821	June 25	1.25	Aries
	Nov. 22	1.33	
	Dec. 23	1.37	
1940	Aug. 15	1.25	Taurus
	Oct. 11	1.28	
1941	Feb. 20	1.35	
1981	Jan. 14	1.15	Libra
	Feb. 19	1.15	
	July 30	1.20	

48 See J. Stein, "The Triple Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn," *Popular Astronomy* 57 (1949): 182.

1981 CE (Libra), 2239 CE (Cancer), and 2279 CE (Scorpio).⁴⁹ Notice that over the last 4000 years, only the 7 BCE triple conjunction was in Pisces. The magi would have probably known that this event was rare but would not have realized that it would only occur once in the next 4000 years.

The association of the Star of Bethlehem with a planetary phenomenon was suggested by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), a devout Christian and a passionate astrologer. In 1603, whilst he was in Prague, Kepler witnessed Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars coming close together in the sky. This phenomenon is known as a ‘massing’. Fortuitously, this massing was followed by the appearance of a new star in the sky. This nova was recognized much later on as being a supernova. Kepler’s nova was in the constellation of Ophiuchus, very close to the ecliptic, between Sagittarius and Scorpio. With an apparent magnitude of -2.5 , it was so bright that it was visible during the day for three weeks and visible in total for around 18 months.

Kepler’s interest in the Star of Bethlehem was possibly kindled by Laurentius Suslyga’s 1605 realization that Dionysius Exiguus (writing in 525 CE) had made a mistake, and that Jesus had not been born in 1 BCE but in around 5 BCE (or earlier). Kepler then calculated the planetary positions around that time, and he was the first to realize that there had been a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE.⁵⁰ Some scholars suggest that Kepler thought the conjunction and the subsequent nova-like Star of Bethlehem were related. Others note that Kepler regarded the Star of Bethlehem as miraculous and non-astronomical.⁵¹ In fact, quoting Kepler himself: “*Stella Haec non fuit e numero communium cometarum aut novorum siderum, sed accessit illi privatim miraculum motus in inferiori regionis aeris.*”⁵²

In 1497 CE, Don Isaac Abrabnel stressed that the constellation Pisces was specifically associated with Judea in the magi’s astrology. Saturn was regarded as the old ruler (and father), with Jupiter as the new king, the son. Both interpretations are unfortunately post facto. Predictions of the 7 BCE triple

49 See <http://www.astropro.com/features/tables/geo/ju-sa/juooosa.html>.

50 See Adair, “The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy,” *Zygon* 47 (2012): 7–29.

51 See, for example, A. J. Sachs and C. B. F. Walker, “Kepler’s View of the Star of Bethlehem, and the Babylonian Almanac for 7/ 6 BC,” *Iraq* 46 (1984): 43–55; Martin Kemp, “Johannes Kepler on Christmas,” *Nature* 462 (2009): 987; and Robert S. Westman, *The Copernican Question: Prognostication, Skepticism, and Celestial Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.).

52 See Christian Frisch, ed., *Johannis Kepleri astronomi opera*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Heyden & Zimmer, 1858); see also Burke-Gaffney (“Kepler and the Star of Bethlehem”), who translates the sentence as: “This star was not of the ordinary run of comets or new stars, but by a special miracle moved in the lower layer of the atmosphere.

conjunction have also been found on Babylonian clay tablets.⁵³ The 7 BCE triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn thus became a popular candidate for the Star of Bethlehem. Farrar and Andrews were both in favor of this hypothesis.⁵⁴ Charles Prichard, the Savilian Professor of Astronomy at New College, Oxford, was less convinced.⁵⁵

In 7 BCE, both Jupiter and Saturn were in opposition in Pisces and were moving around their retrograde loops.⁵⁶ During late 8 BCE and early 7 BCE, the planets approached each other at about 3.5° per month. On 27 May 7 BCE, they were only 1° apart (twice the lunar diameter). They then separated slightly, and by 27 July they were 2.9° apart. Coming together again, they were 1° apart on 6 October, 1.2° apart on 1 November, and 1.05° apart on 1 December. During 6 BCE, they moved away from each other as quickly as they had come together in early 7 BCE. A Jupiter-Saturn separation of 1°, twice the lunar diameter, is an attractive sight to an astronomer but not too startling for the general public. This sight could easily have been ignored by the astrologically uninterested. The close planetary conjunctions in May and then October/November provide an ideal 'two stars' for the magi—one seen in their own country and the other four-and-a-half months later upon leaving Jerusalem. This interval gives ample time for the magi's preparation and travel. Proponents of this theory regard Jupiter as the Star of Bethlehem. The date of the birth of Jesus is still uncertain, but the astrologically minded magi would have possibly associated it with the acronychal rising of the two planets, i.e., Tuesday 15 September 7 BCE.⁵⁷ The magi would have predicted this date well beforehand. They did not have to pay homage to the new king of the Jews on his actual day of birth; anytime when he was a young child would do.

Unfortunately, like most astronomical interpretations of the Star of Bethlehem, the "going before / ahead of them" and "standing over / stopped" clues are still a problem in this hypothesis. Note also that the two planets always stayed at least 1° apart. There was no fusing together to produce a bright

53 See Sachs and Walker, "Kepler's View."

54 Frederic W. Farrar, *Life of Christ* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1874); Samuel J. Andrews, *The Life of our Lord upon the Earth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891).

55 See Edward S. Little, "Interpretations of the Star of Bethlehem" *Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 474 (December 1968); and Roy K. Marshall, *The Star of Bethlehem* (Chapel Hill, NC: Morehead Planetarium, 1949).

56 See David W. Hughes, "The Star of Bethlehem," *Nature* 264 (1976): 513–17; Hughes, "The Star of Bethlehem," *Nature* 268 (1976): 565–67; Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem Mystery* (London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1979); Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's Confirmation* (New York: Walker Publishing Company Inc., 1979).

57 See Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem*; and Percy Seymour, *Astrology: The Evidence of Science* (Redlands, CA: Queen Anne Press, 1988).

star; this just did not happen. In fact, when it comes to planets, it never happens. If two planets of equal brightness get so close in the sky that they appear to fuse together, the resultant object only changes in magnitude by 0.75. This would be noticeable but certainly not startling.

Bulmer-Thomas stresses that both the stationary points and the retrograde motion of a planet's path across the sky are important in Babylonian planetary astrology.⁵⁸ But as stationary points are seen twice a year for each external planet (i.e., Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), other things must also be significant. If we are convinced that the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces is one of the key aspects of the Star of Bethlehem, we have to then consider which specific aspect of this occurrence was taken to indicate the actual time of birth. There are quite a few possibilities: first conjunction, second conjunction, third conjunction, heliacal rising, achronical rising, first stationary point, and second stationary point. One is spoilt for choice and could be accused of simply choosing the event closest to September to fit in with other prejudices.

Jupiter—Venus Conjunctions

Sinnott, De Young and Hilton, Mosley, and Martin all suggest that Venus had a major role to play in the Star of Bethlehem phenomenon.⁵⁹ Three events are mentioned:

- a) Around 22 January 12 BCE, a date too early to qualify, there was a massing of Venus, Mars, and Saturn, when the three planets came to within 0.8° of each other in Capricorn. Unfortunately, this occurred in the early morning at an elongation of only 18.5° from the Sun and would have not been easily visible.
- b) On 12 August 3 BCE, Jupiter and Venus approached within 0.2° in the morning sky at an elongation of 20.7° . This conjunction was close to the time of their heliacal rising.
- c) Jupiter and Venus again had an evening sky conjunction on 17 June 2 BCE, in which they were separated by only 0.05° . The elongation was 45.4° .⁶⁰

58 Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, "The Star of Bethlehem—A New Explanation—Stationary Point of a Planet," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 33 (1992): 363–74.

59 Roger Sinnott, "Thoughts on the Star of Bethlehem," *Sky & Telescope* 36 (1968): 384–86; Sinnott, "Computing the Star of Bethlehem," *Sky & Telescope* 72 (1986): 632; James De Young and James Hilton, "Star of Bethlehem," *Sky and Telescope* (April 1973); John Moseley, *The Christmas Star* (Los Angeles: The Griffith Observatory, 1987); and Ernest L. Martin, *The Star that Astonished the World* (Portland, OR: Academy for Scriptural Knowledge, 1991).

60 See Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 153.

Conjunctions (b) and (c) both occurred in Leo near the star Regulus. In the context of the Star of Bethlehem, much is made of the Judea/Lion association and of the possibility that Herod might have lived until just after the total lunar eclipse of 10 January 1 BCE as opposed to the partial lunar eclipse of 13 March 4 BCE.

Mars—Jupiter—Saturn

There was a 'fiery triangle' of these three planets in the evening twilight around 26 February 6 BCE on the Pisces/Aries border. The distance between Jupiter and Saturn was 2.0° on 1 January, increasing to 4.7° on 1 February and 7.5° on 1 March. In February 6 BCE, Mars joined Jupiter and Saturn, forming a short-lived massing only 8° across. Little has been said about the astrological significance of this event.

Jupiter—Moon Occultations

Michael Molnar has reinterpreted the astrological evidence relevant to the birth of Jesus.⁶¹ He is convinced, both astrologically and numismatically, that the constellation associated with Judea was not Pisces, but rather the adjacent sign, Aries. This suggestion is supported by reference to the Egyptian/Greek astronomer/astrologer Ptolemy, in his *Tetrabiblos*, and also by contemporaneous Syrian coinage, which shows a leaping ram peering over its shoulder at a star. Molnar then diligently searches astronomical records for events that take place in Aries, and only Aries. Molnar also assumes that the magi are Hellenistic astrologers, and comparisons are made with the natal horoscopes of other kings, such as the Emperor Hadrian and Antiochus I of Commagene.

Jupiter and the Moon have important roles to play in these regal horoscopes, and there were two lunar occultations of Jupiter in Aries in 6 BCE; one on 20 March and the other on 17 April, a month later. As the first was 'weakened' by the nearness of the Sun in the sky, Molnar chooses the second as his Star of Bethlehem and suggests that Jesus was born on 17 April 6 BCE.

Unfortunately, this hypothesis has certain problems. Both events were invisible to the naked eye.⁶² Much can be said about the 'clues' in Matthew chapter 2, but nowhere does the account suggest that the Star of Bethlehem could not be seen by the magi. The 20 March occultation of Jupiter by the Moon occurred

61 Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

62 See Owen Gingerich, Michael Hoskin, David W. Hughes, and J. Neville Birdsall, "A Review Symposium of Michael R. Molnar's *The Star of Bethlehem*," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 33 (2002): 386–94.

TABLE 5.3 *The longitudes of Jupiter and the Sun for the two Molnar 6 BCE invisible occultations*⁶³

Date	Jupiter longitude (degrees)	Sun longitude (degrees)
28 February	0.35	333.7
10 March	2.68	347.54
20 March	5.05	357.32
30 March	7.43	7.04
9 April	9.81	16.72
19 April	12.17	26.34
29 April	14.49	35.93

just before sunrise—in a bright region of the sky—and the 17 April occultation occurred at local noon—in the middle of the day. So the fact that Matthew twice stresses that the star was “seen” is ignored. Molnar’s star cannot be seen, which is an original point, to say the least.

It is estimated that Jupiter has to be over 20° from the Sun to be visible at dawn or dusk. Table 5.3 shows that this was not the case in the occultations considered above.

Molnar surmises that astrologers only needed to calculate that something had happened or would happen for it to be considered significant. He suggests that visibility is less important. However, even though Babylonian astronomers could easily predict planetary conjunctions and massings, the prediction of lunar occultations of planets was completely beyond them. The Moon is relatively small, only 0.5° across, and lunar theory (i.e., working out where the Moon will be in the sky in the future) is extremely complicated, due to the intricacies and the variability of the lunar orbit. We have to wait for the seventeenth century and a genius like Edmond Halley before lunar occultations can be predicted with any degree of accuracy. Additionally, lunar occultations of Jupiter are most probably too normal and frequent to be the Star of Bethlehem. Jupiter is in Aries for one year in every twelve, and the Moon moves through Aries twelve times in any given year (the Moon goes all the way around the celestial sphere every month). The magi would have seen the Moon occulting

63 Taken from Bryant Tuckerman, *Planetary, Lunar and Solar Positions 601 BC to AD 1, at Five and Ten Day Intervals* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1962), 330.

planets many times, even though they would not have been able to predict these events beforehand.

Molnar has, however, put his finger on a very important problem, which is our lack of detailed ‘magi-specific’ astrological knowledge. When it came in those days to Judean/Jewish events, was Pisces the relevant celestial location of the astrological predictor, or was it the nextdoor constellation Aries? If something happened in Pisces, did this signpost Jerusalem as a unique destination for the journey of the magi? Maybe if the planets did things in Aries, they should have gone to Damascus in Syria. Unfortunately, the whole subject of geographical astrology is fraught with confusion, multiple attribution, and indecision.⁶⁴ Also, far from being the herald of a messiah, occultations seem to be associated with the deaths of kings.⁶⁵

Molnar’s hypothesis was widely praised by academics in the USA, but less so in Europe.⁶⁶ These scholars identified four major problems: (i) the occultations were unpredictable, (ii) they were invisible, (iii) there was no ‘two stars’ scenario, and (iv) the astrology and numismatics were suspect.

Other Phenomena as the Star of Bethlehem

D’Occhieppo suggested that the Star of Bethlehem might have been a chance sighting of an aurora borealis.⁶⁷ This would be rather unusual from such southern latitudes and would not be specific to a single constellation or have any astrological meaning. He also mentions the zodiacal light, but in the clear, dark desert nights, this would have been a common phenomenon.

Some have suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was nothing more than a few bright meteors,⁶⁸ but meteors have very little astrological significance and are a very common sight. Interestingly, Kühnöl’s suggestion in the early nineteenth century coincided with a prevalent low church desire to remove as many miracles from the Bible as possible by suggesting ‘scientific’ alternatives.⁶⁹

64 See Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 74.

65 See Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1987).

66 See Gingerich et al., “Review Symposium.”

67 Konradin Ferrari D’Occhieppo, *Der Stern der Weisen. Geschichte oder Legende* (Vienna: Herold, 1977). See also D’Occhieppo, “The Star of Bethlehem,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 19 (1998): 517–20.

68 See Christian Gottlieb Kühnöl, *Commentarius in Libros Novi Testamenti historicos. Volumen 1: Evangelium Matthaei* (Leipzig: Ambrosius Barth, 1807); and Patrick Moore, *The Star of Bethlehem* (Bath: Canopus Publishing Ltd., 2001).

69 Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 99.

Conclusion

The astronomical 'reality' interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem has one great snag. If true, it gives a degree of credence and verisimilitude to the subject of astrology, a subject that is a quagmire of subjective, unscientific partiality. If the Star of Bethlehem was real and had a true message for the magi, this would be an undisputable case of astrology being correct, at least in the instance of the birth of Jesus. It might be worth noting that the early Christian church was strongly against astrology.⁷⁰

There are two other popular interpretations of the Star of Bethlehem, as mentioned in the introduction. One abrogates the scientific interpreter of all responsibility and regards the whole phenomena as miraculous. The other possibility is that the whole story is a *midrash*, and the author of the Gospel of Matthew simply made up the events of chapter two, including the star. In both cases, modern astronomy is irrelevant.

Hoskin writes, "[W]e must focus on what would have seemed to be a dramatic portent by a Middle-Eastern astronomer/astrologer of the time. We have to approach the problem through the eyes of the magi. Heliacal risings were important. The Egyptians, for example, used the heliacal rising of Sirius to control the annual calendar. The Greeks (according to Hesiod) used heliacal risings to decide when to sow and when to harvest."⁷¹ Ptolemy in his *Tetrabiblos* (c. 150 CE) links Aries the Ram to Judea. Masha'allah, in his eighth-century *On Conjunctions, Religions and Peoples*, stresses the Babylonian link between Pisces and Judea.

As a Christian astronomer, I must declare my prejudices. I am in favor of the star being real. I think the author of the Gospel of Matthew was trying his best to relate a truthful account of the nativity. Confronted with a bewildering range of astronomical possibilities, I think that the clues in Matthew chapter two are best interpreted by reference to a planetary occurrence, and here the Star of Bethlehem is Jupiter. The "new king of the Jews" is heralded by a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE. The magi regarded the achronical rising of these two planets in 7 BCE as the indicator of the date of the birth of Jesus. The magi thought Jesus was born on Tuesday 15 September 7 BCE, a date that is not inconsistent with many of the other stories in the Bible.

Having lectured on the topic for over 35 years, I must say that the majority of my audiences seem to be happy with regarding the Star of Bethlehem as

70 See Otto Riedinger, *Die Heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1956).

71 Hoskin in Gingerich et al., "Review Symposium," 388.

a completely fictitious invention. I will simply quote Guignebert as an example of this attitude: “[N]either the visit of the magi, nor the appearance of the miraculous star, nor the massacre of the innocents has any other basis than the imagination of the hagiographer who put the whole story together.”⁷² It is also clear that after at least four centuries of debate, when it comes to the question of what the Star of Bethlehem was, there is still very little consensus. Perhaps, as a scientist, I am happily struggling to find some science in the Bible that might never have been there in the first place.

When it comes to the future, I think there is little more that the astronomer can contribute at present. This conclusion, however, does not apply to the historian. An improved and more precise knowledge of the life and death of Herod the Great and of the intricacies of the Roman taxation system would be extremely helpful. The theologian also has much to contribute when it comes to an understanding of the accurate chronology of the life and ministry of Jesus. Another major area of uncertainty is the contemporary astrology of the Middle East. What celestial happenings would unequivocally point to “a new king of the Jews”? It is a clear concept, and if astrology has any significance, surely there must be an obvious celestial phenomenon associated with this prediction.⁷³

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72 C. Guignebert, *Jesus*. Translated by S. H. Hooke (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), 93.

73 I am extremely grateful to professors Peter Barthel and George van Kooten for inviting me to the conference at the University of Groningen, at which this chapter was originally presented. In doing so, they have made me sit down and think. I would also like to thank the attendees for generating such a friendly and stimulating academic environment.

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De Ster der Wijzen (1920): A Forgotten Early Publication about the Star of Bethlehem

*Teije de Jong**

Introduction

In 1920 a modest little book of about 140 pages, entitled *De Ster der Wijzen* (The Star of the Wise Men), was published by the N. V. Uitgeversmaatschappij Paul Brand in Bussum, the Netherlands. The book was written by a Dutch catholic priest, Dominicus Sloet, who was at the time pastor in Abcoude, a village about 12 kilometers southeast of Amsterdam. The book contains an astronomical interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem based on the concept that the “wise men from the East” were Mesopotamian astronomers/astrologers who had reason to look for a “newborn king of the Jews.” This publication is unique in several respects:

1. It summarizes and partly builds on the work of the German scholars F. von Oefele,¹ H. H. Kritzinger,² and H. G. Voigt.³ This early research, in which the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction plays a central role, is almost completely ignored in the modern (predominantly English) literature of the Star of Bethlehem.⁴
2. Contrary to most of his predecessors writing about the star, the author of this book suggests that the only function of the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction is to accompany the planet Mars as the herald of the birth of Jesus,

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1 “Die Angaben der Berliner Planetentafel P8279 verglichen mit dem Geburtsgeschichte Christi im Berichte des Matthäus,” *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft* 8 no. 2 (1903): 1–45; “Das Horoskop der Empfängnis Christi mit den Evangelien verglichen,” *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft* 8 no. 6 (1903): 1–15.

2 *Die Stern der Weisen* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1911).

3 *Die Geschichte Jesu und die Astrologie* (Leipzig: Hinrichse Buchhandlung, 1911).

4 For example, David Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem* (New York: Walker, 1979); Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1999).

consistent with its representing the king of the Amorites in cuneiform astrological literature.

3. In the book, the author quotes advice from and correspondence with the Jesuit priest Franz Xaver Kugler (1868–1929), one of the pioneers of the study of cuneiform astronomical texts and at the time the world's expert on Babylonian astronomy and divination, who lived and worked in Valkenburg, the Netherlands, from 1894 until his death in 1929.⁵

In this essay, I will use the work of Sloet as a vehicle to summarize early research into the astronomical interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem. In doing so, I hope to convince the reader that his little book deserves to be saved from oblivion.

The Author

First, it seems appropriate to say a few words about Pastor Sloet, the author of this remarkable little book. Dominicus Andreas Willem Hendrik Sloet tot Everlo was born in Denekamp in the Dutch province of Overijssel on 29 October 1855. At the age of 12, he entered the Kleinseminarie in Culemborg, where he attended the Gymnasium followed by a one-year course in philosophy. Then he moved to the Grootseminarie Rijssenburg in Driebergen, near Utrecht, for his theological education. He was ordained priest in 1877. After early posts as chaplain in Oude Pekela (1877–1882), rector in Oldenzaal (1882–1898), and pastor in Harderwijk (1898–1906), he spent most of his career as pastor in Abcoude (1906–1936). He died on 27 December 1938 at the advanced age of 83 in Abcoude–Proostdij.⁶

Dominicus Sloet, the descendant of an aristocratic family, is said to have been an unpretentious, devout, slightly autocratic man with a scientific temperament and a great interest in religious education. He developed into a biblical scholar of national renown and played an important role in the Catholic revival in the Netherlands during the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁷

5 See T. de Jong, "Babylonian Astronomy: 1850–1930" in *Otto Neugebauer and Modern Transformations of the History of Ancient Science* (eds. A. Jones, Chr. Proust, and J. M. Steele; Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), in press.

6 For a short biography in Dutch, see O. Swijnenberg, *Utrechtse Biografieën: van Angstel tot Kromme Mijdrecht: levensbeschrijvingen van bekende en onbekende mensen uit Abcoude, Baambrugge en De Ronde Venen* (Utrecht: Stichting Publicaties Oud-Utrecht, 2001), 166–71.

7 L. J. Rogier and N. de Rooy, *In vrijheid herboren. Katholiek Nederland 1853–1953* (The Hague: N. V. Uitgeverij Pax, 1953), 492–585.

As a man of science, Sloet became involved in the controversy between modernism and its counter-movement, integralism, which raged through the Catholic world during the first decade of the twentieth century. The modernistic point of view was most clearly formulated by one of its founding fathers, George Tyrrell (1861–1909), as “the effort to find a new theological synthesis consistent with the data of historico–critical research.”⁸ The way in which this controversy played out in the Netherlands, and Sloet’s role in it, is described in detail by J. P. de Valk.⁹

While open to modern views on historical Bible research, Pastor Sloet was at the same time a strong defender of the Catholic Church and its institutions. He was one of the founders (in 1904) and the second chairman of the *Apologetische Vereniging Petrus Canisius*, a Dutch association of progressive Catholics who aimed to defend and propagate the foundations of the Catholic faith outside its own circle in an intellectual responsible manner. In this spirit, Sloet participated in a new Catholic translation of the Bible based on the original sources, and in 1913 he published an essay defending the legitimacy of the pope as the representative on Earth of Peter, the apostle of Jesus. For these and other similar contributions and activities, Sloet received an honorary doctorate from the Theological Faculty of the Belgian University of Leuven in February 1914. He was also a member of a small group of progressive Catholic intellectuals and



FIGURE 6.1

Dominicus Andreas Willem Hendrik Sloet tot Everlo (1855–1938). This photograph served as the frontispiece of the 7 February 1914 issue of De Katholieke Illustratie, a popular and influential catholic periodical that appeared in the Netherlands between 1867 and 1967. The caption of the photograph mentioned the honorary doctorate that had recently been granted to Sloet by the Theological Faculty of the University of Leuven.

8 M. D. Petre, *Autobiography and Life of George Tyrrell vol. II, Life of George Tyrrell 1884–1909* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), 356.

9 *Roomser dan de Paus? Studies over de betrekkingen tussen de Heilige Stoel en het Nederlands katholicisme, 1815–1940* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Valkhof Pers, Nijmegen, 1998), 235–267.

politicians, who called themselves *de Klarenbeekse Club*, that served as a kind of Catholic think-tank during the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁰ One of the more prominent members of this group was jhr. mr. Charles J. M. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck (1873–1936), who would become the first Catholic prime minister of the Netherlands (1918–1925 and 1929–1933). It is in the light of Sloet's apologetic attitude that one should view his study *De Ster der Wijzen*, which was published in 1920.

From Kepler (Seventeenth Century) to Ideler (Nineteenth Century)

All work on the astronomical interpretation of the star seen by the magi in Matthew 2 goes back to Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who, in his *De stella nova in pede Serpentarii* (1606), was the first to propose that the star might be associated with the triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE in Pisces/Aries.¹¹ According to the well-known German chronologist Christian Ludwig Ideler (1766–1846), who used Kepler's idea in his calibration of the zero point of the Christian era,¹² it was his compatriot, the theologian and church historian Friedrich Münter (1761–1830), who should be credited with reminding the learned world of Kepler's suggestion, which had been completely forgotten by the early nineteenth century. In a publication from 1821, Münter discussed a Hebrew commentary on the biblical book of Daniel (*Ma'yanei ha-Yeshu'ah* or *Sources of Salvation* from 1496) by the Portuguese Jewish scholar Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), in which the author quotes the ancient astrological doctrine that the history of the world is regulated by successive conjunctions of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. According to this theory, the coming of the Messiah is expected to occur around the time that a conjunction of these two planets occurs in the sign of Pisces, exactly as Kepler had calculated for the conjunction in 7 BCE. Abravanel prophesies that the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn of April 1464 in Pisces may be a portent of the coming of the Messiah, who will bring salvation and will resolve the problems of the Jews on the Iberian Peninsula, who were suffering from severe persecution in those days.

10 Rogier and de Rooy, *In vrijheid herboren*, 492–502.

11 See the chapter by Owen Gingerich in this volume.

12 Ideler, *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie II* (Berlin: August Rucker, 1826), 399–411; *Lehrbuch der Chronologie* (Berlin: August Rucker, 1831), 424–31.

The origin of this ancient doctrine of astrological history has been traced back by D. Pingree¹³ to a lost manuscript of the Persian Jewish astrologer Māshā'allāh Ibn Athari (ca. 640–815) from the city of Basra on the Persian Gulf. According to this doctrine, history is the unfolding of the influences of periodically recurring Saturn–Jupiter conjunctions. To explain the astrological principle involved, I quote Pingree:

A Saturn–Jupiter conjunction takes place about every 20 years; a series will occur in the signs of one triplicity¹⁴ for about 240 years, that is twelve conjunctions; and they will have passed through the four triplicities and begin the cycle again after about 960 years. When they shift from one triplicity to another, they indicate events on the order of dynastic changes. The completion of a cycle of 960 years, which is mixed up with various millennial theories, causes revolutionary events such as the appearance of a major prophet. The ordinary course of politics is dependent on the horoscopes of the vernal equinoxes for the years in which the minor conjunctions within a triplicity take place.¹⁵

It is attractive to speculate that this doctrine may have been known to the magi around the beginning of our era, but Pingree presumes that it is an astrological innovation dating from the Sasanian period (224–651 CE).¹⁶ Not aware of its origin, Ideler—and most of his nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors—take it that this doctrine may have been an essential element in the motivation of the magi to start their trip to Jerusalem in search of a newborn king of the Jews.

Ideler also presents new calculations of the dates and the ecliptic coordinates of the 7 BCE triple conjunction based on the best-known orbital elements of his time, resulting in 29 May, 30 September, and 5 December 7 BCE.¹⁷ His calculations were improved by Pritchard, who pointed out that the separation between the planets was of order 1° (two times the lunar diameter) at

13 “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran,” *Isis* 54 (1963): 229–46; see also E. S. Kennedy and D. Pingree, *The Astrological History of Māshā'allāh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

14 A triplicity consists of three signs of the Zodiac 120° apart. The Water triplicity consists of the signs of Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces; the Fire triplicity of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius; and so on for the Air and Earth triplicities.

15 Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology,” 245.

16 Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology,” 245–46. See also the chapter by Antonio Panaino in this volume.

17 Ideler, *Lehrbuch der Chronologie* (Berlin: August Rucker, 1831), 429.

all three conjunctions so that they were seen separately and not as one single bright star.¹⁸

Felix von Oefele (1861–1955)

It took until the beginning of the twentieth century before the conjunction hypothesis reappeared in the scientific arena. In 1903, the German medical historian Felix von Oefele¹⁹ published a paper on the demotic papyrus Berlin P 8279, which he had encountered in search of manuscripts on astrological medicine in the collection of the Berlin Museum. P 8279 contained predictions of the planetary positions of Jupiter and Saturn computed²⁰ for the regnal years 14 to 41 of Augustus (17 BCE–11 CE). In his paper, von Oefele concludes that the astronomical knowledge in those days was apparently sufficiently developed that magi (astrologers) from Mesopotamia could have predicted the 7 BCE conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces and, based on those predictions, could have embarked on a trip to Jerusalem to pay tribute to the newborn king whose birth was announced by that conjunction. Von Oefele identifies 15 April 6 BCE (Julian calendar) as the day on which the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction rose heliacally.²¹ He suggests that this is the observation to which the magi refer in Matt 2:2 and that it marks the moment of Mary’s conception. Jesus must then have been born around 1 January 5 BCE, a date which, according to von Oefele is consistent with the historical facts of the biblical story. In a sequential paper published in the same year, von Oefele uses

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- 18 C. Pritchard, “On the Conjunctions of the Planets Jupiter and Saturn in the Years BC 7, BC 66 and AD 54,” *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* Vol. XVI (1856): 215–216.
- 19 von Oefele, “Die Angaben der Berliner Planetentafel P8279.” For a short biography of Felix Freiherr von Oefele, see H. Goerke, “Felix Freiherr von Oefele,” *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 19 (1999): 428.
- 20 This kind of table was an essential piece of equipment for the Hellenistic astrologer. P 8279 contains sign entry dates in the Egyptian calendar of all five planets for the years 14 to 41 of Augustus (17 BCE–10 CE). The text has been reedited by O. Neugebauer (“Egyptian Planetary Texts,” *Trans. Amer. Phil. Soc.*, New Series 32 [1942]: 210–50). It was demonstrated by B. L. van der Waerden (“Egyptian ‘Eternal Tables’ I,” *Proceedings of the Kon. Ned. Akad. Wet.* 50 [1947]: 536–47) that many of these Egyptian astronomical tables were computed using methods of Babylonian origin.
- 21 This date differs by only two days from 17 April 6 BCE, the date of the heliacal rising of Jupiter and the day that the magi “saw his star in the East,” according to Molnar (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 89). It is remarkable that almost 100 years earlier, von Oefele had already reached exactly the same conclusion.

contemporary astrological doctrines (taken from the *Handbuch der Astrologie* by Ernst Mayer²²) to show that 15 April 6 BCE, his date for the heliacal rising of the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction, is astrologically a plausible date for the conception horoscope of Jesus.²³

Not surprisingly, von Oefele's work led to a flurry of papers—pro and contra—in the literature, not least due to the somewhat unprofessional way in which the astrological context of the conjunction theory was treated. This polemic exchange will not be discussed here, but I will have opportunity to briefly come back to it, since it is addressed in the work of Kritzinger and Voigt, to be discussed below.

The problem of the astronomical origin of the Star of Bethlehem gained renewed actuality in the years preceding 1910 because in April of that year the reappearance of Halley's Comet was expected. This comet had been shown by the British astronomer Edmund Halley (1656–1742) to be periodic; its most famous earlier appearance was in 1066, at the time of the Battle of Hastings, which led to the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy.²⁴ Halley noted that the comet must also have appeared around 12 BCE and that it therefore might be a serious contender for being identified as the Star of Bethlehem.

Hans Hermann Kritzinger (1887–1968)

I now turn to the work of the German astronomer Hans-Hermann Kritzinger,²⁵ who in 1911, at the age of 24, published a little book entitled *Der Stern der Weisen* in which he again takes up the idea of the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction as a candidate for the Star of Bethlehem and forcefully argues in its favor. Many of the issues and problems associated with the conjunction theory are already addressed in this little book. It is surprising and somewhat careless that modern research into the Star of Bethlehem, including the work of Hughes and Molnar (see note 4 above), completely ignores Kritzinger's work.²⁶

22 Berlin: Decker, 1901.

23 Von Oefele, "Das Horoskop der Empfängnis Christi."

24 This appearance of Halley's Comet is depicted in one of the scenes on the famous Bayeux Tapestry, which gives a pictorial account of the events leading up the conquest of England in 1066 by William, Duke of Normandy.

25 For a short biography of Kritzinger and his work as astronomer, occultist, and ballistics expert, see B. Rengert, "Pfarresohn, Astronom und Astrologe. Geboren in Boitzenburg: Hans-Hermann Kitzinger," *Uckermark Kurier* 146 (26 June 2006): 27.

26 The German-speaking author K. Ferrari d'Ochieppo lists Kritzinger's book in the bibliography of the 2nd edition of his book, *Der Stern der Weisen. Geschichte oder Legende?* (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1977).

Sloet's 1920 publication, which provided my main motivation for writing this essay, makes extensive use of Kritzinger's results.

Picking up the actuality in the first chapter of his book, Kritzinger points out that a comet is not a good candidate for the star in Matthew's narrative because traditionally comets are supposed to be bad rather than good omens. To illustrate this, he refers to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who took the reappearance of Halley's Comet in 66 CE as a portent of the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred shortly afterwards.²⁷

Kritzinger then mentions another journey of magi documented by the Roman author Plinius the Elder (in his *Historia Naturalis* 30.16), who reports that in 66 CE, the Parthian prince Tiridates (a magus himself), accompanied by a group of magi, traveled to Rome to be established by Emperor Nero on the throne of Armenia. During this trip a striking conjunction between Mars and Jupiter in Aries (separation ~15 arc minutes) took place in the night of 23/24 June 66 CE, the date of the summer solstice. Kritzinger refers to this as an argument in favor of magi establishing the kingship of Jesus. The general expectation of the coming of a new era that prevailed in those days is, according to Kritzinger, related to the entering of the Vernal Point in Pisces. He notes that, according to Kugler,²⁸ the Babylonians were not aware of the precession of the equinoxes. Nevertheless, he suggests that the passage of the Vernal Point from Aries to Pisces may have played an important role in the considerations of the magi.

In chapter two of his book, Kritzinger discusses the introduction of the Christian year count by Dionysius Exiguus and the use of the astronomical and civil calendars and conversions between them. Then, in chapter three, he discusses different hypotheses that have been put forward to explain the star. Of the work done since Kepler, he mentions that of the astronomers Ideler and Pritchard (see above) and of the Jesuit Hontheim,²⁹ who all discuss the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, giving different but increasingly more accurate dates for the conjunction. Then he critically discusses the work of von Oefele, who, according to Kritzinger, has not properly read and misquotes Kepler's publications on the star. He also shows that von Oefele makes several mistakes in his calculations of lunar and planetary positions. He ends his critical review of von Oefele's work with an analysis of the astronomy of papyrus P 8279. He notes that the sign entry dates of all the planets are too late, corresponding to longitudes that are too large by several degrees. He suggests that

27 See Flavius Josephus, *De Bello Iudaico*, Ch. 5.3 (= 6.289–290).

28 F. X. Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndeutung in Babel* (vol. 1, part 1; Münster, 1909), 32.

29 J. Hontheim, "Die Konjunktion des Jupiter und Saturn im Jahre 7 v. Chr.," *Der Katholik* 88 (1908): 187–95.

this may be explained if the computations in the papyrus follow a Babylonian tradition, in which the zero point of the Babylonian zodiac does not coincide with the Vernal Point. This early suggestion was beautifully confirmed more than 30 years later by the work of Neugebauer³⁰ and van der Waerden,³¹ who show that the data are computed for a sidereal zodiac shifted by about 5° with respect to the tropical zodiac, and that the text was written after 42 CE.³²

In chapter four, Kritzinger quotes the Portuguese Rabbi Abarbanel (1437–1508), who published a work in which he treated the history of the world in terms of periods between conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in different signs of the zodiac (see above). Kepler was aware of this system and used a variant of it in his discussion of the conjunction. In chapter five, Kritzinger illustrates Abarbanel's theory for a number of historic cases (Moses, Alexander the Great, and Mohammed). He computes positions of the planets for different epochs using the Tables of P. V. Neugebauer,³³ based on modern planetary theory, and compares those with the results of previous authors.

In chapter six, Kritzinger presents the text of Matthew 2 with his commentary. He notes a first difficulty in the Greek text of Matt 2:2 associated with the phrase αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα, because ἀστήρ means *star* and not *group of two stars*. According to him, this difficulty may be resolved by realizing that the meanings of the Greek words ἀστήρ (*star*) and ἀστρόν (*stellar constellation*) partly overlap, as in the German *Stern* und *Gestirn*. He then points to a strong argument in favor of interpreting the star as the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn when in Matt 2:10 the magi express their joy at seeing the conjunction again (for the third time), which confirms that it is indeed a Great or Triple Conjunction.

That planetary conjunctions were indeed of special importance to Babylonian astronomers is confirmed by Prof. Kugler in a letter to Kritzinger. In the text, Strassmaier Cambyses 400,³⁴ a similar set of observations of conjunctions between (Venus,) Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, are recorded in the autumn of 523 BCE, this time in the constellation Virgo, near to the bright star

30 Neugebauer, "Egyptian Planetary Texts."

31 Van der Waerden, "Egyptian 'Eternal Tables' 1."

32 See also O. Neugebauer, *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* (3 vols.; Berlin: Springer, 1975), 786–87.

33 P. V. Neugebauer, "Abgekürzte Tafeln der Sonne und der grossen Planeten," *Veröffentlichungen des königliches Astronomisches Recheninstitut zu Berlin* 25 (1904); see also Neugebauer, "Abgekürzte Tafeln des Mondes," *Veröffentlichungen des königliches Astronomisches Recheninstitut zu Berlin* 27 (1905).

34 Kugler, "Ein rätselvolle astronomische Keilinschrift (Strm. Kambys. 400)," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 17 (1903): 203.

Spica (α Virginis).³⁵ Kugler writes, “That was indeed a magnificent and at the same time rare phenomenon.”³⁶ Kritzinger states that the conjunctions in 7 BCE took place close to the star ζ Piscium,³⁷ the star that marks the zero point of the Babylonian zodiac. He constructs a diagram illustrating the separation in longitude between Saturn and Jupiter. The dates for the three conjunctions are: 28 May, 3 October, and 4 December 7 BCE.

He then notes a second difficulty in the text of Matt 2:2: the Greek term ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ should be translated as “in its (heliacal) rising” rather than as “in the East.” Kritzinger computes that the heliacal rising of Jupiter falls on 21 March 7 BCE, and of Saturn on 2 April 7 BCE. The planet Mercury (26 March by Jupiter, 31 March by Saturn) and the Moon (28 March by Jupiter) also pass by.

On 10 March 7 BCE, the planet Mars is in opposition with the Sun and is then the brightest object in the sky³⁸ during the night, with a visible magnitude of -1.5 (equaling Sirius in brightness until its setting at about 23:30 hours). Kritzinger quotes the Babylonian omen text: “When a planet surpasses the stars of the sky in brightness, a king will destroy the land. Mars has become bright and has outshone the stars.”³⁹ He notes that in Babylonian omen texts, Mars astrologically represents the king of the Amurru (Amorites), occupying the Westland. This explains why the magi went to Jerusalem (the capital of the Westland). Kritzinger computes that on 25 March 7 BCE, Mars occulted the star γ Virginis, the fertility star at the base of the ear of wheat in the constellation

35 For a modern edition of this text, see H. Hunger, A. J. Sachs, and J. M. Steele, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia, Vol. v: Lunar and Planetary Texts*. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001), nr. 55. The text was discussed in detail by J. P. Britton, “Remarks on Strassmaier Cambyses 400,” in *From the Banks of the Euphrates: Studies in Honor of Alice Louise Slotsky* (ed. Micah Ross; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 8–34.

36 Kugler (“Ein rätselvolle astronomische Keilinschrift,” 233); Kugler also notes that the preserved text of Strassmaier Cambyses 400 must be a much later copy of the original from 523 BCE. He adds that the exceptionality of the conjunctions in the fall of 523 BCE, in which all the planets were involved, must have been the reason that the text continued to be copied. This text may have been used by the Babylonians to predict future similar spectacular conjunctions for astrological purposes.

37 This is not correct; the beginning of the Babylonian zodiac is located close to the star η Piscium and not ζ Piscium (see H. Hunger and D. Pingree, *Astral Sciences in Mesopotamia* [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 148–51).

38 The outer planets Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn attain their greatest brightness when they are in opposition with the Sun because (i) their full disc is illuminated, and (ii) they are at the shortest distance to the Earth in their orbit around the Sun.

39 Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndeutung in Babel*, 22.

Virgo.⁴⁰ He suggests that this is important for the conception horoscope that the magi must have made.

Kritzinger then discusses the astronomical events during the night of 30/31 March 7 BCE. Mars is visible in the East as the only planet when Venus sets in the West, one hour after sunset. Then, at about 4:45 in the morning, one hour before sunrise, as Mars sets, Jupiter rises in the East, shortly followed by Saturn in its first visibility. He claims that this is the day that the magi saw “his star in the East” in Matt 2:2. He suggests that the conception must have taken place around this time, so that Jesus must have been born sometime in November/December 7 BCE.⁴¹ The magi started their trip to Jerusalem around the time of the second conjunction (about October 1) and arrived shortly before the third conjunction (December 4), which “went before them” (προῆγεν αὐτοῦς, another textual difficulty) when they reached Bethlehem.

In the final chapter of his book, Kritzinger discusses independent historical evidence in favor of a birthdate for Jesus in late 7 BCE. He addresses the calibration of the Christian era (the chronological mistake of Dionysius Exiguus), the lunar eclipse preceding the death of King Herod on 13 March 4 BCE, and other results of biblical chronology.

Heinrich Gisbert Voigt (1860–1933)

Triggered by the polemic exchange of papers on the interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem that followed the publication of von Oefele’s proposal, the German theologian and church historian Heinrich Gisbert Voigt⁴² published in 1911 a book entitled *Die Geschichte Jesu und die Astrologie*,⁴³ in which he tried to demonstrate that the Hellenistic astrological doctrines prevalent around the beginning of our era could explain the motivation and the behavior of the

40 In actual fact, Mars passed γ Vir at a distance of $9'$ ($1/3$ lunar diameter) one hour after sunset on 25 March. The star γ Vir is one of the Babylonian so-called normal stars known as DELE šá IGI ABSIN (the single star in front of the furrow; see Hunger and Pingree, *Astral Sciences*, 148–49).

41 Note that this birthdate falls about one year earlier than the date proposed by von Oefele.

42 For a short biography of Heinrich Voigt, see *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopedie* vol. 10, p. 237.

43 The fact that Voigt’s book is printed in old German Gothic letter type may have contributed to its being virtually ignored in the English-speaking literature on the Star of Bethlehem.

magi in Matthew's narrative.⁴⁴ Although their books were published almost simultaneously, it appears that Voigt must have had access to Kritzinger's manuscript, because he refers to the latter's work extensively.

In the introduction and chapter one of his book, Voigt introduces the question of the interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem by extensively quoting Kepler's work (*De stella nova, De vero anno*). He discusses improvements in the astronomical calculations since Kepler and quotes the work of Ideler, Kritzinger, and Guthnick.⁴⁵ The calculations of Kritzinger are based on the Tables of P. V. Neugebauer (as mentioned above).

In chapter two, Voigt summarizes the work of von Oefele, which was based on the planetary tables in demotic papyrus Berlin P 8279 (as we saw above), and in chapter three he describes the polemic that developed between the theologian O. Strauss, who defended von Oefele, and Kritzinger, who published critical comments on some aspects of von Oefele's work and supported the proposal made by Ideler that the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction of 7 BCE is to be identified with the star in Matthew 2.

Chapter four contains the main results of Voigt's research on Hellenistic astrology at the time of Jesus' birth. He agrees with von Oefele that the astronomical constellation that led the magi to Jerusalem is the one of April 6 BCE, but he argues that von Oefele does not give satisfactory answers to the question of what moved them to embark on their pilgrimage. He discusses reactions to von Oefele's suggestion in the recent literature by Strauss, Guthnick, Kritzinger and others. Then he turns to the Gnostic literature of the first few centuries CE, in particular the *Pistis Sophia*, where the planet Jupiter is associated with the religion of the Jews. He argues that, according to the Gnostic texts, Jupiter is the most important planet in the 6 BCE constellation. This simultaneously solves the problem that Matthew 2 speaks of ἀστὴρ and not of ἀστρόν.

He then turns to the ancient astrological literature in an attempt to answer the question of what astronomical configuration led the magi to search for a newborn king of the Jews in Jerusalem. The most important source is the *Tetrabiblos* by Claudius Ptolemy (ca. 125 CE), but the work of Sextus Empiricus, who lived about 50 years later and is critical of astrology, is also an important source of information. Horoscopic astrology is not so relevant for the magi, but rather a more general astrological prognosis applicable to a country and

44 Many aspects of Hellenistic astrology discussed by Voigt in his book are reconsidered in the light of modern scholarship in the chapter by Stephan Heilen in this volume.

45 For references, see Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu*, notes 20 and 21.

its people. The best procedure is to look at the planets and their positions in certain zodiacal signs and regions of the sky (rising, setting, zenith, nadir, etc.) as well as their relative aspects. Ptolemy and the Roman poet and astrologer Marcus Manilius (first century CE) mention that Aries represents the land of the Jews and that Aries is the house of Mars.

Voigt summarizes the astronomical phenomena in the spring of 6 BCE based on von Oefele, using Kritzinger's astronomical data. He suggests that more astronomical calculations are required in order to determine the key moments for the magi. He notes that in April 6 BCE, all the planets cluster together, centered on Aries, with Jupiter in the middle.

Following up on Voigt's suggestion, I have computed the positions of the planets and their dates of first/last appearance in the spring of 6 BCE using modern values of the orbital elements of the Sun, Moon, and planets and computing dates of first and last visibility for an atmospheric visual extinction of 0.27 magnitudes per airmass,⁴⁶ with the following results:

- The cluster of all the planets reaches its minimum extent of 42° at sunrise on 15 April 6 BCE, running from Venus ($18^\circ 39'$ Pisces), through Saturn ($28^\circ 18'$ Pisces), Jupiter ($11^\circ 05'$ Aries), the Sun ($21^\circ 55'$ Aries), to Mars ($0^\circ 36'$ Taurus) and Mercury ($0^\circ 43'$ Taurus), while the Moon ($13^\circ 36'$ Pisces) would pass Venus later that day to join this so-called massing of the planets.
- During the night of 14/15 April, Venus is the only planet visible (as morning star) so that this massing of the planets is not observable and their positions can only be predicted by computation (e.g., using planetary tables, as in P 8279). The other planets Saturn (4 March), Jupiter (18 March), and Mars (25 March) had disappeared from the (evening) sky, and Mercury (13 March) from the (morning) sky, in the preceding month.
- Mercury is expected to reappear in the morning sky on 16 April 6 BCE, Saturn on 18 April, and Jupiter on 24 April,⁴⁷ but Mars would remain invisible

46 The physical principles underlying the method of computing first and last visibilities of the planets are explained in my paper "Babylonian Observations of Venus: Arcus Visionis, Atmospheric Extinction and Observational Practice", *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 43 (2012): 391–409. A visual atmospheric extinction of 0.27 magnitudes per airmass is typical for ancient Babylon and may also apply to Jerusalem.

47 The date of 17 April 6 BCE, as suggested by Molnar (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 89) for Jupiter's heliacal rising, requires a visual atmospheric extinction of 0.13 mag/airmass in Babylon and 0.11 mag/airmass in Jerusalem. Both extinction values are exceptionally low and may be expected only during a few nights per year. The occultation by the Moon of Jupiter at its heliacal rising on 17 April, as suggested by Molnar, is not confirmed by accurate

for almost four months, finally reappearing in the morning of 13 July, a week before the reappearance of Sirius, the brightest star in the sky.

- All dates of first and last visibility given above have margins of uncertainty of at least a few days, due to variations in atmospheric extinction (weather).

According to Voigt, Jupiter is the most important planet, and he quotes passages from the *Tetrabiblos* to interpret the astronomical situation. The crucial moment is the heliacal rising of Jupiter (“We have seen his star in the East”). Based on the preceding astrological considerations (not taken into account by von Oefele), Voigt supports von Oefele in assuming that the conception of Jesus occurred in April 6 BCE, leading to a birthdate near the end of 6 BCE or the beginning of 5 BCE.

Voigt argues that the astrology of Ptolemy (*Tetrabiblos*) and the Gnosis (*Pistis Sophia*) is more applicable than the old Babylonian astrology.⁴⁸ First-century Hellenistic astrology points to Jupiter as associated with Israel, while the old Babylonian astrology would point to Mars or Saturn.

Based on Babylonian doctrines, Kritzinger and his followers have expressed a preference for Mars as representing the Westland. At the same time, they assign great importance to the Jupiter–Saturn conjunction in 7 BCE. According to Voigt, this creates a contradiction, since Mars and Jupiter cannot both be representative of Israel and the Jewish people. Mars sets heliacally in 6 BCE in Aries and becomes visible again for the first time in the East only three months later in Cancer. He finds it improbable that in 6 BCE Mars may have been the star that the magi saw in the East. Nevertheless, based on old Babylonian astrology, it cannot be excluded that Mars may be associated with the star.

Voigt also criticizes the importance that Kritzinger assigns to the conjunction of Mars (in opposition with Jupiter) on 25 March 7 BCE with the star γ Virginis. He summarizes some of the arguments in favor of identifying Mars (Kritzinger, Guthnick) or Jupiter (Voigt) with the star. He points out that later Hellenistic and Gnostic astrologers identify Jupiter as the star of Israel, while the old Babylonians prefer Mars. He also investigates to what extent Persian doctrines (Zoroaster) may have contributed to the astrological

astronomical calculations. At sunrise on 17 April, Jupiter precedes the (invisible) Moon by more than 3° , about 6 lunar diameters.

48 See the *Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon* by R. C. Thompson (London, 1900).

views of the magi and their expectations of the birth of a messiah to save humankind.

Following Kritzinger, Voigt finally discusses the trip of the Parthian prince and magus Tiridates to Rome in 66 CE. He acknowledges Kritzinger as being the first to point to the spectacular conjunction (separation 15 arc minutes) of Mars and Jupiter in Aries in 66 CE. Using this conjunction, Voigt puts the story of Tiridates' visit to Emperor Nero in Rome in an astrological context, and he discusses it as a parallel to the trip of the magi in 6 BCE to pay tribute to Jesus. He notes that Matthew is supposed to have written his gospel in Antioch around 80 CE, shortly after this trip.

In chapter five, on the historicity of the story of the star, Voigt refers to Dieterich,⁴⁹ who had suggested that the trip of the magi to Nero in 66 CE served as a model for Matthew when he wrote chapter two of his gospel.⁵⁰ Dieterich also emphasizes the Persian origin of the magi. Voigt thinks that the astrological background to the Star of Bethlehem is a strong point in favor of its historicity.

He discusses research into the historical dating of the birth and life of Jesus and points out that the historical data and the astronomical/astrological interpretation are consistent in terms of time. He argues that early Christianity did not show much interest in dating the conception and the birth of Jesus. The apparent contradictions between events described in the gospels of Luke and Matthew can be historically reconciled if viewed within an astrological context. The phrase ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ and the word ἀστὴρ play an important role in this discussion. According to Voigt, they refer to the heliacal rising of Jupiter in the spring of 6 BCE.⁵¹ Additionally, the attitude of Herod towards the magi and his interrogation and interpellation of the Sanhedrin fits in with the interpretation of the magi as astrologers from the East.

49 A. Dieterich, "Die Weissen aus dem Morgenlande," *Zeitschrift für neutestamentische Wissenschaft* 3 (1902): 4ff.

50 See also the chapter by A. de Jong in this volume.

51 It is interesting to note that, already in 1903, von Oefele ("Die Angaben der Berliner Planetentafel P8279," 4) refers to a conversation with the classicist Franz Boll in which the latter expresses his mistrust of the conjunction theory based on the use of the word ἀστὴρ (star) rather than ἀστὸν (stellar group or constellation) in Matt 2. Triggered by the publication of Voigt's book, Boll ("Der Stern der Weisen," *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentische Wissenschaft* 18 [1917/18]: 40–48) apparently decided to put his criticism of the interpretation of several of the Greek terms in Matthew's narrative on record in a short paper, ironically entitled *Der Stern der Weisen*.

Voigt wonders why there is no reference to the trip of the magi, their visit to Herod, Herod's reaction, and their worshipping of Jesus in the work of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. After a lengthy discussion of Herod and his considerations and actions, Voigt argues (again) in favor of the historicity of the events described in Matthew 2 and their astrological interpretation.

In chapter six, Voigt analyzes the text of Matthew in order to ascertain the birthdate of Christ; he also discusses the date of his baptism and his death. Von Oefele and O. Strauss go too far when they interpret the text of Matthew 2 as an astrological message, but Voigt still thinks that it is possible that some astrological report underlies the story of the magi. The interpretation of the word ἐστάθη (stood) by von Oefele as the moment of Jupiter reaching its stationary point in Aries is far-fetched. Voigt reduces the problem to two questions: (i) Which astrological moment was identified by the magi with Jesus' birth? (ii) What was meant by ἐστάθη? If the magi considered 15 April 6 BCE as the moment of conception, then the station of Jupiter on 24 December (P 8279) cannot be associated with ἐστάθη, but may be associated with the birthdate. A planet resuming its forward movement is a good omen in cuneiform texts. Voigt then argues (unconvincingly) that the magi may have expected Jesus' birth on the day that Jupiter exited Aries to enter Taurus, i.e. on 24 January 5 BCE, according to P 8279. But the main interest in Matt 2:9 is the phrase ἐστάθη ἐπάνω (it stood above). This must have happened after the birth of Jesus. Voigt argues that it can be very well explained as the culmination of Jupiter. The only problem remaining, then, is the phrase προῆγεν αὐτούς (went before them) in Matt 2:9. This should not be taken too literally and may be a relic from the astrological text that underlies the Gospel of Matthew.

Voigt summarizes von Oefele's (largely taken over by O. Strauss) chronological sequence of events as follows:

- 15 Apr 6 BCE: Conception
- 25 Nov 6 BCE: Trip to Jerusalem
- 25 Dec 6 BCE: Birthdate
- 28 Dec 6 BCE: Magi paying tribute
- 6 Jan 7 BCE: Children of Bethlehem massacre

Their opponents Kritzinger, E. Jäger and Guthnick support a different scenario:

- 31 Mar 7 BCE: Conception, heliacal rising of Saturn (ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ)
- 1 Oct 7 BCE: Second conjunction, trip to Jerusalem
- End of November 7 BCE: Birthdate
- 5 Dec 7 BCE: Third conjunction, magi travel to Bethlehem

If ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, interpreted as the heliacal rising of a planet, is to be associated with the moment of conception, Voigt argues that the heliacal rising of Jupiter on 14 April 6 BCE is the only possibility. In agreement with P 8279, the birth of Jesus must then have taken place on 24 January 5 BCE, as proposed above.

Voigt then discusses the date on which Jesus died, because this will turn out to support his birthdate scenario. After a lengthy chronological argument, including references to a large number of ancient historians and church fathers, he concludes that Jesus died on 15 April 29 CE and was baptized on 10/11 January 27 CE. He ends this chapter by arguing that these results are in surprisingly good agreement with his proposal for the birthdate of Jesus on 24 January 5 BCE, the date on which Jupiter left Aries and entered Taurus (see P 8279). Future research on the life of Jesus should reckon with this chronological framework.

In his epilogue, the theologian Voigt addresses the central remaining question: “Why did God make use of astrological lore as described in chapter 2 of the apostle Mathew?”⁵² Voigt argues that, for the modern historian, this question does not exist, because for him the trip of the magi is an interesting historical coincidence. For those who want to see the hand of God in the course of human history, this remains a real question. Voigt attempts to give an answer to this question, emphasizing that Matthew’s story cannot be taken as an implicit Godly justification of astrology. Perhaps the following realization can reconcile the different answers to this question: “The coming of Jesus Christ in this world was written by God in the stars.”⁵³

Franz Xaver Kugler (1868–1929)

It could well be more than an interesting coincidence that, one year after the publication of Kritzinger’s and Voigt’s books, F. X. Kugler, the founding father of the discipline of Babylonian astronomy, formulated his answer to the above question raised by Voigt. In a short paper entitled “Der Stern von Bethlehem,” published in the Jesuit journal *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*,⁵⁴ referring to both Kritzinger and Voigt, Kugler reviewed many of the arguments pro and contra the conjunction hypothesis. Then, in a personal and poetic last paragraph of his paper he, the Jesuit priest, confesses that he believes in a miraculous and inspired origin of the star that led the magi to Jerusalem:

52 Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu*, 145.

53 Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu*, 148.

54 Kugler, “Der Stern von Bethlehem,” *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach* 83 (1912): 481–92.

Yes, also the holy Magi may in vain have strived many a night to read in the stars the Godly ruling and to search for the sign of Him on which the nations were waiting. Year after year passes by, the planets appear in the East and the West out of the rays of the Sun, pull their paths by the fixed stars, pass each other and disappear, falling stars spray the sky at regular times of the year, lonely light sparks shoot all of a sudden through the universe, sun-size fireballs disturb the air by the thunder of their explosion, colorful rings and discs surround the Moon, the shadow of the Earth covers at times the full face of the light bringer of the night, even comets appear, and far stretch their light tails. But all that was nothing extraordinary; already for thousands of years the astrologers had seen similar phenomena and had recorded them on clay tablets; the awaited sign does still not appear. Then, all of a sudden shines in the towering height a Light in never seen splendor. Not meteor-like, but slowly it drifts to the West. That is the Sign! A powerful inner voice announces it. Overpowered, speechless the Magi sink on their knee, their arms lifted in prayer, the enraptured eye turned to the miraculous Light. It disappears at the Western horizon. Already the twilight announces the new day. Still the men are kneeling down. For their minds eye appears the holy Virgin with her Godly child, the Light of the World, the King of Kings. And they hear a voice: Cometh to me! The vision dissolves. The day breaks. Gigantic the solar ball rises, this time the symbol of a new life. The men rise. Their decision is made: forth towards the Godly King! "And they left everything behind and followed him."⁵⁵

Conclusion: *De Ster der Wijzen*

When Dominicus Sloet published his little book *De Ster der Wijzen* in 1920 and dedicated it as a "humble tribute to Dr. F. X. Kugler in Valkenburg," the fierce debate about the astronomical interpretation of the star and the origin of the magi that had taken place ten years earlier among German scholars was over. Sloet could stand back and combine the ingredients of the different scenarios proposed to come up with his own version of an explanation of the events described in Matthew 2. His scenario is indeed an amalgamation of previous proposals. In essence it runs as follows:

55 I have made an effort in the translation of this quite personal statement to do justice to Kugler's somewhat archaic and romantic use of the German language.

- The planet Mars is the ἀστὴρ to be associated with the newborn king of the Jews. Sloet quotes Kugler: “The relation of the planets to certain countries becomes particularly clear for Jupiter and Mars. Jupiter is the star of Akkad [Babylonia], resp. its king; Mars, on the contrary, the star of Amurru [the Westland (and Elam)]. Faint brightness, resp. decrease in magnitude means disaster; increasing brightness on the other hand wellbeing of the associated country and the contrary for the other country, resp. its king. Similarly, the approaching of Mars to Jupiter means threatening of Akkad and its king by the army of the Amurru.”⁵⁶
- In March 7 BCE Mars rises acronychally⁵⁷ and reaches its greatest brightness, outshining all the stars in the sky (“When a planet surpasses the stars of the sky in brightness, a king will destroy the land. Mars has become bright and has outshone the stars”).⁵⁸
- The three conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE are the markers of an important historical change in turbulent times, with collective messianic expectation.
- On the evening of 26 February 6 BCE, the configuration of Mars at the end of Pisces, standing between Jupiter and Saturn near the star η Piscium, the zero point of the Babylonian zodiac, may have had special significance for the magi (the moment of conception?).
- Mars disappears from the sky shortly afterwards until its triumphal return at its heliacal rising with Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, in July 6 BCE.
- Jesus is born at the end of November 6 BCE.

Sloet concludes his little book with the strong statement: “If the Star of the Magi has been a natural and calculable phenomenon, further searching is no longer required.” Even if one does not go along with this conclusion, the little book that he wrote contains an interesting summary of the exchange of ideas among theologians and astronomers about the interpretation of the star during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is to be regretted that this

56 Kugler (*Im Bannkreis Babels* [Münster, 1910], 111), my translation.

57 The acronychal rising of an (outer) planet was routinely observed and its date recorded by Babylonian astronomers during the last seven centuries BCE (see Hunger and Pingree, *Astral Sciences*, 145). The acronychal rising marks the moment that a planet becomes visible close to the Eastern horizon shortly after sunset (see L. Hollywood and J. M. Steele, “Acronychal Risings in Babylonian Astronomy,” *Centaurus* 46 [2004]: 145–62). The date of acronychal rising of a planet precedes the date of opposition of the planet with the Sun, when the planet reaches its greatest brightness, by about a week.

58 Kugler (*Sternkunde und Sterndeutung in Babel*, 22), my translation.

early research of German scholars has been almost completely ignored in the later literature on the Star of Bethlehem.

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PART 2

The Star—What, When, and How



What, If Anything?

Peter Barthel

My longtime curiosity on the subject of the Star of Bethlehem relates not only to my astronomical fascination but also to my science communication and education interests. Science deals with the fascinating natural world around us, whereby fascination (“wow”) must ideally be followed by understanding (“aha”)—these are also the goals of science outreach. Understanding of natural phenomena (following fascination with these phenomena) must be sought and can be found at all levels, starting at elementary schools. My engagement with astronomy outreach has seen several highlights, such as Santa Claus and the Moon,¹ and has received prizes.

The Star of Bethlehem presents us with a beautiful and fascinating story around a cosmic phenomenon. This story in the Gospel of Matthew has inspired artists for many centuries. At the same time, it poses an intriguing question, not only to astronomers but to everyone with an interest in history and culture: Was this star real? Several theologians whom I have met over the years do not seem to care: “It’s just a story made up by the evangelist.” Others even reacted with some hostility: “This star is none of your business, astronomer.” Two years ago my irritation with this attitude reached saturation point, and, realizing that the 400th anniversary of the University of Groningen was going to be commemorated in 2014, I contacted my colleague George van Kooten (New Testament and Early Christianity Studies). I told him what I knew about the Star of Bethlehem, kindled his enthusiasm for my favorite explanation, and proposed that we look together into the possibility of organizing the first multi-disciplinary scientific meeting on the star, involving astronomers, theologians, philologists, and historians. You know the rest.

The literature dealing with the star is immense, and we are fortunate to have two acknowledged experts among the contributors to this volume: Aaron Adair and David Hughes. The former wrote a fine review paper recently² on the many explanations for the star, concluding that the whole story is fabricated, pure fiction, having nothing more than a legend- or myth-making, propagandistic

1 P. D. Barthel, “Santa and the Moon,” *Communicating Astronomy with the Public Journal* 12 (2012): 13–15.

2 A. Adair, “The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy,” *Zygon* 47 no. 1 (2012): 7–29.

goal. He quotes Keller: “anything that has ever moved across the canopy of heaven, as well as much that has only existed in men’s imaginations, has been dubbed the Star of Bethlehem.”³ As I will illustrate below, I believe that Adair’s skeptical conclusion, which he repeats in his contribution in this volume (p. 43), fails to see and to acknowledge certain elements in Matthew’s story, which cannot be fiction or *midrash* but must contain some historical, scientific facts. I say this despite being fully aware of this story’s similarity to other nativity and infancy stories, despite realizing that Matthew (writing eight decades *post dato*) was a Jew who knew Balaam’s prophecy⁴ and that he, being an intellectual, probably knew the Tiridates story in the year of Halley’s Comet,⁵ 66 CE. Moreover, I am aware of the differing mindsets and backgrounds of Matthew and Luke (but let us not forget the problem with the timing of Quirinius’ census in Luke’s narrative), I know that Matthew may have used Mark’s Gospel as inspiration, and I also know that Jesus is often described as Jesus of Nazareth (but that may well reflect the home town of his parents). Still, I feel the Star of Bethlehem story is more than pure fiction.

In his review and in his contribution in this volume, Adair notes that astronomers have only come up with naturalistic explanations for the star since the early 1800s. This does not come as a surprise to me, because astronomers made good progress in computing planetary orbits and in their understanding of the properties of stars since that time, and hence they felt they could contribute to the issue. On the other hand, my colleagues in astronomy have also come up with unlikely, impossible, and even ridiculous spectacular explanations. Adair must be credited with collecting the many naturalistic, no-nonsense, and nonsense explanations, many of which also feature in Hughes’s contribution in this volume (p. 103).

Matthew’s narrative contains quite a few details, which must all be taken into account together rather than in isolation. Let me repeat the story, with emphasis on some of these details. Wise men (*magoi* in Greek) from the East (plural in the Greek) came to Jerusalem enquiring about the newborn king of the Jews, as they had seen his (possessive pronoun) star (singular) in the east (now singular; this can also be translated as: “at its rising in the east”). Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled. Through his advisors, Herod found out that the king must have been born in Bethlehem. After finding out from the *magoi*

3 W. Keller, *The Bible as History* (New York: Bantam Books, 1955).

4 Numbers 24:17.

5 It is nevertheless remarkable that the two sources of the Tiridates story do not mention the comet (see the contribution by De Jong on p. 279).

when the star had appeared, Herod sent them onwards to Bethlehem. On the road again, the wise men found that the star went before them (lead them, in the accusative), eventually standing still over the place where the child was.

The story continues and ends with the slaughter of the innocents, but those parts—though interesting, on which point see below—are not relevant for the star. The first key question is: Whenever he can, Matthew will mention a fulfillment of prophecy—why not here? The second key question is obviously: Is there a sky phenomenon (“star”) which makes people travel from A to B (and to C)? Moreover, why did the *magoi* come from the east, not from the north or the south? Why was the appearance of this phenomenon unnoticed in Jerusalem, and why did it create stress for the vassal king, Herod the Great? What does one see toward the east, or rising in the east, that makes one travel to Jerusalem in Judea? Each night dozens of bright stars rise. What makes this one special? Why is it *his* star, him being the newborn king of the Jews? What kind of star moves through the sky and stands still? Our interval of interest is 7–5 BCE.

Implausible Astronomical Explanations

Astronomy, in combination with astrology and cultural history, in my view provides plausible answers for some of these questions, but before describing these I will briefly deal with the less likely but nevertheless often proposed explanations based on naturalistic phenomena: novae, supernovae, comets, and planetary conjunctions. As already mentioned, more details can be found in the contributions by Adair (p. 43) and particularly Hughes (p. 103) in this volume.

A nova (“new star”) is a star in our galaxy, which shows a sudden brightness increase by a factor of up to 100,000. The ultra-bright star remains bright for a period of weeks or months. Conspicuous, naked-eye novae occur once every couple of years. Historical occurrences of such novae were recorded, for instance by the Chinese. They recorded a 5 BCE nova (or non-moving comet) in the constellation Capricorn, which was visible for two months. That object, however, would also have been seen in Judea, and moreover did not move across the sky.

Supernovae represent the extreme form of novae. They present themselves with a brightness increase of up to a billion (10^9). Supernovae in nearby and distant galaxies are frequently observed with powerful telescopes. Supernovae in our own galaxy must occur at the rate of a few per century, but these are

rarely spectacular naked-eye objects; the last one was Kepler's Star, a supernova in 1604—see the contribution by Gingerich (p. 3) in this volume. SN1006,⁶ in the constellation of Lupus, was recorded in China, Switzerland, and other countries. Modern measurements⁷ of its still-expanding hydrogen shell front allow us to infer its peak brightness: It was ten times brighter than the brightest planet (Venus), hence it must have been visible during the day for many weeks. The famous SN1054 in Taurus reached four times the brightness of Venus and was seen over the course of 23 days.⁸ There are no historical records of daytime stars in the years of interest to us, and again, these would also have been seen in Judea and would not have moved across the sky.

Comets do move across the sky and often (but not always) represent spectacular objects. There are no historical records of spectacular comets in the years in which we are interested. Halley's Comet—the best-known periodic comet—was visible in 12 BCE, outside of our interval. Comets, moreover, were generally seen as bad omens, and Herod of course would have seen a comet himself.

All planets make roughly circular orbits around the Sun, in one and the same plane, the plane of the zodiac. Hence, as seen from the Earth, two planets can get close to each other in the sky; this is called a planetary conjunction. When they are really close, with one planet basically located in front of the other one, an unusually bright object results. However, because planets move, such a conjunction is only spectacular for a few days at most. Moreover, conjunctions are stationary in the sky and do not fit Matthew's description of a single star.⁹

Nevertheless, planetary conjunctions have been favorite explanations for the star. One of these was the 12 August 3 BCE close conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in the constellation of Leo; this conjunction, however, lasted only one

6 Supernovae are labeled with the year of their first sighting. Kepler's supernova is technically known as SN1604. Nowadays, extra letters are being used because many supernovae are detected every year—for instance, SN2014J or SN2010ih. The most spectacular naked-eye supernova in recent history was SN1987A, which occurred in the Large Magellanic Cloud, a neighboring galaxy.

7 P. F. Winkler, G. Gupta, and K. S. Long, "The SN 1006 Remnant: Optical Proper Motions, Deep Imaging, Distance, and Brightness at Maximum," *The Astrophysical Journal* 585 no. 1 (2003): 324–35.

8 G. W. Collins II, W. P. Claspay, and J. C. Martin, "A Reinterpretation of Historical References to the Supernova of AD 1054," *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 111 (1999): 871–80; see also D. H. Clark and R. F. Stephenson, *The Historical Supernovae* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977).

9 As explained in Heilen's contribution to this volume (p. 297), the Greek word 'aster' equally fits 'star' and 'planet'.

or two nights, did not represent a single star, and occurred after Herod's death in 4 BCE. Other well-known conjunctions also fail in some aspects, such as the very close conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, again in Leo, close to royal star Regulus, on 17 June 2 BCE, which was a spectacular but very short event, in the west, and also after Herod's death.

Modern planetarium software/freeware, such as Celestia, Starry Night, and Stellarium, permit us to examine¹⁰ these historical conjunctions in incredible detail (in fact much better than the original sky watchers saw them!). Various astronomers, including David Hughes (see p. 103), have focused on the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE. Over the course of seven months in that year, the two big planets Jupiter and Saturn performed a cosmic dance within a few degrees of each other, in the Pisces constellation. Because at opposition, both were going through their phase of retrograde motion (see below), and they approached each other three times, within approximately one degree. Such triple conjunctions occur on average seven times per millennium. The 7 BCE one was certainly a peculiar phenomenon, although it was not very spectacular, as the planets were always more than two full moons apart. While indeed moving across the sky, this triple conjunction obviously consisted of two well-separated 'stars'.

A Plausible Astrological/Astronomical Explanation

For quite a number of years, I have been fascinated with the theory of Michael Molnar. I believe that this astrological/astronomical theory has unique elements that fit Matthew's story remarkably well. Molnar's conference presentation, which I read in his absence, can be found on p. 17, and Prof. Schaefer gives a good summary of its selling points on p. 85. The 17 April 6 BCE sunrise in Aries (in the east) indeed represents very special conditions for Hellenistic astrologers in Parthia. These include the massing of all of the planets and the luminaries (the Sun and the Moon) in and around the ascending male sign of Aries, Saturn and Jupiter preceding the Sun, and the upcoming (daytime) occultation of the regal planet Jupiter by the new moon. The early hours of 17 April most likely saw the 6 BCE heliacal rising of Jupiter (a heliacal rising represents the first dawn that a planet is far enough away from the slowly moving Sun to be seen again).

10 Here, caution is required: counting revolutions of the Earth around the Sun, formally there was a year 0 between 1 BCE and 1 CE; classical history/historians and planetarium software often skip it, as does Molnar.

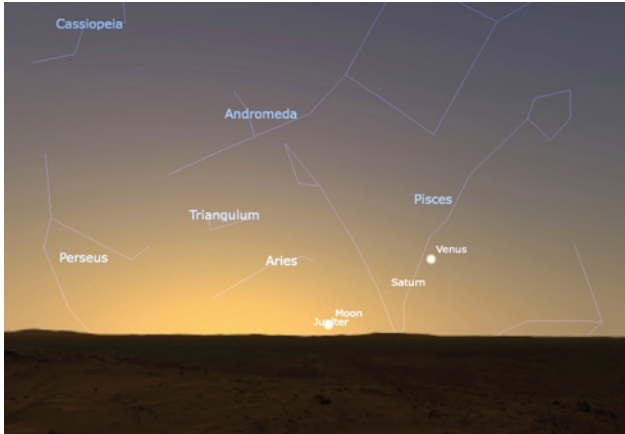


FIGURE 7.1 *The Mesopotamian eastern sky, 05:13 am, i.e., 15 minutes before sunrise, on 17 April 6 BCE, made visible with Stellarium software (for 5 BCE). Note that the new moon is lit from behind, and hence cannot be seen; the Moon will occult the heliacally rising Jupiter in Aries later, during the day. Jupiter is preceded by Saturn (and Venus).*

According to Hellenistic astrology, Jupiter and nearby Saturn were seen as the spear-bearers of the Sun. As Heilen confirmed (p. 297), these conditions indeed have a royal (king) birth portent. During the course of that year, the regal planet moved through Aries; reached Taurus, where it stood still for a week in August; reversed its course back into Aries; and stood still again for a week in Aries, in December. The reason for this peculiar motion is very basic and relates to the fact that Jupiter, like Mars and Saturn, is an outer (superior) planet, further from the Sun than the Earth is. All revolving around the Sun with virtually circular orbits having increasingly larger radii, once every 12–13 months the Earth overtakes distant Jupiter and Saturn, causing an apparent retrograde motion of these planets in their momentary constellations. Molnar presents evidence that Aries was connected with Judea; on that basis, his explanation of Matthew’s *magoi* story develops, leaving it an open question whether they ever traveled to Judea or even noted the portent. Following other scholars, Molnar claims the retrograde motion effects of Jupiter to be the phenomenon that Matthew describes as guiding¹¹ the *magoi* to Bethlehem.

11 It is not so relevant whether the Greek *pro-ago* can be translated as “moves retrograde” (Molnar) or not (Adair, Heilen); the alternative translation, with the *magoi* as the object of the leading, makes perfect sense.

It is difficult to assess the uniqueness of this dawn event on 17 April 6 BCE. On the one hand, conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn occur roughly every 20 years, the Sun must be in that same constellation (1:12), and that constellation must be Aries (another factor of 12), so one must wait roughly thirty centuries for a repeat of this event; this is indeed quite unique. Adding the Moon and the other planets to this computation does not make a substantial difference. On the other hand, *magoi* may of course be triggered by other events.

Now, did *magoi* practice astrology? The answer is yes (Albert de Jong, Panaino, Heilen). *Magoi* were associated with the Parthian court, and astronomy/astrology was a prime task (in addition, they were king-makers—see the contribution by De Jong, on p. 271). It must be kept in mind that the astronomical sky (read: the fixed star constellations in general, the zodiac constellations in particular, the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) had been studied for centuries, in excellent, dark conditions. The positions and orbits of the Sun, the Moon, and the planets were very well known. High-precision tables were used to predict planetary conjunctions, heliacal risings of stars and planets, and eclipses (night and day). As such, the fact that the occultation of Jupiter happened during daylight, and the fact that we cannot say with certainty that Jupiter was actually seen in the morning twilight of 17 April 6 BCE,¹² are not major shortcomings of Molnar's theory; the expert astronomers knew that these events took place. Astrology played an enormously important role in all aspects of life; cities had astronomical observatories and employed professional sky watchers (see also the contribution by Jones in this volume, on p. 171).

A crucial element of Molnar's theory is obviously the connection of Aries with Judea. First of all, it is important to note that ancient Near Eastern astrological geography does not involve foreign countries (see the contribution by Steele, p. 201). However, three centuries before, Alexander had introduced Hellenistic astrology in Mesopotamia, and as can be seen in the contribution by Heilen (p. 297), countries such as Syria, Idumea, Judea, Lybia, Egypt, Persia, and others were associated with Aries. As such, the philological experts have a different (wider) view than Molnar. However, there is no doubt that Syria, with its capitol Antioch, featured among the countries associated with Aries. Antioch coins bear clear witness to that association, which goes back long before their minting. Molnar deserves credit for pointing this out, but as I will

12 With reference to B. E. Schaefer ("Heliacal Rise Phenomena," *Archaeoastronomy* 18 [1987]: 19–33; and also private communication), the heliacal rising of Jupiter in that year was predicted and could be seen over the interval of a few days, centered on the dawn of 17 April. On that day, the elongation difference of the Sun and Jupiter was 12.5 degrees.

discuss below, there may be other reasons why *magoi* would travel westward. Molnar also deserves compliments for drawing attention to the importance of an astrological portent as a possible explanation for the star. The importance of this portent may likely have gone unnoticed in Herod's Judea (as it has with many of my colleagues over the years).

The next crucial question is, of course: Is there evidence that astrologers generated horoscopes *a priori* and subsequently set out on an expedition to search for individuals born on auspicious dates, such as 17 April 6 BCE? While *magoi* expeditions did occur, visiting established kings and other VIPs, the answer to this question is no (see for instance the contributions by Beck, Heilen, and Ossendrijver in this volume). However, as discussed in detail by Van Kooten (p. 496), Parthian delegations, most probably involving *magoi*, were frequent visitors to Syrian/Roman Antioch in those days, with quite a different agenda. Starting in the year 20 BCE, Parthians and Romans were involved in a peace process; hence, the delegations had a political agenda. In fact, Parthian-Roman-Jewish relations were at their best, i.e., extremely relaxed, around 6 BCE! That fact may explain why the visit of Matthew's *magoi* was not reported by the Jews or the Romans, and did not "[rock] the Roman world," as Adair says. Hence the key question is not, "Is there a sky phenomenon which makes people travel from A to B (and to C)?" but is rather reduced to, "Is there a sky phenomenon which focuses the attention of astrologers/king-makers in A on B?"

I find it plausible that in the summer of 6 BCE,¹³ certain *magoi* shared their astronomical observations and astrological deductions in Antioch (where decades later Matthew would be writing his Jesus biography), and possibly subsequently set out for some of the neighboring countries (regardless of any association with Aries), noticing the peculiar motion of their star, that is to say the regal planet Jupiter. As part of their mission, they may have visited the important city of Jerusalem, including (circles around) King Herod, and told their story there.¹⁴ As for the continuation of the story—that is to say the trip to Bethlehem, the visit to the young parents and their child, and the slaughter of the innocents—I have sincere doubts concerning the factual truth of these accounts. Matthew is surely using certain Hebrew Bible elements here. On the other hand, let me recall what Caesar Augustus reportedly said about Herod: "It is better to be his pig than his son" (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2:4:11).

13 5 BCE, when counting the year 0 (see note 10 above).

14 They may also have stayed in/around Antioch and simply noted the motion of the planet from there.

Matthew wrote his historic biography of Jesus using stories from various traditions, and he may be retelling a star and king-maker story, or elements of such a story, which he had heard in Christian/Antiochian/Jewish circles, adding in elements from Jewish history, i.e., the Hebrew Bible. Considering Matthew's narrative as pure fiction fails to acknowledge the absence of a prophecy-fulfillment statement. This is in my view a serious point: Whenever he can, Matthew will mention the fulfillment of a prophecy (see the contribution by Van Kooten, p. 496). If his story is fiction, he should have related his star to the Balaam prophecy, just as almost all early Christian commentators on Matthew will connect the magi story to Balaam (see the contribution by Hannah, p. 433). However, if he is reporting certain facts, the story makes perfect sense: There is no case of fulfillment to be reported, since nothing conspicuous was seen in Judea. Prophecy fulfillment uses a special event—witnessed and/or known by many people—and recalls its prediction. Furthermore, if the narrative is pure fiction, what does Matthew mean with “his star”? While it was a popular belief that each human being had an association to a star, hundreds of stars rise each night, which raises the question of what was special about this star. Certainly *magoi* would not care about just any star, so the fiction is contrived and makes no sense. However, if it recalls certain facts, namely a *magoi* report of the 6 BCE regal Jupiter portent, the story does make sense, at least within the context and atmosphere of Antioch in 6 BCE. Equally important, the narrative does not give explanations for astronomical details in the story, namely the motion and the standstill of the star. Only three “stars” can move (or even reverse their motion) and become stationary, namely the three outer planets: Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In my view, these elements cannot be a fantasy of the evangelist, unless he was an amateur astronomer/astrologer. Are there other stories from these days, in which stars lead people, move, and stand still? Furthermore, as if that moving star fantasy was not brilliant enough in itself, Matthew added *magoi* from the East. Why not from the North, such as Tiridates? My answer is simple: *magoi* astrologers/king-makers from Parthia (the East) were well-known and frequent visitors in Augustan Antioch, and their observations and astrological deductions were recalled by the people of Antioch, who later became the earliest Christians and eventually transmitted the account to the evangelist. Matthew had reasons to believe that historical star/*magoi* details would enhance the credibility of his story, which—of course—was written with a propagandistic purpose. A story gains credibility if it contains historical elements, particularly widely known, spectacular elements. I believe Matthew knew of such elements and used them to strengthen his case, and I challenge the skeptics to come up with explanations for (a) the

absence of prophecy fulfillment, (b) the possessive pronoun “his,” and (c) the unusual motion of the star in Matthew’s fantasy.

To conclude: Is the Star of Bethlehem story a completely invented tale, a legend? I am not at all convinced of this, and I feel that historians, philologists, and theologians must take an astronomical/astrological explanation seriously; Matthew’s story is too good (and too detailed) not to be partly true.

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The Astronomical Resources for Ancient Astral Prognostications

Alexander Jones

My purpose here is to examine the astronomical knowledge, and more specifically the astronomical tools, that ancient astrologers in Mesopotamia and the Greco-Roman world possessed and used. Much of what I will say will be well known to specialists in ancient astronomy and astrology. To the best of my knowledge, however, a broad treatment of the topic has not yet been written. I offer this chapter as a contribution to understanding the expertise of an ancient astrologer as well as its limits.

The roughly 1200-year evolution of astrological practice that I survey is characterized by several shifts. First, interpretation of direct observations of the heavens was progressively supplanted by reliance on predicted astronomical data. Second, prediction based on the principle that astronomical phenomena observed in the past would approximately repeat after certain time intervals (called recurrence periods) gave way to mathematical models that had a more remote derivation from observations. Finally, astrologers became increasingly removed from the production of the astronomical information they used and increasingly dependent on published almanacs comprising precomputed data.

Distinguishing Astronomy and Astrology

It is often said that there was no distinction or separation between astronomy and astrology in the ancient world. Such a statement, when it is made in the most general terms, is practically meaningless. In reality, the relationship between astronomy and astrology varied from one cultural milieu to another; moreover it makes a big difference whether one is considering the practices or the practitioners.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will adopt an ahistorical definition of astronomy and astrology, according to which astronomy is concerned with observed or theoretical configurations of the heavenly bodies (fixed stars, Sun, Moon, and planets) and the observable celestial phenomena connected with them, whereas astrology is concerned with relations between these celestial

configurations and phenomena and mundane, human circumstances. By 'ahistorical' I do not mean that this distinction was never made in antiquity; in fact, it is essentially the distinction that Ptolemy draws at the outset of his astrological treatise, the *Tetrabiblos*:

Of the things that serve a prognostic purpose by means of *astronomia*, O Syros, two are greatest and most important: one being first in both rank and power, in accordance with which we grasp the configurations that arise at all times in the motions of Sun and Moon and stars relative to each other and to the Earth, and a second one, in accordance with which, by means of the physical specific tendencies of their configurations, we make inquiry into the changes effected in the things that are enclosed within . . .¹

Ptolemy expresses his distinction (which for him is between two predictive faculties depending on a single science that he calls *astronomia*) in terms of the basically Aristotelian cosmology that he accepts.² According to this cosmology, we and our immediate environment constitute a spherical world composed of the four elements earth, water, air, and fire, which are kept in a perpetual condition of change and interchange through physical agencies transmitted from the heavens, a surrounding spherical shell composed of a fifth element, ether, and comprising the visible heavenly bodies embedded within a plenum of invisible ethereal bodies. Leaving this rationale aside, his definitions provide a criterion for deciding whether a particular kind of prediction involving the heavenly bodies falls within the scope of his first faculty or his second, and this turns out to be essentially my criterion for whether the prediction is astronomical or astrological. It is ahistorical, for Ptolemy as much as for us, in that it pays no attention to the historical origins, evolutions, and paths of cultural transmission of predictive practices. It also does not require us to decide whether a form of prediction is 'rational', 'scientific', or 'pseudoscientific', considerations that are not so much ahistorical as anachronistic. The advantage of using Ptolemy's criterion is that it allows us to classify a practice, or for that matter a text dealing with astral matters, as astronomical or astrological (or both) by looking at its explicit contents and without having to invoke historical recon-

1 *Tetrabiblos* 1.1 (W. Hübner, ed., *Claudii Ptolemaei opera quae exstant omnia. Volumen III 1. ΑΠΟΤΕΛΕΣΜΑΤΙΚΑ* [Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998], 3).

2 A. Jones, "Ptolemy's Mathematical Models and their Meaning," in *Mathematics and the Historian's Craft: The Kenneth O. May Lectures* (eds. M. Kinyon and G. van Brummelen; New York: Springer, 2005), 23–42.

structions, assumptions about the (usually unstated) purpose and underlying rationale of the practice or text, or the muddled ancient terminology for astral disciplines and professions.³ Of course a text or practice that is astronomical according to its contents may have come into existence as a resource for astrology, but that is usually something we have to infer from context.

Applying the criterion of contents, we find that there was a high degree of separation between astronomy and astrology in ancient astral texts and documents, whether we are looking at cuneiform texts from Babylonia in the second half of the first millennium BCE (also including a few tablets from Babylon from the first century CE), Greek and Latin texts from the Hellenistic and Roman periods transmitted through the medieval manuscript tradition, Hellenistic Greek inscriptions, or Greco-Egyptian papyri. Theoretical and instructional texts that are about explaining or predicting the phenomena, positions, and motions of the heavenly bodies rarely also discuss the application of these things to making predictions about terrestrial and human affairs, while texts that are about making such predictions seldom discuss either how one obtains the astronomical data on which they depend or the underlying astronomical theories.⁴ Tables for calculating astronomical data and almanac-like tabulations of computed astronomical data, even when it seems obvious to us that they existed for the sake of making astrological predictions, hardly ever make this purpose explicit.

Although it is comparatively rare to find astronomical and astrological material in the same texts, it does not necessarily follow that different groups of people produced them. In Babylonia, the same people appear to have

3 For example, *astrologia* and *astronomia* can mean either astronomy or astrology, and *astrologos*, *astronomos*, and *mathematikos* are terms applied to practitioners of astrology as well as to astronomers. See Hübner, *Die Begriffe "Astronomie" und "Astrologie" in der Antike. Wortgeschichte und Wissenschaftssystematik, mit einer Hypothese zum Terminus "Quadrivium"* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989).

4 There are some exceptions: Geminus's *Introduction to the Phenomena* (first century BCE), an elementary exposition of aspects of astronomy, has a chapter (2) on astrological relations ('aspects') between zodiacal signs, and another (17) that discusses weather predictions based on the visibility of fixed stars. Vettius Valens' *Anthologiae* (second century CE), an astrological treatise, devotes some chapters (1.15–18 in Pingree's edition, *Vettii Valentis Antiocheni anthologiarum libri novem* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1986]) to rather crude methods of calculating the positions of the Sun, Moon, planets, and lunar nodes. Some Babylonian tablets mix sections containing astronomical and astrological schemes (e.g., Louvre AO 6455 = TU 11, for which see L. Brack-Bernsen and H. Hunger, "TU 11, a Collection of Rules for the Prediction of Lunar Phases and of Month Length," *SCIAMVS* 3 [2002]: 3–90). Such crossings of the astronomy–astronomy divide represent a minuscule fraction of the surviving textual materials.

practiced both astronomy and astrology at the highest level. For the Greco-Roman world, however, it is hard to find many examples of individuals engaging in, or writing as experts about, both astronomy and astrology. There was, indeed, a particular specialized type of prediction that our definition (or Ptolemy's) would categorize as astrological but that was closely associated with people whom we would unhesitatingly consider astronomers, namely the so-called *parapegma* tradition of predicting weather changes through correlation with an annually recurring cycle of appearances and disappearances of stars in the morning and evening sky. The figures whose names are linked to such predictions—we have no original texts attributed to them, only citations in later documents—are people we would not hesitate to call astronomers, for example Meton of Athens (late fifth century BCE), Euktemon (late fifth century BCE), Eudoxos (early fourth century BCE), Kallippos (mid-fourth century BCE), and Hipparchos (mid-second century BCE). However, if we look for astronomers who engaged with astrology more broadly, Ptolemy comes immediately to mind, but there is practically no one else.⁵ It appears that the practitioners of Greco-Roman astrology were not normally the originators of the astronomical knowledge and data on which their work depended.

Resources for Event-driven Astrology

Schemes for categorizing the varieties of astrology practiced in antiquity often take as their starting point Ptolemy's division of the subject into two major parts according to their mundane reference: the "more general" one that deals with "entire peoples and lands and cities," which he calls universal (*καθολικόν*), and the "more particular" one that deals with individual persons, which he calls nativity (*γενεθλιαλογικόν*) astrology.⁶ A complementary approach, more productive for the topic of this paper, is to consider how the occasion for examining what is going on in the heavens as a basis for mundane predictions is

5 Apollinarios of Aizanoi (first or early second century CE) was an astronomical author known from a handful of ancient references (see O. Neugebauer, *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* [Berlin: Springer, 1975], 601 note 2; Jones, *Ptolemy's First Commentator* [Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society NS 80.7, 1990], 12–17), among which some attribute to him opinions on astrological matters. There are also a few rather doubtful ascriptions of astrological doctrines to Hipparchos (Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bikāner* [Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Serie Orientale Roma 78. Roma: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997], 25).

6 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.1, ed. Hübner, 88.

chosen. One kind of astrology, which we can call ‘event-driven’, waits for a specific type of astral phenomenon or configuration to occur and takes this as the moment to be examined. The other kind, which I will call ‘date-driven’, chooses the date and time for which the configuration of the heavenly bodies is to be examined based on mundane circumstances. Event-driven astrology, as it turns out, is practically coextensive with Ptolemy’s universal astrology, while date-driven astrology comprises Ptolemy’s nativity astrology (in which the given date is that of the birth of an individual) as well as catarchic astrology, a kind of ancient astrology that Ptolemy does not treat, in which the given date is that of a contemplated or actual action, such as getting married or going on a voyage.

The Mesopotamian astrology attested as early as the Old Babylonian period in the early second millennium BCE, though best known from the Neo-Assyrian (mostly seventh century BCE) letters and reports of scholars to the kings at Nineveh, was event-driven, constituting a major part of the broader tradition of divination through the interpretation of ominous events. The basis of prediction was a repertoire of ‘omen texts’, concatenations of a described ominous occurrence and a described predicted outcome, usually expressed in the form of a conditional sentence, such as: “If an eclipse occurs on the 15th of (the month) Simanu and the west wind blows, then the land of Amurru will be victorious.”⁷

The operative model of Neo-Assyrian omen astrology was observational. For an omen text such as the eclipse omen text just quoted to be brought into play, an expert would have to actually observe an event, in this case a lunar eclipse, that matched the “if” clause (protasis) of the text, identify the text as pertaining to the observed event, and interpret the “then” clause (apodosis) in relation to the current state of affairs. We know from the letters and reports that the scholars who practiced omen astrology had methods of forecasting the likely occurrence of certain ominous astral events, such as eclipses.⁸ However, even if it was strongly expected, the omen was not considered valid unless an observation of it took place, and the identification of pertinent omen texts—sometimes many texts would be applied to a single event—depended on circumstances that could not be forecast, such as, in the above-quoted example, the direction the wind blows during the eclipse. The practice of astral omen observation thus demanded considerable expertise in knowing not only

7 F. Rochberg, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enūma Anu Enlil* (Horn: Berger, 1988), 91.

8 J. M. Steele, “Eclipse Prediction in Mesopotamia,” *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 54 (2000): 421–54.

the right times to watch for phenomena (guided, where possible, by methods of astronomical forecasting) but also what conditions to watch for that might be relevant as elements in the protases of omen texts. Quantitative elements hardly enter into these protases, and the observers seem to have employed no instruments except water clocks.⁹

Very little is known about the extent to which omen astrology was practiced in later first millennium BCE Babylonia. Astral omen compilations such as the great tablet series *Enūma Anu Enlil* were still copied during this period, and the professional title “Scribe of *Enūma Anu Enlil*,” found previously among the Neo-Assyrian scholars for whom the series was undoubtedly of living importance, was also held by some of the copyists and owners of tablets in Hellenistic Uruk and Babylon. The Astronomical Diaries record observations of celestial events that the omen texts recognized as ominous, often with details that could have been applied to astrological interpretation; for example, the reports of eclipses take note of the wind direction. However, we lack direct archival documentation confirming that anyone was actually interpreting astral events in a manner comparable to what we find in the Neo-Assyrian period, though some Greco-Roman sources speak of Babylonian scholars providing omen-based forecasts and advice to Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic successors to his empire.¹⁰

We are in a comparable position with respect to event-driven astrology in the Greco-Roman world. In this tradition, which at least in part derived from Egyptian adaptations of Mesopotamian astral omens dating back to about the middle of the first millennium BCE,¹¹ two varieties of astral event were singled out as ominous: eclipses, and the annually recurring first morning appearance of Sirius, regarded as the harbinger of the Nile flood. Unfortunately, we again have no sources witnessing this tradition in practice, and we cannot even identify who its practitioners were. Nevertheless, the documents that we do possess enable us to learn something about how it was done.

Our main sources of information for Greco-Egyptian event-driven astrology are texts setting out the correspondence between the circumstances of the

9 For the use of water clocks in Neo-Assyrian omen observation, see D. Brown, J. Fermor, and C. Walker, “The Water Clock in Mesopotamia,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 46/47 (2000): 130–48, especially 142.

10 Diodoros, who was exceptionally well informed about the “Chaldeans” (by which he means Babylonian scholars expert in astrology), relates (117.112 and 19.55) that they gave omen-based advice to Alexander the Great and to Antigonos Monophthalmos.

11 R. Parker, *A Vienna Demotic Papyrus on Eclipse- and Lunar-Omina* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1959).

ominous astral events and the outcomes forecast for peoples and geographical regions. Although the doctrines in these texts seem to have been formulated in the Hellenistic period or earlier, we depend for our knowledge of them chiefly on fragmentary Demotic and Greek papyri from the first several centuries CE and on material of the same character incorporated in treatises and compilations in Greek transmitted through the medieval manuscript tradition. The most comprehensive presentation is a series of chapters (1.21–23) in Hephaestion of Thebes's *Apotelesmatica* (ca. 400 CE), which purports to be an abridgement of the teachings of the “Egyptians of old.”¹²

Hephaestion states (ed. Pingree 66) that the first appearance of Sirius takes place on a fixed date in the Egyptian calendar (Epiphi 25), so that the event's occurrence was trivially forecastable. (Before the Roman reform of the Egyptian calendar with the introduction of leap years, the assigned calendar date would have had to be shifted one day later every four years.) Sirius' first appearance thus did not acquire its prognostic character through being an anomalous occurrence, but rather as a natural point of beginning for the year, so that the condition of the heavens on this date indicated what would happen during the year. Among the circumstances that, according to Hephaestion, were correlated with mundane outcomes were some that we would attribute to meteorological or optical conditions that could not have been forecast by astronomical methods, such as the apparent colors and brightness of Sirius itself and of visible planets, the direction that the wind was blowing, and thunder (ed. Pingree 66–67 and 73). Other relevant factors are astronomical: the zodiacal signs occupied by the Moon and planets, their distances from the Earth, their proximity to certain stars or to the lunar nodes, and the current stages of the planets in their synodic cycles (ed. Pingree 67–72). While some of these circumstances might have been determined by observation, they are much more amenable to calculation, and some of them (e.g., whether a heavenly body is near apogee or perigee or a lunar node) could only be calculated. For eclipses, too, Hephaestion gives prognostications based on meteorological and optical factors (disk colors, halos, rain, thunder, and wind directions; ed. Pingree 52–53) as well as on forecastable astronomical factors (zodiacal sign occupied by the eclipsed body, time of day or night, and eclipse magnitude; ed. Pingree 53–63).

Astrologers practicing the Greco-Egyptian style of event-driven astrology did not have to be able to calculate the astronomical characteristics of eclipses

12 Pingree, ed., *Hephaestionis Thebani Apotelesmaticorum libri tres* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1973), 52–73. The references to the Egyptians are in the opening sentences of 1.21 (page 52), “οἱ παλαιοὶ Αἰγύπτιοι,” and 1.23 (page 66), “οἱ παλαιγενεῖς σοφοὶ Αἰγύπτιοι.”

or the zodiacal positions and synodic phenomena of the planets for themselves. Determining the situations of the planets at the date of Sirius' first visibility is essentially the same problem as determining them for an individual's birthdate, which I will discuss in the following section. Predictions of eclipses circulated in the form of eclipse canons—lists of descriptions of series of eclipses of the Moon or of the Sun. We have two specimens of this type of text: PBerol. 13146+13147, a Demotic papyrus from the early first century BCE, which is likely to be an abridgement of a canon originally written in Greek; and *POxy astron.* 4137, a Greek papyrus from the middle of the first century CE.¹³ These texts provide the date and time of each eclipse and the directions of obscuration of the Moon's disk, and *POxy astron.* 4137 also gives the magnitude, the duration, and the Moon's location relative to fixed stars. It is likely that these canons were generated by applying eclipse recurrence periods to earlier observations or calculations of eclipses,¹⁴ whereas Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Book 6 contains procedures and tables for computing the data in eclipse canons based on his astronomical models for the motions of the Sun and Moon.

The Antikythera Mechanism (ca. 60 BCE or earlier) casts unexpected new light on the shifting roles of observation and prediction in Hellenistic event-driven astrology.¹⁵ This gearwork device translated an input rotary motion rep-

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- 13 O. Neugebauer, R. A. Parker, and K.-T. Zauzich, "A Demotic Lunar Eclipse Text of the First Century, BC," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125 (1981): 312–27; Jones, *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999), 1.87–94 and 2.16–17.
- 14 Steele, *Observations and Predictions of Eclipse Times by Early Astronomers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 86–91.
- 15 The fragments of the Mechanism were recovered in 1901 from the site of a shipwreck currently dated (primarily by coins and ceramics) to about 60 BCE; see N. Kaltsas, E. Vlachogianni, and P. Bouyia, eds., *The Antikythera Shipwreck: the ship, the treasures, the mechanism* Exhibition catalogue. (Athens, 2012). Archeological context and other considerations favor a recent dating of the Mechanism relative to the wreck (Jones, "The Antikythera Mechanism and the Public Face of Greek Science," *Proceedings of Science PoS* [Antikythera & SKA] 038 [2012], available at: <http://pos.sissa.it>), notwithstanding evidence that its eclipse cycle's starting date was in 205 BCE (C. C. Carman and J. Evans, "On the Epoch of the Antikythera Mechanism" (paper presented at the workshop on The Antikythera Mechanism: Science and Innovation in the Ancient World, Lorentz Center, Leiden, 17–21 June 2013), available at: http://www.conicet.gov.ar/new_scp/detalle.php?keywords=&id=21332&congresos=yes&detalles=yes&congr_id=2064637; Carman and Evans, "On the Epoch of the Antikythera Mechanism and its Eclipse Predictor," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 68 (2014): 693–774; T. Freeth, "Eclipse Prediction on the Antikythera Mechanism," *PLOS One (Public Library of Science)* 9.7.e103275 (2014), available at: <http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0103275>.

representing the passage of time into motions of revolving pointers on multiple dials, some of them representing the current date within various chronological cycles, others the current positions of the heavenly bodies in the zodiac.¹⁶ The so-called Saros Dial, occupying the lower half of the Mechanism's rear face, was one of those displaying a chronological cycle, in this instance a 223-lunar-month cycle of predictions of lunar and solar eclipses. The predictions—which were inscribed partly on the scale of the dial and partly in supplementary texts inscribed on other areas of the rear face—specified a time (apparently of mid-eclipse or, more correctly, the moment of opposition or conjunction), a color, a magnitude (small, medium, or large), and a shift in something's orientation from one direction of the horizon to another, which is likely to refer to wind directions.¹⁷ What is interesting about the Mechanism's treatment of eclipses in the present context is not so much the mechanization of cyclic prediction—such devices were scarce, delicate, and surely beyond the means of most astrologers—but the idea that the optical and meteorological aspects of eclipses could also be forecast, obviating the need to make any observations. This possibility may also be implicit in Ptolemy's frequent allusions to methods of predicting weather changes (ἐπισημασίαι) based on the computable astronomical circumstances of eclipses.¹⁸ However, in the context of the *Tetrabiblos*, the forecast weather changes have a status analogous to the apodoses of eclipse omen texts, whereas on the Mechanism the colors and wind

16 M. T. Wright, "Counting Months and Years: The Upper Back Dial of the Antikythera Mechanism," *Bulletin of the Scientific Instrument Society* 87 (2005): 8–13; Freeth et al., "Decoding the ancient Greek astronomical calculator known as the Antikythera Mechanism," *Nature* 444 (2006): 587–91, supplementary information available at: <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v444/n7119/supinfo/nature05357.html>; Freeth, Jones, Steele, and Bitsakis, "Calendars with Olympiad display and eclipse prediction on the Antikythera Mechanism," *Nature* 454 (2008): 614–17, supplementary notes available at: <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7204/extref/nature07130-s1.pdf>; Freeth and Jones, "The Cosmos in the Antikythera Mechanism," *ISAW Papers* 4 (2012), available at <http://dlib.nyu.edu/awdl/isaw/isaw-papers/4/>.

17 *IAM4* ("Inscriptions of the Antikythera Mechanism. 4. The Back Dial and Back Plate Inscriptions," forthcoming), and provisionally Freeth, "Eclipse Prediction, note S2, with a transcription of the inscription by C. Crowther differing in only a few fairly minor readings from transcriptions by Y. Bitsakis and A. Jones, to which Freeth had access since 2009, as well as from the final text in *IAM4*. Freeth asserts that the directional statements refer to directions of obscuration of the eclipses, but if so, both the general method of prediction and the specific predictions in the preserved part of the inscription are astronomically nonsensical.

18 Ptolemy, *Almagest* 6.5–13 (ed. Heiberg, 1.476, 512, 536–546).

directions are best understood as characteristics of the eclipse itself and thus as potential elements of the protases of omens.

The earliest kinds of event-driven astrology in the Greek-speaking world, preceding the influx of Mesopotamian astral omens, were methods of weather prediction. These came in two varieties. One worked through correlations of observed sign and predicted outcome expressed similarly to Mesopotamian omen texts, for example, "If the Ass's Manger [the nebula Praesepe in Cancer] contracts and becomes dusky, it signifies storms."¹⁹ These texts involving astral weather signs are found scattered among a much larger repertoire of weather sign texts in which the observed events are much more commonly behaviors of animals, plants, or meteorological conditions. They were inherently unforecastable, requiring observation but no deep observational expertise beyond the ability to recognize a few objects such as Praesepe and the Pleiades.

The other variety of Greek astral weather prediction correlated weather patterns with the first and last appearances of stars after sunset and before sunrise. A specimen linkage is: "The Haedi rise in the evening; storms occur."²⁰ Taken in isolation, this resembles a weather-sign text or a Mesopotamian omen text and suggests a similar operative model, in which one makes the prediction of storms in response to observing the Haedi for the first time after sunset after an interval during which the stars could not be seen. However, if we look at the quoted passage within the broader context of the document in which it is transmitted, the picture changes:

On the 3rd [day], according to Euktemon the Haedi rise in the evening; storms occur.

On the 4th, according to Eudoxos Capella rises at nightfall.

On the 5th, according to Euktemon the Pleiades become visible in the evening; weather change. According to Kallippos Virgo finishes rising.

On the 7th day, according to Euktemon Corona rises: storms occur.

On the 8th day, according to Eudoxos the Pleiades rise at nightfall.

On the 10th day, according to Eudoxos Corona rises in the morning.

On the 12th day, according to Eudoxos Scorpius begins to set at nightfall: and a storm supervenes, and a great wind blows.²¹

19 Pseudo-Theophrastus, *De Signis* 43, ed. D. Sider & C. W. Brunschön, *Theophrastus of Eresus On Weather Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 86.

20 From the "Geminos parapegma" appended to Geminus' *Introduction to the Phenomena* (K. Manitius, ed., *Gemini Elementa Astronomiae* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1898]), 216.

21 Manitius, *Gemini Elementa Astronomiae*, 216, adopting his corrections to the transmitted text.

First, and most crucially, all the statements are given within a chronological framework of numbered days. Taking the document as a whole, we find that the framework (generically called a *parapegma*) comprises a cycle of 365 days, starting with the summer solstice and portioned into intervals of stated numbers of days, during which the Sun is supposed to travel through each of the twelve zodiacal signs in turn. This means that we are looking at a fixed and repeating cycle, locking all the statements at constant intervals of days from each one to the next. Second, every statement is attributed to an authority, implying that several source documents associated with such figures as Euktemon and Eudoxos have been combined, and in the combined form we get conflicting dates for the same star-event attributed to different authorities. Third, there are many statements of star-events not coinciding with a weather-outcome, and also (elsewhere in the document) statements of weather-outcomes not coinciding with a star-event.

The document that we have been looking at, the so-called *Geminos Parapegma*, is a text transmitted through the medieval manuscript tradition as a sort of appendix to Geminos' *Introduction to the Phenomena* and is thus a static object written on the page, giving few clues to how it was meant to be used, and by whom. However, we also have fragments of a very similar document in the form of an inscription on stone that was apparently erected in a public place in Miletos during the second century BCE, thus seemingly inviting nonexpert viewers to consult it.²² This inscription has most of the characteristics we have noted for the *Geminos Parapegma*: attributions to multiple authorities, assignment of the same star-events to more than one date according to different authorities, and unlinked statements of star-events and weather-outcomes. All statements are embedded in a fixed, year-long chronological framework, but this framework is represented not by numbered days but by drilled holes representing each of the (presumably 365) days of the year. If a hole has a statement or statements next to it, the statements apply to that day; runs of days with no associated statements are represented by rows of the appropriate number of holes.

According to the most plausible explanation of the holes' function, a peg was moved each day from one hole to the next to indicate where the current date fell within the cycle. Hence this was a dynamic document that in effect identified for the viewer what part of itself was relevant on any day—though of course it required an operator, someone to move the peg from one hole to the next on a daily basis and to restore the peg to the first hole on the day designated

22 IMilet inv. 456A, 456B, 456D, and 456N, most recently edited in D. Lehoux, "The Parapegma Fragments from Miletus," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 152 (2005): 125–40.

as the beginning of the annual cycle. From the user's perspective, a parapegma (whether static or dynamic) functioned in a way analogous to a hypothetical type of eclipse canon, in which the apodoses of the relevant eclipse omen texts have been appended to the predictions of the astronomical circumstances of the eclipse. The conceptual connection between astral event and mundane outcome is preserved, but no observation of the heavens is required, though the *variorum* type of parapegma leaves it to the user to make a choice among divergent forecasts, rather as a user of the Mesopotamian omen corpora had to choose among multiple omen texts whose protases fitted an eclipse.

Again, the Antikythera Mechanism presents us with an interesting variant type of dynamic parapegma.²³ A list of statements of morning and evening risings and settings of stars and constellations was inscribed on plates mounted above and below the single front dial. Each statement was marked by a letter of the Greek alphabet, and the same letter was engraved somewhere along the scale of the dial, which represented the zodiac and was subdivided by graduations into the twelve zodiacal signs and their constituent degrees. When a revolving pointer representing the Sun in its annual motion lined up with one of the letters, this constituted a prediction that the associated astral event took place on the corresponding date. There were no weather predictions in the parapegma inscriptions, however, and in this respect the Mechanism parallels a second stone parapegma inscription with pegholes, found in Miletos, which lists stellar risings and settings but has only a single reference to weather.²⁴ Parapegmata lacking weather forecasts would have functioned like the attested eclipse canons, replacing observation as the source of the protases of omens or signs but not indicating which correlations of protases and apodoses were relevant.

Date-driven Astrology

Although ancient date-driven astrology came to encompass prognostication based on the state of the heavens at dates and times determined by a wide range of criteria, its original and always central mode was 'genethliology' or nativity astrology. A memorable description of how the "Chaldean" or nativity

23 D. de S. Price, *Gears from the Greeks: The Antikythera Mechanism—A Calendar Computer from ca. 80 BC* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1974), 49; *IAM3* ("Inscriptions of the Antikythera Mechanism. 3. The Front Dial and Parapegma Inscriptions," forthcoming).

24 IMilet inv. 456C, reedited in Lehoux, "The Parapegma Fragments from Miletus."

astrologer originally (ἀρχικῶς) operated is given by the sceptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus (ca. 200 CE):

By night the Chaldean, they say, sat on some high ridge watching the stars, and another attended upon the woman in labor until she gave birth, and the moment she gave birth he made a sign by means of a gong to the one on the ridge. And he, when he heard, took note himself of the rising zodiacal sign as the ascendant (ᾠροσκοποῦν). But by day he paid attention to clocks (τοῖς ᾠροσκοπίοις) and to the movements of the Sun.²⁵

However, this picture of the astrologer making a ‘real-time’ observation of the heavens at the moment of birth, though it gives Sextus a convenient starting point for a critique of astrologers’ claims to precision in timing, does not correspond to the actual practice of nativity astrology, either in Babylonia, where it originated, or in the Greco-Roman world.

The records of Babylonian nativity astrology are tablets commonly called ‘horoscopes’ because of their obvious points of resemblance to the horoscopes of the Greco-Roman tradition and its descendants. The term ‘proto-horoscopes’ more accurately describes them—since they make no mention of the ascendant point of the zodiac, whose Greek name (ᾠροσκόπος) is the origin of the term ‘horoscope’—but this term quickly becomes cumbersome. Horoscope tablets contain one or occasionally two astral birth records. The record begins with the statement of the birthdate of an individual, who is sometimes named (either here or at the document’s end) but more often simply called “the child.” Then follows a list of statements of astronomical conditions in effect at or near the birthdate. In a few horoscopes, statements of outcomes pertaining to the individual (for example, “He will have sons”) seem to be linked to astronomical statements in the manner of omen texts.

Twenty-eight horoscope tablets are known, pertaining to individuals whose birth years range from 410 BCE through 69 BCE.²⁶ Most of them are known or presumed to be from Babylon (the earliest 410 BCE, the latest 69 BCE), one is from Nippur (410 BCE), and five are from Uruk (the earliest 263 BCE, the latest 199 BCE). These places of origin are significant. Babylon and Uruk are the two cities from which we have large numbers of astronomical tablets

25 Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 5,27–28.

26 Rochberg, *Babylonian Horoscopes* (Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society NS 88.1, 1998.) Additionally, four tablets (Rochberg’s texts 29–32) that record birthdates unaccompanied by astral data apparently functioned as notes for the preparation of horoscopes.

from the second half of the first millennium BCE, including the remains of a vast archive of observational records from Babylon as well as many tablets of predictive mathematical astronomy from both cities. Nippur is one of a very small number of other cities from which a few astronomical tablets have been identified.²⁷ All the Nippur tablets are nonmathematical and date from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. It thus appears that nativity astrology in Babylonia was usually practiced in proximity to centers of astronomical expertise.

A notorious passage from the geographer Strabo (late first century BCE or early first century CE) refers to practitioners of nativity astrology in Babylon:

A dwelling place is set aside in Babylon for the philosophers of the country, who are called Chaldaioi, and who are for the most part occupied with astronomy (ἀστρονομίαν). Some profess also to interpret nativities (γενεθλιαλογεῖν), but the others do not approve of them (ἀποδέχονται).²⁸

At the time Strabo wrote his treatise, there were still scholars in Babylon producing astronomical texts on cuneiform tablets, though we do not know how recent his source was. His allusion to the nativity astrologers indicates that they were part of the scholarly community of astronomers—“philosophers” for Strabo means roughly what we would call “intellectuals”—but that they formed a distinct, not entirely reputable subgroup. Direct proof or disproof of either part of this statement is impossible, because neither the horoscope tablets nor most categories of astronomical tablets from Babylon bear colophons identifying the people who wrote them, and for most of them we have no archeological context.²⁹ From the colophons of tablets from Uruk, on the other hand, we can establish that astronomical and astrological tablets were written, owned, and presumably also used by the same experts.³⁰ Again,

27 M. Ossendrijver, *Babylonian Mathematical Astronomy: Procedure Texts* (New York: Springer, 2012), 6 with note 31. The other sites from which we have astronomical tablets are Sippar and Ur (Steele, “The Circulation of Astronomical Knowledge between Babylon and Uruk,” in *The Circulation of Astronomical Knowledge in the Ancient World* [ed. J. M. Steele; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming]). They do not include any observational records or tablets of mathematical astronomy.

28 Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.6.

29 For a discussion of the problems involved in establishing the accurate provenance of astronomical tablets from Babylon (mostly in the British Museum), see E. Robson, *Mathematics in Ancient Iraq: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 220–27.

30 Steele, “Astronomy and Culture in Late Babylonian Uruk,” in “*Oxford IX*” *International Symposium on Archaeoastronomy. Proceedings IAU Symposium No. 278. Proceedings of the*

we cannot prove that any of the Uruk horoscopes were produced by these experts, but it is very likely that a certain Anu-bēlšunu, who was born on 29 December 249 BCE and whose horoscope is preserved in the tablet NCBT 1231 (in the Yale Babylonian Collection), was a prominent scholar of that name who wrote or owned tablets, including both astronomy and astrology, ranging from 229 to 185 BCE.³¹ Our single horoscope from Nippur apparently derives from an archive pertaining to the family of one Ninurta-aḥḥê-bullit, a temple brewer, which also contained one of the few astronomical tablets known from Nippur.³² All in all, we have persuasive circumstantial evidence that the Babylonian horoscopes were produced within the community of scholars engaged in astronomy, whereas it is hard to discern any sign of an internal division between a group of astronomers who practiced nativity astrology and another group hostile to this activity.

A closer examination of the astronomical data in the horoscope tablets strongly confirms the institutional connection between astronomers and nativity astrology while revealing just how astrology depended on that connection. Interestingly, each of the three cities seems to have had its own approach when it came to the astronomical data recorded in horoscopes.

The contents of most of the horoscopes from Babylon are fairly uniform, comprising a birthdate statement and list of astronomical data without astrological interpretations.³³ We can consider them to constitute a distinctive local type. The astronomical data may be grouped according to how their dates relate to the birthdate:

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- International Astronomical Union 7* (ed. C. Ruggles; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 331–41; Ossendrijver, “Science in Action: Networks in Babylonian Astronomy,” in *Babylon—Wissenskultur zwischen Orient und Okzident* (eds. E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, M. van Ess, and J. Marzahn; TOPOI Berlin Studies of the Ancient World 1; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 229–37.
- 31 Rochberg and P.-A. Beaulieu, “The Horoscope of Anu-bēlšunu,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 48 (1996): 89–94.
- 32 F. Joannès, *Textes économiques de la Babylonie récente* (Paris: Éditions Recherches sur les Civilisations, 1982), 7 note 1; and Joannès, “Les archives de Ninurta-aḥḥê-bullit,” in *Nippur at the Centennial* (ed. M. Ellis; Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14; Philadelphia: University Museum, 1992), 87–100, especially 95.
- 33 The latest known horoscope, BM 38104 (Text 27 in Rochberg, *Babylonian Horoscopes*, 137–40), cast for an individual born in 69 BCE, is the only one from Babylon to contain an astrological interpretation.

On the birthdate itself

- (1) In many horoscopes for birth years down to 142 BCE, the location of the Moon relative to a nearby star in the zodiacal belt (“Normal Star”) at the beginning or end of the night of birth or the night preceding the day of birth
- (2) The zodiacal sign occupied by the Moon; in some horoscopes from 125 BCE on, the Moon’s longitude in degrees
- (3) The zodiacal signs occupied by the Sun and any planets that were currently visible at some time of the night (We defer discussion of two late horoscopes from Babylon that give longitudes in degrees for the Sun and planets.)

During the month of the nativity

- (4) First and last visibilities of planets
- (5) The so-called Lunar Three, comprising an indication of whether the first day of the calendar month coincided with or followed the thirtieth day of the preceding month, the date of the first moonset following sunrise, and the date of the last lunar visibility

Within a few months of the nativity

- (6) The date of an equinox or solstice preceding or following the nativity

Within the year of the nativity

- (7) Lunar and solar eclipses

Uncertain meaning

- (8) In many horoscopes down to 142 BCE, it is stated that the child was born in the *bīt niširti* (“secret place”) of a specified planet. A planet’s *bīt niširti* was a constellation or zodiacal sign astrologically associated with that planet. It is not known what criterion determined when a nativity occurred “in” one of these places.

These texts from Babylon offer a range of items of information, among which only the report of the Moon’s passage by a Normal Star (item 1) is really specific to the birthdate itself, whereas the zodiacal signs occupied by the heavenly bodies (items 2 and 3) would be valid for intervals of varying length containing the birthdate, and the remaining items (4–7) pertain to dates that are proximate in varying degrees to the birthdate.

It is not difficult to identify plausible sources for most of the astronomical data in the Babylon horoscopes.³⁴ We can begin by considering the statements of the Moon's position relative to Normal Stars. If these came from any of the known categories of Babylonian astronomical texts, as opposed to the highly improbable alternative that they were products of independent observation or calculation, the only available candidate is the Astronomical Diaries. The Diaries were tablets recording—month-by-month over an interval up to half a year, and day-by-day within each month—a variety of astronomical phenomena and weather conditions, with the day-by-day reports followed by monthly sections summarizing the state of visibility and zodiacal locations of the planets, river levels, commodity prices, and general news. They were compiled in Babylon, apparently without interruption, from at least as early as the mid-seventh century through the mid-first century BCE.³⁵ In the day-by-day sections, the most numerous astronomical records are observations of the Moon's location relative to Normal Stars, expressed exactly as they appear in the horoscopes. There were twenty-eight Normal Stars in regular use, distributed rather unevenly through the zodiac, so that on a majority of nights the Moon made its closest approach to one of them, and this was recorded whenever the weather permitted an observation.³⁶ No other known kind of astronomical tablet included these lunar observations. The frequency of occurrence of statements about the Moon's location relative to Normal Stars in the horoscopes from Babylon is consistent with the hypothesis that such a statement was extracted from the Diaries whenever there was one recorded for the birthdate.

The Diaries also contain most of the other varieties of information regularly found in the horoscopes. Dates of first and last visibilities of planets, first moonsets after sunrise, last lunar visibilities, eclipses, and solstices and equinoxes are regularly recorded in the day-by-day sections. The monthly summaries give the zodiacal signs occupied by the planets as well as repeating their

34 See Rochberg, "Babylonian Horoscopes and their Sources," *Orientalia* 58 (1989): 102–23, and Rochberg, "Babylonian Horoscopy: The Texts and their Relations," in *Ancient Astronomy and Celestial Divination* (ed. N. M. Swerdlow; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 39–60, for a broader treatment of this topic.

35 The datable fragments of Astronomical Diaries are published in the first three volumes of A. J. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia* (Oesterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften; Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse, 1988-).

36 For the twenty-eight regularly used Normal Stars (as well as several others that occur more rarely in the observation records), see Jones, "A Study of Babylonian Observations of Planets Near Normal Stars," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 58 (2004): 475–536.

visibility dates. Again, it is not just the nature of the data but also the forms of expression in the Diaries that are largely reproduced in the horoscopes. While other categories of astronomical tablet could contain one or another of these kinds of information, economy might suggest that if the authors of the horoscopes had to consult the Diaries for the lunar Normal Star observations, they would also have used them for anything else they contained, at least if the information was comparatively easy to locate in these rather voluminous texts.

On the other hand, it is also likely that another type of astronomical tablet, the so-called Almanacs, were used in conjunction with the Diaries.³⁷ Almanacs were more compendious compilations of a narrower range of astronomical data, including the Lunar Three, solstices and equinoxes, eclipses, planetary synodic phenomena, and dates when planets moved out of one zodiacal sign into another. Unlike the Diaries, which were predominantly records of observation (though containing predicted data as well), the Almanacs were entirely predicted; the basis of the predictions was the application of recurrence periods to Diary records from earlier years rather than mathematical models involving extensive numerical operations.³⁸

The longitudes of the Sun and Moon are not recorded in the Diaries but could have been derived from other information that is recorded there. It would have been easy to determine the Sun's zodiacal sign or even estimate its longitude in degrees by counting the days separating the birthdate from the nearest solstice or equinox and adding to or subtracting from the assumed longitude of the tropical or equinoctial point a proportionate number of degrees. The Moon's zodiacal sign or longitude in degrees could be obtained from an observation relative to a Normal Star, correcting for one or two days' motion if the closest observation report was not from the night of or preceding the

37 Rochberg, "Babylonian Horoscopes and their Sources," 119–23; Rochberg, "Babylonian Horoscopy," 53–54.

38 Rochberg ("Babylonian Horoscopy," 50) notes that the terminology expressing eclipses in the horoscopes is in the form characteristic of predictions rather than observations. In the Diaries, some categories of record (e.g., Normal Star observations) were apparently always observed, some (solstices and equinoxes) were always predicted, and some (e.g., lunar and planetary visibilities) were sometimes observed, sometimes predicted. For the methods of generation of the Almanacs, see J. M. K. Gray and Steele, "Studies on Babylonian goal-year astronomy I: a comparison between planetary data in Goal-Year Texts, Almanacs and Normal Star Almanacs," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 62 (2008): 553–600.

birthdate;³⁹ this calculation would have required a list of longitudes of the Normal Stars, and we have tablets giving such a “star catalogue.”⁴⁰

The single extant Nippur horoscope lists dates of astronomical events that occurred during the Babylonian calendar year of the nativity—none of them on the actual birthdate.⁴¹ The following are the events, with their approximate dates in the proleptic Julian calendar, reordered according to chronological sequence:

411 BCE	July 19	Saturn, first appearance in Cancer
	October 13	Jupiter, second station in Aquarius
	November 27	Saturn, first station
	December 5	Mercury, first morning appearance behind Gemini
	December 28	Winter solstice
410 BCE	January 5	Saturn, acronychal rising
	January 13	birthdate
	January 14	Moon, last appearance
	January 20	Mercury, last morning appearance in Capricorn
	February 1	Venus, last morning appearance in front of Aquarius
	February 17	Jupiter, last appearance in Pisces

For the Sun and Moon, only one event is listed: the winter solstice that fell a few days before the birthdate, and the Moon’s last visibility that fell a few days later, respectively. For the planets, the text lists some or all the synodic phenomena that took place within the calendar year; it is not clear on what basis the selection was made (or why no phenomena for Mars are listed at all), though there seems to have been some preference for events that fell near the

39 In two of the horoscopes that give the Moon’s longitude in degrees, it is expressly stated to apply to the stage of night when a Normal Star observation would be possible, a strong hint that the longitude was obtained from such an observation.

40 N. A. Roughton, Steele, and C. B. F. Walker, “A Late Babylonian Normal and *Ziqpu* Star Text,” *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 58 (2004): 537–72.

41 Rochberg, *Babylonian Horoscopes*, 51–55 (Text 1 = Louvre AO 17649); see also Rochberg, “Babylonian Horoscopes and their Sources,” 111–14.

birthdate.⁴² Nevertheless, if the birthdate had not been recorded, we would at best be able to guess that it fell somewhere within a three-month range that covers eight of the ten recorded events; in other words, an astrological interpretation based purely on the astronomical data in this kind of horoscope would not have been able to differentiate between individuals born quite far apart in the same calendar year.

The astronomical data in the Nippur horoscope are all such as could have been found observed or predicted in a Diary or predicted in an Almanac. On the other hand, the restriction of statements concerning the planets to the dates of their synodic phenomena (sometimes accompanied by an indication of the zodiacal constellation occupied by the planet on the date of the phenomenon) and the complete absence of a positional statement for the Moon might suggest not just that the author had a different conception of the kinds of astronomical circumstances that were pertinent to nativity astrology, but also that he had access to astronomical records constituting a subset of the contents of the Diaries. The source was definitely Diary-like and not of a purely predictive variety, such as an Almanac, since Saturn's first appearance is given both an observed date ("high and faint") and a corrected, "ideal" date, and the presence of dense cloud cover is mentioned in the statement of Mercury's last morning appearance.

The Uruk horoscopes again form a distinct group. All of them intermix apodosis statements (e.g., "he will find favor wherever he goes") with the astronomical statements, and all the astronomical statements are indications of the position of the Sun, the Moon, or a planet on the birthdate, or of a planet's invisibility on that date. The earliest two (263 and 249 BCE) give the Sun's and Moon's longitudes in degrees but the planets' positions only in relation to zodiacal signs without degrees. The others give degrees for all the heavenly bodies, and additionally the trend of the Moon's latitudinal motion. Nothing in any of the Uruk horoscopes appears characteristic of an origin in observational records. A point of particular interest in the latest tablet (containing a pair of horoscopes for 199 and 200 BCE) is that the individual planets are characterized as "present" or "not present," apparently meaning that they were above or below the horizon at the time of birth. These statements imply that the author calculated or estimated the rising and setting points of the ecliptic for the time of birth—data not known to have been taken into account in any

42 Following the usual practice in Babylonian astronomy, the recognized synodic phenomena of Mercury and Venus are the first and last visibilities in the morning and evening, while those for the superior planets include the first and last visibilities, the two stations, and the sunset rising.

other Babylonian horoscopes, but that acquired central importance in Greek horoscopy.

The longitudes in degrees for the planets in the later Uruk horoscopes could not have been derived, directly or indirectly, from the Diaries, the Almanacs, or the other classes of observational or predictive tablets dependent on the Diaries; they must have been calculated by mathematical methods. In Babylonian mathematical astronomy, however, a planet's longitude on an arbitrary date was only obtainable indirectly, by interpolation between computed longitude-date pairs for consecutive synodic phenomena. While we have an abundance of tabular texts giving the computed synodic phenomena, tablets presenting sequences of day-by-day longitudes interpolated between the phenomena are comparatively rare. Both linear interpolation and more sophisticated approaches employing sequences with constant third differences to produce the effect of acceleration and deceleration are attested. These may, however, have been scholastic exercises, since making them involved an expense of labor seemingly out of proportion to the occasional need for just one longitude; the actual interpolations leading to the longitudes in the horoscopes could have been done by a more direct calculation on ephemeral media.

At this point, we should take a second look at the Babylon horoscopes. The last known horoscope tablet from Uruk, in terms of birthdate, is the one with the pair of horoscopes for 200 and 199 BCE; speaking more generally, Uruk appears to have ceased to be a center of astronomical and astrological scholarship after the Parthian conquest in 141 BCE.⁴³ Horoscope production in Babylon continued until at least the mid-first century BCE, and it is noteworthy that among the ten known Babylon horoscope tablets for birthdates later than the middle of the second century, there are two (for 87 and 69 BCE) that give longitudes in degrees for all currently visible planets as well as for the Sun and Moon—clear evidence that mathematical astronomy was coming to be used in Babylon as a source of horoscopic data. Unlike the Uruk horoscopes, however, this pair contain lunar visibility, eclipse, and solstice reports, so that they should be considered rather as a modification of the Babylon type of horoscope than as an importation of the Uruk type. Furthermore, there was still some dependence on Almanacs, if not on Diaries.

43 H. Hunger and T. de Jong ("Almanac W22340a from Uruk: The Latest Datable Cuneiform Tablet," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 104 [2014]: 182–94) have dated a problematic fragmentary Almanac tablet from Uruk to 79/80 CE, more than two centuries after the latest securely dated astronomical tablets from Uruk—a circumstance that renders the dating doubtful at best.

Horoscopy in the Greek (and the related Egyptian) tradition has long been known to have depended exclusively on predicted astronomical data. These data constitute a detailed description of the configuration of the heavenly bodies in relation to both the zodiac and the local horizon and meridian at the moment of birth; occasionally, reference was also made to the conjunction or opposition of the Sun and Moon immediately preceding the birthdate. At the conceptual level, the predominant frame of reference for a horoscope is defined by the horizon and meridian, whose intersections with the zodiac are the four cardines—called ascendant or “hour watcher” (ὠροσκόπος), mid-heaven (μεσουράνημα), setting (δύσις), and lower midheaven or “under-Earth” (ὑπὸ γῆν)—which in turn determine a division of the zodiac into twelve sectors called places (τόποι) associated with various aspects of one’s life.⁴⁴ In practice, however, the division of the zodiac into twelve signs of 30° each, defined either sidereally in relation to fixed stars or tropically in relation to the solstitial and equinoctial points, served as the scale in relation to which the locations of not only the heavenly bodies but also the cardines were calculated. Hence a Greek horoscope minimally consists of a statement of the birthdate followed by the longitudes of the Sun, Moon, planets, and the ascendant. Most of the more than two hundred extant horoscopes preserved on papyri and ostraca from Roman Egypt keep to this minimum or go barely beyond it, and the great majority of these give all the longitudes as zodiacal signs without degrees.⁴⁵ At the other extreme, we have a few ‘deluxe’ horoscopes that present additional astronomical and astrological data, typically embedded in a prose exposition instead of the usual list format.

Practices of astronomical observation were far more limited in the Greco-Roman context than in Babylon. The reports of observations by Greek astronomers preserved in Ptolemy’s *Almagest* and a very few other sources are not excerpts from records comparable in breadth, consistency of method, and chronological span to the Babylonian Diaries. Each astronomer seems to have chosen to observe particular types of phenomena or configurations, using varying metrological and calendrical conventions, with a view to theoretical

44 These are the ‘houses’ of modern astrological terminology, but in Greek astrology the word ‘house’ (οἶκός) meant a zodiacal sign as the domicile of a ruling heavenly body.

45 The principal collections of Greek documentary horoscopes are: Neugebauer & H. B. van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1959); D. Baccani, *Oroscopi greci: documentazione papirologica* (Messina: Sicania, 1992); and Jones, *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus*. At the date of writing, 250 Greek and Demotic Egyptian horoscopes on papyri and ostraca are inventoried in the Trismegistos database (www.trismegistos.org). An extremely small number of documentary horoscopes are known from sites outside of Egypt (e.g., graffiti at Dura Europos) and on small unprovenanced objects.

astronomical investigations. The lack of Diary-like observational corpora also rendered impracticable the composition of nonmathematical predictive corpora like the Babylonian Almanacs, since their predicted data were more or less direct extrapolations from observations by means of recurrence periods.

All Greek horoscopes thus depended for their data on mathematical models expressed in the form of numerical tables. Two categories of table were required: tables for computing the positions of the Sun, Moon, and planets for a given date, and ascension tables correlating degrees of the ecliptic with the degrees of the celestial equator that simultaneously cross the horizon or meridian (used for determining the longitudes of the cardines). Among the two hundred or so horoscopes preserved in Greek or Demotic Egyptian on papyri and ostraca, a very small number—all of them specimens of the deluxe type—explicitly refer to tables. The introductory section of *PLond.* 1.130, a horoscope for a birthdate in 81 CE, identifies the source of its longitudes of the heavenly bodies as αἰώνιοι κανόνες, “Aeon tables.”⁴⁶ Ptolemy (*Almagest* 9.2) and Vettius Valens (*Anthologiae* 6.2) also allude to these tables, and it is clear from Ptolemy’s uncomplimentary description of them that the designation applied to a whole class of tables by various authors, not to a specific set.⁴⁷ Ascension tables are indicated as the source of the computed ascendant in *PLond.* 98 (95 CE) and *POxy. astron.* 4276 (second or third century CE), in the latter instance with an attribution to or at least association with Hipparchos (Ἰππαρχικοῦ συντάγματος).⁴⁸ Numerous fragments of tables for computing positions of the heavenly bodies according to mathematical models are extant on papyrus.⁴⁹ They fall into two groups, according to whether they are based on Babylonian-style arithmetical models or geometrical models assuming combinations of uniform circular motions treated trigonometrically; among the latter group, fragments of Ptolemy’s *Handy Tables* and adaptations of Ptolemy’s tables predominate. Surprisingly, the only ascension tables attested in papyri are parts of the *Handy Tables*, though we have abundant indirect evidence that astrologers also used arithmetically structured tables ultimately derived from Babylonian mathematical astronomy.

46 Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, 21–28.

47 Ptolemy employs the variant expression αἰώνιος κανονοποιία; the collective noun, difficult to render in English, is roughly equivalent to the German *Tafelwerk*.

48 Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, 28–38; Jones, *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus*, 1.282–283 and 2.418–419.

49 For the various formats of astronomical tables found in Greek papyri, see Jones, “A Classification of Astronomical Tables on Papyrus,” in *Ancient Astronomy and Celestial Divination*. (ed. N. M. Swerdlow; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 299–340.

It is likely that any astrologer who professed to do high-quality work—the kind who produced the deluxe horoscopes, for example—would have owned and known how to use at least one set of numerical tables. The most elaborate horoscopes report more astronomical information than just the longitudes of the heavenly bodies on the birthdate. The current stage of each planet's synodic cycle may be indicated, the convention being to identify the stage by the synodic phenomenon that immediately preceded the date. The latitudes of the Moon and planets are also sometimes given, as well as the names of nearby stars in the zodiacal belt. Ptolemy's *Handy Tables*, which incorporates tables for computing both longitudes and latitudes as well as for determining whether a planet is visible and whether it is stationary, plus a catalogue of zodiacal stars, turns out to constitute a more or less complete package of astronomical resources for the most ambitious astrologer.

However, among the astronomical papyri, the fragments of such 'primary' tables are greatly outnumbered by fragments of almanac-style tables that gave precomputed positions of the heavenly bodies for a series of dates at regular or irregular intervals. The most common format tabulated the dates in each calendar year when each of the five planets was predicted to enter a new zodiacal sign. This type of 'sign-entry' almanac would have sufficed for the majority of horoscopes that only specified positions according to zodiacal sign without degrees. Other almanacs gave computed dates and longitudes of the planets at their synodic phenomena as well as their sign-entries, allowing for the possibility of interpolating longitudes for intermediate dates. Starting in the third century CE, one begins to encounter almanacs tabulating planets' longitudes in degrees, computed at fixed intervals, such as every fifth day. A numerically skilled astrologer could have computed an almanac for himself, but it appears probable that many of the almanacs we have were produced commercially for the astrological trade by specialists. For an individual astrologer, the labor involved in computing a few years' worth of an almanac would probably have far exceeded the labor of directly computing the horoscopes of those clients whose birthdates fell within the almanac's span.

Ephemerides—that is, tables listing computed positions of the heavenly bodies at intervals of single days within a calendrical structure—constitute a special category of almanac. Some ephemerides gave daily longitudes only for the Moon, accompanied by an almanac giving the planets' longitudes only at their synodic phenomena and sign-entries. Others laid out the longitudes of the Moon, Sun, and five planets in parallel columns. While astrologers certainly could have employed ephemerides for composing horoscopes, there was also a broader market of nonexperts who consulted ephemerides to determine auspicious and inauspicious days for various activities, according to the configurations of the Moon relative to the other heavenly bodies. In the latest examples

we have on papyrus, from the fifth century CE, such astrological appraisals are explicitly provided in a separate column.

For a sophisticated astrologer, almanacs were a time-saving and labor-saving resource to be called upon when imprecise astronomical data were sufficient for an astrological interpretation. In precision work involving numerical tables, an astrologer had to possess mathematical skills different from the knowledge of metrology, mensurational formulas, and problem-solving algorithms that were the substance of common mathematical education, and also different from the deductive theoretical mathematics of the Euclidean kind. In particular, he had to understand and know how to perform arithmetical operations—addition, subtraction, occasional multiplication, and tabular interpolation—with sexagesimal fractions. Almanacs would have made it possible to dispense with most of the sexagesimal arithmetic, at least so far as the planets are concerned, and it is conceivable that some astrologers managed to carry on a low-end practice with slender mathematical skills, relying on ephemerides, almanacs, and crude rule-of-thumb algorithms. No systematic study of the errors in the preserved horoscopes has yet been made, but even a superficial survey suggests that gross mistakes were not uncommon.

Astrological practice called for only a rather superficial knowledge of theoretical astronomy. An astrologer obviously would have needed to know the identities of the heavenly bodies, their apparent patterns of movement through the zodiac, and the elementary concepts of the celestial sphere underlying the definitions of the cardines. Even comparatively complex astronomical tables like Ptolemy's, however, can be used by someone who has no deep understanding of the theory behind the tables, so long as one has clear instructions and the requisite arithmetical skills. Although the prevailing rationale for Greco-Roman astrology appealed to a vaguely Aristotelian cosmology of revolving heavenly spheres influencing the sublunary world and its denizens, the detailed geometrical models of epicyclic and eccentric motions played no significant role in astrology. We should not be surprised, therefore, that among the abundant remains of astrologers' resources found among the papyri, fragments of works on theoretical astronomy are exceedingly rare.

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PART 3

Ancient Near-Eastern Astrology and the Magi



Mesopotamian Astrological Geography

John M. Steele

References to countries and cities appear throughout the corpus of astrological texts from Mesopotamia. The most commonly occurring geographical references are to the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland (Amurru), and Subartu, which appear in the apodoses of many celestial omens. These four lands frequently occur as the lands affected by the same prediction in groups of four sequential omens, which cycle through four possible protases (for example, eclipses which begin on the right, left, top, or bottom side of the Moon). Several different schemes featuring the four lands may be identified from the various collections of celestial omens; some such schemes are also explicitly presented in commentary and other texts. A much less well-known tradition of geographical astrology is attested by a small number of texts that give associations between constellations or signs of the zodiac¹ and cities in Babylonia. Some of these texts follow the model of the four-land schemes in that they give predictions that affect different cities depending upon the constellation or sign of the zodiac in which a celestial body is located when it exhibits a particular phenomenon. Other texts simply list associations between constellations or signs of the zodiac and cities.²

Astrological cuneiform tablets are known from throughout the second and first millennia BCE, although by far the majority of the preserved texts date to either the last part of the Neo-Assyrian period (eighth and seventh centuries BCE) and come from the Assyrian capitals of Nineveh and Assur, or the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods (fifth century BCE to first century CE) and come from Babylon and Uruk in Babylonia. The largest proportion of the

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- 1 Because the signs of the zodiac were named after twelve of the zodiacal constellations, it is generally only possible to determine whether a constellation or the zodiacal sign is being referred to by the context in which it is mentioned. In order to make this distinction clear in my discussions, when a name is used to refer to a constellation I translate it literally (e.g., “The Twins,” “The Crab,” “The Lion”), whereas when it is used as a zodiacal sign I translate it using the modern equivalent (e.g., “Gemini,” “Cancer,” “Leo”).
 - 2 Some further texts associate signs of the zodiac or subdivisions of zodiacal signs with specific cultic sites, such as temples in the Babylonian cities, but I shall not discuss those texts here. For examples of such texts, see E. Weidner, *Gestirndarstellungen auf babylonischen Tontafeln* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1967).

preserved astrological tablets of all periods contain collections of celestial omens, in particular copies of tablets from the series *Enūma Anu Enlil*. Smaller numbers of tablets contain omen commentaries. Many new developments in Babylonian astrology took place during the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods, including the invention of personal astrology, as epitomized by the Horoscope tablets, new forms of astral medicine which linked constellations and signs of the zodiac to particular illnesses and to the ingredients for making medical remedies, and astrological forecasting of such things as business in the markets and the level of the River Euphrates. Many of these new astrological developments made use of the recent system of twelve signs of the zodiac, invented in the late fifth century BCE. These new astrological techniques are presented both in the traditional form of omens and in texts that present statements or lists of astrological associations.

My aim in this chapter is to survey the evidence for different types of astrological geography in the various astrological texts. As I have already mentioned above, there are two main traditions of astrological geography found in cuneiform sources: a tradition linking groups of celestial phenomena to the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu, and a tradition associating constellations and signs of the zodiac with Babylonian cities. In neither case, however, is there a single tradition; rather, we find a range of schemes and associations within each tradition. Thus, as with almost all aspects of Mesopotamian astrology, there was never a single, unambiguous interpretation of any celestial event that applied to a particular geographic location.

The Four Lands: Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu

In many celestial omen texts, we find sequences of four similar omens with more or less identical apodoses, differing only in that they refer to a different one of the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, or Subartu (sometimes Subartu is combined with the land of the Gutu). For example, the first four omens of *Enūma Anu Enlil* Tablet 17 read:

[DIŠ *ina* ITU.BÁR U]D.14.KAM *ina* EN.NUN AN.USÁN AN.KU₁₀ GAR-[*ma* SA₅ *ina* IM.MAR.TU SAR-*ma* ZALÁG-*ir*] LUGAL MAR.TU MU AN.KU₁₀ BI SA₅ šá-*lim* SU.KÚ *ina* KUR.BI GÁL

[DIŠ *in*]_a ITU.BÁR UD.14.KAM *ina* EN.NUN AN.USÁN AN.KU₁₀ GAR-*ma* SA₅ *ina* IM.SI.SÁ SAR-*ma* ZALÁG-*ir* LUGAL URI^{ki} MU AN.KU₁₀ BI SA₅ šá-*lim* SU.KÚ *ina* KUR.BI GÁL

DIŠ *ina* ITU.BÁR UD.14.KAM *ina* EN.NUN AN.USÁN AN.KU₁₀ GAR-*ma*
 SA₅ *ina* I[M.KUR.RA SAR-*ma* ZALÁG-*ir*] LUGAL SU.BIR₄^{ki} MU AN.KU₁₀
 BI SA₅ šá-*lim* SU.KÚ *ina* KUR.BI GÁL

DIŠ *ina* ITU.BÁR UD.14.KAM *ina* EN.NUN AN.USÁN AN.KU₁₀ GAR-*ma*
 SA₅ *ina* IM.U₁₈.LU SAR-*ma* ZALÁG-*ir*] LUGAL NAM.MA^{ki} MU AN.KU₁₀
 BI SA₅ šá-*lim* SU.KÚ *ina* KUR.BI GÁL

[If] an eclipse occurs on the 14th of [Month I] in the evening watch [and is red; it begins and clears in the west]; the king of the Westland is well on account of that red eclipse: there will be famine in that land.

[If] an eclipse occurs on the 14th of Month I in the evening watch and is red; it begins and clears in the north; the king of Akkad is well on account of that red eclipse: there will be famine in that land.

If an eclipse occurs on the 14th of Month I in the evening watch and is red; [it begins and clears in the e]ast; the king of Subartu is well on account of that red eclipse: there will be famine in that land.

If an eclipse occurs on the 14th of Month I in the evening watch and is red; [it begins and clears in the so]uth; the king of Elam is well on account of that red eclipse: there will be famine in that land.³

In this example, the predicted outcome of the eclipse, namely that the king will be well but there will be famine in the land, affects one of the four lands depending upon the direction of the eclipse shadow across the surface of the Moon.⁴

A variety of principles for associating the four lands with the various characteristics of an observed astronomical phenomenon are attested in the form of general schemes as well as in individual omens (the relationship between these schemes and the omens is not well understood; in particular, there are clear cases where omens in *Enūma Anu Enlil* disagree with the schemes). These principles include: consideration of the month, the day, and the watch of the night in which the event took place; in which of the three paths across the sky the astronomical body was located; the sector of the Moon covered by the shadow during an eclipse and the direction of that shadow across the moon's

3 *Enūma Anu Enlil* 17 §1.1–§1.4; transliteration and translation following F. Rochberg-Halton (*Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enūma Anu Enlil* [Horn: Berger & Söhne, 1988], 115–16), with minor changes by the present author.

4 See further the discussion in Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination*, 55. It should be noted that few examples are as clearly repetitive as this one.

surface; and the direction of the wind.⁵ Many of these principles are set out in Tablet 4 of the commentary series *Šumma Sin ina Tāmartišu*:

[DIŠ] AN.KU₁₀ EN.NUN AN.USÁN *a-na* KUR URI^{ki}: DIŠ AN.KU₁₀ EN.NUN MURUB₄.BA *a-na* KUR SU.BIR₄^{ki}
 [DIŠ] AN.KU₁₀ EN.NUN UD.ZAL.LI *a-na* KUR NIM.MA^{ki}: DIŠ ITU.BÁR ITU.IZI ITU.GAN KUR URI^{ki}
 [DIŠ] ITU.GU₄ ITU.KIN ITU.AB KUR NIM.MA^{ki}: DIŠ ITU.SIG₄ ITU.DU₆ ITU.ZÍZ KUR MAR.TU^{ki}
 DIŠ ITU.ŠU ITU.APIN ITU.ŠE KUR SU.BIR₄^{ki} ITU.MEŠ šá AN.TA.LÙ^{d30}
 [DIŠ] UD.13.KAM KUR.URI^{ki} UD.14.KAM KUR NIM.MA^{ki} UD.15.KAM KUR MAR.TU^{ki} UD.16.KAM KUR SU.BIR₄^{ki} UD.MEŠ šá AN.TA.LÙ^{d30}
 [DIŠ] IM.U₁₈.LU KUR NIM.MA^{ki} IM.SI.SÁ KUR URI^{ki} IM.KUR.RA KUR SU.BIR₄^{ki} *u gu-ti-i* IM.MAR.TU KUR MAR.TU^{ki}
 [DIŠ] KASKAL šu]-ut^d en-l[^l KUR URI^{ki}] KASKAL šu-ut^d a-nim KUR NIM.MA^{ki} KASKAL šu-ut^d é-a KUR MAR.TU^{ki} u SU.BIR₄^{ki}

An eclipse of the evening watch is for Akkad. An eclipse of the middle watch is for Elam. An eclipse of the morning watch is for Subartu.

Month I, Month v, (and) Month ix: Akkad. Month II, Month vi, (and) Month x: Elam. Month III, Month vii, (and) Month xi: the Westland. Month iv, Month viii, (and) Month xii: Subartu. These are the months of a lunar eclipse.

The 13th day: Akkad. The 14th day: Elam. The 15th day: the Westland. The 16th day: Subartu. These are the days of a lunar eclipse.

The south wind: Elam. The north wind: Akkad. The east wind: Subartu and the Guti. The west wind: the Westland.

The path of Enlil: Akkad. The path of Anu: Elam. The path of Ea: the Westland.⁶

5 See Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination*, 36–63; U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1995), 105–09; and Z. Wainer, “Traditions of Mesopotamian Celestial-Divinary Schemes and the 4th Tablet of *Šumma Sin ina Tāmartišu*,” in *The Circulation of Astronomical Knowledge in the Ancient World*. (ed. J. M. Steele; in press).

6 Composite transliteration based on Wainer’s forthcoming edition.

Most of these schemes are also attested on tablets containing the so-called Great Star List. In addition, those tablets also present a scheme associating the four quarters of the Moon with the four lands:

15 30	KUR [URI] ^{ki}
2,30 30	KUR NIM.[MA] ^{ki}
AN.TA 30	KUR MAR.[TU] ^{ki}
[KI.TA] 30	KUR SU ^{ki} u [KUR <i>gu-ti</i>]

Right (part) of the moon: [Akkad].

Left (part) of the moon: El[am].

Upper (part) of the moon: the West[land].

Lower (part) of the moon: Subartu and [the Guti].⁷

The relationship between these various schemes and the actual omens is not always clear, however.

Following the invention of the zodiac in the late fifth century BCE, the principle associating the four lands with the twelve months of the year was used as the model for assigning the lands to the signs of the zodiac. This scheme is attested on the reverse of the tablet BM 47494 (as I will discuss in the next section, the obverse of this tablet contains associations between constellations and Babylonian cities).⁸ Reverse 1–16 present a series of omens predicting the strength of business in the land of Akkad, which are stated in Rev. 1 to concern the zodiacal signs of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius. Following the series of omens, Rev. 17–22 list the other zodiacal signs in groups of three, stating that they are for the other lands: Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn for Elam; Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius for the Westland; and Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces for Subartu. The twelve signs of the zodiac have simply been mapped onto the twelve months of the year, and the scheme then follows the month scheme from *Šumma Sin*

7 Great Star List lines 183–186 in Koch-Westenholz's (*Mesopotamian Astrology*, 196) composite edition.

8 H. Hunger, "Stars, Cities, and Predictions," in *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honour of David Pingree* (eds. C. Burnett, J. Hogendijk, K. Plofker, and M. Yano; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 16–32. It is clear that the obverse of this tablet is discussing constellations, whereas the reverse concerns zodiacal signs, despite the fact that these are not distinguished in the writing of the names.

ina Tāmartišu.⁹ This same association of zodiacal signs with the four lands is implicit in the omens found on another Late Babylonian tablet, BM 36746.¹⁰

A separate tradition, attested in the Great Star List and elsewhere, separates the thirty-six stars (including some planets) of the so-called Astrolabes into three groups of twelve stars and associates each group with one of the lands of Elam, Akkad, or the Westland (the land of Subartu was apparently not used in this way).¹¹ The appellation “star of Elam/Akkad/the Westland” appears occasionally after the name of a star from this list in letters concerning the interpretation of celestial omens, which were sent by scholars to the Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.

At this juncture, it is important to discuss the geographical meaning of the four lands. By the first millennium BCE, the names Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu had become traditional designations for the four parts of the world, corresponding to the four terrestrial directions south, east, west, and north, respectively. More specifically, Akkad refers to Babylonia; Elam refers to the lands to the east, which would by the sixth century BCE become the heartland of the Persian Empire; the Westland refers to the area to the west of Mesopotamia; and Subartu refers to Assyria and the north. The names were generally used in a fairly broad sense, perhaps akin to how Europeans today might talk of the East when referring to Russia, the North when referring to the countries of Scandinavia, the South when referring to Italy and Greece, and the West when referring to Spain and Portugal. Thus, the four lands did not have an absolute, unchanging connection to a particular country or geographical territory, but rather could be interpreted in ways that seemed appropriate at any particular time. For example, the seventh century BCE scholar Mar-Issar wrote to the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon on the occasion of a lunar eclipse, explaining what the Westland means:

Perhaps the scholars can tell something about the (concept) ‘Westland’ to the king, my lord. Westland means the Hittite country (Syria) and the

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- 9 On the relationship between months of the schematic calendar and signs of the zodiac, see, for example, L. Brack-Bernsen and Steele, “Babylonian Mathemagics: Two Mathematical Astronomical-Astrological Texts,” in *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honour of David Pingree* (eds. C. Burnett, J. Hogendijk, K. Plofker, and M. Yano; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 95–125; and Steele, “Celestial Measurement in Babylonian Astronomy,” *Annals of Science* 64 (2007): 293–325.
- 10 Rochberg-Halton, “New Evidence for the History of Astrology,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43 (1984): 115–40.
- 11 See, for example, W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 175–77.

nomad land or, according to another tradition, Chaldea. Someone of the kings of Hatti, Chaldea or Arabia will carry this sign. With the king, my lord, all is well; the king, my lord, will attain his desire, and the deeds and prayers of the king, my lord, are acceptable to the gods. The king of Kush, the king of [Tyre] or Mugallu [will die] naturally, or the king, my lord, will take [him] captive; the king, my lord, will reduce his country, and his concubines will enter into the possession of the king, [my] lord. The king, my lord, can be glad.¹²

In this example, an omen affecting the king of the Westland is considered to be applicable to the king of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast; Mugallu, the king of Tabal in Anatolia; or even the king of Kush, whose land lay south of Egypt in modern Sudan. All three kings were important adversaries of Assurbanipal. During other time periods, the Westland could be interpreted to refer to different countries depending upon the geopolitical situation of the time.

Cities

References to cities appear only occasionally in the apodoses of celestial omens in *Enūma Anu Enlil*.¹³ Outside of *Enūma Anu Enlil*, however, we find several texts that contain astrological associations between cities and constellations. These texts include lexical lists, celestial omen texts outside of *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and late (non-omen) astrological texts. In his 1963 article “*Astrologische Geographie im Alten Orient*,” Ernst Weidner collected all such texts known to him and was able to compile a list of associations for each constellation. He demonstrated that although some associations are shared by several texts, other associations are less common. Furthermore, he showed that many of the constellations are associated with several cities, and similarly that several cities are associated with more than one constellation. A few more sources containing associations of constellations and cities are available today. These new sources tend to support Weidner’s finding that there was not a simple one-to-one correspondence between city and constellation, although there are some associations which appear regularly.

The earliest text attesting to associations between constellations and cities is K. 4386 (= CT 19 19), a Neo-Assyrian copy of a lexical list from Nineveh.

12 S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), No. 351, Obv. 19—Rev. 11.

13 Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination*, 37.

A short section (Rev. II 58–62) close to the end of this tablet, unfortunately only partially preserved, contains the following associations: The Crab with Sippar, The Wagon with Nippur, and The Field with Babylon, followed by entries associated with Assur and Susa where the constellation name is lost.¹⁴ Another text known from the Neo-Assyrian period, VAT 9418 from Assur (= KAR No. 142), with a duplicate of the relevant part found on the tablet 82-9-18, 7292 (= Pinches PSBA 33 pl. XI), contains a list of constellations associated with the god Enlil in different cities: The Old Man with Nippur, The Fox with Enamtila, The Wolf with Hursagkalama, The Rooster with Kullaba, The Bull of Heaven with Aratta, and ŠU.PA with Babylon.¹⁵

From the Late Babylonian period, we have a wider variety of sources. MNB 1849, a collection of lunar eclipse omens duplicating in parts some of *Enūma Anu Enlil*, ends with a section (Rev. 37–54) stating which cities are affected by a lunar eclipse, depending upon the constellation in which the Moon is located at that time and “according to the mouth of the scholar.” The section reads as follows:

KI.MEŠ MUL.MEŠ *ša ina lib-bi* ^dsin AN-KU₁₀ GAR-nu EŠ.BAR *a-na* URU.
MEŠ SUM-nu

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.MUL *ú-lu* MUL.ŠU.GI *a-dir* EŠ.BAR BÀD.AN^{ki} DUR.AN^{ki};
UNUG^{ki}

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.GU.AN.NA *a-dir* EŠ.BAR UNUG^{ki} *u* BÀD.AN^{ki}; DUR.AN^{ki}
DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.SIPA.ZI.AN.NA *ú-lu* MUL.zi.ba.ni.tum *a-dir* EŠ.BAR *si-par*
u UD.UNUG^{ki}

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.MAŠ.TAB.BA.GAL.GAL.LA *a-dir* EŠ.BAR GÚ.DU₈.A^{ki}
DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.GÍR.TAB *a-dir* EŠ.BAR A.AB.BA *u* NI.TUK^{ki}; *bár-sip*^{ki}
DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.PA.BIL.SAG *a-dir* EŠ.BAR ^{uru}mu.ra.bal *u* KÁ.DINGIR.RA^{ki}
DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.GU.LA *ù-lu* MUL.SUḪUR.MÁŠ.KU₆ *a-dir* EŠ.BAR NUN^{ki}
ù-lu URU dÍD

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.UR.GU.LA *a-dir* EŠ.BAR LUGAL BE-*ma* UR.MAḪ.MEŠ
BE.MEŠ

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.AB.SÍN *a-dir* EŠ.BAR AB.SÍN AB.SÍN GUN-sà *i-ḫar-ra-aš*
SU.KÚ ŠE *u* IN.NU

14 E. Weidner, “Astrologische Geographie im Alten Orient,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 20 (1963): 117–21, especially 117.

15 Weidner, “Astrologische Geographie im Alten Orient,” 118.

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.MEŠ IGI.MEŠ *šá* MUL.AL.LUL *a-dir* EŠ.BAR ^{id}IDIGNA
ì-dig-lat míl-šá LAL-ti

DIŠ *ina* KI MUL.MEŠ EGIR.MEŠ *šá* MUL.AL.LUL *a-dir* EŠ.BAR ^{id}*pu-rat-*
tum idpu-rat-tum míl-šá LAL-ti

DIŠ *ina* [K]I [MU]L.AL.LUL *a-dir* EŠ.BAR UD.KIB.NUN^{ki}

DIŠ *ina* [KI MU]L.*an-nu-ni-tum a-dir* EŠ.BAR ^{id}IDIGNA *u* EŠ.BAR *a-ga-dè*^{ki}

DIŠ *ina* [KI MUL.Š]IM.MAḤ *a-dir* EŠ.BAR ^{id}*pu-ra-tum u* EŠ.BAR A.AB.BA:
NI.TUK^{ki}

DIŠ *ina* [KI MUL.L]U.ḤUN.GA *a-dir* EŠ.BAR UNUG^{ki} *u kul.aba*₄^{ki}

[...] ^{rx} KI.MEŠ MUL.MEŠ *šá ki-i* ^{dsin} AN.KU₁₀ *ina lib-šú-nu* GAR.MEŠ *u*
EŠ.BAR ^{dsi}[*n* ...]

[...] *šá* KA UM.ME.A¹⁶

Places of the stars within which the Moon makes an eclipse gives a prediction for the cities.

¶ In the place of The Stars (Pleiades) or the Old Man the darkness is a prediction for Der (which is called) Der (variant): Uruk.

¶ In the place of The Bull of Heaven the darkness is a prediction for Uruk and Der (which is called) Der.

¶ In the place of The True Shepherd of Anu or The Scales the darkness is a prediction for Sippar and Larsa.

¶ In the place of The Great Twins the darkness is a prediction for Kutha.

¶ In the place of The Scorpion the darkness is a prediction for the Sealand and Dilmun (variant): Borsippa.

¶ In the place of Pabilsag the darkness is a prediction for Mutabal and Babylon.

¶ In the place of The Great One or The Goatfish the darkness is a prediction for Eridu or Itu.

¶ In the place of The Lion the darkness is a prediction for the King; if Lions(?)

¶ In the place of The Furrow the darkness is a prediction for the furrow (i.e. agriculture); the yield of the furrow will reduce, hunger of barley and straw.

¶ In the place of The Front Stars of The Crab the darkness is a prediction for the Tigris; the flood waters of the Tigris will decrease.

16 Transliteration based upon Weidner's copy ("Astrologische Geographie im Alten Orient").

¶ In the place of The Rear Stars of the Crab the darkness is a prediction for the Euphrates; the flood waters of the Euphrates will decrease.

¶ In the place of The Crab the darkness is a prediction for Sippar.

¶ In the place of Anunitum the darkness is a prediction for the Tigris and a prediction for Agade.

¶ In the place of The Swallow the darkness is a prediction for the Euphrates and a prediction for the Sealand (variant): Dilmun.

¶ In the place of The Hired Man the darkness is a prediction for Uruk and Kullaba.

[...] places of the stars within which the Moon makes an eclipse and the prediction of the Mo[on...]

[...] From the mouth of the scholar.

In total, there are 15 entries in this list. The correspondences between constellations and geographical locations are shown in Table 9.1 below.

A simple list of associations between constellations and cities is found on Obv. 1–15 of BM 47494 from Babylon.¹⁷ The constellations and cities are simply paired in each line of this section. For example, line 3 reads:

DIŠ MUL.SIPA.ZI.AN.NA UD.[KI]B.NUN^{ki} *u la-ár-si^{2ki}*

¶ The True Shepherd of Heaven: Sippar and Larsa.

Note that this is the same association of constellation and cities as in MNB 1849. Occasionally, this text gives associations for parts of constellations. For example, in line 7:

DIŠ SAG.DU MÚL.UR.A UNUG^{ki} GABA-*su* TIN.TIR^{ki} GIR EN.LÍL^{ki}

¶ The Head of the Lion: Uruk. Its Breast: Babylon; The Foot: Nippur.

The associations given on BM 47494 are also summarized in Table 9.1. As noted in the previous section, the reverse of this tablet gives a scheme associating the signs of the zodiac with the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu.

¹⁷ BM 47494 is edited and studied in Hunger, “Stars, Cities, and Predictions,” from which the following quotations are taken.

A compendium of calendrical and stellar astrology from Babylon, which is partially preserved in three fragments (BM 36303+, BM 36628+, and BM 36988),¹⁸ contains two sections referring to cities. BM 36303+ Obv. I 1'–7' contains part of a list which probably associated constellations with cities (only the names of the cities are preserved):

- [...] UNUG^{ki}
 [...] ŠEŠ.UNUG^{ki}
 [...] KÍŠ^{ki}
 [...] GÚ.D]U₈.A^{ki} u ŠEŠ.UNUG^{ki}
 [...] ṛsip-par^{ki} dil-bat^{ki} u GÍR.SU^{ki}
 [...] ṛx¹ E²ki ṛÈŠ².NUN¹.NA^{ki} x²
 [...] ṛx¹ dil-bat^{ki} PA.ŠE^{ki}
- [...] Uruk
 [...] Ur
 [...] Kish
 [...] Ku]tha and Ur
 [...] Sippar, Dilbat and Girsu
 [...] ... Babylon? (and) Eshnunna
 [...] ... Dilbat (and) Isin

In several cases more than one city is given, and the groups of cities are in several cases identical to those found on BM 47494. It seems likely, therefore, that in those cases the associations were with the same constellations. I include these constellations in Table 9.1, but within square brackets to emphasize that the associations are conjectural.

BM 36303+ Obv. I 8'–21' contains a series of statements which associate months of the year, signs of the zodiac, and cities. This section is duplicated on two other tablets: BM 32211 Obv. 1–14 and BM 35237 (= LBAT 1613) Obv. 3–9. The section reads as follows:

18 The text is edited and studied in Steele, "A Late Babylonian Compendium of Calendrical and Stellar Astrology," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 67 (2015): 187–215, from which the following quotations are taken.

[KILAM ITU.MEŠ EŠ.BAR šá GIŠ.B]ÁN A.AN ᵀSIG₅¹-qí
 [KI EŠ.BAR UŠ.MEŠ šá ᵀUDU.IDIM].MEŠ gab-bi ᵀx¹-qí

[DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.BÁR MÚL.UR.JA	BÀD.DINGIR ^{ki}
[DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.GU ₄ MÚL]. ᵀABSIN ¹	EN.LÍL ^{ki}
[DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.SIG MÚL.G]IŠ.RÍN	<i>sip-par</i> ^{ki}
[DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.ŠU MÚL]L.GÍR.TAB	<i>dil-mun</i> ^{ki}
ᵀDIŠ ¹ [<i>ina</i> IT]U.[IZI MÚL].PA.BIL.[SA]G	ᵀAMAR.DA ^{1ki}
DIŠ ᵀ <i>ina</i> ITU ¹ .KIN ᵀ MÚL ¹ .SUḪUR.MAŠ	ᵀGÚ.DU ₈ .A ^{1ki}
DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.DU ₆ MÚL.GU.LA	ᵀGÍR.SU ^{1ki}
ᵀDIŠ ¹ <i>ina</i> ITU.APIN MÚL.KUN.ME	<i>a-kad</i> ^{ki}
DIŠ <i>ina</i> ITU.GAN MÚL.ḪUN.GÁ	UNUG ^{ki}
DIŠ <i>ina</i> ᵀITU ¹ .AB MÚL.MÚL	KÌŠ ^{ki}
DIŠ <i>ina</i> ᵀITU ¹ .ZÍZ MÚL.MAŠ.MAŠ	ŠEŠ.UNUG ^{ki}
ᵀDIŠ ¹ [<i>ina</i> IT]U.ŠE MÚL.ᵀAL.LUL ¹	ᵀUD ¹ .UNUG ^{ki}

[Business of the months: decision for rental pa]yment[?], rain and good fortune[?].

[The Place (relevant to) the decision is (that of) the stations of the planet]s, all of them . . .

[♈ in Month I, Le]o,	Der
[♈ in Month II], Virgo,	Nippur
[♈ in Month III, L]ibra,	Sippar
[♈ in Month IV], Scorpio,	Dilmun
♈ [in Mon]th [v,] Sagittar[<i>ius</i>],	Marad
♈ in Month VI, Capricorn,	Kutha
♈ in Month VII, Aquarius,	Girsu
♈ in Month VIII, Pisces,	Akkad
♈ in Month IX, Aries,	Uruk
♈ in Month X, Taurus,	Kish
♈ in Month XI, Gemini,	Ur
♈ [in Mon]th XII, Cancer,	Larsa

Although there is some overlap between the cities associated with zodiacal signs and those associated with constellations (for example, the sign Aries and the constellation The Hired Man are both associated with Uruk, the sign Libra and the constellation The Scales are both associated with Sippar, and the sign Scorpio and the constellation The Scorpion are both associated with Dilmun), in most other cases there is no agreement.

One further astrological text refers to city names. LBAT 1586+1587 is a so-called *Kalendertext* for the first fifteen days of Month III.¹⁹ A *Kalendertext* contains a numerical scheme associating a day of the schematic 360-day year with positions in the zodiac such that the position increases by 277 days each day.²⁰ This scheme is then linked to various things, such as cultic sites, the ingredients for medical remedies, and, on LBAT 1586+1587, statements about the position of the Moon and the names of stars/constellations. The constellations named (with two exceptions: one a very obvious scribal error of MUL.GU.LA “The Great One” for MUL.UR.GU.LA “The Lion,” the other where the name of the star—Pabilsag, we expect The Scorpion—is damaged) all correspond to the sign of the zodiac given by the numerical *Kalendertext* scheme. Six entries contain the name of a city, while three further entries appear to contain the name of a temple, perhaps in Babylon. These six entries are included in Table 9.1.

In inspecting this table, which includes all of the major sources for associations between constellations and cities, it is evident that, whilst this are some common associations which are found in many or even all texts (for example, Kutha is associated with The Twins in all four texts, and Sippar is associated with The Crab in all three texts where The Crab appears as well as in the lexical list K. 4386), there is also considerable variation, especially where more than one city is associated with a constellation. Thus, a scholar interpreting the location of a celestial object in a constellation would have several options regarding which city to choose.

It is also interesting to note that the geographical spread of the cities found in these texts is quite small. In most texts, including all of the Late Babylonian examples (those listed in Table 9.1), the cities are all located in the Babylonian heartland (with the exception of the island of Dilmum, which is just off the coast in the Persian Gulf). None of the cities given in the Late Babylonian texts are in Assyria, nor are any outside of what would have been considered traditional Babylonian territory. Furthermore, by the Late Babylonian period some of these cities, such as Girsu and Eshnunna, had long since been abandoned, suggesting that the interest among the Babylonian scholars was, at least in part, either in fitting into long-standing scholarly traditions or in glorifying the past (or perhaps both) rather than in providing a practical tool for astrological interpretation. Alternatively, however, it is possible that in these cases the city names were used simply to reflect geographical areas rather than specific

19 Hunger, “Noch ein Kalendertext,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 64 (1974): 40–43.

20 On the *Kalendertext* scheme and the texts, see Brack-Bernsen and Steele, “Babylonian Mathematics.”

cities, in a similar fashion to the use of the outdated (and ambiguous) nomenclature of the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu.

TABLE 9.1 *Associations between constellations and cities in Late Babylonian astrological texts*

Constellation	MNB 1849	BM 47494	BM 36303+ Obv. I 1'-7'	LBAT 1586+1587
The Hired Man	Uruk Kullaba	[...]	[Uruk]	
The Stars	Ur Der ²	Kish ²	[Ur]	
The Bull of Heaven	Ur Der	Nippur [...] Ur [...] Der ² [...]		Ur (Jaw)
The True Shepherd of Anu	Sippar Larsa	Sippar Larsa		
The Old Man	Ur Der ²	[...] Eridu	[Kish]	
The Great Twins	Kutha	Kutha Ur	[Kutha] [Ur]	Kutha (rear)
The Crab	Tigris [front] Euphrates [rear] Sippar	Sippar [middle] Dilbat [front part] Girsu [front part]	[Sippar] [Dilbat] [Girsu]	
The Lion	<The King>	Uruk [head] Babylon [breast] Foot [Nippur]	[...] [Babylon] [Ešnunna]	
The Furrow	<Agriculture>	Elam	[Dilbat] [Isin]	
The Scales	Sippar Larsa	The Land of Akkad		

Constellation	MNB 1849	BM 47494	BM 36303+ Obv. 1 1'-7'	LBAT 1586+1587
The Scorpion	Sealand Dilmun Borsippa	Dilmun Borsippa		
Pabilsag	Mutabal Babylon	Babylon Marad Elam		Lagash Marad (misplaced?)
The Goat-Fish		Subartu		[Babylon]
The Great One	Eridu	[...]		Eridu
The Tails	Tigris [north] Akkad [north] Euphrates & Sealand [south] Dilmun [south]	Babylon [...]		

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The Story of the Magi in the Light of Alexander the Great's Encounters with Chaldeans

Mathieu Ossendrijver

The story of the magi (Matt 2:1–12) is not without its parallels. Its similarity to accounts of Alexander the Great's interactions with Chaldean astrologers suggests the possibility of a dependence. Two different encounters between Alexander the Great and Babylonian astrologers¹ are reported in various historical works about the life of Alexander, henceforth referred to as Alexander histories. The first encounter is said to have taken place when Alexander entered Babylon in October 331 BCE, after he had defeated the Persians in the Battle of Gaugamela. Quintus Curtius Rufus, a Roman historian who lived around 50 CE, provides the following account of this event in his *History of Alexander*:

A large number of Babylonians (*Babyloniorum*) had taken up a position on the walls, eager to have a view of their new king, but most went out to meet him, including the man in charge of the citadel and royal treasury, Bagophanes. Not to be outdone by Mazaeus in paying his respects to Alexander, Bagophanes had carpeted the whole road with flowers and garlands and set up at intervals on both sides silver altars heaped not just with frankincense but with all kinds of perfume. Following him were his gifts—herds of cattle and horses, and lions, too, and leopards, carried along in cages. Next came the magi (*magi*) chanting a song in their native fashion, and behind them were the Chaldeans (*Chaldaei*), who were not only the diviners (*vates*) of the Babylonians but also musicians equipped with their typical instruments. The role of the latter was to sing the praises of the kings, that of the Chaldeans to reveal the motions of the stars and the regular change of the seasons.²

1 The various different forms of Babylonian astral science, which roughly encompasses observation, prediction, and astrological interpretation of celestial phenomena, were pursued by one and the same group of scholars. However, in the absence of a suitable English word covering these different aspects, the term astronomer is here used in the context of observations or predictions, and the term astrologer in the context of celestial divination or astrology.

2 Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*, v.1.19–22. Translation based on J. Rolfe, *Quintus Curtius Rufus: History of Alexander*. Vol. 2: Books VI–X (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

Lucius Flavius Arrianus (Arrian), who lived around 87–145 CE, reports the same event in his *Anabasis of Alexander*:

He [Alexander] was already near Babylon, and was leading his forces in battle order, when the Babylonians (*Babylonioi*) came out to meet him in mass, with their priests and rulers, each of whom individually brought gifts, and offered to surrender their city, citadel, and money. Entering the city, he commanded the Babylonians to rebuild all the temples which Xerxes had destroyed, and especially that of Bel, whom the Babylonians venerate more than any other god. He then appointed Mazaeus viceroy of the Babylonians, Apollodorus the Amphipolitan general of the soldiers who were left behind with Mazaeus, and Asclepiodorus, son of Philo, collector of the revenue. He also sent Mithrines, who had surrendered to him the citadel of Sardis, down into Armenia to be viceroy there. Here also he met with the Chaldeans (*Chaldaiois*); and whatever they directed in regard to the religious rites of Babylon he performed, and in particular he offered sacrifice to Bel according to their instructions.³

Note that there are no magi in this version. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian who lived in the first century BCE, also briefly discusses the event in his *Library of History*. In Book XVII, which deals with Alexander the Great, no encounter with Chaldean scholars is mentioned,⁴ but his account of the history and customs of the Chaldeans in Book II includes the following passage:

These stars [the planets] it is which exert the greatest influence for both good and evil upon the nativity of men; and it is chiefly from the nature of these planets and the study of them that they [the Chaldeans] know what is in store for mankind. And they have made predictions, they say, not only to numerous other kings, but also to Alexander, who defeated Darius, and to Antigonus and Seleucus Nicator who afterwards became kings, and in all their prophecies they are thought to have hit the truth.⁵

1985); and A. Heller, *Das Babylonien der Spätzeit (7.–4. Jh.) in den klassischen und keilschriftlichen Quellen* (Nürnberg: Verlag Antike, 2010), 366.

3 Arrian, *Anabasis*, III.16.3–4. Translation by M. Hammond, *Alexander the Great: The Anabasis and the Indica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* XVII.64.3–4. Translation by C. Bradford Welles, *Diodorus of Sicily: Vol. VIII: Books XVI.66–XVII* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

5 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* II.31.1–2. Translation by C. H. Oldfather, *Diodorus of Sicily: Vol. I: Books I–II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

Hence Diodorus likewise thought that Alexander had been in contact with Babylonian scholars. The encounter must have also been mentioned in the sources that were used by Diodorus, Rufus, and Arrian, most of which are almost completely lost.⁶ A Babylonian astronomical diary for the year 331 BCE confirms that Alexander's visit to Babylon was a public event that drew the attention of the city's population.⁷

The Mesopotamian context of Alexander's interactions with Babylonian scholars was clarified by van der Spek (2003) and Heller (2010). These interactions must be interpreted in the light of celestial divination, a practice that was an integral part of Mesopotamian religion and ideology of kingship. For a Mesopotamian king, the heavens were filled with signs, which the gods produced in order to communicate with humankind. The interpretation of these signs was a complex scholarly enterprise performed by professional diviners on the basis of omen compendia, commentaries, and oral deliberations. The main omen series for celestial divination was called *Enūma Anu Enlil* ("When Anu and Enlil"), after the *incipit* of its first tablet. It consists of about 70 tablets that were probably compiled near the end of the second millennium BCE. Unlike signs in other realms of nature, celestial omens exclusively concerned king and country. An example from *Enūma Anu Enlil* Tablet 16, which deals with lunar eclipses, illustrates the connection with kingship: "If an eclipse occurs on day 14 of the month Dūzu and begins and clears in the south: a great king will die."⁸ Our knowledge of the practical aspects of Mesopotamian celestial divination is largely based on Neo-Assyrian sources (850–612 BCE), but Babylonian practices were probably similar. Letters and reports written by the diviners reveal that the Assyrian kings were constantly informed about observed or expected phenomena and their ritual, political, military, and medical implications.⁹ In this manner, they were able to construe their rule as being in line with the decisions of the gods.

6 A common source of Curtius Rufus and Diodorus Siculus was Cleitarchus, who lived in Alexandria near 310 BCE.

7 A. J. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia, I–III* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 1988–1996), Text—330; see also R. van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship," in *A Persian Perspective. Essays in Memory of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg* (eds. W. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2003), 289–346, especially 299.

8 F. Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enūma Anu Enlil* (Horn: Berger & Söhne, 1988), 94.

9 H. Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings, State Archives of Assyria VIII* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992).

In the event of an unfavorable omen, apotropaic rituals were available for diverting the danger away from the king. As illustrated by the omen quoted above, eclipses were considered to be particularly dangerous signs. If an observed or predicted eclipse was thought to affect the king, then the so-called substitute king ritual could be performed, requiring the king to temporarily step down from his throne and be replaced by a commoner, who was to bear the evil.

By the time of Alexander, celestial divination was an ancient tradition that had existed for many centuries, during which the omen texts were copied, used, and commented on by generations of scholars. When Babylonia lost its independence after the Persian conquest (538 BCE), the importance of celestial divination certainly diminished. For the Persian and Greek rulers, who spent only a limited time in Babylonia, it was neither possible nor necessary to make use of Babylonian divination as intensively as a native king. There is nevertheless ample evidence that they were occasionally consulted by Babylonian diviners and participated in their rituals, including the substitute king ritual. By acting as legitimate Mesopotamian rulers, they could gain acceptance among the Babylonian elites and the general population. Thus, when a lunar eclipse occurred in Babylonia on 21 September 331 BCE, a few days before the battle of Gaugamela, it is fully in line with ancient traditions that the Babylonian astronomers, who had most likely predicted it well in advance, would convey a favorable interpretation to their new king.¹⁰ That this eclipse was the celestial phenomenon alluded to by Diodorus Siculus is confirmed by Arrian:

There [on the Tigris] he made his army rest, and while doing so, an almost total eclipse of the moon occurred, and Alexander sacrificed to the Moon, the Sun, and the Earth, who are all said to cause an eclipse. Aristander thought that the eclipse was favorable to the Macedonians and Alexander, that the battle would take place that month, and that the sacrifices portended victory for Alexander [...] Such was the result of this battle, which was fought in the archonship of Aristophanes at Athens, in the month Pyanepsion; and thus Aristander's prediction was accomplished, that Alexander would both fight a battle and gain a victory in the same month in which the moon was seen to be eclipsed.¹¹

10 For the parameters of this eclipse, see P. J. Huber and S. De Meis, *Babylonian Eclipse Observations from 750 BC to 1 BC* (Milano: ISIAO-Mimesis, 2004), 194.

11 Arrian, *Anabasis* III.7.6; 16.6–7. Translation based on Hammond, *Alexander the Great*, and van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship."

The eclipse is also reported in an astronomical diary from Babylon for year five of Darius (331 BCE).¹² As shown by van der Spek, the Babylonian claim that the eclipse signified the demise of Darius and his replacement by an intruder is at least roughly compatible with the omen compendia. Furthermore, the sacrifice mentioned by Arrian makes sense as a distorted reference to hepatoscopy, a form of divination that was often performed in conjunction with celestial divination as a means to seek confirmation of a celestial omen.¹³

A second encounter between Alexander and Babylonian scholars is reported to have occurred shortly before his last visit to Babylon in 323 BCE.¹⁴ Diodorus Siculus provides the following account:

While he was still three hundred furlongs from the city, the scholars called Chaldeans, who have gained a great reputation in astrology and are accustomed to predict future events by a method based on age-old observations, chose from their number the eldest and most experienced. By the prophetic power of the stars (*ton asteron manteias*), they had learned of the coming death of the king in Babylon, and they instructed their representatives to report to the king the danger which threatened. [...] The leader of the Chaldean envoys, whose name was Belephantas, was not bold enough to address the king directly but secured a private audience with Nearchus, one of Alexander's friends, and told him everything in detail, requesting him to make it known to the king. When Alexander accordingly learned from Nearchus about the Chaldeans' prophecy, he was alarmed and more and more disturbed, the more he reflected upon the ability and high reputation of these people.¹⁵

The name of the astronomer, Belephantas, is identifiably Babylonian on account of the theophoric element Bel (Marduk). Van der Spek (2003) has tentatively reconstructed the original name as Bēl-apla-iddin, a known scholar from Babylon who wrote several astronomical tablets, including a diary for

12 Sachs and Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts*, Diary—330.

13 Van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship," 292–95.

14 A fragmentary Babylonian chronicle mentioning "numerous gifts of the people" may describe Alexander's reception by the Babylonians in 323 BCE (van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship," Text 4).

15 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* XVII.112.2–4. Translation based on Bradford Welles, *Diodorus of Sicily*, www.livius.org, and van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship," 333–34.

the first half of year two of Philip Arrhidaeus, the year following Alexander's death (322 BCE).¹⁶

A less colorful account of the same event is given by Arrian:

When Alexander had crossed the Tigris with his army on their way to Babylon he was met by Chaldean seers (*logioi*), who took him aside from the Companions and begged him to stop the advance towards Babylon; for, they said, they had an oracle from their god Bel that his entry into Babylon at that time would be dangerous for him.¹⁷

Unlike Diodorus Siculus, who mentions that the prediction was derived from “stars,” no celestial phenomena are alluded to by Arrian. That the omen was considered to be lethal is confirmed by passages in the Alexander histories describing what is now understood to be the substitute king ritual, apparently initiated by the Babylonian scholars in order to divert the evil away from Alexander.¹⁸ The cuneiform sources suggest that this Mesopotamian ritual was usually triggered by a lunar eclipse. No eclipse was visible in Babylonia in 323 BCE, but van der Spek rightly points out that the Babylonians might have performed the ritual because they had predicted an eclipse that did not materialize.¹⁹ This would not be exceptional at all, because the main,

16 Sachs and Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts*, Text—321, one of only a very few astronomical diaries mentioning the name of its scribe. The same individual also wrote two undated astronomical procedure texts from the corpus of mathematical astronomy (M. Ossendrijver, *Babylonian Mathematical Astronomy: Procedure Texts* [New York: Springer, 2012], Texts 5 and 9). Bēl-apla-iddin was a member of the Mušēzib family, one of Babylon's most prominent scholarly clans, of which at least seven generations were active in the astral sciences.

17 Arrian, *Anabasis* VII.16.5–6. Translation by Hammond, *Alexander the Great*.

18 Arrian, *Anabasis* VII.24.1; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* XVII.116.4. For a discussion of the substitute king ritual in connection with Alexander the Great, see van der Spek, “Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship;” I. Huber, “Ersatzkönige in griechischem Gewand: Die Umformung der *šar pūhi*-Rituale bei Herodot, Berossos, Agathias und den Alexander-Historikern,” in *Von Sumer bis Homer: Festschrift für Manfred Schretter zum 60. Geburtstag am 25. Februar 2004* (ed. R. Rollinger; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), 339–79, especially 368–79; and A. Heller, *Das Babylonien der Spätzeit (7.–4. Jh.) in den klassischen und keilschriftlichen Quellen* (Nürnberg: Verlag Antike, 2010), 407–21.

19 Van der Spek, “Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship,” 336–40. Note that Huber (“Ersatzkönige in griechischem Gewand,” 379) misses the point when referring to predicted eclipses that do not materialize as hypothetical computational errors. They are unavoidable by-products of the predictive method and are frequently reported in the astronomical diaries and related texts, using the phrase “eclipse of the Moon/Sun,

saros-based predictive method of the Babylonian astronomers yields eclipse possibilities, of which only a fraction turn out to be observable in Babylonia. In fact, with this method a lunar eclipse would have been predicted for 28 April 323 BCE, and a solar one for 12 April 323 BCE.²⁰

It is worthwhile to note that there are prophecies among the omens in *Enūma Anu Enlil* and related compositions announcing the coming of a “king of the world,” the earliest of which date to the Old Babylonian period (1800–1600 BCE).²¹ An interesting and—as far as we know—hitherto overlooked example appears in a commentary on Tablet 7 of *Enūma Anu Enlil*: “Sin [the Moongod], (if) during his rising [or: waxing] one star proceeds behind him: a king of the world (*šar kiššati*) will rise, but he will not become old.”²² The tablet originates from Uruk, where it was found in the house of a scholar who lived around 385 BCE, when Babylonia was under Achaemenid rule.²³ It is conceivable that a similar omen underlies the prediction of Alexander’s victory, because he is addressed with the same title, “king of the world,” in

it passed by.” For an example from the Achaemenid era of a Babylonian ritual performed on the occasion of a predicted eclipse that did not materialize, see P.-A. Beaulieu and J. P. Britton, “Rituals for an Eclipse Possibility in the 8th Year of Cyrus,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 46 (1994): 73–86.

- 20 For a list of eclipse possibilities predicted with the saros method, see Steele, “Eclipse Prediction in Mesopotamia,” *Archive for the History of the Exact Sciences* 54 (2000): 421–54, Tables 2 and 4. In many cases, the astronomical texts confirm that they were predicted and did not occur, but this is not (yet) the case for the above-mentioned eclipse possibilities in 323 BCE.
- 21 See for instance *Yale Oriental Series* 10, 61:8, an Old Babylonian tablet with extispicy omens: “a king of the world will be present in the land” (quoted in *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* Vol. K, 458a). For more attestations of the title “king of the world,” see M.-J. Seux, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes* (Paris: 1967), 310. After Alexander, the title is attested for the Seleucid king Antiochos Soter, who ruled Babylonia from 281 to 261 BCE.
- 22 *Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk* 5 264, rev. 11–12. This passage was pointed out to me by S. Hoffmann. The commentary is of the so-called cola type, which was common in Babylonia (E. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation* [Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011], 36, 142). Tablet 7 of EAE, which deals with the horns of the lunar crescent, is currently not available in a modern edition (as of 2015). For an introduction, see E. Weidner, “Die astrologische Serie Enūma Anu Enlil (Fortsetzung),” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 14 (1941/1944): 308–18.
- 23 The tablet probably belonged to the library of the Šangû-Ninurta family (Ph. Clancier, *Les bibliothèques en Babylonie dans la deuxième moitié du Ier millénaire av. J.-C* [Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009]). It is possible that the commentary was composed in the same period, and that this passage preserves a reflection on the rule of a Persian king, but this remains speculation.

the astronomical diary for 331 BCE that was mentioned above. More elaborate predictions about future kings are contained in so-called prophecy texts, which are essentially anonymized descriptions of the reigns of historical kings. One of these compositions, known as the Dynastic Prophecy, includes a section about Alexander the Great.²⁴ The response of the Babylonian scholars to Alexander must also be viewed in the light of their interactions with the preceding Persian kings. In a Babylonian composition known as the Nabonidus Chronicle, Cyrus's defeat of Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, is described as having been ordained by the supreme god Marduk.²⁵ Henceforth Cyrus, perhaps Babylonia's most famous foreign ruler in the centuries before Alexander, was hailed as a divinely sanctioned Mesopotamian king. It is not clear what role celestial divination played in this, since there appear to be no Babylonian, Greek, or biblical sources in which the victory of Cyrus is said to be announced by celestial signs. However, Babylonian astronomers are known to have interacted with later Persian kings, such as Xerxes,²⁶ and there can be little doubt that these experiences shaped their encounters with Alexander.

The passages from the Alexander histories discussed here exhibit similarities to, but also clear differences with, Matthew's story of the magi. Regarding Alexander's first visit to Babylon, the following elements may be singled out for a comparison: Babylonian astronomers observe a celestial phenomenon (a lunar eclipse), which they interpret as a sign announcing the victory of their new king, who is a foreigner from a western country. They set out to report the favorable sign and pay homage to him. Upon his arrival in Babylon, the king is welcomed by the Babylonians, who offer him gifts, including precious aromatic substances (compare the gold, frankincense, and myrrh offered to Jesus). Only in Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander* is Alexander also greeted by magi, but they are not the ones who interpreted the celestial signs. On the occasion of Alexander's second visit to Babylon, the scholars either observe or predict a celestial phenomenon, the nature of which is not specified—perhaps they predicted an eclipse that did not materialize. This time the phenomenon is interpreted as a sign of the king's death. They report this to him, and they

24 Van der Spek, "Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship," Text 5, 311–26. Due to difficulties in interpreting the damaged section about Alexander, it is debatable whether the attitude toward him is favorable or not.

25 See Heller, *Das Babylonien der Spätzeit*, 379, 446–47.

26 For instance, Babylonian astronomers reformed the calendar under Xerxes, and they identified an eclipse as having announced the death of that king (Ossendrijver, *Babylonian Science in the Reign of Xerxes* [forthcoming, 2016]).

initiate the substitute king ritual in order to avert the danger. No involvement of magi is mentioned in the sources for these events.

One important difference with Matthew's story of the magi concerns the identity of the astrologers. In the Alexander histories they are called Chaldeans, i.e., Babylonian scholars, but in Matthew they are called magi (*magoi*). This is itself unusual because, generally speaking, Greek and Roman historians considered astral science to be a specialty of the Chaldeans, while the magi were originally a class of Persian or Median priests responsible for rituals and certain forms of divination, such as dream interpretation, as well as for educating princes.²⁷ However, in some sources from the Greco-Roman period 'magi' is used in a much wider sense, as a generic term for non-Greek scholars.

I argue that Matthew's magi denote Babylonian astrologers (Chaldeans). In order to understand how these different meanings of the term magi came about, note that by the time of Alexander, Babylonia had been a Persian satrapy for over two centuries. As a consequence, Babylonia could be referred to as Persia, and Babylonian customs as Persian. For instance, in Arrian's *Anabasis* the eunuchs in Alexander's entourage refer to the incident involving the stranger who sat himself on Alexander's throne—the Babylonian substitute king ritual—as a Persian custom (*nomos Persikos*).²⁸ Another example occurs in the *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by the Greek historian Diogenes Laertius, who lived in the third century CE: "He [Democritus] travelled into Egypt to learn geometry from the priests, and he also went into Persia to visit the Chaldeans as well as to the Red Sea."²⁹ Hence for Laertius, the Greek philosopher Democritus acquired oriental wisdom from Chaldeans in Persia, with no mention of Babylonia.

In a related development, the term magi could be a designation not only for Persian but also for other non-Greek scholars and priests, in particular those from regions subsumed into the Persian Empire. One example, again dealing with Democritus, is found in Pliny's *Natural History*: "Both of these philosophers [Pythagoras and Democritus] had visited the magi (*magis*) of Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia, and Egypt, and so astounded were the ancients at their recitals, as to learn to make assertions which transcend all belief" (Pliny, *Natural History*, 25.12–13). A second example occurs in the *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the third century CE: "For he [Democritus] visited Babylon, and Persis, and Egypt, learning from the magi and the priests. As to

27 See also the contributions by A. de Jong and A. Panaino in this volume.

28 Arrian, *Anabasis*, VII.24; Heller, *Das Babylonien der Spätzeit*, 415.

29 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, IX.35. Translation in Brill's New Jacoby, 263 T, fragment 3a.

Pythagoras, he emulated Zoroaster the Persian magus" (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.15.69.1–6).

In some Greco-Roman texts about Persian magi and Zoroaster, a much greater infusion of Egyptian traditions than previously thought has recently been identified.³⁰ It is therefore not surprising that the magi could also be conflated with Chaldean astrologers, especially since they are often mentioned together. One example is found in another legend about Democritus in the *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius: "He was a pupil of certain magi (*magon*) and Chaldaeans (*Chaldaion*). For when King Xerxes was entertained by the father of Democritus he left men in charge, as, in fact, is stated by Herodotos; and from these men, while still a boy, he learned theology and astronomy."³¹ In the following passage ascribed to Bolos of Mendes ("Pseudo-Democritus"), a scholar who was active in the second century BCE, Democritus is said to have met magi alongside astrologers in Babylon: "Democritus, son of Damasippus, a native of Abdera discussing with the gymnosophists among the Indians, and with priests in Egypt, and with astrologers (*astrologois*) and magi (*magois*) in Babylon propounded his system [i.e. his atomistic teachings]."³² Whereas the magi in the latter passage might still be Persian priests, they are clearly Babylonian scholars in other Greco-Roman texts. For example, the Greek sophist Flavius Philostratus refers to the "magi of the Babylonians" (*Vita Apollonii*, 1.2). Perhaps the strongest evidence for a fusion between magi and Babylonian astrologers is found in the *Syriaka* by Appian of Alexandria (ca. 96–165 CE). This history of the Syrian wars includes the following anecdote about magi in Babylon attempting to prevent the founding of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris as a rival to their own city: "They say, also, that when the magi were ordered to indicate the propitious day and hour for beginning the foundations of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris they falsified as to the hour because they did not want to have such a stronghold built against themselves."³³ Irrespective of whether there is any historical truth to the anecdote, these magi must be Babylonian astrologers, because it would otherwise be hard to understand why they are said to defend Babylon. Two arguments provide further support for this interpretation. First, the

30 J. F. Quack, "Les Mages Égyptianisés? Remarks on Some Surprising Points in Supposedly Magusean Texts," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65 (2006): 267–82, especially 269.

31 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, IX.34. Translation in Brill's New Jacoby, 263 T, fragment 2.

32 Preserved in Hippolytus, *Refutationes*, 1.13. Translation in Brill's New Jacoby, 263 T, fragment 3d.

33 Appian of Alexandria, *Syriaka*, chapter 58, 300–8. Translation at www.livius.org.

hemerological practice of establishing auspicious and inauspicious times for various human activities is well attested in Babylonia during the first millennium BCE.³⁴ Furthermore, no other native scholars besides magi are mentioned in those sections of the *Syriaka* that deal with Babylonia. In summary, there is clear evidence that Babylonian astrologers could be referred to as magi in the Greco-Roman literature.

From the above considerations, I conclude that Matthew's magi most likely denote Babylonian astrologers. He may have called them magi for the simple reason that this was common usage. However, Matthew may also have made a conscious decision to call them magi rather than Chaldeans. At the time when he wrote his gospel, Jewish experiences with Babylonia must have been very much alive. In 586 BCE, shortly after Babylonia had become the dominant power in the region, King Nebukadnezzar II conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Jewish temple, and deported the Jewish elite into the Babylonian exile. These tragedies, inflicted by Babylonians, brought about profound changes in Jewish religious and political thought that permeate the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. The term magi was not burdened with such negative connotations, since it could denote generic scholars from the East, or priests associated with the Parthian Empire, where Jews did not suffer the same level of oppression as under Roman rule.³⁵ Moreover, if Matthew wanted his story to convey the universal appeal of his message, then a homage to Jesus by magi would be more suitable than one involving Chaldeans, who represent a specific geographical region (Babylonia).

Other differences between the Alexander histories and the story of the magi concern the identity and the role of the celestial phenomena. In the story of the magi, the phenomenon announcing the new king is a rising star and not a lunar eclipse. However, this is not without precedent in the Alexander histories. While Arrian, in the passage quoted above, mentions that the Babylonian astrologers derived their prediction of Alexander's victory from a lunar eclipse, Diodorus Siculus and Curtius Rufus only mention "stars." It seems very likely that Matthew opted for the generic term star because he did not want to link the birth of Jesus to a specific, identifiable celestial phenomenon, such as a particular star, a planet, or a lunar eclipse. More importantly, the function of the celestial phenomena is rather different. In the Alexander histories, they feature in their traditional Mesopotamian role as signifiers of the king's future fate. As a true Mesopotamian "king of the world," Alexander was fully integrated

34 For an edition of the Babylonian hemerologies, see A. Livingstone, *Hemerologies of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2013).

35 See the contribution by A. Panaino in this volume.

into the Babylonian ideology of kingship. By allowing Babylonian astrologers to consult him and by taking part in rituals initiated by them, he could present himself as a legitimate Babylonian king. Obviously these aspects were of no use to Matthew. Any suggestion that the Star of Bethlehem had an ominous significance, with the implication that the fate of Jesus was accessible through celestial divination and perhaps even dependent on apotropaic rituals, would be incompatible with the message of the gospels. The Star of Bethlehem is not an ominous phenomenon in the Mesopotamian sense. It is neither a favorable omen announcing the king's victory nor an unfavorable one that could necessitate the intervention of diviners. Instead, it signifies the birth of a king, which has already taken place, and it directs the magi to him.

Finally, the question of why Matthew included the story of the magi is beyond the scope of this contribution, since it can only be addressed within the framework of Judaic and New Testament studies. Here it suffices to point out that Jewish attitudes towards celestial divination are now known to be more varied than what is suggested by the official theology underlying the Hebrew Bible.³⁶ In this connection, I merely want to briefly address the issue of Jewish familiarity with Babylonian astral science and its possible implications for the story of the magi.

After the Persian conquest, Babylonia and Palestine were incorporated as satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire. However, the Persians had a marginal presence in Babylonia, and they did not interfere much with local traditions. In the cuneiform sources, Persian influence is largely confined to the higher levels of administration. Babylonians and Jews were able to maintain their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity virtually unhampered. In the Jewish tradition, Cyrus is credited for having allowed the Babylonian Jews to return to their homeland, but not all Jews made use of this offer. Cuneiform texts prove that many were well integrated into Babylonian society. They may have felt little desire to return to Palestine, the barren land of their forefathers. Moreover, well before the time of their exile, the Babylonians spoke Aramaic as their first language, the same language spoken by the Jews. More than other immigrant communities, Jews could therefore feel at home in Babylonia. While the depth and the extent of their scholarly interactions with Babylonians are a matter of debate, it is clear that the common Aramaic language provided the Jews with the means to have direct access to Babylonian culture.

As it happened, Babylonian astral science experienced an unprecedented sequence of developments during the period of Persian domination. This includes the introduction of the zodiac and the emergence of mathematical

36 See the contribution by K. von Stuckrad in this volume.

astronomy and horoscopic astrology near 400 BCE. Furthermore, these new forms of astral science were no longer pursued exclusively for the benefit of the king. For instance, horoscopes were produced for private individuals. Hence the general public was increasingly exposed to Babylonian astral science. It is therefore not surprising that some elements were apparently taken up by Jewish scholars in Babylonia. For instance, the Babylonian luni-solar calendar was adopted with identical names of the months as well as an intercalation practice very similar to the one introduced during the reign of Xerxes. Qumran texts and parts of the Babylonian Talmud suggest that Jewish scholars also adopted certain elementary Babylonian methods for predicting astronomical phenomena.³⁷ Apart from these examples of knowledge transfer within Babylonia, the subsequent diffusion of horoscopic astrology across the Greco-Roman world also affected Jewish attitudes toward astral science, resulting in a greater acceptance of astrological motives. Matthew could therefore consider a story about a star announcing the birth of the king of the Jews to be fully appropriate for his audience.

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37 On this topic, see for instance J. Ben-Dov and S. Sanders, eds., *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge in Second Temple Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

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Pre-Islamic Iranian Astral Mythology, Astrology, and the Star of Bethlehem

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This contribution¹ will try to outline three² different but partly related subjects:

- 1) the origin of Iranian,³ and in particular Mazdaean,⁴ astral lore and the beginnings of its evolution in the framework of Late Antique astrology;

1 I would like to thank Dr. Eng. Salvo De Meis (Milan), Dr. Andrea Gariboldi (University of Bologna), and Prof. Stephan Heilen (Universität Osnabrück) for their kind suggestions and improvements.

2 Given the nature of this volume, I will not enter into the many other theories concerning the explanation and interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem, but I will try to focus on the hypothesis that the bright astral object observed by the magi would have been the planet Jupiter, as suggested by I. Bulmer-Thomas (“The Star of Bethlehem: A New Explanation. Stationary Point of a Planet,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 33/4 [1992]: 363–74) and, later, by Molnar (“The Magi’s Star from the Perspective of Ancient Astrological Practices,” *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 36 [1994]: 109–26; *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1999]; and a number of other essays as well).

3 Pre-Islamic Iranian history can be roughly divided in three periods (apart from the proto-historical phase of the nomadic migrations of the Indo-Aryans in their historical lands), which are connected with the most important dynasties that ruled in Iran: 1) the Median and Achaemenian (or Achaemenid) periods, 2) the Seleucid and Parthian periods, and 3) the Sasanian (or Sasanid) period. We should also consider that modern scholars used to distinguish three different phases in the linguistic history of the Iranian languages: Old Iranian (from the proto-history of the Iranian peoples to a few centuries after the collapse of the Achaemenian Empire); Middle Iranian (from the end of the Achaemenian Empire to the fall of the Sasanian Empire); and Modern Iranian (from the end of the first millennium CE until the present). It is evident that in the periods of transition, we can find phenomena belonging to the new phase as well as conservative examples of preservations of much older linguistic features. Furthermore, the Eastern Iranian languages shared a more conservative trend than the Western Iranian ones, so that the evolution from one to another was not at all synchronic in the two areas.

4 ‘Mazdaean’ usually refers to the religion of Ahura Mazdā, as attested in the Old Persian inscriptions and in the Avestan and Pahlavi texts attributed to an Iranian religious school founded by Zoroaster (av. Zaratuštra), a prophet whose actual historical origin is much

- 2) the magi and the pericope of Matthew 2:1–12 between history and spiritual fiction;
- 3) the astral implications of Jesus Christ's "super star" in the light of historical methodology and textual criticism and, where possible, in comparison with the Iranian tradition.

Early Iranian Astral Lore and the Introduction of Astrology

In spite of a certain vulgate based on an uncritical use of later classical sources, earlier Iranian religions did not know any form of professional astronomy or evolved astral divination,⁵ Zoroaster was not a member of the religious circle of the magi, and astrology was a discipline in which he himself did not play any role. Presumably, some agricultural predictions were deduced in ancient Iran by means of direct observations of the heliacal rising of Sirius (Tištrya), who was the main astral divinity according to the Avestan pantheon, apart from the Sun and the Moon. This astral god played the fundamental role of liberator of the waters, fighting against the demons of draught (in particular Apaoša) and also against shooting stars (*pairikā*-, f., "witches," also called *stārō.kərəmā*- or "starred worms").⁶ According to a sharp dualistic vision of creation, all of the fixed stars (plus the Sun and the Moon) were considered divine and associated with the cosmic order, while the rest of the astral bodies were considered negative beings who were responsible for famine, probably because of their unpredictable orbits. The planets are never mentioned in the Avestan sources,

debated. For the Parthian and Sasanian periods, 'Mazdaean' and 'Zoroastrian' can be taken as synonyms, but in the earliest phases of Iranian religious history (i.e., more or less in Achaemenian times), some scholars suspect that not all of the Iranian tribes worshipping Ahura Mazdā were necessarily also followers of the theological school attributed to Zoroaster. In any case, in this chapter the reference to 'Mazdaeism' and the use of the adjective 'Mazdaean' simply refer to the Zoroastrian tradition, i.e., to a religious tradition whose chronological extension ranges from the first millennium BCE to the present.

- 5 Panaino, *Tištrya. Part II: The Iranian Myth of the Star Sirius* (SOR 68, 2; Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995); Panaino, "Yt. 8,8: *stārō kərəmā* o *stārō.kərəmā*? «Stelle infuocate» o «stelle-verme»?" in *Indogermanica. Festschrift Gert Klingenschmitt. Indische, iranische und indogermanische Studien, dem verehrten Jubilar dargebracht zu seinem fünfundsechzigsten Geburtstag* (ed. G. Schweiger; Taimering: VWT Verlag, 2005), 455–63.
- 6 For the cycle of the star Sirius in Pre-Islamic Iran, see Panaino, *Tištrya. Part I: The Avestan Hymn to Sirius* (SOR 68, 1; Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990); Panaino, *Tištrya. Part II*.

but we assume that their identification was established in Iran, when the Persians became dominant in the Near East and also took control of the astronomical schools of the Mesopotamian world, whose activity was supported by the Achaemenian power.⁷ We also presume that the later planetary denominations attested in the Middle Iranian languages, in particular in Pahlavi, reflect an earlier Mesopotamian interpretation according to a syncretistic process of association between functionally similar divinities:⁸

TABLE 11.1 *Later planetary denominations attested in the Middle Iranian languages*

Planet	Akkadian	Greek	Old Persian	Middle Persian	Sogdian	New Persian
Mars	Nergal	Áres	*V ₁ θraγna-	Wahrām	Unxān	Bahrām
Mercury	Nabû	Hermês	*Tīriya-	Tīr	Tīr	Tīr
Jupiter	Marduk	Zeús	A ^h uramazdā-	Ohrmazd	Urmazt	Hormozd
Venus	Ištar	Aphrodītē	Anāhitā-	Anāhīd	Nāxid	Anāhīd
Saturn (cf. Lat. Saturnus)	Kajamānu ⁹	Krónos	*Kayvānu- (*Zruvan)	Kēwān (Zurwān)	Kēwān	Keyvān

The denomination of the Iranian planets is surely earlier than the process of demonization. This conclusion is based on the observation that the name for Saturn, *Kēwān*, was certainly of Babylonian derivation,¹⁰ while that of Mercury, *Tīr*, is surely of Western Iranian origin; it was already attested in the Achaemenian documentation as *Ti-ri-ya* (and variants) and designated an

7 Panaino, "Considerazioni storico-linguistiche e storico-religiose intorno ai nomi dei Magi evangelici." Prolegomena alla redazione di un *Namenbuch*. *Atti del Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese* (2015, in press).

8 Panaino, "Considerazioni sul lessico astronomico-astrologico medio-persiano," in *Lingue e culture in contatto nel mondo antico e altomedievale. Atti dell'VIII convegno internazionale di linguisti, tenuto a Milano nei giorni 10–12 settembre 1992* (ed. R. B. Finazzi and P. Tornaghi; Brescia: Paideia, 1993), 417–33; Panaino, *Tištrya. Part II*; Panaino, "Considerazioni storico-linguistiche."

9 However, the god usually identified with Saturn was Ninib. See Fr. Cumont, "Les noms des planètes chez les Grecs," *L'Antiquité Classique* 4 no. 1 (May 1935): 5–43, esp. 7.

10 D. N. MacKenzie, "Zoroastrian Astrology in the *Bundahišn*," *BSOAS* 27 no. 3 (1964): 511–29, esp. 520 n. 46.

ancient divinity who patronized scribes and writing as Hermes, Thoth, and Nabû.¹¹ Furthermore, the other three Iranian denominations, which clearly named the highest gods of the Mazdaean pantheon (Ohrmazd, Wahrām, and Anāhīd), referred to heavenly demons when used for the planets. In the framework of later Mazdaean sources, particularly in the Pahlavi texts, all of the planets became demons and assumed the same negative role that had previously belonged to shooting stars. Practically, the apparently irregular motion of the planets, particularly their retrogradation, favored a progressive association with the Ahremanic army. In short, the astrological doctrine that reached ancient Iran through a Greco-Babylonian and Egyptian influence from the West and via India from the East was rearranged according to Mazdaean patterns, which attributed a positive role to the Sun, the Moon, single stars, and constellations, but a negative influence to the planets (although some strictly astrological technicalities, in spite of patent contradictions, were preserved and eventually adapted).¹² The planetary demons were sometimes called *Parīgān* (i.e., *Pairikā-s*, evidence confirming the ancient functional link with shooting stars) and were considered responsible for any negative influence on the sub-lunar world. Thus, their irregular movements, in particular their retrogradation, were probably referred to through the general denomination of the planets in Pahlavi as *abāxtar(ān)*. This name actually derives from the Old Iranian word *apāxtara-* (“backward-turning, retrograde”), a comparative stem built on *apāk-/apāṅk-*, meaning “backward” (from the preposition *apa* “behind”);¹³ however, it is also possible that this denomination was understood as simply and strongly connected with the northern direction, the traditional side of the demons in Iran, “north” being another meaning of *apāxtara-*. Just as “planet” in Greek (πλανήτης) comes from the verb (πλανάομαι) meaning “to wander,” so we find in Pahlavi the word **wiyābanīg* (from the verb *wiyābān-*, “to deviate”) fittingly adopted in the Middle Persian reverse denomination of

11 On this problem, see Panaino, *Tištrya. Part II*. All of these gods were, in their turn, connected with the planet Mercury.

12 Panaino, “Considerazioni sul lessico astronomico-astrologico;” Panaino, *Tištrya. Part II*; D. Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology in Iran: History of Astronomy in Iran,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (vol. 2 part 9; ed. E. Yarshatter; London/New York: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 858–62; Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology in Iran: Astrology in Islamic Times,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (vol. 2 part 9; ed. E. Yarshatter; London/New York: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 868–71; Pingree, “Classical and Byzantine Astrology in Sassanian Persia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989): 227–39; E. Raffaelli, *L'oroscopo del mondo. Il tema di nascita del mondo e del primo uomo secondo l'astrologia zoroastriana* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001).

13 W. Eilers, *Iranische Ortsnamensstudien* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987).

the (fixed) “stars,” which were considered *a-wiyābanīg* (*inerrantes*) because these astral bodies, later named by Ke(p)pler¹⁴ as *fixae*, did not “deviate” from their orbits (*ἀπλανής* = *inerrans*).¹⁵

We do not know anything about the status of the astronomical and astrological professional competence developed in the Iranian world, especially under the Parthians. We can suppose that it was already strongly influenced by the Greco-Mesopotamian tradition, although we cannot exclude other external influences such as Egypt and India, as attested in the astrological background shown by some Gnostic movements (that of the Manichaeans, for instance)¹⁶ active in the Irano-Mesopotamian areas. However, we must presume there were certain special attitudes and possible peculiarities developed in later times under the Sasanians. In fact, during their rule between the third and the seventh centuries CE, this new Persian dynasty gave enormous impetus to the development of the exact sciences and, in the context of a very aggressive politics of expansion, promoted the introduction of many additional foreign sciences, which were adapted to the Mazdaean traditions.¹⁷ A select group of Persian astrologers and astronomers mastered Western and Eastern sources, producing a mixture of Greek, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hindu technical terms, doctrines, and mathematical patterns and models. Sasanian astronomers edited at least three different sets of astronomical royal tables and knew the *Almagest* (which they translated into Pahlavi) and many other astrological Greek and Indian texts very well. The Cycle of the Decans—as ultimately transferred into the artistic performances appearing in the Italian Renaissance—in spite of its Egyptian origins, not only passed through an Indian re-elaboration before finally being translated into Arabic (and then into Latin), but this transfer occurred during a fundamental phase of Pahlavi intermediation.¹⁸ Sasanian astrologers were probably responsible for the further elaboration of an extremely sophisticated form of astrology, usually

14 A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den Indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1953), 42.

15 W. G. Henning, “An Astronomical Chapter of the Bundahishn,” *JRAS* (1942): 229–248, esp. 232 n. 3; cf. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen*, 40–41.

16 See in particular the overview offered by Panaino, *Tessere il cielo. Considerazioni sulle Tavole astronomiche, gli Oroscopi e la Dottrina dei Legamenti tra Induismo, Zoroastrismo e Mandeismo* (SOR 79; Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1998).

17 See H. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943; repr. with a new introduction by the author, 1971); M. Shaki, “The Dēnkard Account of the History of the Zoroastrian Scriptures,” *Archív Orientální* 49 (1981): 114–25.

18 Pingree, “Classical and Byzantine Astrology;” Panaino, *Tessere il cielo*; Panaino, “Sasanian Astronomy and Astrology in the Contribution of David Pingree,” in *Kaid: Studies in History*

known as ‘historical astrology’, and for the remarkable invention of the doctrine of the great conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter,¹⁹ which had enormous success in Arabo-Islamic astrology and thereafter in the Western Middle Ages and the Renaissance.²⁰ Unfortunately, we do not possess any positive datum supporting the hypothesis that the astrological doctrine concerning the influence of the recurring conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter and their cyclical shift of triplicity played any important role either in pre-Sasanian times or in the Indian or the Greco-Mesopotamian frameworks, so that its pertinence cannot be invoked to support an astrological interpretation of the pericope of the magi.²¹

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- of *Mathematics, Astronomy and Astrology in Memory of David Pingree* (ed. A. Panaino and G. Gnoli; SOR 102. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 2009), 71–99.
- 19 E. S. Kennedy, “Ramifications of the World-Year Concept in Islamic Astronomy,” in *Actes du dixième Congrès International d’Histoire des Sciences, Ithaca 26 VIII 1962–2 IX 1962* (ed. H. Guerlac; Paris: Hermann, 1964), 23–43; Kennedy and Pingree, eds., *The Astrological History of Māshā’allāh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran,” *ISIS* 54 no. 2 (1963): 229–46; Pingree, “History of Astronomy in Iran;” Pingree, “Astrology in Islamic Times;” Pingree, “Classical and Byzantine Astrology;” Ch. Burnett and Pingree, eds., *The Liber Aristotilis of Hugo of Santalla* (Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts 26. London: Warburg Institute, 1997); Panaino *Tessere il cielo*; Raffaelli, *L’oroscopo del mondo*.
- 20 See Dyroff in F. Boll, *Sphaera. Neue griechische Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Sternbilder* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903), 482–539; F. Sezgin, *Astrologie–Meteorologie und Verwandtes bis ca. 430 H* (Vol. 7 of *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 139–51; A. Warburg, “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara.” in *L’Italia e l’arte straniera. Atti del x Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell’Arte* (Rome: Maglione & Strini, 1922), 39–67; republished in *Gesammelte Schriften* (vol. 1, part 2; ed. G. Bing; Leipzig: 1932), 459–81; English translation: “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles, 1999), 563–91; Pingree “The Indian Iconography of the Decans and Horās,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26 (1963): 223–54, esp. 223; Pingree, “History of Astronomy in Iran;” Pingree, “Astrology in Islamic Times;” Pingree, “Classical and Byzantine Astrology;” F. Saxl, *La fede negli astri* (ed. Salvatore Settis; Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1985), 280–91; Ch. Burnett and Pingree, eds., *The Liber Aristotilis*.
- 21 Panaino, “Nuove riflessioni sulla stella dei Magi tra fonti canoniche e apocriefe,” in *Scritti in onore di Pietro Mander* (ed. P. Notizia and F. Pomponio; Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli [Or.], 72, 1–4; Napoli: Università degli Studi L’Orientale, 2012), 77–98.

The Magi and Matthew's Pericope

This part can be divided in two minor sections, one dedicated to the magi and their cultural importance in the Gospel of Matthew and the other to a more general methodological problem concerning the historicity of the events narrated in that pericope and their potential relation to the Iranian area.

The *magu*-s were a western Iranian priestly circle that played an enormous role in ancient Iran, so that Herodotus assumed they had been one of the Median tribes;²² they certainly had a relevant political and ceremonial role under the Achaemenian Dynasty. One of them, the *magu* Gaumāta, was credited with a *coup d'état*, which was later repressed by King Darius I.²³ Somewhat paradoxically, the *magu*-s—from which the Greek loanword μάγος and the Latin *magus* or *maga* as well as the Greek abstract μαγεία and the Latin *magia* derive—originally had nothing to do with “magic” or “witchcraft.” The standard association with the most obscure arts of wizards and other charlatans is a Western phenomenon, arising from a negative semantic ‘infection’ of this Greek loanword. The magi were specialists in religious activities (sacrifices, ceremonies, etc.) who also assumed administrative and political functions, so that they had access to a number of scholarly competences, becoming scribes and experts in various (more or less esoteric) disciplines. For this reason, these wise men were considered able astrologers and were associated with the Chaldeans and the Babylonian experts in astral divination. It is in the western Iranian political context, i.e., in the centres of the Persian Empire, that the magi gained direct access to most of the scholarly disciplines elaborated over many centuries of

22 See de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 133; Leiden: Brill, 1997); J. Bidez and Fr. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés: Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe, d'après la tradition grecque* (2 vols; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938); Panaino, “I Magi in Occidente,” in *Storia d'Italia* (ed. G. M. Cazzaniga; Annali 25; Esoterismo; Torino: Einaudi, 2010), 49–76; Panaino, “Erodoto, i Magi e la storia religiosa iranica,” in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich / Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (ed. R. Rollinger, B. Truschnegg, and R. Bichker; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 343–70.

23 Panaino, “Erodoto,” Panaino, “Daniel the Magus and the Magi of Bethlehem,” in *From Source to History: Studies on Ancient Near Eastern Worlds and Beyond. Dedicated to Giovanni Battista Lanfranchi on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday on June 23, 2014* (ed. S. Gaspa, A. Greco, D. M. Bonacossi, S. Ponchia and R. Rollinger; Alter Orient und Altes Testament 412; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 455–67.

Mesopotamian history. For these reasons, the magi also were presumed to be masters of astronomy and astral prognostics, oneiromancy,²⁴ and other arts.

After the fall of the Achaemenian Empire and the progressive hellenization of the East, Zoroaster and the Eastern priestly class, who were originally clearly distinct from the magi, came to be associated with them; Zoroaster himself became an astrologer, and his name was also interpreted as referring to the stars. With regard to the semantic determination of words like the Greek *μάγος* and the Latin *magus*, we must observe two main lines of evolution. The first and most ancient line considers *magus* as the proper denomination of a member of the Mazdaean priestly class; in this case, as is already clear in the *Alkibiádes I* of Plato (or Pseudo-Plato),²⁵ the *μάγοι* were a type of positive intellectual responsible for the education of the young Persian prince, and their *μαγεία* is then a *θεῶν θεραπεία*, or “the worship of the gods.” This positive meaning has also been preserved in Greek and Latin,²⁶ but this mostly occurs when the authors want to make direct reference to the priests of Zoroaster. Thus, the term is used technically, in a semantically neutral form, as also attested in diplomatic documents and even in Persian political inscriptions in Greek, where a negative term would never have been used to designate Persian priestly staff. In contrast, in the second line of evolution, it can assume a negative nuance, albeit not in itself, but rather through its reference to the priests of the enemy and to a rival religious tradition. On the other hand, since the earliest attestations in Greek and also in Old Persian, *magu-* and *μάγος*, can be used negatively, as was already the case with reference to the usurper Gaumāta, the magus.²⁷ So when the Median and Persian word *magu-* entered the Greek lexicon, it was

24 Panaino, “I Magi in Occidente;” Panaino, “I Magi secondo G. Messina e H. Lommel nella riflessione critica di R. Pettazzoni. Nota in margine ad un’antica discussione,” in *Il mistero che rivelato ci divide e sofferto ci unisce. Studi Pettazzoniani in onore di Mario Gandini* (ed. G. P. Basello, P. Ognibene, and A. Panaino; Indo-Iranica et Orientalia; Series Lazur 6; Supplemento speciale a *Strada Maestra*; Milan: Mimesis, 2013), 365–86; Panaino, “Daniel the Magus.”

25 de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*; Panaino, “Erodoto;” Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella. Storia, scienza e teologia di un racconto evangelico* (Parola di Dio, second series, 67; Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo Edizioni, 2011); Panaino, “Daniel the Magus.”

26 See J. N. Bremmer, “The Birth of the Term ‘Magic;’” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 126 (1999): 1–12; de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*; Panaino, “Aspetti della complessità degli influssi interculturali tra Grecia ed Iran,” in *Grecia Maggiore: Intrecci culturali con l’Asia nel periodo arcaico. Graecia Maior: Atti del Simposio in occasione del 75° anniversario di Walter Burkert* (ed. C. Riedweg. Basel: Schwabe, 2009), 19–53; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*.

27 W. Burkert, *Da Omero ai Magi. La tradizione orientale nella cultura greca* (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), 94–95. Cf. Panaino, “Aspetti della complessità;” Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 29–33.

directly associated with ambiguous or even negative connotations, and only more informed authors such as Plato and a few others made use of it with restricted 'ethnic' care. Generally, it referred to soothsayers and charlatans, so that μάγος practically became synonymous with the Greek γόης ("one who howls out enchantments, a sorcerer").

We must observe that in the pericope of Matthew, the magi are beyond any doubt presented in a positive light, and their behavior does not correspond to that of sorcerers or charlatans. This fact compels us to presume that the evangelist, when he adopted this ambiguous and semantically infected word, was strictly referring to its positive semantic association, i.e., that concerning a legitimate Iranian priestly circle; it is very improbable that he wanted to introduce controversial actors such as astrologers and magicians, whose role would have been not only ambiguous but strongly compromised. The author of the text, in fact, had many other words at his disposal if he wanted to refer to a group of experts in astral divination. In contrast, as we will see, many facts support the association of the magi with the Eastern world, and in particular with the Iranian milieu, as follows:

- a) The Mazdaean religion was the only one in the area in which the arrival of the three posthumous sons of Zoroaster, who are born of a virgin and will resurrect all of the dead, was expected (in particular the last one, who would begin the final battle against evil and the definitive apocatastasis). We know for sure that this association was openly developed through Christian propaganda in the East,²⁸ and also that centuries of mutual knowledge acquired by the Jewish community (which produced the Babylonian Talmud in the Iranian area) meant that at least some of its members were well acquainted with this Iranian belief.
- b) If Cyrus was already the "Lord's anointed" according to Deutero-Isaiah 45:1, now the magi, as the priests who had anointed the Persian king, arrived to pay homage to Jesus, the new Lord of the world.²⁹ In this way,

28 G. Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme e una predizione di Zoroastro* (Rome: 1933); A. Piras, "I Magi persiani," in *I Tre Saggi e la Stella. Mito e Realtà* (ed. A. Piras; Rimini: Il Cerchio, 1999), 7–30; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*; Panaino, "The Three Magi, the Stone of Christ and the Christian Origin of the Mazdean Fire Cult," in *Gnostica et Manichaica. Festschrift für Alois van Tongerloo* (ed. M. Knüppel and L. Cirillo. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 153–64.

29 Panaino, "Ciro, i Magi evangelici e la *Disputatio de Christo in Persia*," *Studi Romagnoli* 62 (2012): 57–73; Panaino, "I Magi evangelici, Ciro il Grande e il Messia," in *Ricerare la Sapienza di tutti gli Antichi* (Sir. 39,1). *Miscellanea in onore di Gian Luigi Prato*. (ed. M. Milani and M. Zappella; Supplementi alla Rivista Biblica 56; Bologna: EDB, 2013), 425–32.

a sort of *translatio imperii* was openly invoked. We must consider that later sources insisted on the tradition that Cyrus would have already seen the star of Jesus, ordering his magi to send gifts to him. Although chronologically impossible, these legends insisted on the direct symbolic links between the Persian *Christós* and the divine one.³⁰ Furthermore, the role of the magi—not only as royal priests but also as king-makers,³¹ indispensable in royal initiations, and king-educators—certainly emphasizes the meaning of their presence in Bethlehem.

- c) The condition of the Jewish community in the Parthian kingdom was extraordinarily positive in comparison to the worsening conditions under Roman rule;³² this difference was already evident in the time of Jesus, but it became much more relevant later, in particular after the brutal Roman destruction of Solomon's temple. In contrast, in the same year (70 CE) the Parthian King Vologeses granted the Jewish community a sort of autonomy, appointing an *exiliarcos* (*rēš gālūtā*) and thus emphasizing the privileges of this ethnic and religious minority.³³ It is clear that the insertion into the gospel (whose composition seems to be later than the years 80/85 CE) of a text directly referring to the magi would have included (for a contemporary reader or hearer) a subtle (but patent) endorsement of the Parthian kingdom, in which these magi were a leading social and religious group, representing a very important moral and spiritual authority, waiting for the resurrection of the dead and the virgin birth of a divine savior.³⁴

30 Panaino "I Magi evangelici," with an extensive bibliography on the subject.

31 On this subject, see in particular A. de Jong's chapter in this volume.

32 Panaino, *I Magi evangelici. Storia e simbologia tra Oriente e Occidente* (Ravenna: Longo, 2004); Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*.

33 J. Neusner, *The Parthian Period* (vol. 1 of *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 44–46; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 56.

34 The expectation of the three posthumous sons of Zoroaster, born by three different virgins at a distance of one millennium one after the other before the final resurrection, is a well-known Zoroastrian doctrine, fully developed in the Mazdaean Pahlavi sources. These three eschatological figures are named *saošiant-* in the *Avesta*, or *sōšāns* in Pahlavi texts (particularly in the *Bundahišn*), i.e., "he who will make prosper the world," but practically they became the "saviours" *par excellence* of the Iranian Zoroastrian culture. In fact, particularly with the birth of the last one, the resurrection of all the dead will take place, and his appearance will signify the beginning of the final, definitive battle against the forces of Ahreman, the devil. The antiquity of this doctrine (and its complete independence from Jewish and Christian doctrines) is supported by the clear statement attested in *Yašt* 19, 88–96, one of the most ancient hymns of the later Avestan sources (first half of the first

- d) We must not forget that, while Christians were heavily persecuted inside the Roman borders, they did not suffer particular harm in the Parthian lands, a condition which lasted until Constantine issued the Edict of Milan. We should remember that even Jewish resistance against the Romans insisted on the positive role played by the Parthians against their Western enemies. Furthermore, the Iranian geographical space was not far removed from the perspective of earliest Christianity, if we consider that the people who attended the miracle of the Pentecost were mostly of Iranian origin.³⁵

Although we cannot be certain that the magi in Matthew's Gospel were definitely Persian or Parthian priests,³⁶ it is clear that many implicit (but very sharp) inferences supported this association, as in early Christian literature where their Persian or generically Iranian origin is credited. Furthermore, we must consider the extensive use Christian missionaries made of this text in their religious propaganda in Iran. This is a well-known phenomenon, which has been extensively studied and on which I will not dwell in this contribution. What does deserve to be emphasized is the very complex symbolism of this text. With the explicit mention of the magi, if we assume they are representatives of a foreign culture and religion, Christianity declared its manifest universalism,³⁷ *de facto* stating that the priests of one of the most prominent spiritual traditions in antiquity had fully recognized the birth of the true savior, Jesus. In doing so, the evangelist also (implicitly) attacked the Jewish temple,³⁸ showing that these magi, who were waiting for their savior, had discovered the astral sign of his coming, while the priests of the temple in Jerusalem and their false king, Herod, had remained blind to it. If the magi were reduced to simple specialists in astrological knowledge and the celestial sign was reduced to a technical diagram, then all of the universalistic implications connected

millennium BCE), in which the last son of Zoroaster, *Astuuat.ərətā-*, "he who embodies truth/righteousness," will perform the complete regeneration of the world and the definitive destruction of evil. This subject has been deeply studied in many works, and it is the main subject of the book by Messina (*I Magi a Betlemme*).

- 35 J. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide* (Paris: Librairie Victor LeCoffre, 1904), 16; M.-L. Chaumont, *La christianisation de l'empire iranien. Des origines aux grandes persécutions de IV^e siècle* (Leuven: Peeters, 1988); Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 58–59.
- 36 Cf. L. C. Casartelli, "The Magi: a Footnote to Matthew 11.1," *Dublin Review* 131 (1902): 362–79.
- 37 Panaino *I Magi evangelici*; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*.
- 38 On this subject, see Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 76–77.

with their presence in Bethlehem would be strongly debased, if not completely undermined.

We must recall that in the Acts of the Apostles two other magi are mentioned,³⁹ but in this case they are presented as very impious people (at least from a Christian perspective), and the comparison with the magi in Matthew's Gospel shows that the difference is qualitative and spiritual from the point of view of the author of the pericope. The author, in fact, may have also had in mind the example of Daniel,⁴⁰ who was taken prisoner and sent to Babylon, to King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel, being a gifted person, was forcibly embedded in the royal staff of the king, technically called *ašafīm* or "oneiro-mants" (Aramaic *ʾāšāf / ʾāššāp*;⁴¹ cf. Akkadian *āšipu*, "interpreter of dreams"),⁴² for which the word *μάγοι* was chosen as the most fitting translation in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Thus, when Daniel gave his inspired interpretation of the terrible dream of his new king, he was acting as a *μάγος*. But this is not all; according to the Book of Daniel, when taken to the court as prisoner, Daniel himself was given a new name (*Bēlšaʿšsar* or *Bēlṭəšaʿšsar*), which very interestingly was that of Balthazar. This explains why in some later traditions one of the magi was also called Balthazar, evidence confirming the existence of a direct speculative link between Jewish and Christian sources⁴³ in which the magi were considered wise men inspired by a divine power and not simply astrologers discovering a scientific truth by means of their human competence.

All of the considerations presented here should invite us to reconsider the pericope of the magi as a very dense text, in spite of its shortness. The question

39 Simon Magus and Eliphaz; Casartelli, "The Magi," 362–79; A. D. Nock, "Paul and the Magus." Pages 164–88 in *The Beginnings of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles. Additional Notes to the Commentary* (vol. 5, part 1; ed. F. Jackson and K. Lake; London: Macmillan, 1933); Panaino *I Magi evangelici*; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 36.

40 Panaino *I Magi evangelici*; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*, 60–64, 174, 176–77; Panaino, "Daniel the Magus."

41 L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (Aramäisches Lexikon 5; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1675a–1676a; cf. W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic* (trans. E. Robinson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 80a, 1083a; P. V. Mankowski *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 43–44.

42 E. Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 85, part 4; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 47–48.

43 See in particular the study on this name and its background in Panaino, "Daniel the Magus." For the names of the magi more generally, see my more detailed study (Panaino, "Considerazioni storico-linguistiche"), with an extensive bibliography on the subject.

of its historicity is a never-ending, tantalizing subject, which appears, if more critically observed, to be a false and frequently misleading conflict. In fact, if most of the specialists in biblical studies, many of whom clearly share a confessional background, have prudently refused to insist on the determination of the historical *realia* behind the cycle of the magi in Bethlehem, our caution should probably be even higher. From a practical point of view, it would be sufficient to observe that such an able and intelligent (although criminal) king as Herod the Great would never have allowed the magi to go to Bethlehem without sending a mass of spies on their footsteps. The way in which the magi later avoided coming back to Jerusalem while the king was behaving like an idiot is simply worthy of a fiction, not of a serious historical report.

Thus, it is peculiar to see how many strong confessional preoccupations move those scholars, mostly belonging to the fields of the exact sciences, who continuously suppose that they have finally discovered the definitive support for the historicity of a narrative whose transmitted version has absolute relevance only from the theological and religious points of view. (This does not mean *a priori* that there was nothing historical behind it, but only that such an account cannot be taken seriously as true history).⁴⁴ It is more embarrassing to observe the number of very bold contradictions and ahistorical implications into which they fall. While a modern scholar tries to discover a precisely datable astral phenomenon in order to arrive at a precise dating of the event, an evangelist (Luke) introduces into the cycle of the nativity a reference to a Roman census happened more than ten years later.⁴⁵ What to do? We must also insist on the fact that any approach to religious documents developed in order to prove or disprove the absolute truth of the religious contents these “sacred texts” would pretend to propagate is not a proper activity for a professional historian; this way of working has nothing to do with our professional duty in any sense. Our scope as scholars working in the field of history of religions is to understand the complexity of any religious source—its background, its implications, the historical and spiritual framework, the comparative data, and the multicultural trends—not to prove or disprove any ontological truth that is supposed to stand behind it. When we study Mazdaean texts, for example, our target is not to demonstrate the truth or falsity of this religion. *Mutatis mutandis*, the study of the Star of Bethlehem and its definitive identification cannot be used to support or dismiss the Christian tradition, and it is peculiar that this

44 See H. Leclercq, “Mages,” in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq; vol. 1, part 1; Lyon—Manosque. Paris: Letouzey et An, 1931), 980–1067, esp. 981–982.

45 See Panaino, *I Magi evangelici*; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*.

sort of obsessive challenge, the compulsive need to solve this mystery while simultaneously proving some religious truth, most frequently comes from the field of exact sciences, with deep disregard for historical disciplines, philology, and history of religions. In fact, whether or not one believes in Jesus Christ does not and cannot depend on whether the star of the magi has been correctly identified or whether it has been shown to be non-existent. Theological explanations are always at hand, if one wants, for any potential result.

The Star of Bethlehem and Its Meaning in the Light of Textual and Historical Data

As a philologist and a historian, my duty is to analyze the sources as they present themselves, and to propose interpretations, but not to force their meaning according to *a priori* assumptions.⁴⁶ The pericope in Matthew insists on the occurrence of a celestial phenomenon, the manifestation of a particular astral body, which would have attracted the attention of a group of magi. No word has been introduced in order to qualify this event as terrific or exceptional, meaning it is unnecessary to look for extraordinary facts (such as, for example, the explosion of novae or supernovae),⁴⁷ as if a god, in order to reveal the birth of his beloved son (for those who presume a divine, teleological purpose behind this story), would need to destroy another solar system to make this little bang. Nevertheless, we know that divinities can be very strange, and their behavior is unpredictable. In any case, these magi, while still in the Orient, the area from which they came (απὸ ἀνατολῶν), saw what is literally called “star” (ἀστήρ, ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ). On the topic of this expression, which occurs two times in the pericope, we have read many apparently “thrilling” discussions, each of which suggests a new, definitive solution. It could certainly refer to the heliacal rising of a star or a planet. However, in spite of the fact that this assumption was already the subject of a long discussion presented by Voigt a century ago,⁴⁸

46 A very useful presentation of the opposing theories concerning the identification of the Star of Bethlehem has been offered by A. Adair, “The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy,” *Zygon. Journal of Religion & Science* 47 no. 1 (2012): 7–29; cf. also Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View* (Farham: Onus Books, 2013). In this contribution, I have avoided entering into all of the interpretations; for a general bibliography on the subject, see also R. S. Freitag, *The Star of Bethlehem: A List of References* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1979).

47 Cf. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 43–50.

48 H. G. Voigt, *Die Geschichte Jesu und die Astrologie* (Leipzig: Hinrichse Buchhandlung, 1911), 104.

there is no memory of another later, more important contribution offered by one of the best specialists of ancient astrology and astronomy—Franz Boll. In a seminal article,⁴⁹ this scholar showed in detail and with a mass of pertinent references that the syntagm ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ might be translated as either “at its rising” or “at its heliacal rising,”⁵⁰ although, given the unclear textual context preserved in this passage of Matthew’s Gospel, there is no compelling reason to assume (or presume) that such an astral body was exclusively observed at its heliacal rising, in particular if that expression referred to a star.⁵¹ It might

49 “Der Stern der Weisen,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde des Urchristentums* 18 (1917–18): 40–48, esp. 44–47, and in particular n. 1 pp. 44–45.

50 For a more detailed discussion, see Panaino, “Nuove riflessioni.” Boll restricted the meaning of ἀνατολή, but on this point, see the following note. Adair’s hypothesis (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 133) that the syntagm ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ could be translated “at the rising of the sun” is very risky. In fact, although it is not impossible that here the ἀνατολή might concern a heliacal rising, we have no reason to state this with absolute certainty. The insertion into the translation without any caveat (such as, at least, a parenthesis) of the sequence “of the sun” remains an abuse of the text; this possibility should be proposed in a commentary.

51 Alexander Jones (see his chapter in this volume) is perfectly right when he remarks that Boll was incorrect when he assumed that the meaning of “heliacal rising” should be restricted only to the word ἐπιτολή; in contrast, ἀνατολικός is frequently used in astrological and astronomical texts, such as the Oxyrhynchus papyri (Jones, *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus* (P. Oxy. 4133–4300) (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 233; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999), 460), with reference to the “heliacal rising” of a planet. In any case, this correct observation does not conclusively demonstrate that in Matt 2:1–12 the text was strictly referring to a planet and its heliacal rising. A more detailed analysis of technical syntagms such as ἑώρα and ἔσπερία ἀνατολή has been offered by S. Denningmann (*Die astrologische Lehre der Doryphorie. Eine soziomorphe Metapher in der antiken Planetenastrologie* [Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 214; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005], 386–478; Denningmann, “The Ambiguous Terms ἑώρα and ἔσπερία ἀνατολή, and ἑώρα and ἔσπερία δύσις,” *Culture and Cosmos* 11 (2007): 189–210); the same subject has been treated again by Heilen (“Problems in Translating Ancient Greek Astrological Texts,” in *Writings of Early Scholars in the Ancient Near East, Egypt and Greece: Translating Ancient Scientific Texts* (ed. A. Imhausen and T. Pommerening; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 299–329, esp. 308–313). Furthermore, Heilen himself has considered the problem of the interpretation of the “rising” in the framework of Matthew chapter two, showing that it is unfortunately too ambiguous; actually, as he writes in a recent circular letter sent to the colleagues who took part in the Groningen conference: “[I]t can refer to a celestial body’s rising above the eastern horizon as well as to its heliacal rising (i.e. its emergence from the glaring light of the sun). Besides, it has a third, exclusively astrological meaning, namely that a celestial body is more than 15° but less than 120° apart from the Sun” (regarding the last meaning, see in particular Heilen, “Hadriani genitura”—*Die astrologischen Fragmente*

simply have been seen when it was rising on the horizon (but not just before the sun's rising); or when it was in another part of the Eastern Hemisphere, probably higher in the sky; or again at any other moment of the "nuktemeron" as well (the star might be seen as ascending in the night), according to the conditions of the weather, the observers, the place, the hour, the *arcus visionis*, etc. In any case, there is no textual indication that this celestial body was *heliacally* ascending, and the occurrence of this Greek syntagm, as it is, does not authorize any restricted translation of it.

It is clear that one of the main *Problemwörter* of this chapter is the Greek word ἀστήρ. Again, Boll prudently remarked that it cannot refer to a group of stars or a constellation, as if it were a simple synonym of ἄστρον (Latin *sīdus*) or of the more technical term συναστρία.⁵² An equally violent interpretation of the text would be the one presuming that ἀστήρ was chosen here in order to describe an astral body that should actually have been denominated as κομήτης or ἀστήρ κομήτης.⁵³ In fact, ἀστήρ can be associated with a meteor or a shooting star, but only on the condition that something more is attributed to it; alone, as in the case of the English "star" or Latin *stēlla*, it means only "star," not "shooting star" or "comet."⁵⁴ Thus, if one plays with the words occurring in the text and modifies their regular, standard meanings without any strictly philological argument and in spite of any explicit supporting historical and linguistic data, this way of working would be the synonymous with a scientist who, desiring to obtain certain expected results, changes the final figure of a calculation or omits all of the data that do not fit into his theory. This is not science. In this case, the Greek words are very clear and simple. Their meaning is the standard one, and the translations, not only in Latin but also in other languages into which this pericope was transferred in late antiquity between East and West, do not introduce any peculiar deviation.

des Antigonos von Nikaia. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar [Texte und Kommentare 43. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015], comm. on Antig. F1 § 27).

52 Boll, "Der Stern der Weisen," 40–44. Cf. also Stobaeus (*Corpus Hermeticum*, III, 6, 17, [edition and translation according to A. J. Festugière, *Fragments extraits de Stobée* [I–XXII]; vol. 3 of *Corpus Hermeticum* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1983], 38]: ἀστέρες δὲ ἀστρων διαφορὰν ἔχουσιν. ἀστέρες μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν οἱ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ αἰωρούμενοι, ἀστρα δὲ τὰ ἐγκείμενα ἐν τῷ σώματι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, συμφερόμενα δὲ [ἐν] τῷ οὐρανῷ, ἐξ ὧν δώδεκα ζῳδία προσηγορεύσαμεν "Les *astères* (astres) différent des *astra* (constellations). On appelle *astères* les astres qui flottent dans le ciel, *astra* les étoiles fixées au corps du ciel et emportées dans le mouvement céleste: parmi ces *astra*, douze ont été nommés par nous signes du zodiaque." See also H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin, 1879), 466; cf. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen*, 42–43.

53 Boll, "Der Stern der Weisen," 40–44; cf. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen*, 105.

54 Cf. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 31–41.

These simple observations rule out the possibility that any comet or strange object could be associated with the ἀστήρ in Matthew. But poor ἀστήρ has also been taken as an imprecise reference to a conjunction of two planets, in particular Jupiter and Saturn, that in the year 7 BCE actually met three times in the same constellation, an event already recorded in a series of Babylonian tablets.⁵⁵ This identification could be made more exciting if we consider that in the same period, precisely in the year 6 BCE, a triple conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars took place in Pisces.⁵⁶ This phenomenon was well described by Kep(p)ler himself, who tried to establish its periodicity, although he was not at all responsible of the (later) association of the Star of Bethlehem with the astrological doctrine of the great conjunctions. This attribution, as explained by Sachs and Walker,⁵⁷ was a first propounded by L. Ideler⁵⁸ (and some other scholars)⁵⁹ and was dramatically adopted by all of the scholars who uncritically followed him. In any case, ἀστήρ cannot be interpreted as meaning σύνοδος or “conjunction,”⁶⁰ nor were these stars in conjunction so close to be seen as a single point in the sky, so that they might potentially be confused with a single beaming star. A desperate invocation of the astrological doctrine concerning the cycle of the great conjunctions would be meaningless, because such a theory had no apotelesmatic relevance in the period of the birth of Jesus Christ. Actually, it was invented at least three centuries later, during the Sasanian period. In this case, linguistics, astronomy, and the history of astrology all concur in ruining any hypothesis based on the observation of a conjunction as an explanation for the pericope concerning the magi.

However, ἀστήρ really does sound like a quasi-magic word, for truly magic magi, and thus we could also attribute to it the alternative meaning of “planet.” This is one of the main new arguments introduced into the current discussion by Molnar,⁶¹ in the footsteps of other interpreters,⁶² regarding the Star of

55 See A. J. Sachs and C. B. F. Walker, “Kepler’s View of the Star of Bethlehem and the Babylonian Almanac for 7/6 BC,” *Iraq* 46 (1984): 43–56, with bibliography. Cf. also the discussion in Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 68.

56 Cf. Bulmer-Thomas, “The Star of Bethlehem,” 367; see Sachs and Walker, “Kepler’s View,” 44–47.

57 “Kepler’s View,” 43–44, in particular notes 11 and 12, and 45, n. 20.

58 *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie* (vol. 2; Berlin: A. Rucker, 1826), 399–401.

59 See Sachs and Walker, “Kepler’s View,” 44, n. 11.

60 Boll, “Der Stern der Weisen,” 40.

61 *The Star of Bethlehem*, 17, 25, 95–96, 156, n. 17.

62 It is strange that D. W. Hughes (Review of Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem. Journal for the History of Astronomy* 33 [2002]: 389–91, esp. 389) remarks that the star,

Bethlehem and its mystery (see in particular Bulmer-Thomas,⁶³ from whom Molnar had taken most of his [pseudo]linguistic arguments). These authors have rightly noted that ἀστήρ is also attested as meaning “planet,”⁶⁴ but they have not explained that this meaning can normally occur only in the plural (in order to refer to all of the planets as a group) and only under particular circumstances (e.g., in the title “About the influence of the planets,” literally “of the wandering stars” [περὶ τῆς τῶν πλανωμένων ἀστέρων δυνάμεως]);⁶⁵ the singular ἀστήρ was used to mean “planet” strictly in clear syntagmatic sequences,⁶⁶ such as ὁ ἀστήρ τοῦ Διός, ὁ ἀστήρ τοῦ Ἄρεως, ὁ ἀστήρ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης, ὁ ἀστήρ τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ, ὁ ἀστήρ τοῦ Κρόνου (“the star of Zeus, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Kronos”). This was an archaic way of referring to the planets as celestial bodies sacred (or belonging) to Zeus (Jupiter), Ares (Mars), Aphrodite (Venus), Hermes (Mercury), and Kronos (Saturn). This has to do with an earlier pattern already attested in Mesopotamia,⁶⁷ which insists on the divine association of the “wandering” astral bodies (to be distinguished from the so-called “fixed” stars) with the most important divinities of the pantheon; a kind of link that also played, as we have seen, an important role in the Iranian world. The fundamental problem to be considered is that, without the genitival determination, this use is very uncommon, if not strange, in normal literary texts, although we can expect it in professional astronomical and astrological sources.⁶⁸ However, we must underline the fact that the use of ἀστήρ alone and without any previous specification remains very peculiar in these contexts as well, particularly if the author wanted to mention a specific planet, because the term is too generic, and one is not able to deduce which wandering star (= planetary body) the

when no adjective was attributed to it, might still be anything: a constellation, a wandering star (i.e., a planet), a comet, a nova, a meteor, etc. This assumption completely disregards ancient Greek usage and does not take into consideration what was already argued by Boll (“Der Stern der Weisen”).

63 “The Star of Bethlehem,” 364–365.

64 Molnar’s (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 25) reference to the etymology of the word “planet” deriving from the Greek πλανος = *planos* (sic!) or “wanderer” is simply an offence against centuries of Greek linguistics.

65 *Tetrábiblos* 1, 4; cf. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* (ed. and trans. E. F. Robbins; Loeb Classical Library 435; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 34–35; Tolomeo, Claudio, *Le Previsioni astrologiche (Tetrabiblos)* (ed. S. Feraboli; Milan: Mondadori, 1985), 32–33; W. Hübner, ed., *Claudii Ptolemaei Opera quae extant Omnia* (vol. 3, part 1: Apotelesmatika; Leipzig: Teubner, 1998), 22.

66 See Cumont, “Les noms des planètes,” 12–13.

67 Cumont “Les noms des planètes,” 6–13.

68 See the fitting remarks offered by Heilen in this volume about this important subject.

author was referring to. In fact, a generic reference to an undetermined ἀστήρ would only produce certain confusion; this would also be the case in a professional astrological text, if the planetary body to which the astral source was referring to was not otherwise introduced or evoked in a comprehensible form.

Furthermore, it is useful to remember that the word ἀστήρ was actually unnecessary in many cases, the syntagm ὁ τοῦ . . . (i.e., without ἀστήρ) being sufficient to define the correct planet in question.⁶⁹ If the interpretation of ἀστήρ as “planet” were the correct one, this would have been clarified,⁷⁰ at least in the later traditions. It is peculiar that all of the church fathers, all of the Apocrypha, and all of the translations of the gospels from early antiquity onward (Western and Eastern Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Coptic, Georgian, Old Slavonic, etc.) completely ignored that evidence. Generations of ancient interpreters who spoke Greek as their own mother tongue never thought that ἀστήρ in Matthew chapter two might be connected with a “planet;” this was not because such an identification was a secret or an astrological mystery covered up by Church authorities, but *sic et simpliciter* because such a potential meaning, in that very context, isolated and without any textual caveat, was neither the first choice nor the most reasonable solution. In other words, although some scholars have rightly noted that in certain sources we do find the word ἀστήρ referring to planets (in its singular grammatical form), this was not the

69 If the evangelist had wanted to mention a planet, he should have also given a direct mention of its name. Even if a religious taboo might have prevented him from mentioning Greek or Roman divinities, we must recall that he had other names at his disposal, where no reference to pagan divinities was present (for instance, in the case of Jupiter, it was possible to call it Φαέθων; see Cumont, “Les noms des planètes,” 25), so that the use of ἀστήρ would have been completely unnecessary. We might even question whether, in Matthew’s reference to “his own star” (αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα, 2:1), the presence of αὐτοῦ signifies that ἀστήρ was “his star” = “his planet,” where αὐτοῦ (alias Ἰησοῦ or θεοῦ), was considered equal to Διός (the gen. of Zeus). The consequence of this peculiar syllogism is that the evangelist, in order to avoid a reference to Zeus or to the alternative planetary name (Phaëthon), finally established a bizarre correspondence between Zeus and Jesus-Theós. It seems to me that we would go too far! Furthermore, we must observe that, as noted by Heilen (again in this volume), the use of ἀστήρ as it appears in the pericope of the magi has no pertinent meaning for a royal horoscope.

70 Presently, we do not have at our disposal any statistics concerning the number of occurrences in which ἀστήρ was actually used in isolation, without any additional determination or any clear reference from the context or from previous chapters, not with the standard meaning of “star,” but with that of “planet.” For these reasons, although it is theoretically possible to assume that the occurrence of a syntagm like “his star” might be interpreted in the framework of an omen text as referring to any kind of astral body, this does not permit us to determine its status, e.g., whether it is a star or a planet.

normal use in Greek literature,⁷¹ and this is not what we can reasonably presume in a text like the pericope in Matthew's Gospel.

71 Thus, I do not object to the fact that ἀστὴρ can also mean "planet," and any generic statement about the fact that both meanings are also possible ("star" and "planet") in the singular is *formally* correct. But this possibility does not imply that the true percentage can be distributed at a rate such as 50% ("star") and 50% ("planet") with respect to all of the attested occurrences, as a non-specialist could deduce from a brief description of the linguistic data. In fact, I must still underline the presence of a serious problem: the meaning "planet" is surely the second choice and not the first one; "planet" is clearly a secondary meaning, because the semantic association with a planetary body denominated "planet" was a later phenomenon, due to the (later) sharp distinction between wandering stars and "fixed" stars. Historically, ἀστὴρ was a very ancient word of Indo-European origin, basically meaning "star" or "bright astral body;" and, as had already happened in Mesopotamia with Sum. MUL or Akk. *kakkabu*, a star could also be that of such and such a god, so that it eventually corresponded, according to our modern taxonomy (and also to the Greek one), to a "planet." Thus, the meaning "planet" is possible and eventually frequent in contexts where we expect to find planets, i.e., where this distinction is relevant. When I have insisted (and I still insist) on a statistical analysis of the occurrences, I did so because I wanted to see fitting and clear quotations from passages where this secondary meaning was not *a priori* expected or required. If one can show an astrological text in which a planet is simply named ἀστὴρ, we could easily agree, of course; but this document remains a professional text, not an everyday novel or a non-astronomical treaty. Before concluding, I want to call attention to a further paradox; if we theoretically assume that ἀστὴρ might (not only in the singular in Matthew 2, but at this point, we could say, in any literary Greek text) have two possible and equally appropriate meanings—that is, "star" and "planet"—it remains in any case clear that this distinction was not interesting or pertinent for the author of the gospel himself. In fact, if the author had desired to inform us that this precise ἀστὴρ was really a planet (and not a star), he would have been compelled to follow a different path: a) using the common word for "planet;" 2) adding the proper name of the planet, thus referring to its divine patron; or 3) using the scientific denomination for it—all solutions which were at his disposal. If the evangelist knew the secret of the planetary identification, why should he have occulted it rather than offering a clearer description of the facts? But he did not take advantage of any of these possibilities; in fact, no one among the never-ending generations of Christian interpreters understood this obvious (?) fact (if this was actually the evangelist's true desire). Furthermore, if one makes reference to a planet, this reference should be logically pertinent and informative. Contrariwise, in the use of Matthew 2, ἀστὴρ offers no information from the strict astronomical point of view, apart from the fact that the text states that an imprecise astral body rose, that at a certain moment it disappeared, and that it again became visible. By using external, *a priori* hypotheses, by forcing the syntax and the semantics of the text, we can propose sensational solutions, but these go against the evidence of the other ancient sources. If the evangelist adopted an unmarked word for a bright astral body (i.e., "star" or

Thus, after an objective examination of the extant sources, there is no compelling linguistic, syntactic, or exegetic reason to support the translation of ἀστήρ as “planet” in this text. The force of an external *a priori* assumption goes against philology, linguistics, and statistics, especially when we consider that no occurrence of words (any word) referring to “planet(s)” is attested in the whole Septuagint or in the New Testament.

The same violence against the Greek text can be seen in the assumption that the sentence in Matt 2:9 (καὶ ἰδοὺ ὁ ἀστήρ, ὃν εἶδον ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, προήγγεν αὐτοῦς, ἕως ἔλθῶν ἐστάθη [var. ἐστή] ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον [var. ἐπάνω τοῦ παιδίου], in Latin *Et ecce stella, quam viderant in oriente, antecedebat eos, usque dum veniens staret supra, ubi erat puer*) could be interpreted as a literal reference to the retrogradation of the planet Jupiter and its arrival at a stationary point. This ‘terrific’ discovery would produce a new translation of the passage under discussion, which would read as follows: “and behold the planet (Jupiter), which they had seen at its heliacal rising, went retrograde and become stationary above in the sky (which showed) where the child was.” Neville Birdsall⁷² has already undermined the alleged association between technical expressions such as προήγησις (nom.sg) or “retrogradation,” προηγήσεις (nom.pl.), and the present participle προηγούμενος, which used to describe the apparent advancing motion of a star in the *Almagest* and in other works by Ptolemy, on the one hand,⁷³ and the verb προήγγεν in Matt 2:9, on the other. The form under discussion is, in fact, the third person singular of the imperfect of προάγω,

“planet,” but more probably the first one, for all the above-mentioned reasons), it means that, also in the (most improbable) case, the body could have really been a “planet,” appearing as a bright star in the vision of an evangelist completely ignorant of positional astronomy; for him, the most important thing was just the vision of a brilliant “thing” moving and rising in the sky. In fact, if we cannot distinguish which planet was meant, the information is unimportant. On the other hand, if the evangelist knew its exact identity and had desired to inform his readers that what had appeared was in fact a planet, he should have helped his more ignorant brethren, adding at least a minimum of information. In the way in which the text appears, the choice of the translation “planet” (and the suggestion that this could be a fitting translation in such a framework) remains very weak and ungrounded—not only in my opinion, but in the millennia-long tradition of confessional and non-confessional scholars, ancient and modern, who simply took the easiest solution as the correct one.

72 Review of Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem, Journal for the History of Astronomy* 33 (2002): 391–94, esp. 391–392.

73 See G. J. Toomer (*Ptolemy's Almagest* [London: Duckworth, 1984], 20), who gives a precise explanation of these forms, their use, and the objective complexity of their literal translation. Cf. also J. L. Heiberg, ed., *Syntaxis Mathematica*, part 1, books I–IV (vol. 1 of *Claudii Ptolemaei Opera quae extant omnia*; Leipzig: 1898); Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 90.

meaning “to lead forward,” while προήγησις is etymologically connected with a very different verb, προηγέομαι, meaning “to go first and lead the way, to be the leader, to precede.” Additionally, these terms have larger and not only technical connotations⁷⁴ as well, so that their meaning cannot be restricted only and exclusively to the examples chosen in order to demonstrate the occurrence of a planetary phenomenon. For instance, at the beginning of chapter three of the *Tetrábiblos*, the participle προηγουμένης is attested with the simple meaning “to come first.”⁷⁵ We must also underline that, according to this new suggested interpretation, we should delete αὐτούς, which, on the contrary, had a very simple explanation.⁷⁶ Note also that not only is the apparent similarity in the initial η- only due to the presence of the augment in the historical times of ἄγω, but the two roots to which these verbs belong are completely different from the etymological point of view; in fact, ἄγω-ω [*ag-ō*] (“to lead, to carry”) and ἡγέομαι [*hēg-éomai*] (“to go before, to lead the way”) are connected with the Latin *agō* (“to put in motion,” Skt. *ájaiti*)⁷⁷ and *sāgiō* (“to perceive quickly,” Got. *sokjan* “to look for”) respectively.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Matthew has προήγεν αὐτούς, which means that αὐτούς as an accusative plural must be governed by a transitive verb (i.e., προάγω), so that it would be simply crazy to assume that the attested verb should be intransitive.

Another lack of philological prudence appears in the further assumption that the expression ἐστάθη ἐπάνω should be taken as another astronomical *vox technica* directly referring to a planetary stationary point;⁷⁹ ἐπάνω, in fact,

74 Cf. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1480.

75 Cf. Robbins, Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 220–21; Feraboli, Claudio Tolomeo, *Le Previsioni astrologiche*, 178–79; Hübner, *Claudii Ptolemaei*, 166. This edition of Hübner (*Claudii Ptolemaei*, 418–19) offers all of the references to the passages in which προηγέομαι and προήγησις occur. In *Tetrábiblos*, 11, 7, 582 (Hübner, 128), the use of προηγήσεις is surely technical, and, in fact, here it surely means “retrograde” (see also Robbins, Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 168–69; Feraboli, Claudio Tolomeo, *Le Previsioni astrologiche*, 136–37). On this subject, see also Heilen, “Problems in Translating Ancient Greek Astrological Texts,” 311–12; as well as his contribution to the present volume.

76 In reality, Bulmer-Thomas (“The Star of Bethlehem,” 371) suggested a more sophisticated solution, preserving the text but inferring a technical astronomical meaning behind its literal interpretation.

77 P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque. Histoire des mots*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), 18.

78 Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique*, 406. It is to be noted that the Greek verb also means “to suppose, to believe.”

79 Cf. Bulmer-Thomas, “The Star of Bethlehem,” 371.

would have been used only adverbially in astronomical contexts. This assumption is totally misleading, however, because Toomer,⁸⁰ in his introduction to the *Almagest*, has patently listed ἐπάνω (“above”) among the prepositions used by Ptolemy to indicate the positions of the stars. Furthermore, Birdsall has rightly noted⁸¹ that any possible adverbial use of ἐπάνω by Ptolemy in order to mean “in the sky” does not in any case concern Matthew’s use, particularly here, where ἐπάνω is attested with patent prepositional value, being regularly followed by a relative pronoun in the genitive.⁸² Again, Birdsall⁸³ has emphasized the fact that, in spite of Bulmer-Thomas⁸⁴ and Molnar’s⁸⁵ sensational declarations, Ptolemy made reference to the stationary point by using the word στήριγμός (“being fixed, standing still”),⁸⁶ which, in its turn, is a derivative of the verb στήρίζω (“to fix,” pass. and med. “to be firmly set, fixed,” in the technical sense of “to stand still”), which had nothing to do with ἵστημι and the forms attested in the pericope in Matthew’s Gospel (the passive aorist ἐστάθη and the mss. variant ἐστή, radical aorist) in order to simply describe the position of the star above the child’s home.

The statement that the main phenomenon concerning the Star of Bethlehem would not have been seen, that it was only calculated by the magi, is also astonishing. In fact, as Hughes⁸⁷ has rightly underlined, Molnar’s reconstruction assumes that the Moon/Jupiter transits occurred in 6 BCE—the first on 29 March, the second on 17 April, which is the best candidate for the birth of Jesus—and that they were not visible from the Middle East. What is worse, Hughes⁸⁸ again rightly insists on the serious technical difficulties for any astrologer of the first century BCE in calculating such an event (i.e., in both ecliptic longitude and latitude).⁸⁹ This was a problem until the seventeenth century CE. And the difficulties are not finished. Molnar⁹⁰ has tried to counter

80 *Ptolemy’s Almagest*, 15–16.

81 Review of Molnar, 392.

82 See Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 609.

83 Review of Molnar, 392–93.

84 “The Star of Bethlehem,” 368–73.

85 *The Star of Bethlehem*, 95–96, 104.

86 Cf. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1644.

87 Review of Molnar, 391.

88 Review of Molnar, 391.

89 Heilen states this in a letter he sent to me (October 2015); there, he rightly insists on the fact that for ancient astrologers, latitude represented a weighty problem, and they actually based their horoscopic calculations on tables of the longitudes of the astral bodies (and not, of course, on direct observations).

90 “The Magi’s Star,” 125 n. 61.

the textual evidence contained into the pericope, where it states that the magi “saw” a star, by arguing that the two verbal forms εἶδομεν (“we saw”) and εἶδον (“they saw”) do not preserve the standard meaning, but could have another one, namely, “to perceive, to behold.” Unfortunately, this possibility, although listed by Liddell and Scott among many others,⁹¹ has been introduced *ad hoc*, and it is completely farfetched in the framework of Matthew’s passages, in which the magi clearly state that they have directly observed an astral event in the sky and not that they have deduced it by means of a horoscopic diagram they made.⁹² Furthermore, when the magi leave Jerusalem and travel to Bethlehem, the star disappears for a while and they do not see it, and when it reappears they rejoice greatly. This simple sequence of events does not fit with the description of an observation of a horoscopic diagram, because even on an ancient papyrus a planet, if noted once, should not disappear.

Another important element has been observed by Molnar⁹³ on some coins of Antioch, which present the image of an Aries looking back at a star, a zodiacal sign which has been considered in the light of Ptolemy’s *Tetrábiblos* (and other classical astrological sources)⁹⁴ as a direct geographical reference to Judea.⁹⁵ The main problem, apart from some other questions of detail⁹⁶ such

91 *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 483.

92 Cf. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 69–82.

93 *The Star of Bethlehem*, 86–111. Cf. Also Molnar, “An Explanation of the Christmas Star Determined from Roman Coins of Antioch,” *The Celator* 5 no. 12 (Dec. 1991): 8; Molnar, “The Coins of Antioch,” *Sky and Telescope* (Jan. 1992): 37–39; Molnar, “The Case for Astrologic Roman Coins,” *The Celator* 7 no. 11 (Jan. 1993): 43; Molnar, “The Magi’s Star.”

94 See Molnar, “The Magi’s Star.” 112. In reality, Molnar’s assumption disregards a number of ancient astrological geographies in which Aries was not related to Judea but rather, for instance, to Persia. On this point, see the contributions in this volume by Heilen and Steele.

95 Ptolemy (*Tetrábiblos* 11, 3, 29, 31; 4, 2), in the framework of astrological geography, describes the “familiarities” between countries, triplicities, and stars, stating that Aries (but also Mars, although less so) is particularly familiar with lands such as Idumea, Coele-Syria, Judea, Phoenicia, Chaldea, Orchinia, and Arabia Felix (Robbins, Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 142–43, 156–57; Feraboli, Claudio Tolomeo, *Le Previsioni astrologiche*, 116–18, 128–29; Hübner, *Claudii Ptolemaei*, 108–09, 120–21).

96 A list of arguments against Molnar’s interpretations has been already given by S. De Meis (“Astronomical Reflexes in Ancient Coins,” in *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction. Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project Held in Innsbruck, Austria, October 3rd–8th 2002* (Oriens Occidens 6; Melammu Symposia 6; ed. R. Rollinger and Chr. Ulf, with K. Schnegg; Munich: Steiner, 2004), 470–98, esp. 474–76). See also the various considerations of Molnar’s statements concerning the complete

as the dating of the coins,⁹⁷ is why the people of Antioch, in the first years after the death of Herod the Great, should have minted coins with astral symbols chosen in order to exalt a royal birth that had happened earlier in Judea. Molnar⁹⁸ has assumed that “[f]or Romans who exploited coinage for its propagandistic value, the conjunction and heliacal rising were most likely seen as a celestial manifestation predicting good fortune for Antioch and the annexation of Judaea.” However, I cannot understand the logical connection between this acceptable statement and Molnar’s conclusion, which has been inferred. The assumption is that behind the star appearing on these coins of Antioch⁹⁹ we should see: 1) a planet; 2) the planet Jupiter; 3) a standardized representation of a planetary conjunction; and 4) the image of an heliacal rising of Jupiter. This is pure fantasy. This iconological reading is not supported by any direct evidence or by any analysis of the artistic conventions adopted in the ancient mints. The alleged reference to Hadrian *denarii*, which portray a star within the arms of a crescent moon, in its turn, is not necessarily connected to another occultation of Jupiter in 125 CE, which again results in an *ad hoc* solution. The Moon and stars are frequently represented on ancient coins with many symbolic implications; for instance, their presence is very important on Sasanian coins as well, but it would be absurd to explain such a convention by looking for exact astronomical events. Thus, an alleged stereotype, such as representing conjunctions of the Moon and the planets on coins in the way these would have appeared on the coins of Antioch, should at least find not only a consistent series of similar examples in other ancient numismatic rules adopted by Roman and Hellenistic artists, but also a well-grounded literary historical support.¹⁰⁰ I also want to underline that if any astral symbol on a Roman coin should be connected with a possible horoscope calculated for a

hostility of Jews towards astrology, which von Stuckrad has shown to be completely unfounded (see his chapter in this volume).

97 Molnar’s (“The Magi’s Star,” 124, n. 11) reference to the work of G. Macdonald (“The Numeral Letters on Imperial Coins of Syria,” *Numismatic Chronicle and the Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* 3, Fourth Series, Fasc. 1 [1903’: 105–10, esp. 110–11], where the first Antiochene coin showing the image of Aries is attributed to Quirinius, is completely out of date. This series is surely later and was struck under Silanus between 11/12 and 13/14 CE (see K. Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria: Northern Syria, 64 BC–AD 253* [Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication 34; London: Royal Numismatic Society, 2004], 328–29).

98 “The Magi’s Star,” 111.

99 See Molnar, “The Magi’s Star,” 110–11.

100 On these problems, see Fr. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954), 29–43. We do not find an argument supporting Molnar’s interpretations. It is notable that coins bearing images of Aries and stars

dating already passed by more than ten years, as would be the case here, we would introduce a completely ungrounded interpretative method in ancient numismatics. This solution would be very peculiar, because Roman political traditions did not support the public use of horoscopic data. In fact, it is important to differentiate the reference to Caesar's comet in order to transform a dangerous omen into a positive symbol from the decision to represent a horoscopic prognosis concerning a recently conquered state.

On the contrary, we must carefully consider the complete skepticism professed by professional numismatists regarding this way of interpreting the iconography of ancient coins. We need historical evidence, which is not present at all. Thus, the direct involvement of Antioch, under Roman rule, in emphasizing a divine royal birth that was supposed to have taken place in Judea, a land they (the Romans and Antiochenes as well) considered of minor importance, not only implies an open act of hostility against the same authorities issuing the coins (in other words, political suicide), but it also presupposes that the horoscope of Jesus was well known. It is peculiar that Molnar does not recognize that such a propagandistic emphasis on a royal horoscope for an event that happened in Jerusalem under Herod the Great would, if true, have given additional impetus to all of those Jewish movements that still wanted to rebel against Rome. Is this form of political self-punishment a freshly discovered Roman habit?

A second inference is that such an astrological report was commonly known and widespread in Syria and the Near East, and that someone had a political interest in promoting it. However, if we were to admit this possibility, as Molnar later associated the horoscope with the magi, it could have been attributed to anybody else—that is, to any potential rebel acting in Judea and aspiring to power. In my opinion, none of these possibilities have any historical basis, and all belong in the category of pseudo-historical reconstruction. Through centuries of studies, professional numismatists have assumed that Aries, as in the case of other astral symbols attested on Syrian products, celebrated the founding¹⁰¹ of certain cities or a certain particular moment of their his-

appeared in later times, under Gordian III in Nisibis (Mesopotamia), but there is no need to invoke particular horoscopic conditions in order to interpret their iconography.

101 In *CCAG* (*Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*; Codices Britannicos descripti St. Weinstock, Part altera: *Codices Londinenses, Cantabrigenses, Bibliothecarum Minorum* [Accedunt Codices Batavi, Daneses, Sueci; vol. 4, part 2; Brussels, 1953], 176–79), Weinstock edited the horoscopic data concerning six towns (Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, Gaza, Caesarea, and Neapolis) together with the world horoscope. This manuscript (Cod. Batavo 4, Leid. B. P. Gr.78), in fact, confirms the existence of an older tradition concerning

tory: thus, we find not only Aries at Antioch, but also Taurus at Cyrrhus, and Capricorn at Zeugma.¹⁰² There is thus no historical reason to search for the horoscope of Jesus (or of any other person) behind these coins.

In conclusion, Molnar's theory that Matthew was referring to a horoscopic diagram based on the calculation that on 17 April 6 BCE the royal planet Jupiter was rising as a morning star and was occulted by the Moon while it was located within the constellation Aries, so that later it was again observed by the magi (when they were leaving Jerusalem) during its retrogradation until it finally reached its stationary point, does not find any support either in the text of the gospel or in other, later sources explicitly referring to the birth of Jesus and the magi. I do not deny that the description of the evangelist frames a condition in which we can imagine that any reader was free to suppose that those magi had (or were assumed to have)¹⁰³ arrived thanks to an observation (joined with a technical calculation), but this kind of professional performance was beyond

the *dies natales* of the towns, which continued into Islamic times. See Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law*, 11–12, and n. 70. Malalas himself (*Chronographia* VIII, ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia* [CSHB; Bonn, 1831], 200) stated that the foundation of Antioch happened on 22 May 300 BCE (μηνη Ἀρτεμισίῳ τῷ καὶ Μαίῳ κβ' ὥρα ἡμερηνῆ α' τοῦ Ἥλιου ἀνατέλλοντος καλέσας αὐτὴν Ἀντιόχειαν, trans.: "Seleucus [founded the city] on the 22nd day of the month of Artemisius, which is also May, at the first hour of the day as the sun was rising, and he called the city Antioch, after the name of his son Antiochus Soter"). Weinstock very interestingly quoted the numismatic datum of the Antiochene coins, also noting that it does not correspond to these astrological sources, but we know that the horoscopes were changed in different periods, following the political decisions of new rulers. It was also possible to adopt catarchic criteria (cf. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law*), so that the more appropriate and favorable moment to found (or re-found) the town might be chosen according to a more archaic procedure that countered simple astrological determinism. Very prudently, Butcher (*Coinage in Roman Syria*, 226) writes about the iconography of these coins: "The movement of foundation or refoundation presumably dictated the horoscope of the city. The link between a foreordained future determined by a horoscope and a city's Tyche seems clear from the Antiochene coinage: on Antiochene civic coins the obverse/reverse combination is commonly Tyche/Aries, and sometimes there is a forepart of Aries in front of Tyche's bust. On the reverses Aries is accompanied by other astrological symbols, a star (or sun) or star/sun plus crescent moon. Aries is shown leaping over the head of Tyche on the coins of Elagabalus, Severus Alexander, Philip, and Trajan Decius (and on some of these stars and crescents occur as well), and leaps over the shrine of Tyche on the last issues of Decius, Gallus and Valerian. It appears by itself on sc bronzes of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, where it would appear to be interchangeable with another probable symbol of foundation, the eagle."

102 See Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria*, 225–26.

103 This does not mean that this pericope can be taken literally and uncritically as a historical description of a real event.

the main interests of the narrative, and this background represents only a speculation *a posteriori*.

The pericope was not written in order to exalt astrology or the depth of the magi, but rather to emphasize the fact that foreign wisdom, *primitia gentium*, had recognized Christ's extraordinary birth. This search for the precise astrological *thema diei et horae natalis* is a waste of time in the absence of any direct, indirect, or sufficiently credible ancient tradition about it.¹⁰⁴ It is completely devoid of philological value, historically ungrounded, and, if observed from the point of view of the history of religions, very peculiar, because it presupposes that the evangelist himself knew the main lines of the horoscope of Jesus but either disguised or omitted it, and that this secret was concealed until it was finally uncovered by modern astronomers. The final consequence would be offering new data for another novel by Dan Brown.

We must also take into consideration some additional (but not minor) difficulties. First, the astrological events reconstructed by Molnar would require that he should determine a real *thema natale* for Jesus. The magi, in fact, should have cast their horoscope for a precise date, hour, and latitude, and according to all of these data, they should have delivered some astrological deductions. In fact, without the exact hour and place of the birth, any (Hellenistic or modern) horoscope would be meaningless, and what would be taken as a good omen at a certain moment and for a particular subject could turn out to be dreadful for another, born in a different place or just at a different hour of the day. The astrological method described by Molnar is unpredictable, and thus its results are groundless, because it can be adapted and modified according to any desired target, a procedure that contrasts sharply with any scientifically acceptable historical methodology. In particular, we must also consider that no astrological technique is able to establish the location of a miraculous birth starting from the observation or calculation of the sky in the context of the whole world. If desperate, one could say that the magi did not know the exact place of this birth but only the area (Judea = Aries), and it is for this reason that they visited Herod. But do we really want to start serious historical discussions by suggesting that the visit of the magi in order to obtain the neces-

104 In his chapter (in this volume), Alexander Jones has shown that there is no evidence that astrologers worked in the way Molnar presumes, that they never generated horoscopes entirely *a priori* which they then used to search for individuals born on auspicious dates; on the contrary, they would have searched for auspicious dates within a precise timespan. In turn, Heilen (also in this volume) has remarked that no text makes reference to the birth of a king within the framework of astrological geography. See also some useful remarks advanced by Adair in the present volume.

sary information (as a historical fact) was indeed due to a previous astrological reconstruction of Jesus' horoscope? The description of the transits of Jupiter and the Moon and the registration of the subsequent phenomena offer a foundation for an uninterrupted prognosis based on a continuous series of events, but Molnar does not explain how these data could fit in with the destiny of a unique person, according to a particular astrological pattern. The presence of lunar occultations is also an ambiguous element, and we must recall that such an omen (the Moon moves in front of Jupiter in Aries) was considered in such a long-standing speculative tradition as the Babylonian one to indicate the sudden death of a great king,¹⁰⁵ and certainly not his exaltation.

As we have seen, some recent explanations are extraordinary in a negative sense, for they openly counter Greek philology, linguistics, and even syntax; however, if we reflect more deeply on them, we will observe that such new theories necessarily presume the absolute efficacy of the apotelesmatic deduction. In brief, if we were to admit that some of the magi described by Matthew as visiting Jesus were hellenized astrologers who made their historic visit on the strength of a very fine astronomical casting of the *thema natale* of the newborn child, we would be compelled to pay homage to their astounding astrological wisdom.¹⁰⁶ Whether these magi were Iranian or Greek, they would have certainly been the wisest men in the world, because, starting from an undetermined place in the lands of the Orient, they were able to calculate the precise chronological occurrence and location (although an Aries pointing to Judea surely helped them) of a royal birth and then to move on in time to pay due honor to such a majestic power. They were lucky, because an idiot king hosted them and let them go to Jesus without any regulation, although he later repented, wised up, and killed all of the babies, an event so violent that unfortunately no contemporary Greek, Latin, or Oriental source considered it worth recording. In that case, the place of history is not in a literal reading of the text, but rather in its careful interpretation, and this carnage can be explained in various ways.

If the astrological prediction was true in itself and determined all of the subsequent actions of the magi, taken as a historical fact (as some interpreters

105 See H. Hunger and S. Parpola, "Bedeckungen des Planeten Jupiter durch den Mond." *Archiv für Orientforschung* 29/30 (1983/84): 46–49; this fact was emphasized by Hughes, Review of Molnar, 390.

106 See Panaino, "I Magi e la Stella nei Sermoni di San Pier Crisologo. Qualche riflessione critica a proposito di scienza, fede e metodo storico," in *Ravenna da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale. Atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di studio sull'Alto medioevo. Ravenna, 6–12 giugno 2004* (vol. 2; Atti dei Congressi 17; Spoleto: CISAM, 2005), 559–92.

seem to do), I would expect to find classes on astrology in our faculties of sciences. I would also expect that Christianity would have accepted the astrological art as one of the fundamental means of interpreting human destiny, a possibility that, in spite of minor exceptions,¹⁰⁷ was strongly attacked by Christian communities. On the contrary, the church fathers prudently interpreted this pericope as referring to a sort of divine revelation offered to some wise men, who were already waiting for God, as a universal symbol of conversion. When they referred to a miracle, it was not meant as if the star itself was a “miracle,” like a bomb in the heavens or a shocking event, but in a spiritual sense, probably as a kind of interior vision. In fact, if we read the text of the pericope more carefully, we see that the star was seen only by those who were looking at it spiritually, that is, the magi themselves. In contrast, the people of Jerusalem did not see anything. In spite of an esoteric horoscope, finally uncovered on the basis of a series of sloppy linguistic interpretations and improbable historical assumptions, it is more prudent to accept the fact that ancient religions simply believed in the power of divine inspiration. This does not mean that we must also believe in these powers, but rather that, as historians, we should be prepared to analyze that way of thinking instead of searching for clues to fictional mysteries.

With regard to Irano-Christian relations, the pericope of the magi is one of the earliest Christian sources confirming a certain attention towards the Eastern world involving civilizations not included into the Roman *limes*, and the direct reference to the magi, although formally neutral, should be framed in the crucial contemporary context of the first century CE. The esoteric competence attributed to such a circle of wise men and priests traditionally belonging to the Iranian world offered the basic net for further speculations, and their act of submission was considered a sign of universal conversion, mirrored in the recognition of a star that appeared to a pagan people waiting for a new savior. The symbolic, spiritual, religious, and multicultural meanings of this literary presence are altogether the most important historical fact preserved in Matt 2:1–12. Whether this story was to any extent a true event or the re-elaboration of another historical event, perhaps the conflation of a midrašic tradition or a pious narrative transmitted by a particular Christian community, is certainly important, but it is not essential; if the historical truth is probably somewhere in the middle, the spiritual legacy appears clear: universalism, research, and dialogue. These are the fundamental pillars of the story. Very prudently, early Christian tradition refused to fall into the trap of the historicization of the

107 See the discussion in T. Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (Patristic Studies 6; New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

astronomical event and of its scientific demonstration, which, as we have seen, paradoxically open the way to the ambiguous powers of magic and apotelesmatic divination. The star was a symbol of faith and the prize for a secular expectation. This is the main message, and that was the way in which theological traditions interpreted the event.

The speculations of a rude scientism do not support any faith, and they ruin historical science. Thus, there is no compelling reason for any professional astronomer to feel obliged to give an astronomical explanation for the phenomenon of the Star of Bethlehem. In fact, it would be absurd for a scientist to be asked to give a 'religious' answer (although offered in the name of science and by means of 'scientific' mathematical and astronomical arguments) in spite of the obvious fact that very many Christian churches, starting with the oldest ones, have prudently avoided any explicit statement on this subject. The desire for sensational explanations and the attraction of mystery have nothing to do with science, and I refuse to consider the massive abuses of textual sources such as Matthew's Gospel—which are committed by some scholars who presume that the astronomical approach concerns 'reality'—to be 'scientific', while the explanations of a philologist or a specialist in the history of religions should be considered 'theological' and abstract. Theology has to be known in order to follow the history of ideas and their interpretation and evolution over the course of time, but a professional historian has no religion to defend *a priori*; thus, his approach is not at all theological. Rather, he is closer to Popper¹⁰⁸ in his crude considerations concerning "the myth of the framework" or in the criticism already expressed by Jaspers¹⁰⁹ in the difficult dialogue between philosophy and theology. The historian must frequently study texts belonging to religions in which he does not even believe, but it would be methodologically inconsistent to assume that a Jew or a Muslim, a deist or an atheist, would not be capable of studying Matthew's Gospel and its legacy. A scholar, as a specialist in the field, should be indifferent with respect to any confessional approach.

In this sense, history is also a science, and as a very difficult science, it must also take into consideration the continuous contributions coming from the fields of the 'exact sciences'; in many cases, the historian has to consult the astronomer and is compelled to learn in order to avoid making a beginner's mistakes. In contrast, it is a pity that in many cases the study of the ancient world is treated in an overly simplistic way, as if its contents did not demand

108 K. R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of the Science and Rationality* (ed. M. A. Notturmo; London/New York: Routledge, 1999).

109 K. Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube* (Zürich: Piper, 1948).

deep study and extensive background, as often happens in astrophysics and mathematics. Thus, philology (and philologies), linguistics, political and religious history, and other disciplines are simply confused and compressed, reduced to 'theology', simply because we are speaking of something concerning god. Furthermore, we are compelled to read amateurish texts containing a number of mistakes that could have been corrected in a basic introductory course on the subject.

For all of these reasons, it is not important in this context whether one believes or not, but rather whether one wants to understand the concepts and the interpretive patterns created over the course of time, in order to explain—at least in part—the historical consequences they produced. On the contrary, if one feels the duty to explain the mystery of the star, one enters into another field, that of religion—although not as a historian, but with the full title of a confessional interpreter. This is another job, indeed.

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PART 4

Astrology in the Greco-Roman World



Matthew's Magi as Experts on Kingship

Albert de Jong

This chapter argues that the magi of Matthew chapter two do not appear in that text because they were, in one way or another, hellenized astrologers (as Michael R. Molnar suggests),¹ but because they were regarded, in Matthew's literary world, as experts in kingship. Kingship mattered to Matthew, who is the only New Testament author for whom Jesus was *born* the King of the Jews, and this claim needed suitable literary support. That is what the magi accomplish in the narrative; their connection with the star is secondary to that theme, and almost all of the connections between Persian magi and astrology one finds in classical literature are based upon the Matthew narrative, rather than the other way around.

A Star Announces the Birth of John the Baptist

The *Book of John* or the *Teachings of the Kings*, a Mandaean text that is always claimed to be late,² even though it incorporates earlier materials, contains a long story on John the Baptist, a person seen by the Mandaeans as one of the initiators of their religion.³ The story follows some of the elements of the gospel narrative on John the Baptist, but with characteristic Mandaean twists.

1 M. R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 32–33.

2 See, for example, J. Hart, *The Mandaeans, a People of the Book? An Examination of the Influence of Islam on the Development of Mandaean Literature* (diss. Indiana University, 2010); G. Mayer, *Und das Leben ist siegreich. Ein Kommentar zu den Kapiteln 18–33 des Johannesbuches der Mandäer: Der Traktat über Johannes den Täufer* (diss. Heidelberg 1996).

3 For the book of John (*draša d-iahia*), also known as the “teachings of the kings” (*drašia d-malkia*), see M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1905–1915, 2 vols.; repr. in a single volume Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966), and the dissertations in the preceding note. The work is known in the English-speaking world through the problematic work of G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostic John the Baptist: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book* (London: Watkins, 1924). A new edition with an English translation is currently being prepared by Charles Häberl and James McGrath; see <http://rogueleaf.com/book-of-john> (accessed 24 March 2015).

For the Mandaeans, Jesus is evil, although his mother, Miriai, was a Mandaean herself, and Jesus' initial relationship with John the Baptist implied that he was not evil by nature, but rather evil by choice.⁴ He is the false Messiah, one of a long series of key figures from Jewish and Christian mythical history who have been transformed into evil beings. Thus, Moses and Abraham are both called *nbiha d-ruha*, "prophet of the Holy Spirit," but this Holy Spirit, *Ruha d-Qudša*, is the leader of the forces of evil in this world in our timeframe. Therefore, it is remarkable—and poorly explained—that the Mandaeans have exalted the role of John the Baptist, a figure unknown in the earliest attested Mandaean texts but of increasing importance in later Mandaean literary production.⁵

The eighteenth chapter of the *Book of John* tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist to his parents *Nišbai* (Elizabeth) and *Aba Saba Zakria* ("old father Zechariah") in Jerusalem. As one might expect in the setting of the present volume, the story involves a star that appears above Jerusalem as well as other heavenly portents; while the star is particularly associated with Elizabeth, three lights appear above Zechariah, the Sun and the Moon change their course, smoke billows out of the temple, and a further shooting star appears over Jerusalem. None of this bodes well for the priestly establishment of Judah, whose grip on the world John the Baptist is destined to loosen.⁶

If we compare the treatment of this Mandaean narrative with the ways in which the theme of the Star of Bethlehem has been studied, discrepancies are immediately evident. Not a single Western scholar has ever imagined or suggested that meteorological and astronomical evidence should be adduced for its interpretation. The narrative is barely known beyond a small circle of scholars, and the Mandaean community is small, but these are matters of scale and familiarity that should not *per se* govern interpretive strategies. As it is, the Mandaean narrative on John the Baptist is consistently explained as a literary invention, in this case partially dependent on Matthew's narrative about the Star of Bethlehem. This is the only reasonable option for this particular text, but that should also be true of the narrative on the Star of Bethlehem in the Gospel of Matthew. The presence of the magi in this narrative is, in fact, one of the key indicators of the literary constructedness of the gospel story. This is immediately evident in Michael Molnar's discussion of the magi, since in

4 See J. J. Buckley, "The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus' Mother, Miriai," *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993): 181–96.

5 A. de Jong, "Johannes de Doper en de Mandeeërs," *Schrift* 42 (2010): 218–21.

6 G. Mayer, "Ein Kind aus Himmelhöhen—Geburt und Gestalt Johannes des Täuflers bei den Mandäern," in *Und das Leben ist siegreich! And Life is Victorious. Mandäische und samaritanische Literatur, Mandaean and Samaritan Literatures* (Mandäische Forschungen 1; ed. R. Voigt; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 145–60.

his quest to figure out “what really happened, and when,” he had to reinvent the biblical magi in a way that represents them as something they have never been: hellenized astrologers. Molnar is not wholly to be blamed for this, since New Testament scholarship itself has long failed to engage seriously with the presence of the magi.

Visions of the Magi in Greek Literature

The problems are caused, of course, by the fact that the Greek word *magos*, although generally recognized as a loanword from Old Persian *magu-*, has always had two distinct meanings in Greek.⁷ On the one hand, it identifies Zoroastrian priests; on the other, it refers to a type of specialists who were reputed to be experts in what has come to be called, after them, “magic.”⁸ It would be comforting if the one meaning of the word could be said to have developed out of the other, but this is at the very least extremely difficult to prove. From the earliest attestations onwards, we meet the word *magos* in both usages: Persian priest and not-ethnically definable ritual specialist. Any opinion on the meaning the word would have had to the ears of the first hearers of Matthew’s narrative thus becomes a matter of guesswork. If reception history is anything to go by, however, it is clear that most expert interpreters—those who wrote commentaries on Matthew, based their theologies on this story, or transformed it into artistic representations—went for the option that the magi were, indeed, Persian priests.⁹ There are good reasons for this: the overall

7 See A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 133; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 387 with n. 1; W. Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 99–123; P. S. Horky, “Persian Cosmos and Greek Philosophy: Plato’s Associates and the Zoroastrian *magoi*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37 (2009): 47–103; A. Ahmadi, “The *magoi* and *daimones* in Column VI of the Derveni Papyrus,” *Numen* 61 (2014): 484–508.

8 For the development of this deeply problematic concept, see R. Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); W. J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 164–77; and especially B.-C. Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 57; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

9 See, *inter multos alios*, U. Monneret de Villard, *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici* (Studi e Testi 163; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1952); A. Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella: Storia, scienza e teologia di un racconto evangelico* (Milano: Edizioni San Paolo, 2012).

learned interpretations of the activities of the other type of specialists also known as magi—those who perform private rituals, speak words of power, write protective spells, bind enemies or loved ones, etc.—did not generally accord a high social desirability to their activities, to the point of disparaging them and their craft.¹⁰ Magi as magicians would hardly constitute a group to which an author would gladly attribute recognition of the significance of the birth of Jesus.

The Magi in Matthew

Since Matthew plays so extensively with the failure of Herod to understand what was going on and with the superior knowledge of the magi in this respect, that latter class must be expected to correspond to a group of experts known for their insights in at least one of two aspects Matthew wants to stress: either astrology, which is the option chosen by most specialists, but one I am going to reject below, or kingship, which is the option I am defending in this chapter. I argue that it is the notion of the magi as royal experts, as king-makers, that explains their presence in the gospel narrative better than the notion of them as observers of the heavens, a reputation they did not really have.

Matthew is not just the only authority for the Star of Bethlehem narrative; he is also alone among the gospel authors in stressing the fact that Jesus was, as a matter of birthright, the “King of the Jews.” All four of the canonical Gospels use that title in their narratives about the trial and execution of Jesus,¹¹ and in Luke, this title is foretold in the story of the annunciation, as one that would be applied to Jesus, but in a clear eschatological context: Gabriel tells Mary that she will give birth to a son, whom she should name Jesus, to whom God will eventually give the throne of David, and who will reign over the house of Jacob as an eternal king in a kingdom that will not end.¹² It is only Matthew who

10 Some nuance is necessary even here, however; recent work has tended to stress the ‘popular’ negative interpretation of the term *magus*, while allowing for a ‘serious’ reception of the practice of magic, and, hence, its specialists. See, for example, R. Gordon, “Magic as a Topos in Augustan Poetry: Discourse, Reality, and Distance,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 11 (2009): 209–28; R. Gordon, “Magian Lessons in Natural History: Unique Animals in Graeco-Roman Natural Magic,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (eds. J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen & Y. Kuiper; Numen Book Series 127; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 249–69; J. B. Rives, “*Magus* and its Cognates in Classical Latin,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West* (eds. R. L. Gordon & F. M. Simón; Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 168; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53–77.

11 E.g., Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33.

12 Luke 1:30–33.

claims that Jesus was *born* as such, and the visit of the magi is the instrument through which this fact is illustrated. I suggest, therefore, that we should not look for hellenized astrologers, but rather for Oriental king-makers, when we want to make sense of the journey of the magi.

The (Hellenized) Magi and Astrology

In Molnar's *Star of Bethlehem*, we meet the magi in two distinct capacities: one—claimed to be of historical interest only—is that of Zoroastrian priests; the other—better serving his purposes—is that of hellenized astrologers.¹³ The reason why these astrologers must be considered hellenized is the fact that the astrology Molnar has deduced from Matthew's narrative—which he suggests as the most plausible background to the story, and indeed, as propping up the historicity of the narrative somehow—is Greek rather than Mesopotamian. There is, in principle, nothing strange about this. Greek astrology spread far and wide in the first three centuries of the Common Era, all the way up to India, in fact.¹⁴ It is clearly responsible for the development of Iranian astrology in the Sasanian period, and it is likely to have been part of learned Iranian culture before the rise of the Sasanians.¹⁵ One does not have to be hellenized, in other words, to avail oneself of the techniques of Greek astrology, any more than one needs to be Indianized to practice yoga, meditate, or use ayurvedic medicine in the contemporary West, or any more than one would have to be Indianized when introducing the zero in the interest of a better way of doing mathematics.

The notions of hellenization and its twin sister, romanization, have come under brutal attack over the past few decades, largely under the influence of post-colonial reconsiderations of the ways in which the cultural developments of the ancient world have traditionally been interpreted.¹⁶ Although the

13 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 32–33 (almost everything that Molnar writes about the Persian magi and the semantic development of the word *magos* is historically problematic).

14 D. Pingree, *The Yavana-jātaka of Spujidhvaja* (Harvard Oriental Series 48; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

15 E.g., E. Raffaelli, *L'oroscopo del mondo. Il tema di nascita del mondo e del primo uomo secondo l'astrologia zoroastriana* (Milano: Mimesis, 2001), 13–49.

16 See, for example, M. J. Versluys, "Understanding Objects in Motion: an *Archaeological Dialogue* on Romanization," *Archaeological Dialogues* 21 (2014): 1–20, with the following articles (by R. Hingley, T. Hodos, T. D. Stek, P. van Dommelen, G. Woolf, and a rejoinder by M. J. Versluys) in that same issue, pp. 20–64.

concepts have likewise been defended¹⁷ and modified,¹⁸ these recent debates seem to have failed to make much of an impact on the discussion of the magi in general and the magi in Matthew in particular.

This is the setting for a proper understanding of the theory of cultural adaptation one can find in the most famous work¹⁹ ever to have been published on the magi as hellenized wise men: the two-volume study *Les mages hellénisés* by Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont.²⁰ In it, they collected all of the fragments from Greek and Latin literature, with a bit of Syriac, that were passed on under the names of Zoroaster, Ostanès, and a wide assortment of less well-known magi. This is a bulky work dealing with a huge array of different crafts from antiquity: alchemy is well represented, of course, alongside geomancy, knowledge of the special properties of stones and gems and the powerful working of various plants, and a bit of astrology as well, although the astrological fragments are all very late. This was an immensely useful work, produced by two brilliant scholars, further establishing their reputations. However, a serious threat to that reputation came from the interpretive essay with which they opened the work in its first volume.²¹ Here, they claimed as the most likely background of these writings a community that they had basically invented: the hellenized magi, whom they also (wrongly, as is now known) called the “Magusaeans.”²² These would have been communities of magi who moved from Iran to Mesopotamia and there switched languages—adopting Aramaic instead of Persian—and became saturated with Babylonian lore before moving once more, this time to Anatolia, where they again switched languages—to Greek. This gave Bidez and Cumont an astonishing (and no doubt much appreciated) intellectual freedom to attribute whatever they found in these texts to any particular culture of their liking, with the exception of the most obvious

17 P. Le Roux, “La romanisation en question,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 59 (2004): 287–311, and especially J.-B. Yon, “La romanisation de Palmyre et des villes de l’Euphrate,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 59 (2004): 313–36.

18 E.g., C. Marksches, “Does it make sense to speak about a ‘Hellenization of Christianity’ in Antiquity?” *Church History and Religious Culture* 92 (2012): 5–34.

19 The only other works that would come close to the status of a ‘classic’ in this field are A. D. Nock, “Greeks and Magi,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 30 (1940): 191–98 (a response to Bidez & Cumont), and A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

20 J. Bidez & F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d’après la tradition grecque* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938; 2 vols., repr. 1973).

21 Bidez-Cumont, *Mages hellénisés* 1, in particular the preface (pp. v–xi), where their main theory is set out.

22 See de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 404–13.

setting of most of this literature, which—if anything—seems to be Egyptian.²³ It was a wide-ranging interpretation that has, by now, been fully discredited, especially because it attempted to impose order on a collection of texts that shared no more than the fact that they were put in the mouths of Persian wise men.²⁴ The Magusaeans are known, of course, from a handful of texts; their name is derived from Aramaic, and everything we know about them shows them to have been members of Zoroastrian communities in Anatolia, which is not in the least surprising, since Anatolia flows over into Armenia, one of the strongholds of Zoroastrianism in the ancient world.²⁵

Although Molnar does not refer to the work of Bidez and Cumont at all, his interpretation of the magi is based on a strikingly similar view of hellenization: that whenever someone uses anything Greek, he must have been 'hellenized'. But there are other problems; the astrological works circulating in this particular catalogue are numerically not the strongest and mostly postdate the gospel narrative considerably. The reputation of the magi as astrologers is therefore often believed to have been produced by Matthew, who attributed to them the ability to find meaning by following a powerful star.

The Journey of Tiridates

The same logic seems to underlie interpretations of that other famous episode of magi bearing gifts: the journey of Tiridates of Armenia to Nero's Rome. This, too, has been unearthed recently in relation to the Star of Bethlehem, since the story coincides chronologically with the appearance of Halley's Comet in the year 66 (and is therefore conveniently close to Matthew's Gospel).

This is a difficult subject; the Parthian Empire and the Roman Republic, and later the Roman Empire, fought over Armenia for almost the entire duration of their states. The most crushing defeat the Roman Republic ever suffered, in

23 A point forcefully made by J. F. Quack, "Les Mages Égyptianisés? Remarks on Some Surprising Points in Supposedly Magusean Texts," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65 (2006): 267–82.

24 R. Beck, "Thus Spake not Zarathuštra: Zoroastrian Pseudepigrapha of the Greco-Roman World," in *A History of Zoroastrianism III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, by M. Boyce and F. Grenet (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 491–565.

25 For the Magusaeans there, see de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 404–13; for Zoroastrianism in Armenia, see J. R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Carrhae in 53 BCE, was part of this struggle,²⁶ and so was the interpretation—and propagandistic use—of the journey of Tiridates to Rome.²⁷ Very briefly, this is the background to the story: The Armenian kingdoms had long been ruled by royal families who could trace their ancestry to Achaemenid satraps. These are the lines of the Orontids and the Artaxiads, respectively. In the incredibly tumultuous political situation in the first century before and the first century of the Common Era, Rome attempted to extend its reach far to the East, and failed; its eastward expansion was permanently halted by the Parthians. Armenia lay right between these two rival superpowers and suffered much from it. The Artaxiad dynasty came to an end in the fifties of the first century CE. The Parthian king of kings, Vologeses I, attempted to put his brother, Tiridates, on the Armenian throne, just as he had made his other brother, Pacorus, king of Media Atropatene. The Armenians, it seems, did not oppose this move, but Rome could not countenance it and resorted to a diplomatic game of shadows. The end result was that Tiridates would indeed be made king of Armenia, but that he would receive his crown from the hands of Nero. This enabled the Parthians to gain the substance of power and to establish the long-lasting Arsacid line of kings of Armenia, while also allowing Rome to save face. Tiridates had to travel to Rome to receive his crown, and this took him nine months, because he refused to sail there, since this would compromise his ritual purity. It turns out that the king fulfilled priestly duties in Armenia's temples, and he did sail back, but in a journey that would only take a day.²⁸ Tiridates' visit to Rome has been reported in exuberant terms by several historians, and it was taken up by Cumont, unsurprisingly, who suggested a connection between the "Magian feasts" the king of Armenia organized for the Roman emperor and the mysteries of Mithras (which at the time, however, did not yet exist).²⁹ Once again, the suggestion has been made that the causal relation is the other way around: Roger Beck has persuasively argued that Tiridates' visit actually produced, somewhat distantly, the mysteries

26 G. C. Sampson, *The Defeat of Rome: Crassus, Carrhae and the Invasion of the East* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008); and especially G. Traina, *Carrhes. 9 juin 53 avant J.-C. Anatomie d'une défaite* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011).

27 The journey itself is known only from three (at times fleeting) witnesses, each of whom contributes unique details: Dio Cassius 63.1–7; Pliny, *Natural History* 30.16–17; Suetonius, *Nero* 13. The events leading up to Tiridates' journey are supplied especially by Tacitus, *Annales* 15.24–31.

28 This particular piece of information is found only in Dio Cassius 63.7.1.

29 F. Cumont, "L'iniziazione di Nerone da parte di Tiridate d'Armenia," *Rivista di Filologia* 11 (1933): 145–54.

of Mithras.³⁰ In a recent article by Rod Jenkins, Tiridates' journey has been connected with the appearance of Halley's Comet in the year 66, and both, he suggests, could explain Matthew's combination of a 'star' and the 'magi'.³¹ There is, however, no mention of a star in the Tiridates narrative, and apart from the king (as *magus*) himself,³² the magi appear in it mainly, as happens to be proper, in the king's retinue.

The Magi and the King

This is, in fact, where they always are in the Greek imagination. By far the majority of Greek texts that speak of Persian magi locate them at the Persian court and interpret them as servants of the kings of kings.³³ Although many of these passages make use of long-standing stereotypical notions of a partly imaginary Persian court, we also have Iranian documentation from the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods that shows their presence at court.³⁴ This is

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- 30 R. Beck, "History into Fiction: The Metamorphoses of the Mithras Myths," *Ancient Narrative* 1 (2001–2002): 283–300 (repr. in R. Beck, *Beck on Mithraism* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004], 93–110).
- 31 R. M. Jenkins, "The Star of Bethlehem and the Comet of AD 66," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 114 (2004): 336–43.
- 32 It is only Pliny who mentions that the king was a magus; Tacitus simply mentions the fact that the king had said that he could not travel to Rome, because he was needed at home for religious duties.
- 33 There is no full inventory of these passages, but many of them are discussed in de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 387–403; see also A. de Jong, "Religion at the Achaemenid Court," in *Der Achämenidenhof. The Achaemenid Court* (eds. B. Jacobs & R. Rollinger; *Classica et Orientalia* 2; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 533–58.
- 34 For the Achaemenid period, the evidence derives largely from the Elamite administration from the reign of Darius, and its interpretation is not easy; a sensible brief discussion can be found in M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism II: Under the Achaemenians* (Leiden: Brill 1982), 133–37; the suggestion of H. Koch (*Die religiösen Verhältnisse der Dareioszeit. Untersuchungen an Hand der elamischen Persepolistäfelchen* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977], 156–58) that the magi were almost exclusively responsible for the *lan*-sacrifice has justly been rejected by W. Henkelman (*The Other Gods Who are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets* [Leiden: NINO, 2008]), a monumental work that has considerably expanded our knowledge of these difficult matters; for the Parthian period, we have to rely on Greek and Latin sources, since the Parthian sources themselves have only preserved a more specific priestly title, not the generic title of 'magus'. This is also largely true of Sasanian inscriptions, although the title 'magus' is extensively extant on Sasanian seals and thus shows its presence. See R. Gyselen,

only to be expected, for Zoroastrianism—the religion they served—is a family-based religion, and a dynasty is, among many other things, also a family. There are two interesting points to be made, I think: the first is literary, and the second takes us into the realm of Platonic and Stoic philosophy.

The literary point is the simplest. The magi as court priests are not just frequently found in Herodotus' *Histories*, but they are especially well attested in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.³⁵ Their presence in the Greek imagination can thus be very securely attested, since both Herodotus and the *Cyropaedia* remained crucial points of reference for many intellectuals and statesmen in the Greek and Roman worlds.³⁶ They are there in most descriptions of Persian or Persian-style monarchies in the relevant periods: among the kings of Commagene,³⁷ at the court of Mithradates of Pontus, in the Parthian royal house, etc. Their connections with royal courts in the service of those kings who happened to resist Rome's territorial expansion—arranging their rituals, choosing the gods to whom sacrifices had to be made, and divining the future—made them into a class of non-Roman experts in royal affairs that was not to be found elsewhere in Matthew's world. The Chaldeans, who as star-gazers would otherwise have been suitable candidates for interpreting a miraculous celestial portent, failed on this account, and so did the sages of Egypt, the Brahmins of India, and all others who may have had similar reputations as wise men but who did not serve a 'kingship' of the type Matthew needed for his King of the Jews. The most important reference roughly contemporary with Matthew is probably Plutarch's description of the royal initiation at Pasargadae.³⁸ This is part of a story Plutarch is relating about the struggle between the future king Artaxerxes II and the rival claimant to the throne, Cyrus the Younger. There was a plot, Plutarch writes, to kill the new king and replace him with Cyrus at

"Les sceaux des mages dans l'Iran sassanide," in *Au carrefour des religions. Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux* (ed. R. Gyselen; Res Orientales 7; Bures-sur-Yvette: Peeters, 1995), 121–50. The important epigraphic exception, moreover, is the great trilingual inscription of King Shapur I on the Ka'be-ye Zartosht (ŠKZ), where the Greek version uses the word *magos* to translate more specific Iranian titles. See Ph. Huysse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999).

35 Thus, for example, Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 4.5.14; 7.5.57; 8.3.11.

36 See, for example, F. Hobden & C. Tuplin (eds.), *Xenophon: Ethical Principles and Historical Enquiry* (Mnemosyne Supplements 348; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

37 Boyce & Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism III*, 329–30.

38 Plutarch, *Life of Artaxerxes* 3. See de Jong, "Religion at the Achaemenid Court," 545–47, and C. Binder, "Das Krönungszeremoniell der Achämeniden," in *Der Achämenidenhof: The Achaemenid Court* (eds. B. Jacobs and R. Rollinger; Classica et Orientalia 2; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 473–97.

the moment when Artaxerxes was undergoing the initiation administered by Persian priests (Plutarch here uses the word *hiereus*, not *magos*). In the end, Cyrus was betrayed by another priest (who had taught him the wisdom of the magi, mentioned as such), caught, and punished. The importance of this passage for a proper understanding of Matthew's magi is that it shows the Persian priests as king-makers.

The philosophical part of the explanation is rather similar. Plato specialists weary of grandiose claims of Oriental influence on Plato's thought have generally highlighted the negative things Plato wrote about Persia and the Persians, but alongside an interpretation of these negative remarks—which fit Athens in the fourth century BCE rather well—there is a growing body of scholarship that points out the importance of an idealized Persia for the development of Plato's ideas about statehood, and especially stresses the continuing presence of Iranian ideas and subjects in the Academy after Plato's death.³⁹ It is immaterial whether one believes the *Greater Alcibiades* to have been written by Plato or not;⁴⁰ it is generally recognized as a hugely important text for the history of Platonic thought in antiquity, and it precisely stresses the intimate interrelations between an ideal notion of kingship and the activities of the magi, who are charged with teaching the princelings the wisdom of Zoroaster as well as royal affairs.⁴¹ One can trace the presence of this view of Persian wise men through a long series of philosophical writings,⁴² and it pops up, remarkably, in the Borysthenian oration of Dio of Prusa (again roughly contemporary with Matthew), who supports his Platonic views on the monarchy by invoking a long and spurious myth about heavenly chariots, which he ascribes, once more, to the magi.⁴³

39 P. Kingsley, "Meetings with Magi: Iranian Themes among the Greeks, from Xanthus of Lydia to Plato's Academy," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1995): 173–209; Horky, "Persian Cosmos and Greek Philosophy."

40 See the long discussion, arguing for authenticity, in N. Denyer, *Plato. Alcibiades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

41 (ps-)Plato, *Alcibiades* I.121E–122A; see de Jong (*Traditions of the Magi*, 446–51) on Greek references to "Persian" education.

42 De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 213 with n. 29.

43 See H.-G. Nesselrath, B. Bäbler, M. Forschner, and A. de Jong, *Menschliche Gemeinschaft und göttliche Ordnung: Die Borysthenes-Rede* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003).

Conclusion

The magi who came from the East in the Gospel of Matthew are not present in that text because they really arrived, because there really was a star, and because they were capable of interpreting its significance. They are not in the text because these magi were astrologers; in fact, they were not. The issue should therefore move away from questions of historicity (what really happened?) to questions of literature (why does Matthew tell the story the way he does?). Why did Matthew choose, from among a host of wise men reputed to practice astrology on a very high level, a group of specialists who did not share that reputation, and who could moreover always be mistaken for a class of specialists (well known in the New Testament in the shape of the *magus* Simon),⁴⁴ whose reputation would do them no good? The answer to that question lies in their ability to represent authoritative knowledge on kingship. This reputation was unique to them, both in the real world—since Persian-style monarchies served by magi were ubiquitous in Matthew's own world, if only he cared to look to the East—and in the Greek literary and philosophical *imaginaire*. All of this plays into Matthew's strategy, unique among the gospel writers, of representing Jesus as being born the King of the Jews.

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⁴⁴ Acts 8:9–24; and cf. Acts 13:6–12.

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Greco-Roman Astrologers, the Magi, and Mithraism

Roger Beck

I would like to begin with a theory, advanced more than a century ago by Albrecht Dieterich,¹ that Matthew's story of the journey of the magi was calqued on—or, as we might say today, cloned from—the story of an actual historical journey undertaken by actual historical magi: the journey of Tiridates of Armenia to Rome in 66 CE. This journey culminated in Tiridates' homage to Nero, at which, if Dio² is to be believed, he hailed the emperor with these words: "I have come to you, my god, to kneel to you as I do to Mithras."³ Pliny (*NH* 30.6.17) adds that Tiridates, who was himself a magus and had brought other magi with him, "initiated" Nero into "magian feasts" (*magicis etiam cenis eum initiaverat*). Now to Pliny, who loathed magic and all of its works, all "magi" were, by both definition and nomenclature, practitioners of what we would call black magic. That Tiridates and company were nothing of the sort, but rather the genuine Iranian article, good Mazdayasnians all, can be shown from a detail he reported, the significance of which he did not appreciate. Unusually, Tiridates traveled overland in great pomp and at huge public expense, fêted by the cities through which he passed (Dio 63.1–2). Why overland? The land journey was dictated by religious scruple: magi would not pollute the element of water with their bodily discharges (Pliny, *ibid.*).

So, we have a notable journey undertaken by magi, culminating in an act of adoration, but no star and no astrologers. And this is precisely the point. The "star," whatever it was or might have been, is an addition to the new fictional travelogue constructed to bring magi to Bethlehem.

If Dieterich was right, then we have a *terminus post* for the genesis of the new travelogue: 66 CE. The *terminus ante* is of course the composition of

1 "Die Weisen aus dem Morgenlande," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 3 (1902): 1–14.

2 63.5.2.

3 On this episode, see A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 289, n. 152; R. Beck "History into Fiction: The Metamorphoses of the Mithras Myths," *Ancient Narrative* 1 (2001–02): 283–300, especially 284. On the amazing cross-fertilization of sacred myth and history that characterizes this period (mid-first century CE), see G. W. Bowersock, *History as Fiction: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Of this era, one is tempted to say: it is all story, all the way down.

Matthew's gospel in about 90 CE. The precise circumstances of its genesis are irrecoverable, but I would imagine something like this: a group of Antiochene Christians proclaiming, "Yes! And the true king and savior of the world was visited and adored by magi, too!" The "star" was then fitted into the narrative. Maybe there was a separate, pre-existing story about it, maybe not.⁴

Where do Mithras, Mithraism, and the Mithraists fit into all of this? Certainly, in what I think was the original historical narrative, Tiridates performs *proskynesis* to Nero "as to Mithras," and he and his complement would all have been worshippers of the Iranian deity Mithra. However, if there was no historical "journey of the magi" to Bethlehem, what follows? Not much, I'm afraid. The story, star and all, must be returned to New Testament scholars and narratologists, and the magi-astrologers—this particular instantiation of them—must vanish into thin air. Nevertheless, I have my mandate, and so I shall proceed to tell you something about the unstable combination of Greco-Roman astrologers, the magi, and Mithraism.

First "Mithraism"—I put that word in quotation marks because it is our term, not theirs. The cult of Mithras—my own preferred term—developed in the Roman Empire as a network of autonomous and autarkic voluntary associations centered on the worship of the god Mithras. Though secret in the sense that one did not divulge its mysteries, it was not secretive. It had no need to be, for its members were respectable folk, in and of the secular world. They met in smallish interior rooms furnished with daises, for reclining to celebrate their communal meal, on either side of a central aisle, at the end of which was a representation of Mithras killing a bull, the climactic event in the cult myth. The cult meeting places are now known as mithraea (singular "mithraeum"); the icon of the bull-killing we call the tauroctony, which is another neologism.⁵

Nomenclature matters, for it is one of the keys to identity, both self-identity and the identities imposed by the surrounding culture, not to mention successive waves of historians. Here is what a well-informed outsider, the third-century CE scholar Porphyry, has to say about the Mithraists, their founder, their religious project, and their sacred space:

4 Although I am skeptical of the whole story, I agree with Michael Molnar that a sequence of astrologically portentous configurations is more probable than an observed celestial event. For the latter, there is no evidence (other than Matthew) that a celestial event was observed and recorded, while for the former, it was at least technically possible for, say, a late-first-century Antiochene astrologer, asked to trawl for meaningful configurations back when Herod was king, to have hit on the basic configurations of 17 April 6 BCE by reviewing the all-important planetary longitudes.

5 This word means "bull-killing" in Greek. We may have to change the term if C. A. Faraone's hypothesis that the bull is perpetually wounded, not killed, catches on: "The Amuletic Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene," *Journal of Roman Studies* 103 (2013): 96–116.

... the Persians [by which he means contemporary Mithraists, not contemporary Persians] perfect their initiate by inducting him into a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again, calling the place a “cave.” For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all; it was located in the mountains near Persia and had flowers and springs. This cave bore for him the image of the cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos.⁶

That the Mithras cult was founded by Zoroaster “in the mountains near Persia” is of course pure fantasy—but fantasy of the sort beloved by the ancients, who tended to attribute anything profound in their culture to sages of long ago and far away.⁷ In contrast, archaeology has confirmed that the Mithraists did indeed call their meeting places “caves” and frequently designed and decorated them as such (a few were sited in natural caves or built against rock or cliff faces). No one would deny that initiation into a mystery was Mithraism’s business, though what precisely that mystery was is perennially in dispute. Lastly, there is no reason to doubt Porphyry’s word, confirmed by Origen, that the initiates of Mithras were known to their contemporaries as “the Persians”:

These things [i.e., the celestial ascent of souls] the teaching of the Persians and the mystery initiations of Mithras intimate... for there is therein a certain symbol of the two celestial revolutions, that of the fixed stars and that assigned to the planets, and of the route of the soul through and out (*diexodou*) of them. Such is the symbol: a seven-gated ladder and an eighth [sc. gate] on top. (*Against Celsus* 6.22)

6 *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*, 6. For a reconstruction of how exactly the mithraeum was equipped with “symbols of the elements and climates of the universe” in “proportionate arrangement” so as to serve as an “image of the cosmos,” see Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102–16; Beck, “If So, How? Representing ‘Coming Back to Life’ in the Mysteries of Mithras,” in the Proceedings of the Conference on “Coming Back to Life,” McGill and Concordia Universities, Montreal, May 2014, forthcoming.

7 A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Beck, “Thus Spake Not Zarathustra: Zoroastrian Pseudepigrapha of the Graeco-Roman World,” in *A History of Zoroastrianism III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, by M. Boyce and F. Grenet (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 491–565.

Historians of astronomy will recognize that what underlies Mithraic teaching here is not astrology at all but commonplace Hellenistic astronomy: the apparent revolution of the sphere of the fixed stars in one direction and of the seven “planets” in the opposite direction, the former uniform and universal, the latter erratic and particular to each of the seven. It is the same astronomically based cosmos that the mithraeum replicates, according to Porphyry and his sources.⁸

When did the Mithras cult get underway? I see no reason to change the view I advanced sixteen years ago, that the cult as we know it from the copious archaeological record started to blossom some time in the last two decades of the first century CE.⁹ If I am right, Mithraism cannot have influenced the very early development of Christianity or Christianity’s stories.¹⁰ This, however, is not to say that Michael Molnar was wrong to appeal to Mithraism on very broad climate-of-the-times issues, such as the widespread allure of heliolatry.¹¹

Did Mithraism include members characterized as “magi”? Since the Mithraists defined their cult as “the mysteries of the Persians” and claimed Zoraster as their founder, we might reasonably expect to find a self-styled “magus” or two, especially as the cult was quite inventive with its titles. It is rather surprising, then, to find only two mentions of “magi” in the archaeological record. Both of them occur in graffiti in the late second- to mid third-century mithraeum at

8 Whether or not the function of the mithraeum as a literal microcosm was initiation “into a mystery of the soul’s descent and ascent back out again” is not at issue here. I think that it was, and that Porphyry was not mistaken in saying so (Beck, “If So, How?”).

9 Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A new account of their genesis,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 115–28.

10 For the record, I am not one of those who hold that, when both cults were up and running, there was any significant interaction between them, or that either cult influenced the other in matters of myth, theology, or ritual.

11 Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 56–57, 108. Molnar’s information on the cult and its god, Mithras, relied on David Ulansey’s *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The choice was understandable; at the time, Ulansey’s book was the only monograph on the cult readily available in English, other than Franz Cumont’s *The Mysteries of Mithra*, first published in 1903 (trans. T. J. McCormack; reprint New York: Dover, 1956). Ulansey proposed that the Mithraists worshipped their god as the power ruling the world axis and thus the causal agent behind the astronomical phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes. While I agree that Mithraism was freighted with astral matters—to say otherwise would be to negate a good part of my academic career—Ulansey’s particular thesis about Mithras as the god of precession, in my view and the views of most experts on the science and religion of the times, is not tenable. The main difficulty is to explain, in the silence of the sources, the transmission, not to mention the reason for the transmission, of such an arcane piece of technical astronomy to a religious cult.

Dura Europos on the Euphrates, the easternmost cult site known. The first mentions one Maximus, a/the “magus.”¹² The second speaks of “fiery breath, which is baptism for holy magi too.”¹³ The meaning of the second graffito is opaque, but we cannot infer from it that all of the Mithraists at Dura, let alone Mithraists elsewhere, considered themselves or styled themselves “magi.”¹⁴

And so, finally, we move from magi and Mithraism to Mithraism and Greco-Roman astrologers. Interest in things celestial is explicitly attested for two initiates of the cult. In Milan, the funerary inscription of one Marcus Valerius Maximus describes him as both a “priest” (*sacerdos*) of Mithras and a “student of astrology” (*studiosus astrologiae*).¹⁵ In Rome, the mid-fourth-century aristocrat and “father of fathers” of a Mithraic group, Nonius Victor Olympius, was described retrospectively by his grandson in an inscription as “devoted to heaven and the stars” (*caelo devotus et astris*).¹⁶ Marcus Valerius Maximus may or may not have been a professional astrologer. Nonius Victor Olympius certainly was not. In neither case is it implied that astral expertise was linked to cult office.

Knowledge of technical astrology can sometimes be inferred from the design of Mithraic monuments. For example, I have demonstrated¹⁷ that the signs of the zodiac around the representation of the birth of Mithras from the Housesteads Mithraeum on Hadrian’s wall¹⁸ are arranged according to the system of planetary houses, with the nocturnal houses below the Moon’s house, Cancer, on the left, and the diurnal houses below the Sun’s house, Leo, on the right (see Figure 13.1 below).¹⁹ I must leave aside the controversial issue

12 V61; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992), 239. “V+number” refers to the number in M. J. Vermaseren’s *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, 2 vols (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1956–60). Note the word “religion,” for while all of Vermaseren’s inscriptions and monuments relate to Mithras-worship, they do not all relate to the Roman cult of Mithras.

13 V68; see previous note.

14 That leaves us with the inscription, of uncertain date, from Faraša in southeast Cappadocia, that a certain Sangarios, son of Megaphernes (note the Iranian name), a *stratēgos* of Ariaramneia, *emageuse Mithrēi* (V19; M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 272–73). Whatever “being a magus for Mithras” or “performing a magian rite for Mithras” means, there is agreement that the inscription is not a record of the Mithras cult proper. This is an instance where appearance in Vermaseren’s catalogue can be misleading (see above, n. 12).

15 V708; Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 66.

16 V406; Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* (rev. ed.; Darmstadt: von Zabern, 2012), 34.

17 Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 35–9.

18 V860.

19 On the system of planetary houses (*oikoi*), see Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* 1.17; also Beck, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 84–87; Molnar, *The Star of*



LEFT		RIGHT	
"lunar semicircle"		"solar semicircle"	
House	Sign	Sign	House
of Moon	Cancer	Leo	of Sun
of Mercury	Gemini	Virgo	of Mercury
of Venus	Taurus	Libra	of Venus
of Mars	Aries	Scorpio	of Mars
of Jupiter	Pisces	Sagittarius	of Jupiter
of Saturn	Aquarius	Capricorn	of Saturn

FIGURE 13.1 *V86o: The Birth of Mithras, with zodiac arranged according to the system of planetary houses (Housesteads Mithraeum, Hadrian's Wall). (Photo credit: Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne and the Great North Museum, Hancock.)*

of whether the tauroctony was designed as a star chart of sorts, not so much for reasons of space, but because it concerns astral symbolism, not astrology in any technical sense.²⁰

In conclusion, I will mention a famous horoscope related to Mithras-worship,²¹ but not to the Roman cult of Mithras, which it pre-dates by more than a century. The horoscope takes the form of a magnificent lion in bas-relief, embellished with stars (see Figure 13.2 below). Three of the stars are labeled as the planets Mars, Mercury, and Jupiter.²² Another, particularly large star is set within the lunar crescent on the lion's chest and is thought to represent Regulus, Alpha Leonis, the "royal star in the heart of the Lion." The horoscope was dated by

-
- Bethlehem*, 129–30. Note that arranging the zodiac in this way precludes the more normal arrangement with the solstices and/or equinoxes at the cardinal points. To have set the solstices, with their seasonal implications, directly above and below the nascent Mithras would have required moving the signs one place clockwise (Cancer to where Leo is, Capricorn to where Aquarius is). If one insists on reading seasonality into this monument, the implication would be that Mithras was born a month after the winter solstice, when the Sun moves from Capricorn into Aquarius. This is an appropriate point at which to acknowledge that a cult celebration of Mithras's birthday at the winter solstice is not improbable, although there is no record of it, as there is for the public celebration on 25 December of the birthday of the official Sun god (Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 56).
- 20 On the history of this scholarly debate, see Beck, "The Rise and Fall of the Astral Identifications of the Tauroctonous Mithras," in *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 251–65; on the tauroctony as star chart and on the identity of the tauroctonous Mithras as Sun-in-Leo, see Beck, "In the Place of the Lion: Mithras in the Tauroctony," in *Studies in Mithraism* (ed. J. R. Hinnells; Rome: Bretschneider, 1994), 29–50; repr. in *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, 268–91; and for "a statistical demonstration of the extreme improbability of unintended coincidence in the selection of [astral symbols] in the composition [of the tauroctony]," see Beck, "Astral Symbolism in the Tauroctony: A Statistical Demonstration of the Extreme Improbability of Unintended Coincidence in the Selection of Elements in the Composition," in *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, 235–49. Likewise, I leave aside as irrelevant for our present purposes the category of "star-talk," which I employed in my monograph on the Mithraic mysteries (Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 153–89).
- 21 Hence the horoscope is listed as no. 30 in Vermaseren's catalogue (see above, n. 12). Molnar (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 77–78 with Fig. 18) adduces the lion horoscope as evidence of royal astrology current at the time of the birth of Jesus, as indeed it is.
- 22 Mars is called the "fiery [star] of Heracles," Mercury the "glittering [star] of Apollo," and Jupiter the "brilliant [star] of Zeus." (The Greek adjectives are respectively *pyroeis*, *stilbôn*, and *phaëthôn*.) On this alternative planetary nomenclature, see Beck, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology*, 72–73; F. Cumont "Les noms des planètes et l'astrolatrie chez les Grecs," *L'Antiquité Classique* 4 (1935): 5–43.

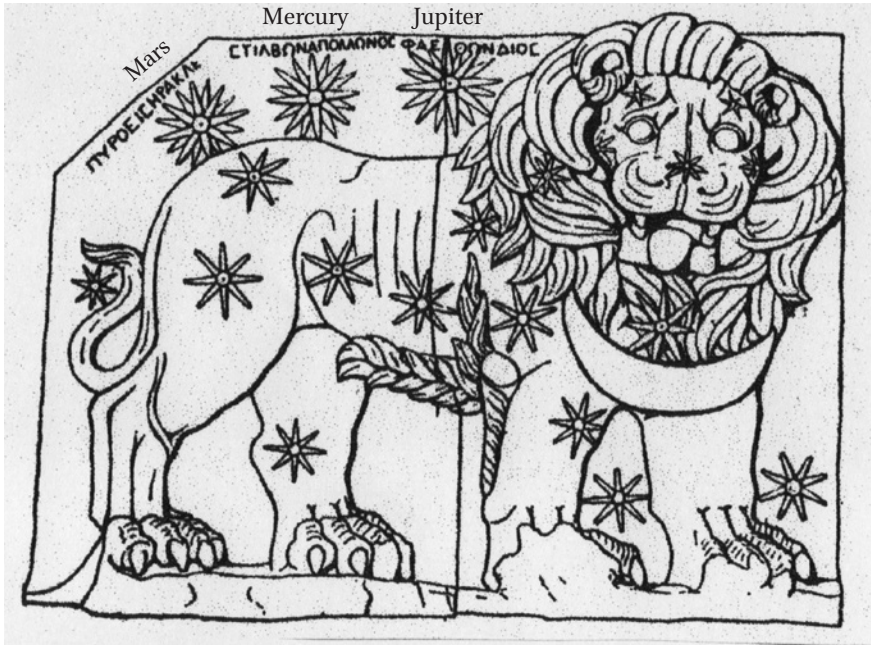


FIGURE 13.2 *The Lion Monument of Nemrud Dagh* (V3r; Neugebauer and Van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, no.–61). Original line drawing in A. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie grecque* (Paris, 1899), Fig. 41, p. 439. Copy in "Impression anastatique," 1963, *Culture et Civilization* (Brussels).

Neugebauer and Van Hoesen²³ to 62 BCE. Recently, Belmonte and González García²⁴ have convincingly re-dated it to 49 BCE.

The lion horoscope is but one of the monuments which King Antiochus I, the ruler of the small but strategic eastern border kingdom of Commagene, set up in a sanctuary dedicated to his gods (and to himself!) on the summit of the highest mountain in his realm, Nemrud Dagh.²⁵ Second among these gods was

23 *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1959), 14–17.

24 "Antiochos' Hierothesion at Nemrud Dag Re-Visited: Adjusting the Date in the Light of New Astronomical Evidence," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 41 no. 4 (2010): 469–81.

25 V28–32. On the Nemrud Dagh sanctuary, the Commagenian royal cult, and the place of Mithras in it, see F. K. Dörner, (ed.), "Kommagene: Geschichte und Kultur einer antiken Landschaft," *Antike Welt*, special issue 6 (1975), with excellent illustrations; Dörner, "Mithras in Kommagene," in *Études mithriaques* (ed. J. Duchesne-Guillemin; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 123–33; H. Dörrie, *Der Königskult des Antiochus von Kommagene im Lichte neuer Inschriften-Funde* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964); B. Jacobs, "Das Heiligtum auf dem Nemrud Daği," in *Gottkönige am Euphrat: Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in*

“Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes,” a composite of Greek Apollo, Iranian Mithra, the Sun, and the planet Mercury. On Nemrud Dagħ, then, we find a close link between technical astrology (as embodied in the lion horoscope), star-worship, and Mithras-worship. But I must emphasize that although this Mithras may have been a precursor of the god of the Roman mystery cult, he was not one and the same. Iranian Mithra had further metamorphoses to undergo in his journey from East to West.²⁶

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26 The story of this journey is not part of my mandate here. For that story, see Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 115–28; repr. in *Beck on Mithraism*, 31–44.

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The Star of Bethlehem and Greco-Roman Astrology, Especially Astrological Geography

Stephan Heilen

Greco-Roman astrology plays a significant part in Molnar's theory on the Star of Bethlehem. I would like to begin this chapter with a clarification. As a classical philologist who spent two decades reading, editing, and analyzing Greek and Latin astrological texts, I appreciate two obvious merits of Molnar's book. Firstly, the author takes an unprejudiced historical approach to astrology as an important cultural feature of the ancient world. Many scholars before Molnar have taken a contemptuous stance towards astrology and excluded *a priori* any potential relevance of astrology to the Star of Bethlehem. Secondly, I appreciate Molnar's intention to go back to the ancient sources, both written and archaeological, instead of pondering modern ideas about what might have plausibly seemed exciting to ancient astrologers.¹ These two points deserve to be emphasized, because more than a few contemporary classicists, historians, and other experts on the ancient world still look down on scholarly interest in ancient astrological texts, although astrology played an important role in various fields of ancient culture. The question of whether astrology deserves scholarly attention or not was settled positively more than a century ago by classical philologists and historians of religion such as F. Cumont, F. Boll, W. Kroll, and others when they embarked upon the big, fundamental project of the *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum* (1898–1953).² These preliminary remarks, together with my earlier publications on astrological topics, will suffice to demonstrate my open-minded and unprejudiced stance towards research in the history of astrology. Nevertheless, I shall argue that Molnar's theory is wrong, being marred by selective use and arbitrary interpretation of the ancient sources.

This chapter will concentrate on a central point of Molnar's thesis: the association of the zodiacal sign of Aries with Judea. Before going into detail, it will be useful to summarize the sequence of events which, in Molnar's view,

¹ Cf. Hand 1999, 60.

² See also the brief but very clear assessment of Otto Neugebauer (1951), arguably the most important historian of ancient astronomy of the twentieth century.

underlies the biblical account of the magi. Molnar assumes (against the mostly skeptical views of New Testament scholars)³ that the story of the magi has historical substance, but he never summarizes his view of the presumed sequence of events. The following is a tentative reconstruction of his view (in italics) with some comments of mine interspersed:

1. Some astrologers in early 6 BCE investigate the planetary alignments of the near future using planetary tables (not observation).⁴

The use of planetary tables for astrological purposes was certainly a widespread practice in the Eastern Mediterranean area in that period, but there is no historical evidence of any case of prospective checking of planetary tables for the purpose of detecting the births of royal individuals in the near future. All known cases are analyses of births that had already occurred.

2. They live east of Judea (in Mesopotamia?) and base their astrological interpretations on contemporary Hellenistic astrology, not on earlier Babylonian astrology, which was in most respects different.

We have no evidence of the existence of any such astrologer in first-century BCE Babylonia. We know of one Hellenistic astrologer of that period called Teucer of Babylon, but according to the authoritative judgment of Pingree, this name “must refer to the city near modern Cairo in Egypt.”⁵ While the theoretical possibility that there were Mesopotamian astrologers who employed Hellenistic astrology cannot be positively excluded,⁶ a Mesopotamian origin for the magi seems unlikely, also in view of the ancient tradition which, from the second century CE onwards, mostly identified their homeland as Persia.⁷

3 See, for example, Davies & Allison 1988, 231 and 246; Hagner 1993, 25; Luz 2002, 162–63.

4 See Molnar 1999, 42: “[R]unning through calculations, the Magi saw something auspicious according to the conventions of Greek astrology, something that revealed a newborn king of Judea.”

5 Pingree 1978, vol. II, p. 442.

6 Since the magi are more commonly thought to have come from Persia, it is worth emphasizing that the same total lack of evidence for the knowledge and/or practice of Hellenistic astrology is true for Persia in the first century BCE as well.

7 See Luz 2002, 177; also n. 150 below.

3. *Their attention is attracted by a rare astronomical event on 17 April 6 BCE: a heliacal rising of Jupiter in combination with a lunar occultation of Jupiter in Aries (plus some further astrologically promising features).*⁸

4. *They interpret this alignment as indicating the birth of a king . . .*

This assumption is in compliance with Hellenistic astrology (see below).

5. *. . . more precisely, a king of the Jews, because in Hellenistic astrology, the zodiacal sign of Aries is associated with Judea.*

Molnar's claim regarding the association of Aries with Judea will be discussed below.

6. *In order to worship the child, they travel to the capital of Judea and inquire of the local ruler (King Herod) where exactly the child has been born.*

7. *From Jerusalem, they travel to Bethlehem; not because they see a guiding star in the sky, but because Herod sent them there after his priests and scribes had reported that it was written that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.*

8. *While they travel, Jupiter is retrograde (since 23 August 6 BCE).*⁹

9. *On 19 December 6 BCE, Jupiter becomes stationary for a second time. This is what Matthew ambiguously describes as "the star stood over where the young child was."*

10. *The astrologers rejoice, enter the house, and worship the child.*

Molnar never addresses the thorny question of how Jupiter becoming stationary can indicate one specific house.¹⁰

8 This alignment is illustrated with diagrams for two different times of day (morning and noon) by Molnar (1999, 97–98).

9 Molnar 1999, 94, with an astronomical diagram.

10 It would be absurd to imagine the magi walking straight into the house in front of which they happened to be in the moment when Jupiter became stationary, because it was and still is impossible to determine the time of this astronomical phenomenon (becoming

The Chart of 17 April 6 BCE as a Royal Horoscope

The planetary alignment envisaged by Molnar could indeed have been interpreted as a royal birth by a Hellenistic astrologer. However, the extant ancient texts do not transmit a monolithic doctrine in this respect, but rather a bundle of closely related yet individually modified doctrines. The two most important (and also the two earliest) extant relevant texts are one by Claudius Ptolemy and one by his contemporary, Antigonus of Nicaea (both ca. 150 CE). This is not the place for a detailed analysis, explanation, and comparison of the astrological criteria of royal horoscopes mentioned by Ptol. apotel. 4.3.1–2 and Antig. Nic. ap. Heph. 2.18.26–28, for which the reader may wish to consult my commentary on the fragments of Antigonus of Nicaea.¹¹ Suffice it here to point out succinctly that if one applies Ptolemy's and Antigonus' criteria to the alignment of 17 April 6 BCE, at sunrise, the two authors would agree that it has the following features of a royal birth:

- Both luminaries (Sun and Moon) are in a male zodiacal sign (here: Aries).
- Both luminaries are in a cardinal position (here: the first place of the dodecatropos, i.e., the ascending sign).
- Both luminaries are accompanied by the five planets (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury¹²) as 'spear-bearers' in an almost perfect distribution: the astrologically 'diurnal' planets Jupiter and Saturn precede the Sun, and the astrologically 'nocturnal' planets Mars and Mercury¹³ follow the Moon; only 'nocturnal' Venus is inconveniently located, because she precedes the Sun instead of following the Moon.
- As to planetary dignities, the Sun and Venus are in their respective 'exaltations' (Aries and Pisces), while Saturn is in his 'depression' (Aries); the Sun, Jupiter, and Venus are in zodiacal signs that belong to their own 'trigons'.

stationary) with such an extreme degree of accuracy. No ancient astronomer would ever have claimed to be able to do this. See also below p. 348 on Matt 2:9: ἐστάρθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον.

11 See esp. my introduction to Antig. Nic. F1 §§ 26–28, where Antigonus discusses the question of why Hadrian became a Roman emperor (Heilen 2015, 680–684). Note that the square diagram of the horoscope of Hadrian reproduced in Molnar (1999, 66) is not, as Molnar thinks, an ancient diagram, but rather a fifteenth-century diagram drawn by a scribe on the basis of the astronomical data in Antigonus' text.

12 Only these five were known to antiquity and thus relevant to astrological interpretation.

13 Astrologers classified Mercury as 'nocturnal' when it was an evening star, as is here the case.

- All seven (the two luminaries and the five planets) are either themselves in a cardinal position (the Sun, the Moon, Jupiter) or are in beneficial right aspects with the midheaven (Mars and Mercury: trigonal; Venus: sextile).

In sum, this comes close to a perfect royal horoscope. Note, however, that all of this is true only as long as the Sun is, in our hypothetical ancient astrologers' view, still in Aries and not yet in the astrologically 'female' zodiacal sign of Taurus. According to modern tropical retrospective computation, the solar longitude on 17 April 6 BCE, at sunrise in Jerusalem, was $23^{\circ} 51'$ Aries. In order to obtain the corresponding sidereal longitude that all Greco-Roman astrologers during the time of Herod used, one must, for the year 6 BCE, add ca. $5^{\circ} 52'$ (using the conversion formula of Jones¹⁴), which leads to a sidereal solar longitude of $29^{\circ} 43'$ Aries.¹⁵ This is extremely close to the beginning of Taurus. Only a few minutes later, the Sun would leave Aries. Depending on the quality of the planetary tables used by hypothetical astrologers during the time of Herod, they may easily have thought that the Sun was already in Taurus at sunrise. Compare, for example, the case of a certain Anubion, who had his horoscope for 4 December 137 CE cast by two different astrologers whose data for the solar longitude of the Sun differ by more than three degrees of arc.¹⁶

Apart from this caveat, it is obvious that the present conclusion—namely, that the planetary alignment of 17 April 6 BCE can be interpreted as a royal horoscope within the framework of Hellenistic astrology—does not imply that this alignment has been analyzed and interpreted in such a way by anyone in antiquity.

Astrological Geography

I shall now concentrate on the fifth premise above, the association of Aries with Judea. This association, as well as the assumption that our biblical source, the Gospel of Matthew, alludes to a real astronomical phenomenon, are premises of central importance to Molnar's argument. Let us abstain for a moment

14 Jones 1999a, vol. I, p. 343.

15 The sidereal positions of all seven celestial bodies are correctly (yet without degrees or even minutes of arc) indicated in the diagram given by Molnar (1999, 97).

16 The first astrologer's version is extant in P. Paris 19 and P. Lond. I 110 (sun: $13^{\circ} 23'$); the other, which is much more elaborate, in P. Paris 19bis (sun: $16^{\circ} 35'$, a much better sidereal value for the date in question). See the discussion by Neugebauer & van Hoesen 1959, 39–44 (nos. 137a,b,c), esp. 43.

from discussing the second premise, which is open to serious question, and focus on the following point: If Molnar's association of Aries with Judea, which is not supported by the text of the gospel, turns out to be plausible, then Molnar has searched for a suitable astronomical phenomenon in the right sector of the zodiac. If, however, it turns out to be implausible, Molnar would have omitted eleven out of twelve zodiacal signs, and the planetary alignment of 17 April 6 BCE that he proposes would appear as an arbitrary choice that does not deserve closer attention. To evaluate the plausibility of Molnar's insistence on the zodiacal sign of Aries, I shall now survey all extant Greco-Roman sources on astrological geography.

Hellenistic astrology falls into four different branches: universal astrology, genethliology, elections, and interrogations. Astrological geography is part of the oldest of these four branches, i.e., of universal astrology, which goes back to Mesopotamian omen astrology and is concerned with entire countries or even the whole world. If single individuals come into play in the context of universal astrology, these are kings—human representatives of entire countries and peoples. Genethliology, in contrast, is individual birth horoscopy, which was—except for a few Babylonian ingredients—developed as a new technique in the cultural environment of Ptolemaic Egypt during the last three centuries BCE. It is a mix of Babylonian, indigenous Egyptian, and Greek elements. The last two branches, elections and interrogations, are even younger techniques. Elections aim at finding a suitable time for an action, such as taking a ship to Rome. Interrogations, in contrast, aim at predicting the outcome of an action—for example, whether the ship currently sailing to Rome will arrive safely or not.¹⁷

The part of universal astrology that matters for this chapter is Hellenistic astrological geography. It continues Mesopotamian astrological geography (see John Steele's contribution to this volume). Although much work has been done on Hellenistic astrological geography in recent years, especially by Godefroid de Callataÿ,¹⁸ the following list comprises, to the best of my knowledge, for the first time, all relevant ancient authorities from Greco-Roman antiquity.¹⁹ The sources will be presented with very brief biographical

17 Another important branch, so-called historical astrology, was not known in the Hellenistic world. It was developed later by Sasanian and Arabic astrologers.

18 See his works in the bibliography below.

19 The first three entries tend to be overlooked by scholars.

information on the respective authors, references to modern editions (“Ed.”), and—if available—translations as well as references to secondary literature (“Lit.”) that deals specifically with the textual passages in question.²⁰

TABLE 14.1 *Survey of extant Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography*

Date	Source
Second century BCE	Hipparchus, Odapsus, and ‘the old Egyptians’, all three transmitted indirectly ²¹ through Hephaestio of Thebes (early fifth century CE), <i>Apotelesmatika</i> 1.1 (~ epit. 4.1). ²²
	Ed.: Pingree 1973, 3–31 (Apotel. 1.1). Pingree 1974a, 135–59 (Apotel. epit. 4.1).
	Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 333. Cumont 1909, 268. Boll 1910 (= repr. 1950, 39). Boll 1922/1950, 343–44. Pingree 1997, 25. Jones 1998, 143. De Callatay 1999–2000, 53–58.

20 For more detailed information on the authors and works in question, see the bibliographical appendix on Greco-Roman astrologers in Pingree 1978, vol. II, pp. 421–445. The data given by Hephaestio (Apotel. 1.1) on Hipparchus, Odapsus, and ‘the old Egyptians’, as well as those given by Ptolemy, Paul, Dorotheus, and Valens, were later put together (sign by sign, with clear attributions to the respective authorities) by an anonymous Greek author, whose text was edited first by Ludwich (1877, pp. 112–19) and then by Pingree (1986, 392–95) (Valens, Appendix III).

21 No ancient author’s handwritten original is extant. When classical philologists speak of direct transmission, they mean transmission of the ancient text through a process of repeated copying over the centuries. When they speak of indirect transmission, they mean that a later author (B) quoted or paraphrased parts of an earlier author’s (A’s) work in his own work. B’s work was then directly transmitted.

22 Note that Pingree’s second volume (1974a) contains four Byzantine epitomes of the main text of the *Apotelesmatika*, published in vol. I (1973). Epitome 4 is in many places of higher quality than the main text. Hence, both versions of the text must be consulted. Pingree was convinced that Hephaestio’s original text could not be reconstructed from the various branches of textual transmission. Therefore, he edited each branch separately.

TABLE 14.1 *Survey of extant Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography (cont.)*

Date	Source
	<p>Hipparchus is the famous astronomer. I see no reason to doubt the attribution of astrological interests to him.²³ Odapsus is a rather shadowy priest.²⁴ His native town was the same as Hephaestio's, namely Thebes in Upper Egypt. It is likely, but beyond proof, that 'the old Egyptians' are identical with 'Nechepsos and Petosiris' (see next entry).</p> <p>While Hephaestio's first chapter (Apotel. 1.1) covers all twelve zodiacal signs or constellations (see below p. 310 on type α), Hephaestio does not in each single case distinguish between the systems of Hipparchus, Odapsus, and 'the old Egyptians', which were apparently similar to each other but not identical in detail.²⁵</p>
Second century BCE?	<p>'The old Egyptians', transmitted indirectly through the same Hephaestio of Thebes (see previous entry), <i>Apotelesmatika</i> 1.21 (~ epit. 3 ~ epit. 4.18),²⁶ and an independent Anonymus of unknown date (henceforth: 'Anon. Boll'). Each one of these two sources</p>

23 Pingree (1997, 25) does not express any doubts regarding Hephaestio's attribution to Hipparchus. Jones (1998, 143) speaks in a non-committal manner of "a tradition that Hephaestio ascribes (rightly or wrongly) to him [i. e., to Hipparchus] associating zodiacal constellations and their parts with geographical regions[...]. In view of the emphasis in modern scholarship on Hipparchus' contribution to mathematical astronomy, it is curious that the two known references to him in papyri[...]are in astrological contexts." See also, without reference to the passage in question, Toomer (1988, 362), who is convinced "that astrology had no importance in the Greek world until after Hipparchus, and that his role, both directly as an advocate of astrology, and indirectly as a developer of astronomical methods which became an essential part of it, was pivotal."

24 See Gundel & Gundel 1966, 38.

25 Hephaestio explicitly mentions Hipparchus with respect to Aries and Sagittarius (Apotel. 1.1.7 and 1.1.162), Odapsus with respect to Cancer, Libra, Sagittarius, and Pisces (Apotel. 1.1.65; 1.1.123; 1.1.163; 1.1.221), and 'the old Egyptians' with respect to Aries (Apotel. 1.1.7). He further refers anonymously to "some" authorities with respect to Taurus (Apotel. 1.1.27) and to "others" with respect to Leo and Capricornus (Apotel. 1.1.85 and 1.1.182). Data without attribution to any authority are given with respect to Gemini, Virgo, Scorpius, Aquarius, and Pisces (Apotel. 1.1.46; 1.1.104; 1.1.143; 1.1.201; 1.1.220).

26 Apotel. 1.21 is preserved with slightly different wording, but with the same geographical data, in Apotel. epit. 4.18. Apotel. 1.21.10–36 (i.e., chapter 21, with the exception of its first nine paragraphs) is preserved with slightly different wording, but with the same

Date

Source

preserves a substantial portion of text that is missing in the other source.²⁷

Ed.: Pingree 1973, 52–63 (Apotel. 1.21). Pingree 1974a, 126–34 (Apotel. epit. 3) and 168–77 (Apotel. epit. 4, 18). F. Boll, *CCAG VII* (1908), 129–51 (Anon. Boll). Trans.: Williams 2008, 306 (only Heph. 1.21.12, the section on Aries).

Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 347–49. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 333–34. Boll 1922/1950, 344. Pingree 1974b, 547. Rochberg-Halton 1984, 120 (= Ead. 2010, 37). Rochberg-Halton 1988, 57. Williams 2008.²⁸

This text concerns eclipse omens combined with a variety of other phenomena. They include the color of the eclipsed body, the simultaneous occurrence of winds, shooting stars, halos, lightning, and rain. The protases of these omens systematically cover the occurrences of both lunar and solar eclipses in each of the zodiacal signs (Apotel. 1.21.12–33),²⁹ many with reference to one of the four three-hour periods into which the night was divided.³⁰ The apodoses specify various large-scale calamities with reference to almost

geographical data, in Apotel. epit. 3 (note that epit. 3 names one additional country for Cancer: Persia).

- 27 Heph. Apotel. 1.21.1–11 (an introduction to the systematic review of all twelve zodiacal signs) has no counterpart in the text of the Anonymous in *CCAG*; this Anonymous, in his turn, preserves in much more detail (*CCAG VII*, pp. 147,22–149,32) the omens for eclipses of the Sun and the Moon in the same month that are only summarily mentioned in one sentence by Heph. Apotel. 1.21.35.
- 28 Williams compares both Greek texts with Mesopotamian omen literature, especially Tablet 16 of the series *Enūma Anu Enlil* (late second millennium BCE).
- 29 Except for Aries and Taurus, the effects are always differentiated with respect to the Sun and the Moon.
- 30 See Hunger & Pingree 1999, 16 (about *Enūma Anu Enlil*): “Daytime and nighttime are each divided into three watches. The omens frequently take notice of the watch in which an eclipse occurs.” For examples, see the translations from Tablet 17 of the series *Enūma Anu Enlil* and from Tablet 4 of the commentary series *Šumma Sin ina Tāmartišu* given by Steele (pp. 203–204 in this volume). For details, and with special attention to Heph. 1.21, see Williams (2008, 304–307), who comments on the change from three four-hour periods (Mesopotamia) to four three-hour periods (Heph. 1.21 and other Hellenistic texts) that this “may reveal some traces of a possible Egyptian transit” (307; cf. *ibid.* 314).

TABLE 14.1 *Survey of extant Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography (cont.)*

Date	Source
	<p>fifty different countries. The source of Apotel. 1.2.1 is “undoubtedly Mesopotamian and probably originally from the great omen compendium <i>Enūma Anu Enlil</i>.”³¹</p> <p>This text is traditionally counted among the fragments of ‘Nechepsos and Petosiris’, two legendary Egyptian authorities of Hellenistic astrology, a king (Nechepsos)³² and a sage (Petosiris), to whom a very influential manual was attributed. It was composed in Greek by one or more unknown authors.³³</p>
Second century BCE?	<p>An anonymously transmitted chapter in Heph. Apotel. 1.22 (~ epit. 4.19), henceforth: ‘Anon. Pingree’.</p> <p>Ed.: Pingree 1973, 63–65 (Apotel. 1.22). Pingree 1974a, 177–179 (Apotel. epit. 4.19).</p> <p>Lit.: Boll 1922/1950, 344. Pingree 1974b, 547. Williams 2008.</p> <p>Another chapter on eclipse omens which is counted among the fragments of Nechepsos and Petosiris.³⁴ The text partly includes (besides eclipses) other celestial phenomena in the protases. The apodoses are here similar to those of the previous source, but notably restricted to Egypt and its neighboring countries.³⁵</p>

31 Williams 2008, 296 (I loosely follow her in my previous lines, as well). Note, however, that “among the lunar eclipse omens of EAE [= *Enūma Anu Enlil*], there are no single tablets which contain all the information that Hephaestio’s text includes” (ibid. 312).

32 This (not ‘Nechepso’) is the correct form of the king’s name; see Ryholt 2011.

33 Some eighty fragments and testimonia survive. See Riess 1891–1893 (Heph. Apotel. 1.21 is Riess frg. 6) and the addenda in Heilen 2011, 31–34 = Heilen 2015, 40–47 (the independent anonymous text is Heilen frg. +32).

34 Apotel. 1.22 is Riess frg. 7.

35 See Williams 2008, 296. The chapter falls into four parts: (I) §§ 1–2 mixed excerpts; (II) §§ 3–14 a coherent series of solar eclipse omens from Aries to Pisces from which one entry (§ 7 Leo) is missing; (III) §§ 15–26 a second series from which seven entries (§§ 16–22 Taurus-Scorpius) are missing; (IV) §§ 27–30 mixed excerpts.

Date	Source
First century BCE?	<p>Teucer of (Egyptian) Babylon, transmitted indirectly through Rhetorius of Egypt (sixth or seventh century CE)</p> <p>Ed.: F. Boll in <i>CCAG VII</i> (1908), 192–213.</p> <p>Lit.: Cumont 1909, 263–265. Metzger 1970, 130.</p> <p>The relevance of Teucer in this list is uncertain; see below pp. 314–315.</p>
Early first century CE	<p>Manilius, <i>Astronomica</i> 4.744–817</p> <p>Ed.: Goold 1985, 106–109; ed. and Engl. trans.: Goold 1997, 280–289.</p> <p>Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 345–346. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 329–332. Housman 1937, xii–xvii. Bartalucci 1961. Abry 1997. Goold 1997, xci–xcii.³⁶ De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 40–41. De Callataÿ 2001a. De Callataÿ 2001b, 136–138. Bakhouché 2002, 85–92. De Callataÿ 2002, 95–97. Komorowska 2004.</p> <p>This is the most literary and poetic system.</p>
Mid first century CE	<p>Dorotheus of Sidon, Appendix II A³⁷</p> <p>Ed.: Pingree 1976, 427–428.</p> <p>Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 344–345. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 331–333. Housman 1937, xiii–xiv. De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 34–40. De Callataÿ 2001b, 136–137. Bakhouché 2002, 86–87. De Callataÿ 2002, 93–95.</p> <p>This system bears relatively close relations to that of Manilius.</p>

36 See also the map facing Goold's title page.

37 These are twelve short Greek fragments, one for every zodiacal sign. Pingree counts these fragments as an appendix because they have no counterpart in the Arabic translation of the entire work. Their source is Hephaestio of Thebes (Heph. 1.1.5; 1.1.25; 1.1.44; 1.1.63; 1.1.83; 1.1.102; 1.1.121; 1.1.141; 1.1.160; 1.1.180; 1.1.199; 1.1.218). Astonishingly, Molnar (2014, 175) claims that Dorotheus "has no list of geographical assignments."

TABLE 14.1 *Survey of extant Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography (cont.)*

Date	Source
Mid second century CE	<p>Claudius Ptolemy, <i>Apotelesmatika</i> 2.3 and (tabular summary) 2.4.2–4³⁸</p> <p>Ed.: Hübner 1998, 94–122; ed. and Engl. trans.: Robbins 1940, 128–59.</p> <p>Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 346–47. Boll 1894, 194–217. Boll 1910 (= repr. 1950, 39–41). Trüdinger 1918, 80–89. Uhden 1933. Housman 1937, xv. Feraboli 1985. Aujac 1993 (= 2012), 69–105 and 284–303. Pérez Jiménez 1998, 178–86. De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 61–67. Hübner 2000, 75–93.</p> <p>This is by far the most sophisticated system. For details, see below pp. 311–312 and 323–326.</p>
Late second century CE	<p>Vettius Valens, <i>Anthologies</i> 1.2</p> <p>Ed.: Pingree 1986, 5–13; Engl. trans.: Riley online 2–6; Germ. trans.: Schönberger—Knobloch 2004, 5–12.</p> <p>Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 349–50. Cumont 1909, 268–69. Housman 1937, xv–xvi. De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 53–58.</p> <p>This chapter transmits two different, fragmentarily preserved systems that will be discussed below.</p>

38 Ptolemy's system is reproduced in three texts transmitted by John the Lydian (sixth century CE) in his work *De ostentis* ('On Signs', ed. Wachsmuth 1897, Ital. trans. Domenici—Maderna 2007, Engl. trans. Bandy 2013): Lyd. ost. 23–26 (a *tonitruale*, i.e., predictions based on thunder, of unknown authorship), ost. 55–58 (a *seismologion*, i.e., predictions based on earthquakes, attributed to Vicellius), and ost. 71 (by John himself). None of these three passages refers to Ptolemy, and they all contain small (not identical) mistakes in reproducing Ptolemy's data. According to Weinstock (1950, 47) and Fugmann (1989, 82) (with references to further literature, add Keyser & Irby-Massie 2008, 828), the otherwise unknown author Vicellius must have lived after Ptolemy, i.e., no earlier than the late second century CE, but probably later. Note, however, that the geographical data in the first two passages may well be later additions to preexisting texts, because *tonitrualia* and *seismologia* usually specify only effects, not countries to be affected.

Date	Source
378 CE	<p>Paul of Alexandria, <i>Introduction 2</i></p> <p>Ed.: Boer 1958, 2–11; Engl. trans.: Greenbaum 2001, 1–5.</p> <p>Lit.: Bouché-Leclercq 1884, 344. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 332. Cumont 1909, 265–70. Boll 1922/1950, 343. Housman 1937, xiii. Metzger 1970, 128–33. De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 27–28. De Callataÿ 2001b, 133–34. Bakhouché 2002, 86–87. De Callataÿ 2002, 88–90.</p> <p>Presumably the oldest system. For details, see below pp. 313–322.</p>
Sixth century CE?	<p><i>Liber Hermetis</i>, ch. 1</p> <p>Ed.: Feraboli 1994, 3–11.</p> <p>Lit.: Gundel 1936b, 115–23. De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 58–61.</p> <p>A unique, late system based on the so-called decans. Only a medieval Latin translation of the lost Greek original is extant.</p>
?	<p>An anonymous chapter of uncertain date (henceforth: ‘Anon. Weinstock’).</p> <p>Ed.: S. Weinstock in <i>CCAG</i> v 4 (1940), 171–76.</p> <p>Lit.: Pérez Jiménez 1998, 197–99.</p> <p>The author pays special attention to the various parts (even rivers) of Asia Minor. This indicates that the text originated there. It makes mostly negative predictions based on the criterion of which zodiacal sign was rising at the time of the vernal equinox (this may point to a Byzantine date). The predicted calamities resemble those mentioned in <i>Heph.</i> 1.21–22.</p>

The above sources have different characteristics:

Transmission

The only astrological sources on the above list to be transmitted directly³⁹ are the texts of Manilius, Ptolemy, Vettius Valens, and Paul of Alexandria. All sources that predate the beginning of the Christian era are preserved indirectly, through paraphrases and excerpts made by Late Antique authors. We do not know for certain how faithfully these Late Antique authors reproduced their sources. The same is, in principle, true in the case of the textual transmission of Dorotheus of Sidon: Some 98% of his work, which comprised five books,⁴⁰ is preserved only in Late Antique Greek paraphrases and in a free Arabic translation of a Middle Persian translation of the Greek original. However, Dorotheus' original text was a poem, and the specific fragments that we have of its section on astrological geography are the original Greek hexameters. Therefore we know *verbatim* what Dorotheus wrote about this topic. In sum, the dividing line between early relevant texts that have been transmitted indirectly and later relevant texts that have been transmitted directly coincides with the beginning of the Christian era.

Only the systems of 'the old Egyptians' (Heph. Apotel. 1.21), Teucer,⁴¹ Manilius, Dorotheus, Ptolemy, Paul, and the *Liber Hermetis* are transmitted completely.

Typology

The sources present different types of astrological geography, and these types can be classified in different manners. I shall here adopt the criterion of spatial extension of the relevant sections of the zodiac. In this respect, the extant systems associate geographical areas:

(α) with entire zodiacal signs or constellations (this is the most common type);

(β) with parts of constellations (not signs), these parts being defined either bodily (Hipparchus, Odapsus, 'the old Egyptians', Valens A, Anon. Weinstock) or with respect to the cardinal points (Valens B);⁴²

³⁹ See above, note 21.

⁴⁰ One ancient 'book' is one papyrus roll. The text that one such roll can hold equals ca. 30–40 pages of printed text in a modern edition.

⁴¹ Provided he really treated astrological geography; more on this question below.

⁴² A zodiacal sign is a 30° section of the abstract, mathematically defined zodiac. A constellation is a visible group of fixed stars which occupies more or less than 30° of arc. In antiquity, a sign and its corresponding constellation were called by the same name and extended more or less over the same part of the sky. However, they very slowly shift

(γ) with one of the three 10° -sections (so-called decans)⁴³ of a zodiacal sign (the only extant source is the *Liber Hermetis*).⁴⁴

Types α and β have Mesopotamian precursors: There was a Mesopotamian tradition of associating either constellations or zodiacal signs with cities,⁴⁵ and the method of subdividing the visible constellations and associating the resulting parts with specific geographical areas equally goes back to Mesopotamia.⁴⁶

Apotelesmatic Information

Only four systems are transmitted with specifications of their astrological effects. Two of these are the old systems transmitted by Heph. Apotel. 1.21–22 (they belong to type α above), where we find the associations of entire zodiacal signs or constellations embedded in typical Mesopotamian omen syntax, with the conditional protases specifying the signs or constellations of solar or lunar eclipses (in Heph. Apotel. 1.21, also their time during the night)⁴⁷ and the apodoses specifying their astrological effects. The effects are generally dire, regarding all sorts of war, social turmoil, death or murder of kings, famine, diseases, earthquakes, etc.⁴⁸ The structure and the predictions of the text of Anon. Weinstock (type β) are similar, but his protases focus on the rising sign at the time of the vernal equinox, not on eclipses.

The fourth relevant system is Ptolemy's (type α). Here, astrological geography explains the different characters of the many different peoples of the

away from each other due to the precession of the equinoxes, which was discovered by Hipparchus in the second century BCE. The ancient (and imperfect) match between sign and constellation is today entirely lost, the discrepancy being ca. 30° and increasing further.

43 On decans, see Gundel 1936a.

44 See Lib. Herm. 1.2 *connumerantes unicuique decano gradus decem* ('counting 10° per decan'). This doctrine may be old; it seems to be alluded to by Bardesanes (Euseb. praep. evang. 6.10.37); cf. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 333, n. 4.

45 See Steele in his contribution to this volume (p. 201), who discusses important new sources that were not yet known to Weidner (1963).

46 Steele (above, pp. 205, 210–211, 214–215) adduces an example from BM 47494, Obv. 1–15. See also Steele (above, p. 201, n. 2) with reference to further examples given by Weidner (1967).

47 See above, n. 30.

48 I remember only one positive effect mixed among the negative ones: rust in corn for Cyprus, festal assemblies, feasts, choral songs, and large gatherings of people in Asia (Heph. Apotel. 1.21.13 ~ CCAG VII p. 133,10–13, both with regard to Taurus).

inhabited world. This ethnological information⁴⁹ is not embedded in omen syntax or in any other kind of conditional clauses. Hence, the astrological effects on ethnicity are, in Ptolemy's view, permanent effects. It is obvious that Ptolemy's system is profoundly different from those in Heph. Apotel. 1.21–22. In particular, his ethnological focus introduces an interest that was entirely absent from the Mesopotamian precursors, with their extremely limited geographical perspective. Ptolemy's ethnological interest is, in a very vague and unsystematic way, foreshadowed by Manilius.⁵⁰

Complexity

Among all of the extant systems, that of Paul of Alexandria is the simplest one, because its principle seems to be the assignment of one sign to one coherent geographical area. This simplicity is one of several reasons why it is, despite the author's late date (378 CE), traditionally regarded to be the oldest system.⁵¹ All other systems associate each single zodiacal sign with several geographical areas that are sometimes far distant from each other and therefore without recognizable geographical coherence. This tendency towards numerically increasing and geographically scattering the associated areas culminates in Ptolemy's system, which mentions a total of 72 areas, assigning six (on average) to each zodiacal sign. Hence, two systems require particular attention: Ptolemy's (because this is the most complex system and the one on which Molnar builds his theory) and Paul's (because this system is the least complex and is not mentioned at all by Molnar, yet is obviously important if it really turns out to be the oldest one).

49 Franz Boll (1867–1924) speaks of “Völkerpsychologie” (“folk psychology,” see for example Boll 1894, 215), but this theoretical term coined by W. Wundt in the nineteenth century has become taboo in the social sciences due to its political abuse in post-World War I Germany.

50 The only explicit causal relationship that Manilius establishes is that between Sagittarius and the people of Crete, who were famous archers (Astr. 4.785 *hinc*, ‘therefore’). Other ethnographical effects are hinted at through the descriptions of the countries that are associated with the signs.

51 See Boll 1903, 296 (with handwritten addenda in Boll's private copy at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/boll1903>). Cumont 1909, esp. 270–272. Boll 1922/1950, 343. Housman 1937, xiii. Goold 1997, xci. Pérez Jiménez 1998, 189 and 217. De Callataÿ 2002, 86.

The System of Paul of Alexandria

Various arguments for the age of Paul's system have been adduced, one of them being that Teucer of Babylon, who lived no later than the first century BCE, seems to have transmitted the same system. This latter argument, however, was already rejected a century ago by Cumont,⁵² and the age of Paul's system has been further called into question (with the help and approval of D. Pingree) by Metzger.⁵³ In view of the relevance of this question to Molnar's theory on the Star of Bethlehem, it is necessary to discuss it here in some detail. I shall first address the different characteristics of Paul's and Teucer's texts, then their relationship to each other, and finally their relationship to the system of Valens B. This will enable us to assess the respective plausibility of the divergent scholarly views.

Paul gives the relevant data twice in his second chapter, which is about the twelve zodiacal signs. The first part of that chapter is structured according to the zodiacal signs, and we find the relevant data on astrological geography scattered over the entire extent of that first part (pp. 2,7–8,3 Boer,⁵⁴ henceforth: Paul A). The second part of the same chapter provides a series of summaries, which is structured by the different qualities of the zodiacal signs (pp. 8,4–11,3 Boer). The summary of the geographical associations is on p. 10,1–8 Boer (henceforth: Paul B).⁵⁵ Paul B associates each of the twelve zodiacal signs with exactly one geographical area. Paul A provides the same data except for the signs of Virgo, Libra, Sagittarius, and Pisces, where Paul A adds a second, neighboring geographical area on the same geographical latitude. Moreover, each piece of geographical information in Paul A is followed immediately by a reference to the dominating wind from one of the four cardinal points (for example, Aries is associated with Persia and the East Wind).⁵⁶ In the series of summaries in Paul B, the data on winds are on p. 9,18–20 Boer, immediately before the summary on geographical associations.

52 Cumont 1909, 265.

53 Metzger 1970, 130–31 (with reference to a communication by D. Pingree in n. 27). For Metzger's debt to Pingree, see also *ibid.* p. 124, n. 6, and p. 132, n. 29.

54 I refer to the critical edition of the Greek text by Boer (1958).

55 This distinction resembles Ptolemy's, who summarizes his chapter 2.3 in ch. 2.4.2–4.

56 The twelve signs of the zodiacal circle are traditionally subdivided by ancient astrologers into four triangles, the so-called trigons or triplicities (see Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 199–206). Paul associates the first triangle with the East Wind, the second with the South Wind, the third with the West Wind and the fourth with the North Wind.

TABLE 14.2 *The system of Paul of Alexandria*

Zodiacal Sign	Associated Geographical Area	Associated Wind
Aries	Persia	East
Taurus	Babylon	South
Gemini	Cappadocia	West
Cancer	Armenia	North
Leo	Asia (Minor) ⁵⁷	East
Virgo	Hellas <i>and Ionia</i> ⁵⁸	South
Libra	Libya <i>and Cyrene</i>	West
Scorpius	Italy	North
Sagittarius	<i>Cilicia and Crete</i> ⁵⁹	East
Capricornus	Syria	South
Aquarius	Egypt	West
Pisces	<i>Red Sea and India</i>	North

Now to Teucer of Babylon. What we have of him is, unlike in Paul's case, not the original text, but rather an excerpt made by Rhetorius of Egypt in the sixth or seventh century.⁶⁰ It proceeds sign by sign (like Paul A) and gives twelve different categories of information for each sign.⁶¹ Astrological geography regularly occupies the seventh position. The data are different from Paul's in two respects: Instead of the winds, which are here mentioned in the first (not the seventh) category,⁶² the excerpt of Teucer regularly adds, in the seventh category, the geographical associations of Ptolemy. For obvious chronological reasons, these must be addenda by Rhetorius. The entry on Aries runs as follows: "The geographical latitudes under the dominion of this sign are: Persia;

57 This equals modern Turkey, especially its western part.

58 Data formatted in italics are those that are missing from Paul's summary on p. 10,1–8 Boer (see above).

59 The excerpt from Teucer omits Crete. This is the only discrepancy between the data provided by Paul in his main account (pp. 2,7–8,3 Boer, see above) and the excerpt from Teucer. It is unclear if the word Crete was omitted by Teucer or by Rhetorius, or if it dropped out at some point in the course of textual transmission.

60 Boll (1903, 7–8) already saw that what we have of Teucer is not the original text.

61 For detailed information, see Boll 1903, 5–6.

62 Only the winds associated with Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Leo, and Virgo are mentioned in that category. The wind data regarding the other signs are, for unknown reasons, missing from the excerpt. See Hübner 1982, 261.

but according to Ptolemy: Britain, Gaul, Germany, Palestine, Idumea, Judea.”⁶³ The transition from one system to the other is, however, clearly marked only in the cases of Aries, Gemini, and Cancer. In all other cases, the stereotype formula “but according to Ptolemy” is omitted, and Ptolemy’s countries are immediately added to the data of the primary system. Therefore the system that the excerpt of Teucer follows in the first place, without attribution to any authority, can be identified only through a comparison with either Paul or Ptolemy. This comparison reveals that all data in the excerpt of Teucer that precede Ptolemy’s data are (except for one missing word)⁶⁴ identical with those of Paul A. The question is now: Did Rhetorius find these data in Teucer’s original, or did he add them by drawing on Paul’s manual? One argument for the former view might be that the excerpt’s title professes overall dependence from Teucer, and that the Ptolemaic data on astrological geography are introduced by references to Ptolemy; hence, if Rhetorius took another set of data from Paul, one might expect him to indicate that debt in the same manner, with references to Paul’s name. However, if one compares Rhetorius’ excerpt, which never mentions any name but Ptolemy’s, with the second chapter of Paul, one finds striking literal coincidences with Paul’s text right from the beginning. Moreover, Rhetorius certainly knew Paul’s manual, because he quotes from Paul in other parts of his work.⁶⁵ Hence, it is clear that Rhetorius took liberties in making his excerpt of Teucer, and it is very possible that he took over the material on astrological geography from Paul rather than from Teucer.⁶⁶ As a consequence, the early date of Teucer cannot be used, as some do,⁶⁷ as an argument for dating the system of Paul, who wrote his manual in 378 CE.

It would, however, be rash to conclude (with Metzger and Pingree) that Paul’s system cannot be traced back to earlier times than the fourth century CE.⁶⁸ Four arguments deserve attention:

63 CCAG VII (1908), p. 195,17–19: εἰσὶ δὲ ὑποτεταγμένα κλίματα τῷ ζῳδίῳ· Περσίς· κατὰ <δὲ> Πτολεμαῖον Βρεττανία, Γαλατία, Γερμανία, Παλαιστίνη, Ἰδουμαία, Ἰουδαία. On the intrusive name of Palestine, see below n. 140.

64 See note 59 above.

65 See Pingree 2001, 11.

66 This is rightly argued by Cumont (1909, 265) and Metzger (1970, 130). Cumont (loc. cit.) thinks that the only set of data contained in Rhetorius’ excerpt that can be attributed to Teucer is the data on so-called paranatellonta (contemporaneously rising extrazodiacal constellations), according to the so-called *Sphaera barbarica*.

67 Ex. gr., De Callataj 2002, 90.

68 See Metzger 1970, 130, and 131, n. 27: “Professor Pingree has given me permission to say that, in his view, Paulus drew upon a fuller stock of astrological lore, but that it is ‘meaningless to take [his list] as a document earlier than the fourth century AD.’”

1. Generally speaking, Paul of Alexandria preserves other material that must have already been several centuries old during his own time. The best-known example is his inaccurate and seemingly archaic method for calculating the ecliptic longitude of the upper culmination (midheaven) from the rising degree (ascendant).⁶⁹
2. With specific attention to astrological geography, Metzger and Pingree overlooked the evidence from Valens, whose chapter 1.2 transmits two different, fragmentarily preserved systems:
 - i) Valens A is about parts of constellations, with eight preserved sections (Aries–Leo and Capricornus–Pisces);⁷⁰ Valens does not attribute this system to any authority, but its data match the data given by Hephaestio about Hipparchus, Odapsus, and ‘the old Egyptians’ (see above, pp. 303–304) in numerous details, so as to indicate that Valens and Hephaestio somehow drew on a common source;⁷¹
 - ii) Valens B contains two preserved sections (Aquarius–Pisces)⁷² of a system that gave threefold associations for each sign: (a) wind, (b) geographical area, and (c) geographical areas differentiated according to the cardinal points of the sign. There is a tiny remainder of a third section (Gemini),⁷³ of which only element (a) is preserved.

Altogether, the extant parts suffice to assert that the data of type (a) and (b) of system Valens B are identical with system Paul A, while the data of system Valens B, type (c), which develop the data of type (b) further, are missing from Paul’s system.⁷⁴ Two explanations are possible: Either Valens B and Paul both go back to one and the same system, which necessarily predates Valens and whose data of type (c) were omitted by Paul,⁷⁵

69 See Paul of Alexandria, ch. 30, pp. 81–82 Boer, and the astronomical commentary of O. Neugebauer (ibid. 140–45). See further Neugebauer 1975, 720.

70 Val. 1.2.7; 1.2.17; 1.2.31; 1.2.39; 1.2.48. (Virgo–Sagittarius: missing). 1.2.65. 1.2.77. 1.2.90.

71 The partial dependence of Valens A on Odapsus (whom he never mentions by name) is evident in Cancer and Pisces (Val. 1.2.39 and 1.2.90), because the copious data that Valens gives here are almost identical with the data that Heph. Apotel. 1.1.65 and 1.1.221 attributes explicitly and exclusively to Odapsus.

72 Val. 1.2.74–75; 1.2.86–87.

73 Val. 1.2.24.

74 This was in principle observed by Cumont (1909, 268–69; he only overlooked the small remainder regarding Gemini in Val. 1.2.24). Metzger and Pingree seem to be unaware of this observation.

75 Paul’s second chapter is altogether concise. If one hypothesizes that he had access to a source which included data of all three types of system Valens B, Paul would have given astrological geography incommensurate weight in the context of his own second chapter if he had quoted not only the data of type (a) and (b), but also those of type (c).

or Valens B transmits an augmented version of a still older and simpler system, whose genuine form is transmitted by Paul. Be that as it may, in any case system Valens B takes us back from the late fourth century (Paul) to the time before Valens, i.e., to the mid-second century CE or earlier.⁷⁶

3. The geographical horizon of Paul's and Valens B's system is smaller than that of any other Hellenistic system. This important argument was already adduced by Cumont,⁷⁷ who adds two additional important points regarding the system Valens B: The level of geographical detail and the appropriately chosen terminology indicate that its author lived in Egypt, while the reference to the city of Myos Hormos, which was founded in the third century BCE, provides a *terminus post quem*.⁷⁸ He argues—in my opinion convincingly—that the source from which Valens B quoted must have originated long before the beginning of the Christian era, probably around 200 BCE.⁷⁹

It is a different question whether Cumont rightly tried to take the date even further back, to the time of the Persian occupation of Egypt.⁸⁰ His main arguments are the prominence of Persia at the first position of Paul's system and the fact that Italy marks the furthest western country in the survey of the inhabited world contained in Paul's system; this geographical horizon clearly falls back behind Eratosthenes (third century BCE).⁸¹ In addition, Cumont thinks that some features of Paul's system, such as the surprising disregard for Ethiopia, indicate that it did not originate in Egypt but was imported there from the

76 I disagree with De Callatay (1999–2000, 57), who discards the data of Valens B as interpolations.

77 Cumont 1909, 266. Housman (1937, xiii) is of the same opinion. Metzger (1970, 127) quotes Housman's opinion but fails in the following (esp. p. 130) to counter that argument.

78 Cumont 1909, 268–69.

79 Cumont 1909, 270.

80 Cumont 1909, 270–72. In doing so, Cumont (p. 266) rejects the earlier view of Boll, who attributed the invention of the system transmitted by Paul to 'Nechepsos and Petosiris', i.e., to the second century BCE (Boll 1903, 297, and Boll in *CCAG VII*, 1908, pp. 149–50, n. 1, and p. 192). Cumont was followed by Bartalucci (1961, 95) and Pérez Jiménez (1998, 189–190).

81 Cumont 1909, 271: "la Perse, qui dominait le monde, est placée en tête," and *ibid.* (about Italy): "C'est pour le rédacteur de ce tableau l'extrémité occidentale du monde: il ne savait donc rien ni de l'Espagne, ni de la Gaule, ni de la Bretagne. Une telle méconnaissance de la réalité serait invraisemblable même au milieu du III^e siècle chez un contemporain d'Eratosthène, dont la géographie donnait toute une description de l'Europe occidentale. C'est bien le degré de science ou plutôt d'ignorance qu'on peut supposer chez un Egyptien de l'époque perse."

East.⁸² Based on these pertinent observations, he states that his presumption of a very early date for Paul's system could possibly be further substantiated if we knew more about the Mesopotamian origins of astrological geography.⁸³

Today we can say that Cumont was on the right track. It was unknown in his time, and also in the time of Metzger and Pingree (1970), that the two divinatory schemes that are typical of Paul's system (not of the whole of Hellenistic astrological geography), namely associations of zodiacal signs with geographical areas and associations of zodiacal triplicities with cardinal winds, have Mesopotamian precursors and are linked to each other in the Mesopotamian tradition. A particularly important text is Tablet 4 of the commentary series *Šumma Sin ina Tāmartišu* (henceforth: SIT 4) from the Neo-Assyrian period (eighth–seventh centuries BCE).⁸⁴ *Šumma Sin ina Tāmartišu* is a serialized commentary to the well-known compendium of celestial omens *Enūma Anu Enlil* (late second millennium BCE). The relevant section of SIT 4, which is about eclipse omens, presents a different structure from Paul's chapter and seven instead of two divinatory schemes. The editor (Wainer) has labeled them with letters A through G and argues convincingly that they were not ad hoc scholarly creations but an important part of the scholarly tradition. Two of the schemes of SIT 4, D and F (they are separated by little or no other text in the extant copies),⁸⁵ constitute, if taken together, a conceptual equivalent to Paul's system. Scheme F associates the four cardinal winds with four geographical areas thus (the relative positions of these areas are added in parentheses): the South Wind: Elam (East); the North Wind: Akkad (South); the East Wind: Subartu and the Gutu (North); the West Wind: the Westland/Amurru (West). Scheme D associates the twelve months of a year (I–XII) with the same four

82 Cumont 1909, 272. Ethiopia is present in the systems of 'the old Egyptians' (Heph. Apotel. 1.21.17/22/25/30: Cancer/Libra/Scorpius/Aquarius), the Anonymous (Heph. Apotel. 1.22.10: Scorpius), Odapsus (Heph. Apotel. 1.1.123: Libra), Manilius (Astr. 4.758: Cancer), Dorotheus (App. II A: Cancer), Ptolemy (Apotel. 2.3.50 and 2.4: Aquarius), and Valens A (Anth. 1.2.17/39: Taurus/Cancer). Cumont sees another indication of Persian origin in the pairing of three Persian satrapies (Ionia, Cyrenaica, and Cilicia) with three independent countries (Greece, Libya, and Crete [p. 271]), but this last argument has (perhaps rightly) been criticized by some.

83 Cumont 1909, 272: "Pour pouvoir pousser au delà et en expliquer la genèse, il faudrait posséder les premiers essais de géographie zodiacale qui furent imaginés sur les bords de l'Euphrate et importés sur ceux du Nil."

84 I thank Z. Wainer for generously sharing his seminal forthcoming article with me. The main exemplar of SIT 4 was found in Nineveh; hence, it most probably belonged to the so-called Library of Assurbanipal. See also Steele's contribution in the present volume.

85 In some copies, one line of text (= scheme E) separates D from F, while K 8088, the main copy of SIT 4 that was first edited by Wainer, presents D immediately following F.

geographical areas in the following manner: I, V, IX: Akkad; II, VI, X: Elam; III, VII, XI: the Westland; IV, VIII, XII: Subartu. If we replace the twelve months of the solar year with the corresponding zodiacal signs through which the Sun travels in the course of a year, we realize that SIT 4 D+F and Paul equally associate the following three sets of data with each other: (a) twelve months or zodiacal signs arranged in four triplicities, (b) four or a multiple of four geographical areas, and (c) four cardinal winds. That months and zodiacal signs are in principle interchangeable is a well-attested phenomenon, not yet in the Neo-Assyrian period (eighth–seventh centuries BCE), but in later Babylonian material (probably as early as the fourth century BCE; we shall return to this in a moment). There are only two structural differences between schemes D and F of SIT 4 and Paul’s system: The number of geographical areas (point b above) is 4 in SIT 4 but 12 in Paul’s system, and while the triplicities of the months in SIT 4 are associated with the winds in the order North–South–West–East, the triplicities of the zodiacal signs in Paul’s system are associated with the winds in the order East–South–West–North. The latter discrepancy may be important: On the one hand, Wainer generally emphasizes that “the content of each [i.e., Mesopotamian] scheme seems to be very stable,” and a passage in Geminus’ introduction to astronomy (first century BCE)⁸⁶ provides specific confirmation for the order NSWE of SIT 4.⁸⁷ On the other hand, Paul’s divergent order (ESWN) seems to be typical of the Greco-Roman tradition,⁸⁸ which, in its turn, has no parallel for the order NSWE of SIT 4.⁸⁹ This seems to indicate that the Mesopotamian schemes D and F were not directly transmitted to Greco-Roman astrologers through multiple channels, but rather through a single channel, and that a change from the order NSWE (Mesopotamian) to ESWN (Greco-Roman) took place along the way.

86 Jones (1999b) shows that Geminus, who had earlier been dated to the first century CE (Neugebauer 1975, 580), wrote his work between ca. 90 and 25 BCE.

87 Gem. 2.8–11 (details are given below, n. 93).

88 While Valens is our earliest (and only fragmentary) witness for this association of zodiacal signs and winds, it is also attested for the astrologer Antiochus of Athens (ca. 200 CE) in a Late Antique epitome of his work. This epitome reports the full system (i.e., for all zodiacal signs), but it does not associate the signs and winds with countries (CCAG VIII 3, p. 112,23–26). One last fragmentary witness is Firmicus (fourth century CE), who associates Pisces with the north wind in his *Mathesis* 2.10.5 (again without a country; note that chapter Firm. Math. 2.10 is heavily mutilated by a lacuna: only the beginning of the data on Aries and some data on Pisces are extant). I owe this information to Hübner 1982, 261. See also Hübner (2000, 79), who calls the system of associations of signs and winds (without countries) that we find in Valens B, Antiochus, Firmicus, and Paul “the most wide-spread” one.

89 Hübner 1982, 261.

If we pursue this thought further and try to identify the hypothetical channel of transmission, two interesting documents deserve attention. One of them is BM 47494, a cuneiform text that is most likely an Achaemenid tablet from Babylon.⁹⁰ It contains “a permutation of Scheme D, which replaces months with their corresponding zodiacal constellations, so that Aries (I), Leo (V), and Sagittarius (IX) are associated with Akkad (S), Taurus (II), Virgo (VI), and Capricorn (X) with Elam (E), and so forth.[...]The development of Scheme D in BM 47494 attests to the adaptability of schemes in light of changing circumstances.[...]This permutation of Scheme D was clearly influenced by the advent of the Zodiac earlier in the Achaemenid period.”⁹¹ The second text is another Late Babylonian tablet, BM 36746.⁹² It contains lunar eclipse omens based on associations of the four triplicities of the zodiacal signs with the four cardinal winds (without geographical associations). These correlations correspond exactly to what Geminus reports, in the context of astrological predictions based on lunar eclipses, as a “Chaldaean” system.⁹³ In other words, both Late Babylonian texts (BM 47494 and BM 36746) have replaced the months of SIT 4 with zodiacal signs,⁹⁴ and one of them (BM 47494) contains astrological geography based on the same order of the winds (NSWE) that is known from SIT 4 but absent from all Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography. Since BM 47494 proves that astrological geography played a role in Mesopotamian scholarly activity at the time of the Persian rule over Babylon and Egypt (late sixth–late fourth centuries BCE), one is tempted to explain the change from the traditional order of the winds NSWE (Neo-Assyrian through

90 This tablet was edited and studied by Hunger (2004).

91 Wainer (forthcoming). BM 47494 has restricted the scope of scheme D to the economic sphere, associating each triplicity with the economic fortunes of the correlated geographical area (see above).

92 See Rochberg-Halton 1984, 120–24 (on the date: 124); Hunger & Pingree 1999, 17; and Steele’s contribution in the present volume.

93 Hunger & Pingree 1999, 17. Gem. 2.8–11 associates the four zodiacal triplicities thus with the four cardinal winds (not with countries): Aries/Leo/Sagittarius: North; Taurus/Virgo/Capricornus: South; Gemini/Libra/Aquarius: West; Cancer/Scorpius/Pisces: East. Geminus calls the winds *boreas*, *notos*, *zephyros*, and *apheliotes*. On the triplicities, see above, n. 56. Cumont was unaware of Gem. 2.8–11.

94 An interesting Hellenistic parallel is that of the system of ‘the old Egyptians’ transmitted by Hephaestio (Apotel. 1.21) and the independent Anonymous Boll (CCAG VII, 129–51; see above, pp. 304–306): While Hephaestio regularly speaks of zodiacal signs (from Aries to Pisces), the Anonymous regularly speaks of the corresponding Roman months (from April to March). Even if the Roman names of the months must have replaced earlier Egyptian names, the Anonymous obviously continues the older, originally temporal scheme. See also John the Lydian (sixth century CE), *De ostentis* 23–26: These chapters explicitly correlate each of the zodiacal signs with the corresponding Roman month.

Late Babylonian) to ESWN in Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography through Persio-Egyptian mediation. More precisely: the intention was to move the East, to which Persia belongs even from a Mesopotamian perspective, from the last position in the traditional order to the first position in the new order. Even if this tentative explanation is beyond proof, it strengthens Cumont's argument.

Careful readers will have noticed that two questions regarding my development hypothesis are still open: When and where did the number of associated countries start increasing beyond the traditional set of four (Elam, Akkad, Subartu and the Guti, and Westland)? And when did the geographical horizon start expanding beyond Mesopotamia? Regarding the first question, the answer is: at the latest in the Late Babylonian period. Steele shows that various cuneiform texts of this period (esp. MNB 1849 and BM 47494; the latter turns out to be a precious document once more) already associate the single constellations⁹⁵ with countries, cities, or rivers. Some of the geographical areas are associated with more than one constellation, and one constellation can be associated with up to four different areas.⁹⁶ As to the second question, all known Mesopotamian systems of astrological geography are limited to the traditional Babylonian territory.⁹⁷ Hence, the extension of that small geographical horizon to much vaster areas, such as those covered in the Hellenistic systems, may have been inspired by the vast extension of the Persian Empire and could thus have occurred in the same hypothetical process of transmission through Persian intermediaries. In this context, it is important to emphasize that Mesopotamian astronomy and astrology did not at all suffer a decline under the Achaemenid rule; on the contrary, the Babylonian schools of astral divination flourished in that period and enjoyed important financial and political support.⁹⁸

One thing, however, is certain: Among all Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography, that of Paul of Alexandria is, conceptually speaking, the most similar to the Mesopotamian precursors that have now come to light. This argument, combined with the other arguments mentioned above, speaks strongly in favor of an early date for Paul's system. If one follows Cumont in dating it to the Achaemenid period, which I am inclined to do, one must follow him also in assuming that Paul quoted directly from that fifth- or fourth-century BCE adaptation of Eastern models, while Valens B would have quoted from a

95 The total is fifteen. See Table 9.1 in Steele's contribution to this volume.

96 This closely resembles the Hellenistic systems of astrological geography, as long as one keeps in mind that the latter always work with a standardized total of twelve constellations or signs.

97 See Steele in this volume.

98 I thank Antonio Panaino for pointing this out to me.

revised version made by a Greek in the late third century BCE, who added the names of cities that had been founded under the Ptolemies. With respect to our leading question, it seems almost certain that the common ancestor of the systems of Valens B and Paul was already several centuries old at the time of Jesus and King Herod.

Before we move on to later systems, one last point regarding Paul's list of countries calls for attention, namely, that it bears curious similarities to the second chapter of Luke's biblical Book of Acts. In that passage, Luke reports how the Holy Spirit came over the apostles and enabled them to speak in all of the languages of the world, so as to be understood by all of the foreigners who happened to be in Jerusalem on that day. Obviously, Luke does not mention zodiacal signs, but his so-called catalogue of the nations is remarkably similar to what one gets if one reads the countries of Paul's astrological system from Aries to Pisces. Various explanations have been proposed: Halévy, who seems to have been the first to discuss the similarities between the two texts, thought that Paul depended, directly or indirectly, on the list in Acts.⁹⁹ This untenable view was rightly rejected by Boll and Metzger.¹⁰⁰ Weinstock, in contrast, argued that both Paul and Luke drew on an old astrological system, and that the latter (Luke) was possibly aware of the astrological origin of his list.¹⁰¹ This theory has been forcefully challenged (again with the help and approval of D. Pingree) by Metzger.¹⁰² In more recent years, it has been equally forcefully restated by De Callataj, who was, however, unaware of Metzger's article.¹⁰³ In my own opinion, the case does not allow for a certain answer, partly because it is complicated by problems of textual criticism involved in each of the two texts.¹⁰⁴ I shall leave the question open, not least because I am convinced in any case that Paul's system predates the Christian era, no matter whether it had an influence on the Book of Acts or not.¹⁰⁵

99 Halévy 1906, esp. pp. 279ff (*non vidi*; I owe my information on Halévy to Metzger, and I thank A. Adair for directing my attention to Metzger's article).

100 Boll 1912, 715, and Metzger 1970, p. 123, n. 1, and pp. 128–30.

101 Weinstock 1948, esp. 46. Weinstock was developing an earlier, unpublished observation by the late F. C. Burkitt. Only after completing his note, he learned about Halévy's theory and joined Boll in rejecting it.

102 Metzger 1970. See above, n. 53.

103 De Callataj 1999–2000, 31–34, De Callataj 2001b, 134–35, and De Callataj 2002, 90–93. Since Weinstock, Metzger, and De Callataj all provide tabular comparisons of the two texts, no table is needed here.

104 Paul gives two slightly different versions of his system (see above, p. 313), while in Acts 2:9 it is unclear whether Judea or Armenia is the correct reading.

105 One last point of interest: Paul's list of countries reappears in two different late documents: a list of Egyptian animals associated with countries in cod. Vatic. gr. 1056, f. 28^v (see

The System of Ptolemy

By far the most complex and sophisticated system of astrological geography is that of Ptolemy. Scholars agree that he heavily reworked and rationalized earlier systems, thus departing—as he does in so many other respects in his *Apotelesmatica*—from mainstream astrology. Ptolemy's innovations in chapter 2.3 are many: His astrological geography includes not only new (partly unheard-of) countries but also two factors that are absent from all other extant systems, namely the seven ancient 'planets' (the Sun, the Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury) and the four intercardinal winds (NE, SE, SW, NW). For various reasons, this is not the place to embark on a full explanation of Ptolemy's system: that would require many more pages than the present contribution allows, it would burden the reader with complicated details without real relevance to the question of whether Molnar is right about Aries, and such detailed analyses of Ptolemy's chapter on astrological geography (the longest chapter of his *Apotelesmatika*) are readily available for anyone who wishes to explore this topic further.¹⁰⁶ Suffice it here to say that Ptolemy is the only author who divides the inhabited world (*oikumene*) into four quadrants, which are each assigned to one zodiacal triplicity,¹⁰⁷ to one of the four intercardinal winds, and to a group of three planets. The center of these quadrants is located somewhere east of Rhodes. To make his distribution more balanced, Ptolemy decided to delimit an area around the center of the *oikumene* in which the qualities of these quadrants interpenetrate each other in such a way that, for example, the part of the south-eastern quadrant that is closest to the center is impregnated with qualities of the diametrically opposite north-western quadrant, and vice versa. All of this justifies scholarly remarks on "le caractère extraordinairement artificiel, pour ne pas dire délibérément falsificateur de toute cette construction."¹⁰⁸ Ptolemy's system is tentatively visualized in the following diagram:¹⁰⁹

Boll 1903, 296, on the so-called Dodecaoros) and an Armenian manuscript report on the astrological geography of the ninth-century author Abū Mašār (see F. Cumont, *CCAG* IV, 1903, pp. 125–126, n. 2).

106 See esp. Hübner 2000, 75–93, and Aujac 1993 (= 2012), 69–105 and 284–303.

107 See above, n. 56.

108 De Callatay 1999–2000, 65 (with reference to a similar, much earlier judgment expressed by Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 339). Aujac (1993 [= 2012], 97) also emphasizes the profoundly original character of Ptolemy's astrological geography.

109 It is inspired by the diagram of Aujac (1993 [= 2012], 300–01), but differs in detail. In particular, the present diagram precisely reproduces the couples of one zodiacal sign and one planet respectively, as indicated by Ptolemy. Note that the geographical distribution here is somewhat schematic in order to preserve Ptolemy's groupings of one planet with one sign. Hence, it does not faithfully reproduce the true spatial relationships, neither those

<p>NW (Europe)</p> <p>Italy, Cisalpine Gaul, Apulia, ϱ + \odot Sicily</p> <p>Tyrthenia Celtica, ζ + λ</p> <p>Spain</p> <p>Columns of Hercules</p> <p>Numidia, Carthage, ϱ + δ</p> <p>Africa</p> <p>Metagonitis, Mauritania, μ + σ</p> <p>Gaetulia</p>	<p>Britain, Transalpine Gaul, Germany, Υ + σ Bastarnia</p> <p>Macedonia, Thrace, Illyria ψ + β Hellas, Achaia, Crete μ + γ Cyclades, Coast of Asia Minor, Cyprus δ + γ</p> <p>Cyrenaica, Marmarica, Lower Egypt μ + β</p> <p>Thebais, the Oasis, Troglodytica Ω + ψ</p> <p>Arabia, Azania, Middle Ethiopia ω + β</p> <p>Phazania, Nasamontis, μ + λ Garamantica</p> <p>Arabian Gulf</p>	<p>Lake Pon- tus</p> <p>Hyrcania, Armenia, Π + γ Matiana</p> <p>Sauromatica, Oxiana, ω + β Sogdiana</p> <p>Bythinia, ϱ + δ Phrygia, Colchica Lydia, Cilicia, Pamphyliia μ + λ Commagene, Cappadocia, Syria μ + σ</p> <p>Coele-Syria, Υ + σ Idumaea, Judea Phoenicia, Chaldaea, Orchunia ϱ + \odot Arabia Felix ζ + λ</p> <p>Babylonia, Mesopotamia, μ + γ Assyria</p>	<p>NE (Northern Asia)</p> <p>Bactriana, Casperia, Ω + ψ Serica</p> <p>India, Ariana, ψ + β Gedrosia</p> <p>Parthia, Media, δ + γ Persia</p> <p>SE (Southern Asia)</p>
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FIGURE 14.1 Ptolemy's system of astrological geography (Apotel. 2.3).

There is, however, despite all its conceptual sophistication, something odd about Ptolemy's astrological geography: The purely geographical quality and horizon that underlies chapter 2.3 of the *Apotelesmatika* is notably inferior to that of the *Geography* which Ptolemy wrote only a few years later. The first scholar to point out and discuss this problem, on whose existence there has been scholarly consensus ever since, was Boll (1894). He claimed that Ptolemy's list of countries in Apotel. 2.3 came from the first-century BCE scholar Posidonius. This attribution has been rejected by Trüdinger (1918) and by all subsequent experts up to the present.¹¹⁰ It has long been clear that the only plausible explanation for the geographical oddities in Apotel. 2.3 is that Ptolemy was somehow using pre-existing geographical material, but that it is impossible to identify a specific source and date. In view of the very high, typically Ptolemaic level of conceptual sophistication of Apotel. 2.3, it is agreed that Ptolemy must have heavily modified and adjusted his geographical source. Even if one were inclined to hypothesize that that lost source contained astrological associations of signs and countries beyond the purely geographical data, which would be a speculative claim, one would still have to admit that Ptolemy was forced to break up and modify those hypothetical associations of signs and countries in order to adjust them to his own complicated distinction in quadrants of the *oikumene* that fall into large outer and small inner sectors, which are in their turn differentiated with respect to planetary rulers and ethnographic characteristics.¹¹¹ We shall return to this point below.

The number of 72 countries, which Ptolemy seems to have explicitly emphasized,¹¹² is almost certainly symbolic, indicating an "ideal totality."¹¹³ With special reference to the fields of geography and astrology, it is worth

imagined by Ptolemy nor those ascertained by modern geodesy. For other diagrams, see Cardanus (1663, 181), Pérez Jiménez (1998, 184), and Hübner (2000, 87). For a geographical explanation regarding the countries mentioned by Ptolemy, see the footnotes of Robbins (1940; I follow his English orthography of the ancient names).

110 See Trüdinger 1918, 80–89; Uhden 1933, 30; De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 67; Hübner 2000, 80 and 93.

111 Cf. the circumspect discussion by De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 61–67.

112 Ptol. Apotel. 2.4.5: γίνονται χῶραι οβ' ("total: 72 countries"). This sentence is found only in part of the manuscripts and was omitted by Robbins (1940). Hübner (1998) considers it authentic.

113 See Izmirlieva (1998) on the cross-cultural symbolism of 72 as a number of "ideal totalities" (esp. p. 184, n. 5, and p. 193). See further Marzell 1913, esp. 71; Kretzenbacher 1952; and Izmirlieva 2008, 72–73.

emphasizing that 72 is a multiple of 12, the number of the zodiacal signs on which astrological geography is based, and—more importantly—that 72 is also the number of the nations of the world in the Old Testament (Gen 10).¹¹⁴ It could thus seem particularly suitable for a system of astrological geography. One may rightly object that the Judeo-Christian tradition probably did not have an influence on Ptolemy. Interestingly, however, the number 72 seems to have had a long tradition of symbolic value in the pagan Greek and Egyptian cultures, as well.¹¹⁵ The most noteworthy detail in this context, which has—to the best of my knowledge—been overlooked by all readers of Ptol. Apotel. 2.3 so far, is that Horapollon reports that the Egyptians used the hieroglyph representing the cynocephalus (i.e., the sacred baboon of Thoth/Hermes) to denote the inhabited world (*oikumene*) because of a shared feature: According to ancient Egyptian belief, the world comprised 72 countries, and cynocephali died piecemeal over a period of 72 days.¹¹⁶ This element of Egyptian culture makes it easy to believe that some anonymous author, perhaps a hellenized Egyptian, composed a catalogue of 72 countries, which was later used by Ptolemy.¹¹⁷

114 See the extensive Jewish and Christian material on the number 72 collected by Meyer & Suntrup 1987, 760–764; and Major 2013.

115 A quick, unsystematic search yields various Greek attestations, all of which predate Ptolemy (except for Galen, who is a few decades younger) and concern obviously symbolic, rather than empirically obtained numbers: Aristotle mentions that certain bitches have a pregnancy period of 72 days, which equals one-fifth of a year (*Historia animalium* 6.20 p. 574a25–27); Galen speaks of a nosological period of 72 hours (*De morborum temporibus liber* pp. 13,13–14,1 Wille); the grammarian Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. 200 BCE) reports that Heracles had 72 children (*Historiae animalium epitome* 1.87 Lambros).

116 Horap. 1,14. Sbordone (1940, 40) thinks—convincingly, in my view—that Horapollon may here actually be following old Egyptian traditions, and not, as others thought, the church fathers. Although 72 is not mentioned as a symbolic number by Sethe (1916), there are several passages in Greek literature which confirm the status of 72 as a symbolic number in Egyptian culture: Diodorus (first century BCE) ascribes to Hecataeus (ca. 500 BCE) the ethnographical information that “when any king died all the inhabitants of Egypt united in mourning for him, rending their garments, closing the temples, stopping the sacrifices, and celebrating no festivals for seventy-two days” (Diod. 1.72.5 = FGrHist 264 frg. 25 p. 49,5–8; trans. Oldfather, Loeb); Plutarch reports that Typhon managed to overcome Osiris with the help of 72 conspirators (*De Iside et Osiride* 13 p. 356B = Eudox. frg. 290 p. 102,14 Lasserre); the same Plutarch attributes to the Egyptians a saying that the Moon is one-seventy-second part of the earth (*De facie in orbe Lunae* 19, p. 932A); and Iamblichus mentions an Egyptian division of the sky into 72 parts (*De mysteriis* 8.3).

117 It would seem arbitrary to claim, only because Thoth/Hermes happens to be the god of astrology, that such a catalogue was not just a geographical list, but was already an astrological geography.

Development Hypotheses

In view of the stunning discrepancies between the various systems of astrological geography, scholars have proposed two main explanations: one that goes back to the early twentieth century, and another recent one that builds on its predecessor.

The earlier explanation takes Cumont's claim of the oldest age of the simple system of Paul of Alexandria for granted and explains the higher degree of complexity of the other systems as later modifications motivated by various considerations, which are partly discernible: One reason would be the historically increasing geographical horizon, which prompted the inclusion of far distant countries into astrological geography. Another reason is manifest in the system of Manilius, who, being a poet, explains some of his associations through Greek mythology.¹¹⁸ Some other modifications have political reasons, especially the change from Libra/Libya and Scorpius/Italy (according to the old system of Paul) to Libra/Italy and Scorpius/Libya (according to Manilius and Dorotheus).¹¹⁹ Still another reason is the pursuit of rationalization in Ptolemy's system (see above). In sum, this traditional approach tends to explain the later systems as increasingly modified and distorted versions of one original system.

A more sophisticated variant of this theory has been advanced by Godefroid de Callataÿ in several articles between 2000 and 2002. He noticed¹²⁰ that the presumably oldest system (Paul), and to a lesser extent also the younger ones, seem to follow more or less a circular order: beginning in the East of the inhabited world and then moving counter-clockwise northwards through Babylonia,

118 One geographical area that Manilius associates with Aries is the Hellespont, which takes its name from the Ram with the golden fleece that allegedly crossed that straight while carrying Phrixus and his twin sister, Helle. Helle fell off the Ram and drowned; hence the name Hellespont ("Sea of Helle"). See esp. Manil. 4.746–748: "The Ram [...] claims for his influence the sea which he overcame himself, when after the girl had slipped off he bore her brother to the shore and wept over the reduction of his burden and the relief to his back" (trans. Goold 1997, 281–83). A similar association is that of Phrygia with Leo because of the lions chained to the chariot of the Phrygian goddess Cybele (Manil. 4.759–760). On Manilius' explanatory efforts, see Housman 1937, xiv; and in much more detail, De Callataÿ 2001a, 40–62.

119 It pleased the Romans to associate their own country with the symbol of justice (Libra) and sinister Scorpius with Libyan Carthage (Manil. Astr. 4.769–782). The presence of real scorpions in the sands of Libya seems to support this assignment (ibid. 4.662–670). See Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 330.

120 De Callataÿ (2002, 92), following an observation of Weinstock (1948, 45).

Asia Minor, and Greece to Italy in the far West, and then back through a series of more southern geographical areas to the Near East. In addition, De Callataÿ found a hitherto overlooked text by the Late Antique Latin author Ampelius, who associates the twelve zodiacal signs in a counter-clockwise distribution with the twelve winds of the wind-rose of Timosthenes of Rhodes.¹²¹ Timosthenes, an important admiral of the early third century BCE, had devised a wind-rose in which each of the twelve winds is separated by exactly 30° from the next wind.¹²² To make a long story short, De Callataÿ thinks that sometime early in the Hellenistic period, someone (perhaps Timosthenes himself)¹²³ projected the wind-rose of Timosthenes onto Eratosthenes' map of the inhabited world,¹²⁴ thus allowing associations of countries, winds, and zodiacal signs in what De Callataÿ calls the "Ursystem" of Hellenistic astrological geography.¹²⁵ All extant Hellenistic systems of astrological geography would then be more or less heavily modified descendants of that "système qui, dans sa formation originelle, n'a rien de proprement astrologique."¹²⁶

The merit of this relatively new and cleverly devised theory remains to be assessed by way of a thorough analysis, which would go beyond the purpose of the present contribution. As a preliminary impression, however, I have to admit that I am rather skeptical. My main reasons are the following: Firstly, De Callataÿ does not take Heph. 1.21–22 into account, a shortcoming that weighs particularly heavily in the case of those already complex and certainly early systems of Hipparchus, Odapsus, and 'the old Egyptians' (Heph. 1.21). Secondly, with regard to the presumably oldest¹²⁷ extant Hellenistic system, he explains

121 Ampelius' text (*Liber memorialis*, ch. 4, introduced by the possibly spurious heading *Quibus partibus sedecant XII signa duodecim ventorum*) reads: *Aries in aphelioten, Taurus in caeciam, Gemini in aequilonem, Cancer in septentrionem, Leo in thraciam, Virgo in argesten, Libra in zephyron, Scorpius in africanum, Sagittarius in austrum et africanum, Capricornus in austrum, Aquarius in eurum et notum, Pisces in eurum*. This is visualized through a diagram including the Greek names of the winds, by De Callataÿ (2002, 104).

122 The wind-rose was explained in Timosthenes' (now lost) work "On Harbors" (Περὶ Λιμένων). The relevant passage has been preserved through the Late Antique geographer Agathemerus (Agath. geogr. 2.7; for details see De Callataÿ 2002, 99).

123 This is a speculation of De Callataÿ (2002, 101).

124 See the diagram in De Callataÿ 1999–2000, fig. 2 (following p. 67), = De Callataÿ 2002, 103, fig. 2.

125 De Callataÿ 2002, 97; tabular explanation of this hypothetical "Ursystem" in De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 51.

126 De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 52.

127 On this point De Callataÿ and I agree.

Paul's clockwise assignment of four winds to the four triplicities as a novelty inspired by certain passages in Ptolemy's *Apotelesmatika*¹²⁸ (i.e., as one of the modifications and distortions of the hypothetical "Ursystem" in which twelve winds were allegedly assigned counter-clockwise to single signs). This view is implausible in view of the new Mesopotamian evidence of the Achaemenid period,¹²⁹ of which De Callatāy was necessarily unaware, evidence which shows close conceptual resemblances to Paul's order and assignment of the winds. Thirdly, the *Liber memorialis* of Ampelius is a Late Antique work (fourth century CE?).¹³⁰ It is theoretically possible that its association of the zodiacal signs with the twelve winds of Timosthenes already existed many centuries earlier and inspired someone to project the wind-rose of Timosthenes onto the map of Eratosthenes, but in the absence of corroborating evidence, this assumption is speculative and uncertain. What readers of De Callatāy's articles may perceive as the main merit of his theory—namely, that it provides a plausible explanation for the association of signs, winds, and countries—loses much of its appeal in view of the Mesopotamian precursors and of those early discrepancies between extant Hellenistic systems, which are not taken into account by De Callatāy, and especially in view of old systems such as Valens B and Heph. 1.22, which bear witness to the geographical horizons of authors who lived in Egypt and are not likely to have been under the spell of Eratosthenes and Timosthenes.

There is reason to suspect that any simple and one-dimensional development theory will fall short of explaining the extant evidence. It is typical of the Mesopotamian sources that they do not always associate the same constellations/signs with the same cities, but rather present a considerable variation. This trend seems to continue in our Hellenistic systems from the earliest times. We should not exclude the possibility that theories like De Callatāy's will turn out to be suitable to explain single lines or sections of single lines within a more complex and ultimately chaotic (i.e., non-linear and certainly non-teleological) development.

128 De Callatāy 1999–2000, 27, with reference (n. 5) to Ptol. *Apotel.* 1.10 and 2.12.

129 See above and Steele's contribution to this volume.

130 For this tentative date, which is primarily based on linguistic criteria, see Schmidt 1989, p. 202. Other scholars have proposed dates ranging from the second century CE to the fifth century CE (*ibid.*). De Callatāy (2002, 100) dates Ampelius to ca. 200 CE.

Survey of Associations for Aries

Since Molnar assumes that the magi noticed a rare, regal portent in Aries and associated Aries with Judea, we must now evaluate the plausibility of the latter part of this assumption: the association of Aries with Judea. The extant systems of Greco-Roman astrological geography (see Table 14.1 above) give the following associations for Aries:¹³¹

TABLE 14.3 *Associations with Aries in ancient Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography*

Date	Source	Countries
Fourth/third century BCE?	Old system quoted by Paul A–B ¹³² and by Rhetorius in his excerpt of Teucer ¹³³	Persia
Second century BCE	Hipparchus and ‘the old Egyptians’ ¹³⁴	<i>left shoulder</i> : Babylonia <i>right shoulder</i> : Thrace <i>chest</i> : Armenia <i>sides</i> : Western Arabia <i>spine and belly</i> : Persia and Cappadocia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Red Sea
Second century BCE?	‘The old Egyptians’ ¹³⁵	Egypt, Libya, Syria

131 Synopses of all extant data for each zodiacal sign (not only Aries, as here) are given by Pérez Jiménez 1998, 202–14.

132 Paul. Alex. 2 pp. 3,1–2 (A) and 10,1–2 (B) Boer.

133 CCAG VII p. 195,17. Valens B also quotes this old system, but only the data for Aquarius and Pisces are extant in Valens B (see above).

134 Heph. Apotel. 1.1.7. Odapsus, whom Hephaestio quotes elsewhere, is not quoted with regard to Aries.

135 Heph. Apotel. 1.21.12.

Date	Source	Countries
Second century BCE?	Anon. Pingree ¹³⁶	Syria
Early first century CE	Manilius ¹³⁷	Hellespont, Propontis, Syria, Persia, Nile, Egypt
Mid-first century CE	Dorotheus of Sidon ¹³⁸	Babylon and Western Arabia
Mid-second century CE	Ptolemy ¹³⁹	Britain, Gaul, Germany, Bastarnia, Coele Syria, ¹⁴⁰ Idumea, Judea
Late second century CE	Valens A ¹⁴¹	<i>front (feet):</i> Babylonia <i>head:</i> Elymaia

¹³⁶ Heph. Apotel. 1.22.3.

¹³⁷ Manil. Astr. 4.744–752.

¹³⁸ Dor. Appendix II A p. 427 Pingree.

¹³⁹ Ptol. Apotel. 2.3.15 (the south-eastern quadrant's outer part), 2.3.31 (its inner part), and 4.2 (tabular summary).

¹⁴⁰ After Coele Syria, Molnar (1999, 46) quotes Palestine, following the translation of Ptolemy's summary by Robbins (1940, 157). Note, however, that Ptolemy did not mention Palestine anywhere in his *Apotelesmatika*. The name is absent from all manuscripts of Ptol. Apotel. 2.3.31 (the south-eastern quadrant's inner part) and appears only in part of the manuscripts of the tabular summary (ibid. 4.2), where it has been rightly deleted by Franz Boll as an addition made by a Christian writer (Boll was followed by Hübner [1998, 121] in his authoritative critical edition). This intrusion into the text must have spread widely in antiquity, because in Hephaestio's quotation of the countries that Ptolemy associated with Aries (Heph. Apotel. 1.1.6), the name of Palestine has replaced that of Coele Syria. That Palestine was, however, not in Ptolemy's original is further (i.e., beyond the manuscript evidence mentioned above) indicated by the fact that it would raise the total number of countries in Ptolemy's system to 73, while 72 seems to be a symbolic number that Ptolemy intended (see above, n. 115). John the Lydian (see above, n. 38) reports the data on Aries correctly, i.e., without Palestine, in *De ostentis* 24 and 71, while Vicellius (quoted ibid. 55) includes Palestine.

¹⁴¹ Val. Anth. 1.2.7.

TABLE 14.3 *Associations with Aries in ancient Greco-Roman (cont.)*

Date	Source	Countries
		<i>right part</i> : Persia <i>left part</i> : Coele Syria and its adjacent lands <i>face</i> : Babylonia <i>chest</i> : Armenia <i>shoulders</i> : Thrace <i>belly</i> : Cappadocia, Susia, Red Sea, Rhypara <i>hind parts</i> : Egypt, Persian Ocean
Sixth century CE?	<i>Liber Hermetis</i> ¹⁴²	0° – 10° : (Atlantic) Ocean 10° – 20° : Bactria 20° – 30° : Lydia
?	Anon. Weinstock ¹⁴³	–

Among these extant¹⁴⁴ systems, Judea is mentioned only by Ptolemy. Not only is his system a very peculiar, conceptually unique creation (see above), but the seven countries that Ptolemy assigns to Aries do not have even one match among the numerous geographical areas mentioned in all other extant systems.¹⁴⁵ This is particularly interesting in view of the following two facts: Firstly, all other systems before ca. 200 CE,¹⁴⁶ with the exception of Dorotheus, assign either Persia or Syria to Aries;¹⁴⁷ and secondly, Dorotheus of Sidon

142 Lib. Herm. 1.4–6.

143 CCAG V 4 (1940), p. 172,1–6. Aries is the only sign in this system whose geographical associations are lost.

144 There may, of course, have been further systems that perished without leaving traces in the extant record.

145 It would not be legitimate to equate Ptolemy's mention of Coele Syria with that of Syria in other systems, because Ptolemy distinguishes the two areas by assigning Syria to Scorpius (Apotel. 2.3.41 and 2.4.3).

146 I.e., all systems except for the *Liber Hermetis* and the Anon. Weinstock (in the latter, geographical data for Aries are missing anyway).

147 Anon. Weinstock is excluded from this and from the following.

and Valens A present data that coincide to a significant extent with those of Hipparchus and ‘the ‘old Egyptians’.¹⁴⁸ This means that all systems before ca. 200 CE present shared features with regard to Aries, from which Ptolemy completely departs. Note also that many of the eleven countries mentioned by the pre-Christian systems are far distant from each other. Hence, it would not be legitimate to argue that they cover a coherent geographical area that includes Judea without mentioning its name.

Since we do not know of any ancient astrologer who put this or that system into practice, and even less of astrologers coming from east of Jerusalem (Mesopotamia or Persia) and living before the time of Matthew, it is impossible for us to determine the country that a hypothetical ancient astrologer would have associated with Aries. At best, we can express a probability based on statistics: Persia and Syria are the most frequent associations with Aries, both before and after the beginning of the Christian era. This is again interesting. If the magi really existed and their story—as told by Matthew—had historical substance (even theologians are skeptical of this),¹⁴⁹ Persia, where magi formed an important priestly class, would be the most likely country of their origin; indeed, this soon became the dominant explanation in early Christian exegesis and iconography.¹⁵⁰ However, Matthew has no interest in determining their country of origin precisely.¹⁵¹ Hence, if such Persian magi really noticed a portent in Aries, why wouldn’t they conclude that a king had been or would be born in Persia, all the more since Zoroastrianism had its own expectation of a savior of the world? They would have rejoiced and stayed home in Persia instead of traveling to Judea. But even if they opted, for whatever reason, for the other most frequently named country, Syria, they should have traveled to Antioch, the capital of Syria, not to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea.

It now becomes clear that Molnar’s argumentation is problematic on the basis of three main shortcomings:

148 Of the nine areas that Hipparchus and ‘the old Egyptians’ associated with Aries, two match the data given by Dorotheus (who mentions only two areas), and eight reappear in the list of Valens A (who adds four other areas: Elymaia, Susia, Rhypara, and the Persian Ocean, probably drawing from Odapsus; see above n. 71).

149 See above, n. 3.

150 See Davies & Allison 1988, 228; Luz 2002, 177. Other options are Arabia and, less frequently mentioned in early Christian texts, Mesopotamia and Ethiopia.

151 Luz 2002, 172.

- 1) his limited knowledge of the extant sources (as a matter of fact, he does not seem to know any of the pre-Christian systems, and among the latter ones, he mentions only those of Manilius, Dorotheus, Ptolemy, and Valens),¹⁵²
- 2) his erroneous characterization of Ptolemy's system, the only one that actually mentions Judea;
- 3) his very eclectic use of the few sources he professes to know.

Let us follow his line of thought for a moment, for the sake of illustration. In his search for astrological attributions of countries to zodiacal signs, Molnar goes straight to Ptolemy. He writes: "The countries that Ptolemy goes on to list are those of the first century BC rather than those of his own time, the second century AD. The nature of this list indicates that he was indeed drawing his information from older astrological sources."¹⁵³ In a footnote, Molnar refers to Boll, who in 1894 claimed that Ptolemy's list of countries in this chapter came from Posidonius (ca. 135–51 BCE). It has been shown above that this is an obsolete view. Molnar seems to be unaware of the research that has been done on Ptol. Apotel. 2.3 during the last one hundred years, and not surprisingly so: With the exception of Boll and Bouché-Leclercq, he never mentions any of the scholarly contributions on astrological geography that were available in the late 1990s.¹⁵⁴ But even his exclusive reliance on Boll is no excuse for the statement that the *Apotelesmatika* is "an ideal primary reference concerning astrology during the time of Herod."¹⁵⁵ Boll himself, together with all later historians of astrology, would have judged this an absurd statement, because it is an obvious truth that Ptolemy's work is in many respects profoundly different from mainstream Hellenistic astrology.¹⁵⁶

Molnar's misconception of all of this is paired with his eclectic use of the countries that Ptolemy assigns to Aries. The names of Britain, Gaul, Germany, and Bastarnia (southern Russia) are suppressed. Molnar writes only that Aries is "related to a number of countries," limiting his literal quotation to Coele

152 Molnar (2003) does not add anything new to these sources.

153 Molnar 1999, 46.

154 The first edition of Aujac's monograph (1993, largely identical with the augmented third edition of 2012) is part of that literature.

155 Molnar 1999, 45.

156 Molnar, instead, writes that Ptolemy's work "is often cited as the bible of astrology" (1999, 44–45, without references; cf. Molnar 2014, 174: "the so-called bible of astrology"). I wonder if Molnar is erroneously thinking of another work, the lost manual of Nechepsos and Petosiris, which has been called the "bible of astrology" by Boll (1908, 106 [= Boll 1950, 4]) and by later scholars.

Syria, Palestine (to be deleted),¹⁵⁷ Idumea, and Judea. Since these are contiguous small areas, the reader is made to believe that Ptolemy is ultimately speaking of just one geographical area. Moreover, Molnar does not tell his reader what ethnological consequence Ptolemy draws from his assignment of Coele Syria, Idumaea, and Judea to Aries and Mars: “[T]herefore these peoples are in general bold, godless, and scheming.”¹⁵⁸ The reason is that “the Jews, because of their monotheism and disregard of all pagan gods, were generally branded as atheists by their neighbours.”¹⁵⁹ Even if Ptolemy had taken his assertions regarding Aries from a pre-existing source, which is thoroughly uncertain, one may still wonder if anyone willing to worship the Messiah of the Jews (i.e., the biblical magi) would have placed their confidence in such a hostile source.

Moreover, Molnar does not pay attention to earlier scholars’ observations that among the 72 countries mentioned by Ptolemy, we find several tiny geographical areas (such as here Idumaea and Judea) and others (Casperia, Oxiana, Orchinia) that are altogether unknown from Greco-Roman literature.¹⁶⁰ Aujac classifies some (though not all) of the countries mentioned by Ptolemy as “pays minuscules, [...] peuples mythiques ou disparus, [...] régions que l’on a peine à situer sur la carte et qui semblent sorties de l’imagination de Ptolémée.”¹⁶¹ As a consequence, it is very uncertain whether Ptolemy’s data existed in any previous source. But even if we hypothesize that Ptolemy took the association of Aries with all of those seven countries (Britain, Gaul, Germany, Bastarnia, Coele Syria, Idumea, Judea) *en bloc* from an earlier source, we might still wonder why the magi travelled to Judea and not to one of the other countries.

Molnar then moves on to Valens, who “recorded that Aries controlled Coele Syria and its adjacent lands.”¹⁶² The reader does not learn that Valens also associates eleven more areas with Aries (Babylonia, Elymaia, Persia, Armenia, Thrace, Cappadocia, Susia, the Red Sea, Rhypara, Egypt, and the Persian Ocean). Lastly, Molnar mentions Manilius, who “placed Syria and northern Egypt under the control of Aries,” with the additional very implausible suggestion that for Manilius, as a poet “not interested in details,” the sign of “Aries

157 See above n. 140.

158 Robbins 1940, 143 (= Ptol. Apotel. 2.3.31 διόπερ ὡς ἐπίπαν θρασεῖς τέ εἰσι καὶ ἄθεοι καὶ ἐπιβουλευτικοί).

159 Robbins 1940, 143, n. 2.

160 Except, of course, Ptol. Apotel. 2.3 and 2.4.2–4.

161 Aujac 1993 (= 2012), 101, quoted with approval by De Callataÿ 1999–2000, 66.

162 Molnar 1999, 47.

represented the entire Near East” between Syria and Egypt, including Judea.¹⁶³ Again, the reader does not learn that Manilius associates three other, far-distant geographical areas with Aries: namely, Hellespont, Propontis, and Persia. Dorotheus, whom Molnar quotes on other occasions, is omitted altogether with regard to astrological geography, obviously because Babylon and Western Arabia do not suit Molnar’s argument.¹⁶⁴

Most readers of these central pages of Molnar’s book will not be familiar with any of the relevant texts on astrological geography. Hence, most of these readers will not realize that Molnar is deliberately making eclectic use of his sources, thus giving the impression that the association of Aries with Judea and with the larger area of Syria is beyond doubt. In this context, Molnar adds another¹⁶⁵ speculative reason why Manilius does not mention Judea: “It is also likely that the incorporation of Judea and Samaria in AD 6 into the Roman province of Syria destroyed Judea’s individuality in Manilius’ eyes.” This is a curious and serious mistake. Judea, which had been an officially independent client kingdom of Rome at the time of King Herod, was in 6 CE made a regular province of Rome. Hence, its individuality was not destroyed at all, but rather put on the same level as the Roman province Syria. As a consequence, we must distinguish clearly between Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria established by Pompey in 64 BCE (where—not surprisingly—coins featuring Aries were later minted); Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Herod (37–4 BCE); and Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province of Judea from 6 CE onwards.¹⁶⁶ None of our extant astrological sources (see Table 14.1) before or after Ptolemy mentions Judea. Therefore, we must assume that no one, not

163 For earlier criticism of Molnar’s use of the relevant passages of Valens and Manilius, see Adair 2013, 74 (with n. 91).

164 A very late source, in contrast, may seem to suit his argument and is therefore included: Molnar (1999, 152, n. 32) refers to Abū Ma’sar’s (ninth century CE) association of Aries with “Babylonia, Persia, Azerbaijan and Palestine [...] which indicates that the connection between Aries and Palestine was still remembered well after Roman times.” This argument ignores the fact that Ptolemy did not mention Palestine (see above n. 140). Besides, it is likely that Abū Ma’sar was not drawing on traditions that were still alive, but quoting a mix of Greco-Roman data from various literary sources (possibly including such manuscripts of Ptolemy into which the name of Palestine had intruded). Abū Ma’sar’s reference to Azerbaijan may have replaced earlier references to the neighboring country Armenia.

165 See his suggestion, quoted at the end of the second-to-last paragraph, that Manilius wanted to denote the entire Near East by mentioning Syria and Egypt.

166 See Stern 1976, 247: “When Judea was converted into a Roman province, Jerusalem ceased to be the administrative capital of the country. The Romans moved the governmental

even if he associated Aries with Syria, would have traveled to Jerusalem. Only after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE (i.e., long after the composition of the Gospel of Matthew), when the provinces of Syria and Judea were merged into the single province Syria Palaestina, hypothetical astrologers who associated Aries with Syria might have traveled to Jerusalem, or more precisely to Aelia Capitolina, the new capital built by order of Emperor Hadrian on the site where Jerusalem had been before its total destruction in 70 CE.

The Horoscope of Nero

One last possible objection needs to be addressed. One can, of course, always speculate that there existed before Ptolemy a now-lost system of astrological geography that associated Aries with Judea. Molnar adduces the horoscope of Nero as an argument in favor of this assumption.¹⁶⁷ This horoscope has been transmitted anonymously by Valens, *Anth.* 5.7.20–35.¹⁶⁸ Molnar makes use of it because Suetonius reports that astrologers had predicted to Nero the future loss of this throne, and that “some of them, however, had promised him the rule of the East, when he was cast off, a few expressly naming the sovereignty of Jerusalem.”¹⁶⁹ Molnar combines this passage with astrological tenets by various authors about loss and recovery of paternal inheritance. He focuses especially on two passages (one from Firmicus Maternus, the other from Dorotheus of Sidon) “which show that astrologers looked to the sign in the anti-Midheaven (Imum Caelum) to foretell where he [Nero] could recover his losses.”¹⁷⁰ Since the Imum Caelum in Nero’s horoscope falls into Aries,¹⁷¹ the astrological predictions regarding Jerusalem seem to justify the assumption that Aries was, at the time of Nero, somehow associated with Judea. This is, at first sight, an astute argumentation with the potential to impress many readers. It loses much of its persuasiveness, however, if one takes into account the following two points:

residence and military headquarters to Caesarea. The centre of government was thus removed from Jerusalem.”

167 Molnar 1999, 110–16.

168 See the analysis by Neugebauer & van Hoesen 1959, 78f., Nr. L 37. The identification with Nero is the merit of Reece (1969).

169 Suet. Nero 40, in the Engl. trans. quoted by Molnar 1999, 110.

170 Molnar 1999, 113.

171 See the diagram in Molnar 1999, 112.

Firstly, the passage from Firmicus Maternus (*Mathesis* 2.19.5) is neither in the context of recovering lost goods, nor does it speak of such recovery. The decisive Latin words are *latentes et repositas patrimonii facultates*, which does not mean “hidden and recovered wealth,”¹⁷² but rather “hidden and stored paternal wealth.”¹⁷³

The other passage, from Dorotheus, is indeed about the recovery of lost or stolen goods. It belongs to the branch of interrogational astrology,¹⁷⁴ as is clear both from the context and from the words “if one of them [the ancient astrologers] was asked [!] about a theft.”¹⁷⁵ What Molnar ignores is that ancient astrologers used to base their answers to such questions (here: “Where will I recover my lost or stolen goods?”) not on the client’s natal horoscope, but either (A) on the horoscope of the event in question (here: the loss or theft) or, if that time was unknown, (B) on the horoscope of the astrological consultation.¹⁷⁶ The latter option (B) is based on the Stoic principle of cosmic sympathy, namely on the assumption that the time of the consultation must somehow be naturally related to the time of the event in question.¹⁷⁷ One obvious reason for not searching for a lost or stolen object based on the birth horoscope is that the client might suffer various losses or thefts in various moments of his life, with the consequence that the various objects would be located and possibly recovered in different places; this requires different charts, one for each interrogation. If one investigated the birth horoscope on all of these occasions, this would lead to the absurd result that anything that an individual ever happens to lose in his life would again and again be recovered in the same place.¹⁷⁸

172 Molnar 1999, 113, quoting (without acknowledgement) from Bram 1975, 48.

173 See the authoritative Oxford Latin Dictionary, ed. by P. G. W. Glare, second edition, Oxford 2012, col. 1786 (*repono* 9a): “to put away for keeping, store away” (with examples). Holden’s translation (2011, 66) “hidden and remote sources of wealth” is better than Bram’s, but still incorrect.

174 See the distinction above.

175 Molnar 1999, 113, quoting the English translation of Pingree 1976, 297. What Pingree translates is the Arabic paraphrase of the work of Dorotheus (Dor. arab. 5.35.20).

176 See Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 463–64 and 469–70, and the authoritative modern analysis of catarchic and interrogational astrology by Hübner 2003 (esp. 194).

177 Compare the similar speculative postulate of ancient astrology that the times of conception and birth of an individual are naturally related to each other and that it is, therefore, legitimate to investigate the birth chart of an individual for genethliological questions, even if the true beginning of human life was agreed among ancient scientists, including astrologers, to be the moment of conception (see Frommhold 2004).

178 The birth horoscope comes into play only with regard to the question of *whether* the object will be recovered (not *where!*). This question must be answered, as Dorotheus

In sum, it is against the principles of ancient interrogational astrology to explain the anecdote reported by Suetonius by applying the passage from Dorotheus to the birth horoscope of Nero.¹⁷⁹ Even if we cannot positively exclude the possibility that some astrologers employed methods that are not attested in the extant record, and even if we are willing to assume that Suetonius' report is historically true,¹⁸⁰ one must at least consider the alternative possibility that the astrologer's promise regarding Jerusalem had nothing to do with the position of anti-midheaven in Nero's birth horoscope. After all, there is a chance of almost 10% (exactly one-twelfth) for each zodiacal sign to occupy that position in a horoscope.¹⁸¹ Hence, the report of Suetonius does not—*pace* Molnar¹⁸²—prove the existence of an association of Aries with Judea at the time of Nero, and even less at the time of King Herod.

More Astrological Problems

Even if there were a testimony to an association of Aries with Judea, it would be awkward to apply astrological geography to the prediction of the birth of a king and redeemer. The effects mentioned by our relevant sources are, in Ptolemy's case, constant ethnological characteristics of entire peoples and,

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- explains in the immediately preceding paragraph (Dor. arab. 5.35.19), through a comparison of the position of the Moon in the interrogational chart with the person's birth chart (if that is known): If the same position in the birth chart was occupied by a maleficent planet, the object will not be recovered, if by a benefic, it will be recovered (in the place that is indicated by the anti-midheaven of the interrogational chart). This paragraph (5.35.19) is also extant in a Late Antique Greek paraphrase (ed. Pingree 1976, 408).
- 179 We should also take notice of the fact that Dorotheus speaks of material goods that have been moved physically from the place where they belong to another place where they do not belong. This is not the same as losing an abstract good, such as power in Rome, and gaining, in return, a different abstract good, such as power in Jerusalem.
- 180 This is not at all certain, and—as A. Adair points out to me (email 22-02-2015)—the name of Jerusalem may have been chosen in retrospect by someone who knew about the Jewish War.
- 181 Note also that, according to Suetonius, some of the astrologers promised Nero no specific country, but instead, using very general terms, the rule of the East (*orientis dominationem*). This raises suspicions as to whether their predictive method was not a different one, based somehow on the cardinal points rather than on specific countries, and if those who expressly named Jerusalem did so in an attempt to satisfy the emperor's request for a more specific answer than just “in the East.”
- 182 Molnar (2014, 176) insists that the passage in Suetonius “*proves Ptolemy correct*” (italics in original).

in the case of more traditional sources following Mesopotamian models (for example, Heph. Apotel. 1.21–22), transient calamities involving entire peoples, such as wars, famines, earthquakes, and epidemic diseases, all allegedly caused by lunar and solar eclipses in the respective zodiacal signs. There is not a single Hellenistic text that speaks of the birth of a king or any other human being in the context of astrological geography. The closest that such texts come to predicting anything about individuals are predictions about multiple calamities afflicting entire countries, one of them being the death of the country's king as its human representative. Also, if the relevant texts specify astronomical conditions at all, these are always eclipses (sometimes combined with other celestial or meteorological phenomena), never conjunctions or any other planetary alignments. The reader may further wish to consider the following: The astrological requirements for royal births seem incompatible with astrological geography. This is because a central requirement for a royal birth was, to our knowledge, that both luminaries must be in a masculine sign of the zodiac, i.e., in Aries, Gemini, Leo, Libra, Sagittarius, or Aquarius.¹⁸³ This rule is theoretically stated by Ptolemy¹⁸⁴ and practiced in the royal horoscopes of Nero and Hadrian, which Molnar adduces to corroborate his theory.¹⁸⁵ In Nero's case, the Sun is in Sagittarius and the Moon in Leo; in Hadrian's case, both the Sun and the Moon are in Aquarius; and in Molnar's hypothetical horoscope of Jesus, both the Sun and the Moon are in Aries.¹⁸⁶ Even if one were to concentrate on just one of the luminaries—for example, on the Sun as the more important one—it is obvious that, in combination with astrological geography, no births of kings could be predicted for countries that happen to be associated with female signs of the zodiac. For instance, the system of Paul of Alexandria would make predictions of royal births in Babylon, Armenia, Greece, Italy, Syria, and India impossible. In sum, it is very unlikely that the rules for royal births were ever systematically linked with astrological geography.

Another problem in Molnar's theory is that he places strong emphasis on the occultation of Jupiter by the Moon on 17 April 6 BCE. This means that both celestial bodies were not only on the same ecliptic longitude, and therefore

183 Since these signs have odd ordinal numbers in the canonical order of the zodiac (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11), they are, according to Pythagorean number symbolism, male; the remaining six signs, with their even ordinal numbers, are female. On this doctrine, which is omnipresent in Greco-Roman astrology, see Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 154–155, and Hübner 1982, 152–56 (Nr. 3.31).

184 Ptol. Apotel. 4.3.1. None of the ancient astrological manuals contradicts this rule.

185 Molnar 1999, 67 and 112.

186 See the chart in Molnar 1999, 98.

in so-called conjunction, but also on the same latitude, that is, equidistant from the ecliptic (above or below), with the consequence that Jupiter would be invisible, hidden behind the—for an earthly observer—much larger disk of the Moon. Such an occultation is certainly a rare and perfect form of conjunction. However, what role does occultation or, more generally speaking, ecliptic latitude play in Hellenistic astrology? Almost none. Among the ca. 350 extant Greek horoscopes, only three that are earlier than 500 CE mention latitude at all.¹⁸⁷ Additionally, the extant Greco-Roman manuals say almost nothing about latitude. In particular, I do not remember any Greco-Roman astrological reference to occultations. Therefore, it is surprising to read (Molnar 1999, 83): “Historian Otto Neugebauer found that the records of Greek astrology indicate that many astrologers were especially interested in close conjunctions involving the Moon and in occultations in particular.” In the following footnote, Molnar gives one bibliographical reference, namely to Neugebauer 1975, pages 1038–51. Those pages belong to a chapter on the latest schools in the fifth–seventh centuries CE. The only references to occultations on those pages concern observations made by the neo-Platonist Heliiodorus around 500 CE, i.e., long after the period in question.¹⁸⁸ It is important to note that Neugebauer refers to observations, because Molnar claims that the magi did not rely on observations, but rather on the use of planetary tables and mathematical astronomy.¹⁸⁹ Even the Mesopotamian evidence does not support such a claim in the context of occultations.¹⁹⁰ As Hughes emphasizes in his review of Molnar’s book, “lunar theory is extremely complicated. We have to wait for the seventeenth century and a genius like Edmond Halley before lunar occultations could be predicted with any accuracy. 2000 years ago it was impossible.”¹⁹¹

187 The earliest one was cast for a date in 81 CE (see Neugebauer & van Hoesen 1959, 21–28, on P. Lond. I 130), the second for a date in 95 CE (see *ibid.* 43 on P. Paris 19bis, col. I, l. 21), the third for a date in 319 CE (P. Berlin 9825, unpublished, to be edited by A. Jones). On the extreme rarity of astrological references to latitude in extant Greek horoscopes, see also Beck 2013, 404.

188 See also Molnar 1999, 84: “According to astrologers, occultation maximizes the interaction between the two bodies and intensifies their astrological effects.” The accompanying footnote does not provide a single reference to ancient sources.

189 See above, n. 4.

190 Hunger and Parpola (1983) analyze four Mesopotamian texts from the seventh century BCE that deal with lunar occultations of Jupiter. However, it is partly evident that the reports are based on observation. In none of these cases can the use of mathematical predictive methods be shown. Note also that the predicted outcomes do not suit Molnar’s theory: These omen texts predict the deaths of kings.

191 Hughes in Gingerich et al. 2002, 391.

Also, why should Matthew write that those astrologers “saw” a star if that star (in Molnar’s opinion, Jupiter) was actually occulted by the Moon? This leaves us with the grave objection that “Molnar’s star was both invisible and unpredictable.”¹⁹²

This list of problems could easily be extended. However, it suffices to sum them all up in the following sentence: Molnar tries to make us believe that astrologers from a country where no historical evidence for the practice of Hellenistic astrology exists practiced Hellenistic astrological geography with unusual astronomical protases, unusual astrological apodoses, unusual associations of signs and countries, and unusual emphasis on ecliptic latitude in an unusual prospective manner to identify extraordinary future events.

On a Recent Variant of Molnar’s View

The manifold difficulties involved in Molnar’s explanation of the Star of Bethlehem prompted some participants at the Groningen conference to embrace a variant theory: Maybe in the late first century CE, one or more Christians eager to enhance the dignity and legitimacy of Jesus Christ checked astronomical tables for those years of the past in which Jesus was assumed to have been born in order to find a suitable birth horoscope for the King of the Jews. Such a retrospective endeavor is easier to imagine than Eastern magi prospectively checking tables during the time of Herod for planetary alignments of great or even universal astrological importance, finding such a portent, and setting out on a journey to hail the newborn King of the Jews.¹⁹³

Objection to Both Variants

Both those to whom such a variant theory appeals and those who prefer Molnar’s original theory will have to choose between two hypothetical scenarios, each of which comes with a high price to pay:

The first scenario is that Matthew had the intention of referring to that hypothetical, either recently or earlier (i.e., ca. 6 BCE) established horoscope

¹⁹² Hughes *ibid.*

¹⁹³ A comparable case of a retrospective search for a suitable birth horoscope is Tarutius’ search for the horoscope of Romulus in the mid-first century BCE (see Heilen 2007). Prospective searches for royal horoscopes are, in contrast, unknown in Greco-Roman antiquity.

of Jesus, but failed to do so in correct and intelligible Greek.¹⁹⁴ Molnar has recently supported this view by summarizing his approach of 1999 as follows: “I theorized that the author of Matthew knew nothing about astrology and struggled with arcane jargon.”¹⁹⁵ It seems very unlikely to impute such a degree of incompetence to an author whose masterly skills have been seen and acknowledged by many.

The other scenario is that Matthew heard about that hypothetical, either recently or earlier established horoscope of Jesus, but intentionally deconstructed the report and reconstructed it with many changes and additions, thus creating a very different, symbolic kind of astral narrative, which is in itself coherent and means exactly what people have understood for two millennia when reading the Gospel of Matthew. This scenario is equally unlikely and leaves even less room than the first for making reliable assertions about the hypothetical horoscopic report.

Conclusion

The analysis of all extant Greco-Roman systems of astrological geography has shown that Molnar’s claim for an association of Aries with Judea in the first century BCE (and equally so in the first century CE) is not plausible. It is likely that Judea did not feature in any system of astrological geography until Ptolemy devised his complex new system. But even if one were willing to grant the possibility that Judea was associated with Aries in some hypothetical, no-longer-extant source, it would still be true that, at the time of Herod, a dozen other countries were certainly associated with Aries, as evidenced in the sources listed in Table 14.1 above: Armenia, Babylonia, Cappadocia, Egypt, Libya, Mesopotamia, Persia, the Red Sea, Syria, Thrace, and Western Arabia. The chances that hypothetical Eastern astrologers (the magi) would have chosen Judea are minimal, especially if they came from Persia, because Persia was an important (I am inclined to believe, the most important) country associated with Aries in the pre-Christian systems of Hellenistic astrological geography and had its own expectation of a savior.

194 For a detailed philological explanation, see the Philological Appendix (below, p. 344).

195 Molnar 2014, 177. I cannot find an exact equivalent to this assertion in his book. See, however, his reference in the introduction (Molnar 1999, 7–8) to a “popular opinion” that “the evangelist’s recording of the arcane terminology used by the Magi obscured the description of their star, and for that reason the account’s true historical basis has remained hidden.” It seems that Molnar meant to subscribe to that opinion.

Additionally, if one considers the manifold other problems and methodological offenses connected to Molnar's view, it seems far better to read Matthew's story of the magi in its scriptural context along the lines of traditional biblical exegesis and recognize it as a masterly, coherent synthesis of literary, symbolic, political, and theological merit.¹⁹⁶

Philological Appendix

Molnar repeatedly claims that Matt 2:1–12 contains traces of technical terminology from the fields of astronomy and astrology. This is intrinsically unlikely in view of the fact that nobody before Molnar, especially no one among the ancient readers and commentators who were native speakers of Greek, understood Matt 2:1–12 in such a way. Nevertheless, those readers who are not themselves familiar with ancient Greek may find it useful to have here some compact information and clarification on four critical expressions from the point of view of a classical philologist and historian of Greco-Roman astrology.

1) ἀστήρ (Matt 2:2, 7, 9, 10)

Molnar wants the Greek noun ἀστήρ (*astér*) in the singular, without further determination (such as 'of Jupiter'), to mean "planet" and to refer to Jupiter. This meaning is certainly possible in ancient astrological texts. There are plenty of generally phrased astrological rules saying that if 'any planet' is in this or that zodiacal sign or in aspect with the Sun or fulfills yet another astrological condition, the outcome will be such and such; or, again generally phrased, that the planet (ἀστήρ) that holds a certain dignity in a chart (one which can by definition only be held by planets, not by fixed stars) will bring about this or that outcome.¹⁹⁷ The same meaning ('planet') is also attested in astronomical

¹⁹⁶ See especially the excellent study of Panaino 2012.

¹⁹⁷ Examples: Ptolemy, *Apotel.* 4.4.2 ὁ μὲν οὖν τῆς πράξεως τὴν οἰκοδεσποτείαν ἀστήρ λαβὼν οὕτως ἡμῖν διακριθήσεται κτλ. Valens, *Anth.* 1.1.40 οὗτος γὰρ ὁ ἀστήρ (i.e., Mercury, whose name had been mentioned 15 lines earlier). Antigonus of Nicaea (second century CE), quoted by Hephaestio, *Apotel.* 2.18.41 ἐάν δὲ ἡ Ἀφροδίτη σὺν τινὶ ἀστέρι παρῆ κτλ. Paul of Alexandria, *Intr.* 18 (p. 39,7 Boer) εἰ μὲν γὰρ συναφῆν τὴν τριγωνικὴν ἢ τὴν ἀπόρροϊαν τὴν τριγωνικὴν ἔχει ἢ Σελήνη πρὸς τινὰ ἀστέρα κτλ. See further the Late Antique paraphrase of the lost original of Dorotheus (first century CE): εἰ δὲ μὴ εἶη οὕτως, ἕτερος δὲ τις ἀστήρ ὁρᾷ τὸν Ἥλιον κτλ. *ibid.* 417,17 ἐάν τις ἀστήρ ἐν οἴκῳ ἰδῶ ὦν καὶ βλέπων τὸν ὠροσκόπον καὶ τὴν Σελήνην ἢ κτλ. (p. 369,13 Pingree).

texts.¹⁹⁸ However, one will not find occurrences of ἀστήρ in the singular and without further determination (such as ‘of Jupiter’) meaning ‘planet’ outside the field of technical writings on astronomy and astrology. If one wishes to claim its presence in a biblical text such as Matthew’s with any degree of plausibility, one must demonstrate that the context contains at least one clearly technical term pertaining to astronomy or astrology. This is impossible, as the following remarks will show. As a consequence, the only plausible interpretation of ἀστήρ is that it has the general meaning “star.” The addition of the possessive pronoun in Matt 2:2 (αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα, “his star”) is probably a reference to the widespread, popular ancient belief that each human being had his or her individual star.¹⁹⁹

2) ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (Matt 2:2, 9)

The literal meaning of this expression is “in the rising.” With reference to a celestial body, it can designate its rising above the eastern horizon as well as its heliacal rising (i.e., its emergence from the glaring light of the Sun). Additionally, it has a third, exclusively astrological meaning: namely, that a celestial body is more than 15° but less than 120° apart from the Sun.²⁰⁰ Some reviewers have rashly accepted Molnar’s claim that Matthew was referring to a heliacal rising,²⁰¹ although there is no parallel to this meaning in biblical texts, and various modern commentators think that Matthew was referring to the messianic prophecy of Balaam in the Old Testament that “a star shall rise out of Jacob, a man shall stand up out of Israel” (Num 24:17: ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐξ Ἰακωβ καὶ ἀναστήσεται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ Ἰσραηλ).²⁰² That text uses the verb ἀνατέλλω, whose

198 See, for example, Ptolemy, *Syntaxis* (= *Almagest*) 13 pp. 601,6. 601,21. 603,3. 603,16 Heiberg. All four examples are in the singular and refer to Venus, whose name is, however, not mentioned in the immediate context.

199 See Davies & Allison 1988, 233–234; and Luz 2002, 161 and 173. The ancient concept of a person’s individual star is comparable to the later Christian concept of an individual guardian angel.

200 For all three meanings, see Heilen 2010, 308–311, and Heilen 2015, 740–745. In a non-astrol context, ἀνατολή can also mean the growing of teeth (since Aristotle) or the growing of the white at the root of the nails (see Liddell-Scott-Jones 1940, 123, ἀνατολή II), or also, in the plural, the sources of a river (LSJ *ibid.*, ἀνατολή I.4).

201 See Hoskin (a historian) in Gingerich et al. 2002, 388: “I personally have no doubt that Matthew is speaking of an heliacal rising”; Birdsall (a biblical scholar) *ibid.* 391: “I am sure that his [i.e., Molnar’s] identification of ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ in Matt. ch. 2, verses 2 and 9 as a *terminus technicus* of astrology is correct.”

202 See Davies & Allison 1988, 230–231 and 235; Hagner 1993, 25; Gundry 1994, 27; Nolland 2005, 111. The literal translation of the prophecy is mine.

nominal derivative ἀνατολή is used by Matthew, and ἄστρον, a phonological variant of Matthew's ἀστήρ.²⁰³ If Matthew was really alluding to Num 24:17, the concept of “rising” expressed with the words ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ is close to a generic “coming to be” and defies interpretation in terms of spatial coordinates.

It must be admitted, however, that Matthew does not, on the present occasion, use one of his usual fulfillment formulas. This leads G. H. van Kooten, in the course of a learned discussion of all fulfillment formulas in Matthew, to deny that the Balaam story is relevant to Matthew chapter two.²⁰⁴ I am not competent to judge this complicated problem of New Testament scholarship in favor of one or the other scholarly position, but it is clear that the proponents of both of these mutually exclusive positions cannot and do not claim certainty. Hence, we are left with the following alternatives to choose from: If the prophecy of Balaam is relevant to the star of the magi in Matthew chapter two (which seems possible to me despite the objections that have been raised by van Kooten),²⁰⁵ then the traditional metaphorical explanation of the star makes perfect sense. If, however, the prophecy of Balaam is not relevant, one needs a different explanation for Matthew's inspiration to tell the story of the magi.

3) προήγεν αὐτούς (Matt 2:9)

The textual transmission of these two words is straightforward: The ancient and medieval manuscripts do not present any variant readings.²⁰⁶ To understand Matthew's expression correctly, one must distinguish between two different Greek verbs: προάγειν (*proágein*) and προηγείσθαι (*prohēgeísthai*, with *-h-*!). Each of these two verbs has its own range of possible meanings. These two semantic fields overlap: They can both mean “to go before someone” or “to lead the way.” This fact implies a risk of lexical confusion by non-philologists. It is important to emphasize that the two verbs, despite their superficial ortho-

203 See Beekes 2010, 156 (ἀστήρ) and 1462 (τέλλω 2). ἄστρον never means ‘planet’. See the pertinent discussion of ἀστήρ and ἄστρον by Boll 1917.

204 See the contribution of G. van Kooten to this volume.

205 See Davies & Allison (1988, 230–31), who point out important further parallels between the two texts (which are not taken into account or discarded by van Kooten): According to Num 23:7, Balaam was from the mountains in the East (ἐξ ὀρέων ἀπ’ ἀνατολῶν, cf. Matt 2:1 μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν); Jewish tradition explicitly made him a *magos* and father of two *magoi*; Balaam is contrasted with the evil King Balak, just as the magi are contrasted with the evil King Herod; and Eusebius already interpreted the magi in Matthew chapter two as Balaam's successors. Not surprisingly, numerous modern scholars consider the story of the magi to be a narrative variant of Matthew's usual, explicit fulfillment formulas.

206 See the critical apparatus of Nestle & Aland 1997, 3.

graphical similarity (and against Molnar's view),²⁰⁷ are not etymologically related to each other.²⁰⁸

The form used by Matthew, προήγεν (*proēgen*, without *-h-*!) is the third-person singular imperfect active of προάγειν. It literally means: "he/she/it went before." This verb is never in all of ancient Greek literature used in the astronomical sense of retrogradation.²⁰⁹

"To be retrograde" is one possible meaning of the other verb, προηγείσθαι.²¹⁰ However, if retrogradation were meant in Matt 2:9, the correct grammatical form meaning "he/she/it went before/ahead of them" would not be the transmitted words προήγεν αὐτούς, but rather προηγείτο αὐτῶν (*prohēgeíto autón*, scil. τῶν ἀπλανῶν ἀστέρων), "went before/ahead of them (i.e., of the fixed stars)." This would require the genitive case αὐτῶν of the pronoun (not the accusative case αὐτούς which is in Matt 2:9). Furthermore, it would require that the pronoun refer to the fixed stars. Since no fixed stars have been mentioned by Matthew, the only natural and possible reference of αὐτούς is to the magi, who had been the indisputable grammatical subject of ἐπορεύθησαν ("they departed") and εἶδον ("they saw") immediately before in the same sentence (Matt 2:9).

Therefore, the transmitted text of Matt 2:9 clearly does not and cannot mean astronomical retrogradation. This is important to emphasize, because

207 Molnar (1999, 90) vaguely asserts that these words are "related," which seems to mean "etymologically related" or even "morphologically related." Note that he actually speaks of the noun προηγῆσεις (this is the plural of προήγησις, "the action of leading the way"), not of the verb προηγείσθαι (even if he translates προηγῆσεις as if he were talking about προηγείσθαι). Since, however, the noun προήγησις is a derivate of the verb προηγείσθαι (see Beekes 2010, 508, last line), these two words are etymologically related to each other but both etymologically *unrelated* to the biblical term προήγεν. On p. 92, Molnar goes even further, claiming that προηγούμενοι, a participle that Ptolemy (Apotel. 3.12.9) uses correctly to express retrograde motion, "is essentially the same word that Matthew uses." He seems to be unaware of the enormity of this mistake.

208 See the authoritative etymological dictionary of Beekes 2010.

209 See Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ). This is the authoritative lexicon of ancient Greek used by classicists all over the world. It covers all of the various meanings and refers, for each meaning, to the earliest attested case, plus a few more select occurrences in later sources. The meaning used by Matthew is found on p. 1466, bottom left (προάγω 11.1), without reference to Matthew, because the biblical passage is not the earliest attestation and also not one of the very few chosen from later sources. The supplement (LSJ 1996) does not have an entry for this verb, which shows that no correction or addition to the entry as printed in 1940 was needed.

210 The seeming contradiction of the fact that a verb whose primary meaning is "to go before someone" can also have the technical sense of astronomical retrogradation is explained by Heilen 2010, 312.

Molnar has only recently returned to this question, writing (2014, 177): “I claim that ‘went before’ (*proágō*) can be a Greek homophone (similar sounding) of ‘went forward’ namely planetary retrograde motion. Geminus of Rhodes (1st century BCE) did in fact use the same verb root (*proágountai*) to describe retrograde motion.” But προήγεν and προηγέιτο (see above) are not “homophones,” nor did Geminus use any form of the non-technical verb προάγειν to describe retrograde motion. The form “*proágountai*,” which Molnar quotes as a “verb root” and without a verifiable reference to Geminus, does not even exist in ancient Greek. He is probably thinking of Gem. 12,22, προηγούνται.

4) ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὐ ἦν τὸ παιδίον (Matt 2:9)

The form ἐστάθη (Aorist Passive of ἵστημι) means “stood still” or “came to a stop.” The technical term for “became (astronomically) stationary” is ἐστήριξεν, from στηρίζω, a “quite distinct verb.”²¹¹ Moreover, ἐπάνω, which can be used both as an adverb and as a preposition with the genitive, is here clearly the latter, meaning “above (the place) where the child was.”²¹² The word denotes a position vertically above the place without specifying the distance. Hence, it leaves open whether the star was immediately above (i.e., touching) the roof ridge, hovering just over the house²¹³ (the most plausible interpretation),²¹⁴ or high up in the sky.

In sum, there is not a single instance of demonstrably and indisputably technical astral language in Matthew’s story of the magi.²¹⁵ It is methodologically unsound to deny a text’s perfectly clear and coherent meaning in favor of an

211 Thus rightly Birdsall in Gingerich et al. 2002, 392–93.

212 See Molnar 1999, 92, with reference to Bulmer-Thomas 1992. In favor of ἐπάνω being used here as a preposition, see also the variant reading ἐπάνω τοῦ παιδίου recorded by Swanson 1995 ad loc. (I owe this reference to A. Adair).

213 Compare, for example, Dan 3:47 in the context of the three young men in the fiery furnace: There the flames are said to rise forty-nine cubits above the furnace (καὶ διεχέιτο ἡ φλόξ ἐπάνω τῆς καμίνου ἐπὶ πήχεις τεσσαράκοντα ἑννέα).

214 See the pertinent comment of Chrysostom, Hom. on Matt. 6:3, quoted by Allison & Davies 1988, 247: “the star did not, remaining on high, point out the place; it not being possible for them [the magi] so to ascertain it, but it came down and performed this office. For you know that a spot of so small dimensions, being only as much as a shed would occupy, or rather as much as the body of a little infant would take up, could not possibly be marked out by a star. For by reasons of its immense height, it could not sufficiently distinguish so confined a spot, and discover it to them that were desiring to see it.”

215 Cf. Birdsall in Gingerich et al. 2002, 391: “the author’s Greek is very insecure;” and *ibid.* 393: “Molnar’s attempt to characterize the whole Matthaean account [...] as reflecting [...] technical terminology breaks down on [...] linguistic grounds.”

alleged hidden meaning, especially if the latter runs counter to the interpretation of all ancient native speakers. What gives us the right to claim that Matthew clumsily patched together his pericope by using several technically insufficient terms, by using a pronoun (αὐτούς) without intelligible reference, and by absurdly describing Jupiter becoming stationary as taking place above a tiny place such as a single house? Was Matthew a helpless duffer? In view of the broadly acknowledged skilled and circumspect composition of Matt 2:1–12, it seems necessary to conclude that Molnar's theory is, despite his rhetoric of evidence,²¹⁶ not plausible.²¹⁷

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²¹⁶ See, for example, Molnar 1999, 103, where he claims to have provided “cogent evidence that I had identified the correct day.” See further above, n. 182.

²¹⁷ A final, more personal note: I appreciate the enthusiasm and open-mindedness with which Molnar embarked on his search for truth. However, he should have asked expert advice in the areas for which he was not competent instead of giving undeserved credence to Bulmer-Thomas 1992 (and maybe also to Voigt 1911), whose ideas he developed further. After all of the public attention Molnar attracted and the religious importance some readers have attached to his theory, it will be difficult (if not psychologically impossible) for him to admit the validity of the objections that have been raised. Nevertheless, that would be an act of greatness.

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PART 5

Astrology in the Jewish World



The World Leader from the Land of the Jews: Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.300–315; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13; and Suetonius, *Vespasian* 4.5

Jan Willem van Henten

This chapter examines the expectation of a world leader coming from the land of the Jews, as mentioned in Josephus's *Jewish War* (6.300–315; Whiston: 6.4.5), in order to assess and contextualize Michael Molnar's reference to this expectation.¹ Because Josephus' prediction of this ruler is connected with Roman views about a world leader coming from Judea (especially Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13, and Suetonius, *Vespasian* 4.5), I will also discuss these passages and their connection with Josephus' prophecy. I will start, however, with a brief discussion of Molnar's key source, Matthew chapter two.

Matthew 2

Matthew's story about the birth of Jesus the Messiah is set during the rule of King Herod, i.e., Herod the Great (40/37–4 BCE).² Matthew chapter two therefore refers to two kings of the Jews, who are presented as each other's opposites. King Herod's negative image, highlighted by the slaughter of the innocents (Matt 2:16–18), clearly places the newborn king in a very positive light. Matthew's negative characterization of Herod matches the far more elaborate and largely negative depiction of the king by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*, where Herod turns out to be a tyrant and a frequent transgressor of the Jewish laws. Matthew and Josephus are part of a trajectory that characterizes King Herod in an increasingly negative way.³

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- 1 M. R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 11, 14.
 - 2 R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 53–4, 179.
 - 3 J. W. van Henten, "Matthew 2:16 and Josephus' Portrayals of Herod," in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan de Jonge* (eds. R. Buitenwerf, H. W. Hollander and J. Tromp; NTSup 130; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 101–22; "The *Panegyris* in Jerusalem: Responses

In fact, Herod may not have been as bad a king as Matthew suggests he was, and the story of the slaughter of the infants is considered to be fictitious by several biblical scholars.⁴

In its present form, Matthew chapter two clearly reflects the voice of the evangelist, which is apparent in the vocabulary, which is typical of Matthew,⁵ and in the notable Old Testament fulfillment quotations that conclude three sections of the chapter (2:15, 18, 23), which are also an important characteristic of Matthew's redaction.⁶ The content of the chapter, however, probably derives from older traditions, perhaps including a reference to the Star of Bethlehem. Several scholars have argued that Matthew chapter two is based on two oral sources: a story about the astrologers' journey to Bethlehem and a tradition about Herod's response to the announcement of the birth of a new king.⁷ This explanation of the origins of the story is plausible, but the problem is that it can hardly be proven. If Matthew based his account on sources, he has re-crafted them so carefully that we are unable to reconstruct them.⁸ The chapter as we have it is a coherent unit, and its cohesion is strongly enhanced by the figure of Herod the Great. There is, however, slight indirect evidence that the Star of Bethlehem, which triggered the astrologer's journey according to Matthew, goes back to an older tradition that Matthew incorporated into the

to Herod's Initiative (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15,268–291),” in *Empsychoi Logoi—Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (eds. A. Houtman, A. de Jong, and M. Misset-van de Weg; AGJU 73; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 151–73.

- 4 E.g., U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 145; D. J. Paul, “Untypische” Texte im Matthäusevangelium? *Studien zu Charakter, Funktion und Bedeutung einer Textgruppe des matthäischen Sonderguts* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2005), 35, 49; G. Vermes, *The True Herod* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 113–19. However, the alternative position is argued for by, for example, G. M. Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew: An Enquiry into the Tradition History of Mt 1–2* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 259, 298; R. T. France, “Herod and the Children of Bethlehem,” *NT* 21 (1979): 98–120, esp. 119–20; A. Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* (2d ed; SJ 4; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 648 n. 11; P. Stuhlmacher, *Die Geburt des Immanuel: Die Weihnachtsgeschichten aus dem Lukas- und Matthäusevangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 85.
- 5 Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 102, 129–30, 143–5.
- 6 M. J. J. Menken, *Matthew's Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist* (BETL 123; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 161–78, convincingly argues that 2:23 contains a brief quotation of Judges 13:5, 7.
- 7 S. Prabhu, *Formula Quotations*, 297–98; further discussion and references: W. D. Davies & D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 190–95.
- 8 Paul, “Untypische” Texte, 17. Differently: Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 104–21; 190–96.

story of Jesus' birth. Two of the Roman parallels to Josephus' oracle (discussed in the next section) share with Matthew an explicit geographical reference to the East (e.g., Matt 2:1: wise men coming from the East). So Matthew chapter two may be part of a cluster of traditions concerning a portent connected with the East, but it should be noted immediately that this is only a limited correspondence, because in Matthew the *magi* come from the East, while in the Roman passages it is a world leader who comes from the East (see below).

Whatever the origin of the tradition about the star and the *magi*, it should be noted that Josephus associates the end of Herod's rule with another unusual astronomical phenomenon, which is, however, quite different from the star in Matthew chapter two.⁹ Josephus describes Herod's end in gruesome detail, and he connects the king's final days with a lunar eclipse and with the Passover festival (Josephus, *BJ* 2.10; *AJ* 17.167; 213–4). The king died, according to most scholars, a few days after 1 Nisan in 4 BCE.¹⁰ There was indeed a lunar eclipse in Judea on the night of 12/13 March in 4 BCE, which implies that Herod died on one of the days between this eclipse and the Passover festival of that year. As is well known, the correspondence of Jesus' birth with the end of Herod's rule as presented by Matthew is a serious chronological problem for New Testament scholarship, which I will not discuss here.¹¹ For our purposes, however, it is important to observe that the concurrence of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the end of Herod the Great's rule is matched by two unusual astronomical phenomena: the Star of Bethlehem in Matthew and the lunar eclipse mentioned by Josephus.

9 Note that Matthew 2 refers twice to Herod's death: 2:15: ἕως τῆς τελευτῆς Ἡρώδης; 2:19–20: τελευτήσαντος δὲ τοῦ Ἡρώδου [...] τεθνήκασιν γάρ). Cf. Josephus, *AJ* 17.211: καὶ τελευτῆς αὐτῷ γενομένης; 17.199: Ἡρώδης μὲν δὴ τοῦτον ἐτελεύτα τὸν τρόπον. See also *BJ* 1.588; 2.27, 88; *AJ* 17.53, 58.

10 E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135): A New English Version* (revs. and eds. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), 294, 326–8; Schalit, *König Herodes*, 638; 643. A slightly earlier date is argued for by J. van Bruggen by counting Herod's reigning years with 1 Tishri as the point of departure instead of 1 Nisan. See J. van Bruggen, "The Year of the Death of Herod the Great (Τελευτήσαντος δὲ τοῦ Ἡρώδου . . . , Matthew ii 19)," in *Miscellanea Neotestamentica* (eds. T. Baarda, A. F. J. Klijn, and W. C. van Unnik; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1–15. See also his survey of other hypotheses concerning this date.

11 B. Mahieu (*Between Rome and Jerusalem: Herod the Great and His Sons in Their Struggle for Recognition: A Chronological Investigation of the Period 40 BC–39 AD, with a Time Setting of New Testament Events* [OLA 208; Louvain: Peeters, 2012], 292–93; 424) argues for 9 March 1 CE as the date for Herod's death, which would match a date for Jesus' birth in 1 BCE–1 CE.

Before dealing with the key passage on the oracle about a world leader in Book 6 of Josephus' *Jewish War*, we have to distinguish clearly between prophecies about a ruler of the Jews and prophecies about a ruler of the world. Molnar connects both types of rulers: Jesus Christ is the Messiah for both Jews and Gentiles. However, the notion of the Jewish Messiah, on which Matthew builds, concerns a ruler of Israel. As is well known, one of the Old Testament prophecies quoted in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth concerns the famous prophecy in Micah 5:1 and 3, that a leader of Israel would come from Bethlehem (Matt 2:6). The passage in Matthew reads as follows: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."¹² Molnar comments that King Herod's Jewish subjects hated him and that several of them dreamed of a messianic figure who would rid Judea of its Roman overlords and their puppet king.¹³ He therefore connects Matthew chapter two with the messianic expectations that were quite common in Judaism around the time of Jesus' birth. The figure of the Messiah was articulated in several ways in this period, sometimes even as a royal and priestly couple, as in the Qumran community.¹⁴ Most messianic passages in Second Temple literature present the Messiah as a ruler of the Jews who acts within the framework of an end-time scenario. There are an enormous number of studies of ancient Jewish messianism, which I will leave aside in this chapter. Molnar also comments—in line with Matthew's account—that the *magi's* report about a regal star seriously troubled Herod. He speculates about the motivation for this as follows: "Because the Messianic prophecy that a king of the Jews would conquer the world was well-known. . . ."¹⁵ With this quotation we are *in medias res*, and Molnar underpins this statement with references to the Roman historians Suetonius (*Vespasian* 4.5) and Tacitus (*Histories* 5.13) as well as to Josephus' *Jewish War* 6.6.4 [this should be 6.5.4].¹⁶ The quotation includes three main points:

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- 12 Micah 5:1, 3 is combined with 2 Sam 5:2 and 1 Chron 11:2. For Matthew's adaptations of the quotation, see Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 130.
 - 13 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 10–11; see also 35–6.
 - 14 J. W. van Henten, "The Hasmonean Period," in *Redemption and Resistance: the Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (eds. M. Bockmuehl and J. Carleton Paget; London/New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 15–28.
 - 15 Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 10 and 14.
 - 16 Molnar (*Star of Bethlehem*, 14 with fn. 15) uses the references of the popular Whiston translation of Josephus, according to the notation of Niese it concerns Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.300–315.

- (1) it concerns a well-known Jewish prophecy about the Messiah;
- (2) the Messiah is a king of the Jews; and
- (3) he will conquer the world.

So in Molnar's view, there was a Jewish prophecy about a king of the Jews who would become the ruler of the world. In the remainder of my contribution, I will analyze the three key passages on the oracle about a world leader, using the following three points as guidelines:

- (1) What is the origin of the prophecy or the oracle? Is it Jewish or non-Jewish? Does it come from the East?
- (2) What type of leader is meant? A king of Israel. . .
- (3) . . . or a ruler of the world?

Below, I will discuss the three main versions of the oracle in detail and will also analyze the context in which the oracle is presented.¹⁷

Josephus' Oracle

In his *Jewish War*, the Jewish historian Josephus, working in Rome and supported by Flavian emperors, aims to explain the devastating conflict between Rome and the Jews (66–73/4 CE).¹⁸ He argues that internal Jewish conflicts and the tyrannical behaviour of key figures, both Jews and non-Jews, ultimately brought about the Roman intervention. "Sedition" or "internal war" (στάσις), tyranny, and banditry are key motifs in the prologue, which frequently return in the main narrative.¹⁹ Thus, the Jews themselves were mostly to blame

17 There are also echoes of the oracle in rabbinic passages; see the references in O. Gussmann, *Das Priesterverständnis des Flavius Josephus* (TSAJ 124; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2008), 358 n. 120.

18 See, e.g., S. Mason, "Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading on and Between the Lines," in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text* (eds. A. J. Boyle and W. J. Dominik; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 559–590; W. den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian* (AGJU 86; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

19 *Bj* 1.10, 11, 24–25, 27–28. S. Mason, "Of Audience and Meaning: Reading Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* in the Context of a Flavian Audience," in *Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond* (eds. J. Sievers and G. Lembi; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 71–100; M. A. Brighton (*The Sicarii in Josephus's Judean War: Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations* [SBLEJL; Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009], 24–8) connects this with Thucydides' use of *stasis* as the concept that structures his history. See also T. Rajak,

for their defeat by the Romans, which happened in line with the divine scenario.²⁰ In books five and six, Josephus describes the Roman siege and capture of Jerusalem step by step. When the sanctuary (ναός, 6.316) of the temple and its surrounding buildings were set on fire because individual Roman soldiers lit the fire without being ordered to do so (6.249–284),²¹ Josephus interrupts his report with a description of a series of prophecies and portents (6.285–315)—first rather brief references to false prophecies, which misled the people (6.285–288), and then a series of portents and prophecies that were warnings from God (6.288–315; see esp. 6.288, 295, 310).²² According to Josephus, these portents indicated the upcoming destruction (6.288) but were ignored by the Jews.²³

The first portent must be mentioned here, because it corresponds to a certain extent with the Star of Bethlehem in Matthew chapter two. It also goes against Molnar's argument that the star was not a spectacular phenomenon in the sky. It concerns a highly unusual double astral phenomenon, which clearly points to disaster: a constellation that looked like a sword (ἄστρον

Josephus: The Historian and his Society (London: Duckworth, 1983), 91–4; L. H. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 140–48; G. Mader, *Josephus and the Politics of Historiography: Apologetic and Impression Management in the Bellum Judaicum* (Mnemosyne Sup 205; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 55–103; J. J. Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11–78.

20 See, e.g. *BJ* 6.110, 250, 288.

21 Although Josephus blames the Jews for the fire and states that they were looking at it with enthusiasm (*BJ* 5.445; 6.167, 216, 251, 364), he reports elsewhere that Titus was responsible for the fire (*BJ* 6.228; *AJ* 20.250).

22 Discussion and references concerning the portents can be found in O. Michel and O. Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus: De bello judaico, der jüdische Krieg: Griechisch und Deutsch* (3 vols. in 4; vol 1, revised ed; Munich: Kösel, 1962–69), 3.178–92; H. Lindner, *Die Geschichtsauffassung des Flavius Josephus im Bellum Judaicum: Gleichzeitig ein Beitrag zur Quellenfrage* (AGJU 12; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 125–32; Rajak, *Josephus*, 191–94; H. Schwier, *Tempel und Tempelzerstörung: Untersuchungen zu den theologischen und ideologischen Faktoren im ersten jüdisch-römischen Krieg (66–74 n. Chr.)* (Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 11; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); E.-M. Becker, *Das Markus-Evangelium im Rahmen der antiken Historiographie* (WUNT 194; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2006), 304–16; Gussmann, *Priesterverständnis*, 357–63. For rabbinic parallels, see *Jerusalem Talmud*, *Joma* 6.2.43c, *Babylonian Talmud*, *Joma* 39b, *Menahot* 109b and *Pesahim* 57a.

23 Josephus directly connects these signs with the beginning of the war against the Romans, which emphasizes the mistake of starting this war. Some of the signs may have been connected more loosely with the war at a previous stage.

ρομφαία παραπλήσιον) appeared above the city,²⁴ and a comet lasted for a year (παρατείνας ἐπ' ἐνιαυτὸν κομήτης, 6.289).²⁵ The other portents concern the following events: a huge light irradiated the altar and the temple at the ninth hour of the night on the eighth day of the month of Xanthikos in the year during which the revolt started (66 CE), which corresponds to the day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (6.290–291); a cow that was going to be slaughtered on the altar gave birth to a lamb during the same festival (6.292); the eastern gate of the inner sanctuary, which was extremely heavy and had to be opened by at least twenty people, opened by itself during the sixth hour of the night during the same festival (6.293); somewhat later, before sunrise on the twenty-first day of the month of Artemisios, chariots and heavy infantry in battle-array appeared in the air across the entire country, dashing through the clouds and surrounding the cities (6.296–298); during the festival of Pentecost, the priests who went to perform their duties heard a movement, then the sound of beating, and finally a voice saying, “Let us go from here” (6.299). All of these portents are mentioned almost in passing. Josephus pays much more attention to a certain prophet of doom, namely Jesus, Son of Ananias, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem for seven years and five months, until his death, which he also foresaw (6.300–309).²⁶

Four points are obvious from this brief survey of the context of our oracle: (1) the portents point to ruptures of the natural order, which interrupt the normal course of time and/or break through spatial boundaries, especially the sacred spaces of the temple; (2) several portents are set in the context of one of the pilgrim festivals, which highlights the temple once again, because huge

24 Cf. 2 Macc. 5:2–3; *Sib.Or.* 3.672–673, 796–799, 805–807; Ovid, *Met.* 15.783–785; Virgil, *Georg.* 1.474–475; Cicero, *Div.* 1.97, Becker, *Markus-Evangelium*, 309–10. For surveys and analysis of portents in general, see R. Bloch, *Les prodiges dans l'antiquité classique (Grèce, Étrurie et Rome)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963); B. MacBain, *Prodigy and Expiation: A Study in Religion and Politics in Republican Rome* (Collection Latomus 177; Brussels: Latomus, 1982); K. Berger, “Hellenistisch-heidnische Prodigien und die Vorzeichen in der jüdischen und christlichen Apokalyptik,” *ANRW II* 23 no. 2: 1428–1469; V. Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter: Das Prodigienwesen der römischen Republik* (Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge und Epigraphische Studien 27; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998).

25 Michel and Bauernfeind (*Flavius Josephus*, 3.180–82) argue that Josephus refers to two separate celestial bodies (p. 180). H. W. Montefiore, “Josephus and the New Testament,” *NT* 4 (1960): 139–60; 307–18 (esp. 140–48) argues that Josephus based his account on Matt 2:2, 9–10 (which is rejected by Michel and Bauernfeind, p. 181).

26 E. W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 165–69; B. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 158–59; 213.

crowds were present in the temple during these festivals;²⁷ (3) the message of the portents is consistent and clear, in line with what Josephus himself says in the introduction to this section (6.288): these signs were warnings from God, which pointed to the approaching disaster for the country, for Jerusalem, and for the temple; (4) several of these portents closely correspond with portents in Greco-Roman literature.²⁸ Josephus must have been aware of this, but there is no indication whatsoever that this was a problem for him. (5) Reading on, a fifth point should be noted, because the portents reported by Josephus thus far function as a lens for the interpretation of a final sign (6.310–315), which is presented as an ambiguous oracle (χρησμός ἀμφίβολου, 6.312). Referring to the previous portents (“When one considers these things...”), Josephus notes the discrepancy between God’s providence, his warning of human beings (ἀνθρώπων), and human self-destruction out of folly and with evil deeds (6.310). He gives a very recent example of this human stupidity, referring to a revealing act of the Jewish rebels (literally: “the Jews,” οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι): they attempted to make the temple quadrangular by destroying the Antonia fortress, although God had indicated²⁹ that when such a thing happened, the city and the sanctuary would be captured (6.311).³⁰

Josephus does not explain why the Jewish rebels wanted to create a quadrangular or even a square temple, but the context helps us to understand this. His introduction of the next sign, the ambiguous oracle (below), points to various motives for starting the rebellion against the Romans: “What incited them most to start a war was . . .” (τὸ δ’ ἐπάραν αὐτοὺς μάλιστα πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον

27 Gussmann (*Priesterverständnis*, 359) argues that by setting the portents during the pilgrim festivals, Josephus provides a plausible temporal context for them, which enhances the credibility of his report, because it also implies that there were many witnesses. See also Becker, *Markus-Evangelium*, 309–10.

28 Berger, “Hellenistisch-heidnische Prodigien.”

29 Literally: “it was recorded in the sayings [i.e., sayings of God]” (ἀναγεγραμμένον ἐν τοῖς λογίοις, *BJ* 6.311).

30 H. Lichtenberger (“Der Mythos von der Unzerstörbarkeit des Tempels,” in *Zerstörungen des Jerusalemer Tempels: Geschehen–Wahrnehmung–Bewältigung* [ed. J. Hahn; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002], 92–107) argues (p. 99) that Josephus’ interpretation of the quadrangular temple is wrong; the quadrangular form is the ideal form and a sign of the temple’s indestructibility. The Antonia fortress was built or expanded by Herod the Great in order to protect the temple (Josephus, *AJ* 15.248). It was a fortified expansion of the northwest corner of the outer wall of the entire temple complex. Destroying the Antonia fortress would, therefore, result in the construction of a quadrangular (in fact: rectangular) outer form of the temple complex.

ἦν, 6.312). Re-arranging the form of the temple was, therefore, probably an important goal for the rebels in support of their case. It may even have been part of bringing about a messianic scenario: the rebels may have wanted to create the temple of the end times, which may have been triggered by Ezekiel's prophecy about an ideal square temple (Ezek 42:15–20).³¹ Josephus criticizes this deed (see above), but the salient point that their modification of the temple went against a decree from God is not supported by any word of God found in the Bible.³² This is all the more surprising because the ambiguous oracle, which is transmitted in the passage immediately following, is introduced as “likewise found in their holy writings” (ὁμοίως ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς εὐρημένος γράμμασιν, 6.312). Despite the lack of biblical passages that support Josephus' statement, his introduction of the ambiguous oracle creates an analogy with his point about the quadrangular temple. From Josephus' perspective, this oracle presents a second negative example that proves his argument about the deep contrast between God's providence and human folly. The fact that he considers the oracle to have been an important motivation for starting the war supports this reading. At the same time, this implies that there must have been a huge difference between Josephus' interpretation of the oracle and that of the rebels. From the perspective of the rebels, the oracle predicted the deliverance brought about by a new Jewish ruler, who would in a Jewish context plausibly be a messianic figure.³³ An oracle about the upcoming intervention

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- 31 I. Hahn, “Zwei dunkle Stellen in Josephus (Bellum Judaicum VI § 311 and II § 142),” *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 14 (1962): 131–38. See also *Mishna Middot* 2.1.
- 32 Michel and Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus*, 3.190. S. Mason (“Josephus, Daniel and the Flavian House,” in *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith* [eds. F. Parente and J. Sievers; *Studia Post-Biblica* 41; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 161–91) argues that Josephus aimed to show that the rebels failed to understand scripture, which showed their godlessness (186).
- 33 With, among others, H. Windisch, *Die Orakel des Hystaspes* (Amsterdam: Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen NR Letterkunde 28.3, 1929), 66–69; A. M. A. Hospers-Jansen, *Tacitus over de Joden: Hist. 5, 2–13* (Groningen/Batavia, J. B. Wolters, 1949), 162; E. L. Abel, “Jesus and the Cause of Jewish National Independence,” *REJ* 128 (1969): 247–252; L. Gaston, *No Stone on Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 459; J. G. Griffiths, “Tacitus Hist. 5.13.2 and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Rheinisches Museum* 113 (1970): 363–68, who argues that the oracle originated in the Qumran community; M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols; Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities: Section of Humanities; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–1984), 2.61 (the substance of the oracle “was the Messianic expectation of the Jewish nation”); M. Goodman, “Messianism and Politics in the Land of Israel, 66–135 CE,” in *Redemption*

of a messianic ruler makes the Jewish decision to revolt understandable. It should be noted, however, that Josephus gives no hint that the oracle was interpreted in a messianic way. There is a plausible explanation for Josephus ignoring the messianic associations connected with the oracle: he thought very little of messianic figures.³⁴

Josephus transmits the ambiguous oracle as follows: “(What incited them [i.e., the Jews] most to start a war was) an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their holy writings, that at about that time someone from their country would rule over the world” (ὡς κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκεῖνον ἀπὸ τῆς χώρας αὐτῶν τις ἄρξει τῆς οἰκουμένης, *BJ* 6.312). Josephus does not explain the Jewish background of the oracle (see above), and he immediately comments upon it in the next paragraph. The time marker “at about that time” remains unexplained. Within the larger context, “that time” probably refers to the period preceding the Jewish war, and not to the time of the burning of the temple, as the present context implies.³⁵ If we presuppose a messianic scenario for the oracle, which is plausible in the context because Josephus reports that the oracle motivated the

and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity (eds. M. Bockmuehl and J. Carleton Paget; T & T Clark, Edinburg, 2007), 149–157, pp. 151–54. A close analogy, of course, would be the Bar Kokhba rebellion. M. Hengel (*Die Zeloten. Untersuchungen zur jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. bis 70 n. Chr.* [Leiden: Brill, 1976], 244–46) and K. Koch (“Spätisraelitisch-jüdische und urchristliche Danielrezeption vor und nach der Zerstörung des Zweiten Tempels,” in *Rezeption und Auslegung im Alten Testament und in seinem Umfeld: Ein Symposium aus Anlass des 60. Geburtstages von O. H. Steck* [eds. R. G. Kratz and T. Krüger; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag, 1997], 93–123 [esp. 115–16]) argue that the oracle was inspired by the messianic passage in Num 24:17. I. Hahn (“Josephus und die Eschatologie von Qumran,” in *Qumran-Probleme: Vorträge des Leipziger Symposiums über Qumran-Probleme vom 9. bis 14. Okt. 1961* [ed. H. Bardtke; Schriften der Sektion für Altertumswissenschaft; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1963], 167–91) considers Josephus’ oracle to be the actualization of a messianic eschatological expectation, possibly based on Num 24:17. The expectation originated in Essene circles in the late twenties of the first century, which expected the birth pangs of the Messiah to begin after a period of 40 years. C. A. Evans (*Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* [AGJU 25; Leiden: Brill, 1995], 56–58) sees a connection with Josephus’ own prophecy and mentions Gen 49:10 and Num 24:17 as possible sources in Jewish scripture. A. Shochat (“On the Ambiguous Oracle in the Words of Josephus,” in *Sefer Yosef Shiloh* [ed. M. Händel; Tel Aviv, 1960], 163–65) argues that Isa 10:33–34 underlies the oracle, which, in a rabbinic re-interpretation (*bGit.* 56ab), is connected with Vespasian.

34 P. Spilsbury, “Flavius Josephus on the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire,” *JThS* 54 (2003): 1–24 (18); Goodman, “Messianism,” 153.

35 Hengel, *Zeloten*, 244.

Jews to rebel, “that time” would probably refer to the end time during which the Messiah would act.³⁶

Returning to the three key questions formulated at the end of the previous section, it is apparent that for Josephus the source of the oracle is clear: it concerns a prophecy transmitted in the sacred writings of the Jews. From a Jewish perspective, this could mean that the ruler mentioned is a messianic figure or perhaps a ruler such as the “One like a Son of Man” in Daniel chapter seven, who is given eternal dominion and kingship.³⁷ No matter what the origin of the tradition underlying the ruler in the oracle, its text indicates that this figure becomes a ruler of the world, as Jesus does in Matthew’s Gospel. Thus, in the present context the ruler referred to is a world ruler. At the same time, it should be noted that the oracle remains rather vague about the kind of ruler that is meant. This could be the reason Josephus says the oracle is ambiguous. The content of the oracle is not specific enough to discover an allusion

36 Michel and Bauernfeind (*Flavius Josephus*, 3.191) argue that the oracle derived from apocalyptic circles, and that the time marker originally referred to calculations of the end-time scenario.

37 F. F. Bruce (“Josephus and Daniel,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 4 [1965]: 148–62) argues that the leader is the “coming prince” mentioned in Dan 9:26; similarly L. Gaston, *No Stone on Another*, 459–461; and A. J. Tomasino, “Oracles of Insurrection: the Great Catalyst of the Great Revolt,” *JJS* 59 (2008): 87–111 (96–108), who adds that this passage provides a timetable for the coming of the messianic ruler (the completion of 490 years); den Hollander (*Josephus*, 95) argues that the most likely scriptural source for the prophecy concerns Dan 2:31–45; 9:24–27. R. T. Beckwith (“Daniel 9 and the Date of Messiah’s Coming in Essene, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Zealot and Early Christian Computation,” *RQ* 10 [1979–1981]: 521–42) identifies the leader as the Son of Man figure in Dan 7:13–14 (p. 532–35); Mason (“Josephus, Daniel and the Flavian House”) argues that the Book of Daniel provides the basis for Josephus’ “conception of history as the rise and fall of kingdoms under God’s watchful care” (p. 176; also Spilsbury, “Flavius Josephus,” 10–17) and that the oracle is based on Dan 7:3–8 (Josephus identified Vespasian with the tenth horn of the fourth beast, pp. 185–87, 189–190). See also Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992), 46–48; for older references, see Hengel, *Zeloten*, 244 fn. 3. T. M. Jonquière (“Josephus at Jotapata: Why Josephus Wrote What he Wrote,” in *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History* [eds. J. Pastor, P. Stern and M. Mor; JSJSup 146; Leiden: Brill, 2011], 217–25) points to Isa 41, which mentions a king from the East who will dominate all people because God gives him the power to do so, as well as *Sibylline Oracles* 3.652–656: “And then God will send a king from the East, who will give the entire earth rest from evil war, by killing some and making treaties with others. He will not do all these things by his own plans, but trusting the noble orders of the great God” (222).

to a Jewish passage about a specific ruler,³⁸ but, as we have seen above, the oracle does make sense within the framework of Jewish expectations regarding the Messiah.³⁹ Another reason for the multi-interpretability of the oracle is that the phrase “from their country” also is ambiguous.⁴⁰ It can refer to the provenance of the ruler mentioned (i.e., a Jew coming from Judea), but it can also refer to Judea as the location for a change in the authority of a non-Jewish ruler, meaning that this leader would become a ruler of the entire world. This reading is taken up in Josephus’ own interpretation of the oracle (see below). Finally, it should be observed that Josephus’ version of the oracle does not explicitly refer to the East, although the reference to Judea (“their country”) perhaps corresponds with “the East” from a Roman perspective.

Josephus’ own comments on the oracle correct the majority interpretation of the Jews: “They [i.e., the Jews] interpreted that [the oracle] as referring to their own people [ὡς οἰκεῖτον] and many of the sages were mistaken in their judgment. But the saying obviously predicts the rule of Vespasian, who was acclaimed emperor in Judea” (6.313). Here Josephus first indicates that there was a standard Jewish interpretation of the oracle. It is plausible to connect this interpretation with the ideal of achieving a quadrangular temple and the incitement to war mentioned in the immediate context (6.311–312). That many sages had busied themselves with the explanation of the oracle points to its importance.⁴¹ Josephus flatly rejects their interpretation that the oracle concerns the Jews and corrects it by arguing that it refers to Vespasian. Josephus’ interpretation is supported by the facts: prompted by Tiberius Alexander, the legions acclaimed Vespasian emperor in Alexandria on 1 July 69 CE. The Roman army in Judea acknowledged Vespasian as emperor two days later.⁴²

38 With Windisch, *Orakel des Hystaspes*, 66; J. J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea and other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 200; M. Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew: On Josephus and the Paradigms of Ancient Judaism* (WUNT 2d series 357; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2013), 126. Cf. Goodman, “Messianism,” 152 n. 19: “Either Num. 24.17 or Dan. 7.13 may have been the biblical source text to which Josephus referred, but since he failed to make this clear, and since there appears to have been no biblical source for the prohibition to make the temple square, the same may be true of the messianic oracle.”

39 Hengel, *Zeloten*, 243, 297, 391, with n. 4.

40 Michel and Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus*, 3.190.

41 In Greco-Roman contexts, it was common that professionals such as the *haruspices* explained portents; see Becker, *Markus-Evangelium*, 308 with references.

42 Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.49–51. D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 108.

In line with Josephus' own comments and the broader context, the implication of the oracle is that Jewish scripture prophesied that Vespasian would become world leader, i.e., emperor. This became true, which implies that Vespasian was divinely sanctioned as emperor.

Josephus continues the report about the oracle with a note about the Roman celebration of the victory in Jerusalem: the Romans put their standards in front of the eastern gate of the temple (i.e., the gate between the court of the men and the court of the women) and brought sacrifices to this location, which was, of course, a desecration of the temple.⁴³ Next, they acclaimed Vespasian's son Titus as *imperator* (*BJ* 6.316).⁴⁴ Josephus concludes his discussion of the oracle (and, in fact, the entire section about portents) by stating that humankind cannot avoid fate, and that the Jews acknowledged signs that they considered to be pleasant but neglected others, until the capture of their city and their ruin became proof of their folly (6.314–315). Once again, Josephus emphasizes that the facts prove that the Jews were wrong in turning a deaf ear to God's warnings. As in 6.310, Josephus sharply differentiates here between humans in general and the Jews, associating the Jews with folly.

It is remarkable that Josephus does not connect the oracle about a new ruler of the world with his own famous prediction about Vespasian becoming emperor in Book 3 of *Jewish War* (*BJ* 3.399–408). We noted already that it is very difficult to find a biblical prophecy that may provide the basis for the oracle about a world leader. Could the oracle, in fact, derive from Josephus' own prediction that Vespasian would become emperor?⁴⁵ This explanation is implausible for several reasons. The oracle's role in inciting the Jews would be incomprehensible if it referred to Vespasian. Additionally, Josephus connects his own prophecy about Vespasian becoming emperor with his expert knowledge of the Jewish scriptures in *Jewish War* 3.352.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the other versions of the oracle in Tacitus and Suetonius speak against the hypothesis that the oracle is based on Josephus' own prophecy.⁴⁷

43 Michel and Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus*, 3.192.

44 Suetonius (*Titus* 5) connects this *acclamatio* with the capture of Jerusalem. Titus succeeded Vespasian as commander in the war against the Jews at the end of 69 CE and as emperor on 24 June 79; Kienast, *Kaisertabelle*, 111.

45 Michel-Bauernfeind (*Flavius Josephus*, 3.191) mentions this possibility. See also Windisch, *Orakel des Hystaspes*, 66–67; Evans, *Jesus and his Contemporaries*, 56.

46 As noted by den Hollander, *Josephus*, 95 n. 128.

47 In contrast, see Lindner, *Geschichtsauffassung*, 70–71.

Tacitus' Oracle

Tacitus wrote his *Histories* around 25 years after Josephus wrote his *Jewish War*. The oracle about the world ruler is part of Tacitus' famous anti-Jewish excursus on the Jews, whom he depicts as godless, amoral, and bearing hatred for non-Jews (*Hist.* 5.5). The final chapter of this section transmits several portents (*prodigia*), which, remarkably, are set in the context of the end of the war against the Jews (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.1; cf. 5.2.1), just as in the Josephus passage discussed above. Tacitus introduces these portents by pointing out that the superstitious Jews (*gens superstitione obnoxia*), who were opposed to religious matters (*religionibus adversa*), did not avert them by sacrifices or by vows.⁴⁸ He mentions a portent of contending armies seen in heaven (*per caelum concurrere acies*) as well as flashing weapons (*rutilantia arma*), the sudden illumination of the Jewish temple by fire from the clouds (*subito nubium igne conlucere templum*), the doors of the sanctuary suddenly being opened (*aperatae repente delubri fores*), and the sound of a superhuman voice saying that the gods were departing (*audita maior humana vox excedere deos*); at the same moment, there was a big disturbance due to the gods' departure (*simul ingens motus excedentium*, *Hist.* 5.13.2–3). It is significant that most of these portents are also mentioned by Josephus, who is, however, more specific in most cases. Josephus and Tacitus share the following portents: (1) armies fighting in the sky, (2) the sudden illumination of the temple, (3) a door or doors of the sanctuary being opened automatically, and (4) a voice and a sound indicating that a group (unspecified in Josephus and identified with the gods in Tacitus) was leaving the temple. The comet that lasted for a year and the cow that gave birth to a lamb during the Festival of Unleavened Bread are absent in Tacitus. Next, Tacitus reports that only a few Jews were fearful because of these portents (5.4), which is reminiscent of Josephus, who comments that the Jews ignored the portents (*BJ* 6.288). The following note marks the transition to the oracle transmitted by Tacitus:⁴⁹

The majority [of the Jews] firmly believed that their ancient priestly writings contained the prophecy that this was the very time when the East should grow strong and that men starting from Judea should possess the

48 Religious matters (*religiones*) may refer to ceremonies to ward off the evil effects of portents (LCL 197 n. 3).

49 Orosius (*Adv. pag.* 7.9.2) offers a paraphrase of the oracle; Hopsers-Jansen, *Tacitus over de Joden*, 163.

world (*Pluribus persuasio inerat antiquis sacerdotum litteris contineri eo ipso tempore fore ut valesceret Oriens profectique Iudaea rerum potirentur*). This mysterious prophecy had in reality pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, as is the way of human ambition, interpreted these great destinies in their own favour, and could not be turned to the truth even by adversity (Tacitus, *Hist.* 13.2; trans. C. H. Moore).

If we turn once again to our three leading questions, it becomes immediately clear that Tacitus gives no indication that the oracle concerns a messianic prophecy. Tacitus states that most of the Jews believed there was a prophecy about a ruler in their own priestly writings.⁵⁰ This implies that the prophecy had a Jewish origin. Tacitus' oracle includes a similar time marker as the version in Josephus—"this was the very time" (*eo ipso tempore*)—but this time we have a clue as to which time is meant. The reference to the East becoming stronger (*ut valesceret Oriens*), which is still rather vague and open to multiple interpretations, is absent in Josephus. It reminds one of oracles expressing the hope of one of the peoples of the East that a ruler from the East would end the hegemony of Rome, as transmitted in several Sibylline Oracles as well as the so-called Hydaspes Oracle: *et imperium in Asiam revertetur ac rursus Oriens dominabitur atque occidens serviet* (Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 7.15.11).⁵¹ Another element particular to Tacitus is that he refers to several persons from Judea (*profecti Iudaea*; literally: "from Judea will proceed") who will rule the world.⁵² Similarly to Josephus, Tacitus immediately gives the correct meaning of the oracle, stating that the prediction refers to Vespasian and Titus (*Quae ambages Vespasianum ac Titum praedixerat*, 5.5). Finally, he concludes this section with a highly critical remark about the Jews: "but the common people (*volgus*), as is the way of human ambition, interpreted these great destinies in their own favour, and could not be turned to the truth even by adversity" (transl. C. H. Moore).

50 M. Friedländer ("Les prophéties sur la guerre judéo-romaine de l'an 70," *REJ* 30 [1895], 122–24) argues that the sacred writings mentioned by Tacitus were the Sibylline Oracles. He concludes that these oracles (he refers to 3.67off; 3.804–6) underlie Josephus and Tacitus. Cf. Stern (*Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.62), who concludes that they must concern Jewish scripture.

51 Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.61; Windisch, *Orakel des Hystaspes*, 66–69.

52 Cf. Josephus' prophecy about Vespasian (*BJ* 3.354), which he applies to Vespasian and his son in *BJ* 3.401–402.

Suetonius' Oracle

Suetonius (69–after 122 CE) wrote his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* during Hadrian's reign. He mentions the oracle in the *Life of Vespasian* in the context of a full report about Vespasian's actions, which may be based on official records, including Vespasian's *res gestae*.⁵³ Among other things, he highlights Vespasian's military victories (*Vesp.* 4.1–2). The oracle in question is mentioned in connection with Emperor Nero's journey to Greece (*Vesp.* 4.4). Vespasian was a member of Nero's staff in Greece (a *comes*) in 66–67 CE.⁵⁴ Suetonius points out that Vespasian fell from grace because he offended Nero by missing many of his musical performances and by sometimes falling asleep when he did attend. Although Vespasian feared for his life, he was saved when he received a province and an army (*provincia cum exercitu oblata est; Vesp.* 4.4). Suetonius does not give the details of this appointment, but we know from other sources that Vespasian became the Roman commander in Judea and probably also the governor of the region; his official title was *legatus Augusti pro praetore exercitus Iudaici*, 67–69 CE.⁵⁵ Contrary to the presentation in Josephus and Tacitus, Suetonius only very loosely connects the oracle with Vespasian's siege and capture of Jerusalem. In Suetonius, there are no oracles or portents preceding the oracle about the rulers, as is the case in Josephus and Tacitus; Suetonius reports such portents only after his transmission of the oracle.

In Suetonius, the oracle passage itself reads as follows:

There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world (*percrebruerat Oriente toto vetus et constans opinio esse in fatis ut eo tempore Iudaea profecti rerum potirentur*). This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome, as afterwards appeared from the event, the people of Judaea took to themselves; accordingly they revolted (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5; trans. J. C. Rolfe).

Suetonius' introduction of the oracle (*in fatis*: literally "in the oracles") is remarkable, because it highlights its popularity in the East. Apparently the oracle was well established and spread over the entire area. Tacitus' version also mentions the East, but in a different way: "when the East should grow strong." Suetonius does not presuppose that the oracle itself came from the

53 Hospers-Jansen, *Tacitus over de Joden*, 160.

54 He was *comes Neronis in Achaëa* in 66–67 CE; Kienast, *Kaisertabelle*, 108.

55 Schürer, *History*, 1.265.

East. The reference to the orient, however, is an interesting point in relation to Matt 2:1, which notes that the *magi* came from the East (cf. the Vulgate: *magi ab oriente*). While Tacitus connects the oracle with the priestly writings of the Jews, most probably with Jewish scripture, Suetonius refers in a much more general way to the oracles (*in fatis*). This does not exclude Jewish oracles, but it is plausible that Suetonius' readers associated this reference with Roman oracles, such as the Sibylline Oracles.⁵⁶

The text of the oracle itself is very similar to the version in Tacitus, but considerably shorter.⁵⁷ There is a time marker, which is not explained (*eo tempore*; Tacitus: *eo ipso tempore*), as in Josephus' version. There are slight variations in the vocabulary of Suetonius and Tacitus, but the authors share the important elements: the plural phrase *profecti rerum potirentur* ("men coming from . . . who will rule the world") as well as the geographical marker *Judaea* ("from Judea"). These close correspondences render it probable that Suetonius' oracle derives from the same source as that of Tacitus.⁵⁸ Both Tacitus' and Suetonius' versions of the oracle imply that persons coming from Judea, i.e., departing from that area and not originating from it, would become world rulers. Like Josephus, Suetonius describes a double interpretation of the oracle: despite the plural "men coming from," he states immediately that the prediction concerned the emperor of Rome, and a few lines further he mentions Vespasian as the person who became responsible for the war against the Jews, which ultimately led to his acclamation as emperor.⁵⁹ This implies that for Suetonius, as for Josephus, the oracle was fulfilled when Vespasian became emperor. But Suetonius also points out that the Jews interpreted the oracle within their own framework, that this incited the Jews to revolt, and that their first move (as mentioned by Suetonius) was killing the Roman governor (*Vesp.* 4.5). This governor must have been Gessius Florus (who was governor of Judea from 64–66 CE), who was corrupt and mistreated the Jews. Josephus presents the behavior of Gessius Florus as an important factor among the events that triggered the outbreak of the Jewish war (Josephus, *BJ* 2.277–558). His evil deeds included plundering the temple treasure (Josephus, *BJ* 2.293–296). However, there is no confirmation in other sources that Gessius Florus

56 Cf. Friedländer, "Les prophéties."

57 Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.61: "Almost identical is Suetonius. . ."

58 As argued already by Windisch, *Die Orakel des Hystaspes*, 68.

59 S. Panzram, "Der Jerusalemer Tempel und das Rom der Flavier," in *Zerstörungen des Jerusalemer Tempels: Geschehen–Wahrnehmung–Bewältigung* (ed. J. Hahn; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), 166–82 (esp. 168–9; 177).

was murdered by the Jews, as Suetonius implies.⁶⁰ Suetonius further mentions that the governor of Syria—Cestius Gallus, although Suetonius does not mention his name—intervened after the outbreak of the war with a large military force. Suetonius presents Gallus' intervention as a failure, because the Jews got hold of one of the governor's eagles (i.e., military standards, *Vesp.* 4.5).⁶¹ The failure of these two governors, from Suetonius' perspective, prepares the readers for the appearance of the right man, Vespasian, who would succeed in crushing the Jewish rebellion: "Since to put down this rebellion required a considerable army with a leader of no little enterprise, yet one to whom so great power could be entrusted without risk, Vespasian was chosen for the task, both as a man of tried energy and as one in no wise to be feared because of the obscurity of his family and name" (*industriæ expertæ nec metuendus ullo modo ob humilitatem generis ac nominis, Vesp.* 4.5).

Thus, Suetonius indicates that the oracle was the reason the Jews began the revolt and killed the Roman governor of Judea, but he does not explain the Jewish interpretation of the oracle. He also indicates that the oracle referred to Vespasian, despite the plural *profecti*, and that Vespasian was best suited to fight the Jews (*Vesp.* 4.5–6). He ends this section by pointing out that Vespasian restored the discipline of the Roman army and fought so bravely in battle that he was wounded in the knee and took several arrows in his shield (*Vesp.* 4.6). The point about restoring the discipline of the army appealed to the ideals of Roman readers, because the discipline of the Roman army was considered to be one of its most important strengths.

The continuation of Suetonius' biography of Vespasian indicates that Vespasian "began to cherish the hope of imperial dignity" when Otho and Vitellius began their struggle for the throne after the deaths of Nero and Galba (*Vesp.* 5.1). At this stage, Suetonius notes that Vespasian's expectations were raised by a series of portents, beginning with his birth and continuing up to his actions in Judea. Thus, Suetonius refers to portents after all, but all of them concern Vespasian. The last portents mentioned form a cluster, because they are connected with the East, and they include Josephus' famous prediction that

60 Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.120. S. Mason, "What Is History? Using Josephus for the Judaeo-Roman War," in *The Jewish Revolt against Rome: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (ed. M. Popović; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 155–240 (esp. 208).

61 Cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.10; Josephus, *BJ* 1.21; 2.499–562; 3.1–3; *Vita* 24–25. A brief survey of the events as presented in Josephus can be found in Schürer, *History*, 1.485–89; a detailed discussion in Mason, "What Is History?" 207–21. Stern (*Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.121) concludes that it concerned the eagle of the Legio XI Fulminata.

Vespasian would become emperor (*Vesp.* 5.6–7). Suetonius first mentions that Vespasian consulted “the oracle of the god of Carmel in Judea” (*apud Iudaeam Carmeli dei oraculum*), which is an imprecise reference.⁶² Suetonius notes that the lots of the oracle “were highly encouraging, promising that whatever he planned or wished, however great it might be, would come to pass” (*Vesp.* 5.6). Next, Suetonius reports Josephus’ prediction: “and one of his high-born prisoners, Josephus by name, as he was being put in chains, declared most confidently that he would soon be released by the same man, who would then, however, be emperor” (*Vesp.* 5.6).⁶³ Another portent concerns the time when Galba was on his way to the elections which would lead to his second consulship and a statue of the Deified Julius (i.e., Julius Caesar) “turned of its own accord towards the East” (*ad Orientem sponte conversam, Vesp.* 5.7). Finally, before the battle at Betriacum, north of the River Po (i.e., the battle between Otho and Vitellius after which Otho committed suicide), eagles were seen fighting each other. The victorious eagle was driven off by a third eagle in the direction of the rising sun, i.e., the East (*ab solis exortu, Vesp.* 5.7). Although Suetonius does not say so explicitly, the message is obvious: the portents predict that Vespasian would become emperor, and the reference to the East points to him. This can easily be understood against the background of his glorious victory over the Jews and his acclamation as emperor in the East.

62 Tacitus (*Hist.* 2.78) offers more specific information: “Between Judea and Syria lies a mountain called Carmel, which is the name of the local god. Yet traditionally this god boasts neither image nor temple, only an altar and the reverence of its worshippers. Here Vespasian had offered sacrifice when he was turning over in his mind his secret ambitions. The priest Basilides time and again examined the entrails of the victims. Finally he declared; ‘What ever you are planning, Vespasian—this is granted to you. You shall have a great mansion, far-flung boundaries and a host of people’. This ambiguous statement was immediately pounced upon by gossip, and was now given great publicity. Indeed ordinary people talked of little else. Still more lively was the discussion in Vespasian’s immediate circle, for hope is eloquent.” Hospers-Jansen, *Tacitus over de Joden*, 161; Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.122.

63 See also Cassius Dio 66.1.4: “These portents needed interpretation; but not so the saying of a Jew named Josephus: he, having earlier been captured by Vespasian and imprisoned, laughed and said: ‘You may imprison me now, but a year from now, when you have become emperor, you will release me.’”

Conclusion

Molnar's contextualization of the Star of Bethlehem and his explanation of Herod's fear as linked to the oracle about a world leader—which was transmitted by Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius—is mainly correct in the light of my discussion. Nevertheless, some points remain to be made. The historical context in which the oracle is set is clearly not Herod's rule, but rather the period of the Jewish war against Rome, just before Vespasian became emperor. With respect to the three leading questions formulated in the first section of this chapter, we can first observe that the question about the kind of ruler predicted by the oracle is a complex issue. Two versions of the oracle clearly mention more than one world leader (Tacitus and Suetonius). Moreover, the interpretation of the oracle is mixed, because a Jewish interpretation is distinguished from the correct interpretation, identifying the emperor Vespasian as ruler of the world (or Vespasian and his son Titus in Tacitus). It is plausible that the Jewish interpretation associated with the rebels focused on a Jewish ruler who would act in a messianic scenario.

Several details point to Judea as the oracle's origin. There are close correspondences between the three versions of the oracle, which refer to Judea directly or indirectly. Several of the portents in Josephus and Tacitus concern locations in Judea, which is additional evidence for a Jewish origin. Both Josephus and Tacitus set the oracle in the time period at the end of the Jewish war and connect it with portents indicating disaster. Suetonius' context is different; it concerns Vespasian's career and the portents about him, and there is only a loose connection with the war against the Jews. Suetonius and Josephus indicate that the oracle triggered the Jewish revolt. All three versions state that the Jews misinterpreted the oracle, and that the ruler it pointed to was Vespasian (or Vespasian and Titus).

The similarities between the three versions are so great that it is plausible that they were dependent on each other or on a common source.⁶⁴ Apart from the correspondences connected with Judea and the double interpretation of the oracle (the Jewish misinterpretation and the identification with Vespasian/Titus), all three versions start with a time reference that remains unexplained. Several of the portents mentioned by Tacitus and Josephus are very similar. Suetonius and Tacitus share important vocabulary and also presuppose a

64 In contrast, see J. J. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State, 66–70 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 266 n. 4.

broader setting in the Orient.⁶⁵ Scholars mainly propose either the official records about Vespasian's career as the basis for a common source underlying all of the versions of the oracle⁶⁶ or argue that Josephus is the source of the two Latin versions.⁶⁷ I consider the second option more probable, because it explains how the oracle could have been meaningful in a Jewish context, as a reason for revolting against the Romans. It is plausible that Josephus' version itself derives from a Jewish tradition. This could be an oral tradition about a messianic oracle, but it is more probable that it concerns a prophecy in Jewish scripture, since Josephus refers to scripture in his introduction to the oracle. Unfortunately, the content of the oracle is not specific enough to trace it to a specific passage in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, if scholars attempt to argue for a specific passage, they mostly propose either Num 24:17 or Dan 9:24–27. These passages are serious possibilities, but one other messianic prophecy should be taken into consideration as well, because it is the only prophecy that explicitly refers to Judea, the location highlighted by the oracle: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2).⁶⁸ Significantly, this is exactly the messianic prophecy that underlies the story in Matthew chapter two (2:1, 5, 8, 16) and is even referred to in verse 6. This would imply that there is a connection between the Star of Bethlehem and the triple oracle about a world ruler. At least one author, Eusebius, makes this interconnection explicit. He criticizes

65 A. L. A. Hogeterp, *Expectations of the End: A Comparative Traditio-Historical Study of Eschatological, Apocalyptic and Messianic ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 102.

66 Hospers-Jansen, *Tacitus over de Joden*, 162, 166, 171; A. Schalit, "Die Erhebung Vespasians nach Flavius Josephus, Talmud und Midrasch. Zur Geschichte einer messianischen Prophetie," *ANRW* 2 no. 2 (1975): 208–327; Schwier, *Tempel und Tempelzerstörung*, 301–02; T. D. Barnes, "The Sack of the Temple in Josephus and Tacitus," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome* (eds. J. Edmondson, J. Rives and S. Mason; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 129–44 (esp. 141).

67 A. von Harnack, "Der jüdische Geschichtsschreiber Josephus und Jesus Christus," *Internationale Monatschrift* 7 (1913): 1036–67; P. Corssen, "Die Zeugnisse des Tacitus und Pseudo-Josephus über Christus," *ZNW* 15 (1914): 114–40; Windisch, *Die Hystaspes Orakel*, 68; Lindner, *Geschichtsauffassung*, 131; Schürer, *History*, 2.604; Mason, "Josephus, Daniel," 188–89; J. Carleton Paget, "Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity," *JTS* 52 (2001): 539–624 (esp. 540 n. 9); Jonquière, "Josephus at Jotapata," 221.

68 As noted by Tomasino, *Oracles of Insurrection*, 110–11.

Josephus for explaining the oracle in the wrong way: instead of Vespasian, it should concern Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

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69 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.8. Similar rebukes can be found in Codex Urbinus gr. Fol. 256 (eleventh century) and Zonaras, *Epit.* 2.16 (thirteenth century); H. Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 114, 142; Carleton Paget, "Some Observations," 600.

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Stars and Powers: Astrological Thinking in Imperial Politics from the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba

Kocku von Stuckrad

Maybe the Star of Bethlehem
wasn't a star at all.

NEIL YOUNG

It was a widespread belief in the ancient world—and beyond—that the movements of the stars are directly linked to events on Earth, and that comets and planets indicate the will of the gods. For the small and quite diverse communities that were the first to follow Jesus as their teacher and Messiah, the spectacular narrative of a star marking Jesus' divine birth strengthened the identity of the new movement and positioned it in a broader context of Jewish and Roman political discourse.

The theoretical and hermeneutical conceptualization of the relation between the planetary and the earthly realms is the task of astrology. Until recently, research into these connections was not separated in any way from that of the mathematical study of the stars—what today we call astronomy—even though in antiquity people already generally agreed that astronomy and astrology described two different ways of looking at heavenly phenomena.¹ These ways of looking were not conceptually differentiated, however, and authors often simply referred to “mathematics” (Lat. *ars mathematica*) or “astronomy” (*astronomia*) when they actually meant astrology. The mathematical study of the stars provided the tools for gathering data for interpretive astrology.

Since astrology asks about the *meaning* of heavenly phenomena for the earthly sphere, it is particularly interested in the *quality* of time (that is, how a specific point in time ‘feels’ or which ‘energy’ is attached to it), as opposed to the pure *quantity* of time (that is, the measurement of duration and the calculation of planetary points of reference). In order to investigate the meaning

1 See Wolfgang Hübner, *Die Begriffe “Astrologie” und “Astronomie” in der Antike: Wortgeschichte und Wissenschaftssystematik, mit einer Hypothese zum Terminus “Quadrivium”* (Mainz: Academy of Sciences and Literature, 1989).

of astral events, astrology postulates correspondences between planetary levels and earthly levels, correspondences that are basically established through symbolic analogies.

Heavenly signs have always played a considerable role in the legitimization of political power. During imperial Roman times, when astrology was intrinsically linked to philosophy, religion, and politics, the utilization of heavenly signs peaked in many ways. Astrologers were the “power behind the throne,” as Frederick H. Cramer demonstrated in his now-classic study.² The emperor made his horoscope publicly known in order to emphasize that his rule corresponded with divine election and predetermination. Against a common misunderstanding, it is important to note that interpretations of a horoscope are by no means completely arbitrary. Despite some hermeneutical freedom, classical astrology operated within a Stoic framework of *heimarmenê* (Greek for “fate/destiny”) and *sympatheia* (“sympathy/mutual interdependence”) in which there were firmly established rules of interpretation. Learned astrologers as well as those in the political milieu knew that a birth could be marked by ‘bad’ or unfavorable constellations and aspects, or by ‘good’ or favorable ones. This is why some emperors propagated their natal chart or tried to forge it, while others forbid talking about it publicly. Nero, for instance, had a bad horoscope (as we read in Dio Cassius, Tacitus, and many others), and Hadrian had a good one.³ The emperor’s horoscope was part of political communication and propaganda.

Astrology in Jewish and Christian Politics

Such political thinking was not limited to the Roman sovereigns. It was adopted by the Hasmoneans, Herod, and the Christian emperors alike. In these cases, however, the Jewish religious tradition was brought into the mix. The strong expectation in Roman political discourse of a fundamental turn of the era and the dawning of a Golden Age (see below) was combined with the Jews’ own

2 See Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954).

3 The chart was transmitted by Hephaestion of Thebes and interpreted by Antigonus of Nicaea and others; see Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 137–38; see also Stephan Heilen, “The Emperor Hadrian in the Horoscopes of Antigonus of Nicaea,” in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology* (ed. Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin, and Kocku von Stuckrad; Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 2005), 49–67.

religious identity. Many documents linked this to another rhetorical strategy—claiming the superiority of Judaism over other religions. Those texts tried to show that scientific, ethical, and political knowledge had been developed and guarded by the Jews since early times, whereas later developments were only possible due to Jewish transmission. The numerous legends about Abraham, describing how he taught astrology to ‘Chaldeans’ and Egyptians, are to be understood against this background.⁴ The hero could equally be Moses or Enoch—what is important is the intention to give evidence of Jewish superiority in religious matters.

With regard to Jewish and subsequent Christian discourses, an important theme formed around the famous prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:17, which is referred to many times in the present volume: “A star will go out of Jacob, a scepter will rise from Israel.” There can be no doubt that many Jews later interpreted this pagan prophecy in a messianic way: the *targumim* translate it as “King of Jacob” and “Messiah of Israel” (Targum Onkelos and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan); the Codex Neofiti (FrgmT) has “Once a King will rise from the House of Jacob, and a redeemer and emperor from the House of Israel;” and the Septuagint renders the sentence as “A star will emerge from Jacob, a man (*antrôpos*) will rise from Israel.” The messianic connotation of this pagan prophecy captured the imagination of many Jews and Christians, especially those striving for political power. In the context of the narrative of the Star of Bethlehem, it is noteworthy that—exactly as in the story about the magi and the star—part of the strategy of legitimization is to have Gentiles proclaiming the birth or rise of a Jewish king.

How did this theme work out in Jewish and Christian politics?⁵

The Hasmoneans

The Hasmonean kings made extensive use of astrological symbolism, usually drawing on Balaam’s prophecy. During the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), many coins were minted that bore a star as prominent symbol, which,

4 This claim is very old. It can be traced back to Artapanus (second century BCE) and his Jewish history (*peri Ioudaiôn*), which is fragmentarily transmitted through Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* 9.8;23;27.

5 For the full argument of this chapter, see Kocku von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie: Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis* (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 2000), 105–58; see also von Stuckrad, “Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity—A New Approach,” *Numen* 47 (2000): 1–40. Annti Laato (*A Star is Rising: The Historical Development of the Old Testament Royal Ideology and the Rise of the Jewish Messianic Expectations* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]) has shown that the messianic concept used in Jewish and Christian discourse has its roots in Near Eastern royal ideology.

according to Ya'akov Meshorer, was “perhaps the most common Jewish coin.”⁶ The Hasmonean star could be depicted with eight rays or, alternatively, with six points, with or without a circle. As historians, we have to find an explanation for the prominent use of the star. One way of approaching this phenomenon is taking seriously the astrological practice of the time.

In ancient cosmological thinking, the cycles of the outer planets Jupiter and Saturn were of special importance. Babylonians were the first to speculate about the meaning of the combined paths of Jupiter and Saturn, but it was Berossus in the third century BCE who further developed this theory and introduced it to Greek and Roman astrology.⁷ Berossus was a priest of Bel (Marduk). Vitruvius (*On Architecture* 9.6.2) tells us that Berossus founded a school of astrologers on the island of Cos, probably around 281 BCE. Berossus' reputation—and the influence of his school in general—was considerable. Pliny the Elder (NH 7.123) reports that Berossus was so highly honored in the imperial period “because of his divine predictions” that a statue with a gold-plated tongue was erected in his memory. With Berossus, we see for the first time an explicit astronomical calculation of the end of days based on planetary cycles (and not on astral myths, as was the case with Plato). The figure of 432,000 years is derived from the revolutions of Jupiter and Saturn—432,000 years corresponds to both 14,400 cycles of Saturn and 36,000 cycles of Jupiter.

This theory of the Great Year was subsequently spread and transformed, and it ultimately influenced the politics of Roman emperors. The history of Berossus' school of astrologers on Cos illuminates the further development of astrology, not only through the application of transmitted knowledge, but particularly through the observation and research conducted by these scholars. Many famous astrologers were affiliated with the Cos school, from Calippus in the school's first generation to the celebrated Hipparchus of Nicaea (ca. 190–120 BCE), who engaged intensively with both Babylonian astronomy

6 Ya'akov Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* (Tel Aviv: Hassefer & Massada, 1967), 119. See also Baruch Kanael, “Ancient Jewish Coins and Their Historical Importance,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 36 (1963): 38–62; and Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage* (2 vols.; Dix Hills: Amphora Books, 1982). It is a serious omission in Molnar's account that, although the author mentions the importance of coins in political rhetoric (Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 3–4), he does not include the Hasmonean and subsequent Jewish coins in his analysis.

7 On the history of astrology prior to the Roman Empire, see von Stuckrad, “Astrology,” in *Companion to Greek Science, Medicine, and Technology* (ed. Georgia L. Irby; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2015).

and Greek geometry and arithmetic.⁸ In addition to many other astronomical calculations—for instance, the creation of a star catalogue that later formed the basis of Ptolemy’s studies—Hipparchus suggested a figure for the precession of the equinoxes of at least one degree in a century, which comes quite close to the actual figure of a little over 50 inches per year. This assumption was supported by Ptolemy.

Considering the great interest of ancient cultures in calculating and interpreting periods, “Great Years,” and planetary cycles, one would expect that a discovery such as Hipparchus’ would lead to excited responses. After all, it occurred during a period in which the Vernal Point was moving from Aries to Pisces, a change that could have triggered many expectations. Unfortunately, we can only speculate here, because the ancient sources do not refer explicitly to the ingress of the Vernal Point into Pisces. But there are scholars who assume that Hipparchus’ discovery had a massive impact on the religions of his time; some even suggest that the cult of Mithras was in fact born out of the astronomical determination of a new epoch.⁹

The conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn are at the heart of the debate about the Star of Bethlehem (as is clear from the prominence of this issue in other chapters in this volume).¹⁰ The rare triple conjunctions corresponded in an interesting way to political events and speculations.¹¹ Of course, there was no “theory of Great Conjunctions” at that time; this was developed later and

8 John North, *The Fontana History of Astronomy and Cosmology* (London: Fontana, 1994), 92–104.

9 This is particularly the case with August Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neuen Forschung* 11.20.2 (ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 988–1190; and Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); cf. the discussion in von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 163–68.

10 See Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern.” Many of the theories that Molnar (*Star of Bethlehem*) presented as ‘new discoveries’ had in fact been discussed by three generations of scholars before him; it is a serious shortcoming that Molnar does not refer to those older contributions, such as Strobel’s (which was even translated into English).

11 See von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 860–75, which gives an overview of all of the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn between 200 BCE and 710 CE; a list of comet descriptions in ancient sources; tables and charts of the major conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn between 126 BCE and 134 CE; and the birth charts of the emperors Nero and Hadrian.

subsequently popularized by Abu Ma'shar and other Muslim scholars in the early Islamic period. However, these conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn could easily be observed for more than a year, every night, and we know that their movements were also calculated. Hence, even without a theory, the importance of those planets' movements is firmly established in classical astrology.

If we want to understand the astrological message underlying Alexander Jannaeus' coins, we should take into account that his year of birth, 126 BCE, was marked by a great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces. To be precise, in 126 BCE the great conjunction was not completed, since the retrograde phase of Jupiter ended with an orb of $1^{\circ}05'$ to Saturn. The next exact great conjunction happened in 7 BCE. This conjunction was calculated beforehand by Babylonian astrologers, as Kugler showed many years ago.¹²

Jupiter was typically connected to kingship and royalty, whereas Saturn, being the seventh star and thus heralding the Sabbath, was often attributed to the Jewish people.¹³ When Alexander and his family minted coins bearing the Hasmonean star, he laid claim to his divine election as sovereign, in correspondence with the great conjunction. His reign was the fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy.

Herod the Great

Herod the Great, for his part, read the heavenly signs differently, yet he applied the same pattern of arguments. There can be no doubt that Herod was deeply engaged in skilled astrological discourse: He was a good friend of the Pollio

12 Franz Xaver Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel: Assyriologische, astronomische und astralmythologische Untersuchungen* (vol. 2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1907–1935), 498–99.

13 The link between Saturn and the Jewish community is a well-attested theme in ancient literature, at times linked to the assumption that the Jews would venerate Saturn with sacrifices; on this point, see Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, *Lastronomie Grecque* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899), 318, 478, 483–84; on the Sabbath as the *dies Saturni* in Roman theology, see Jörg Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: Die Geschichte der Repräsentation und religiösen Qualifikation von Zeit in Rom* (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 1995), 457–58; Bouché-Leclercq, *Lastronomie Grecque*, 476–84. Judaism was also repeatedly linked to Pisces as the sign of the Messianic Age; for the rabbinic discussion, see Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (vol. 4; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922–1961), 1046 and 1049; for the theme in Mandaean and Gnostic literature, see Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Gießen: A. Töpelmann, 1915), 408ff; E. S. Drower, trans., *The Book of the Zodiac* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1949), 60–61 and 119 (the “Great King” who will rise when Venus and Saturn govern the sign of Pisces); see also Testamentum Levi 18:3.

family, including C. Asinius Gallus (the bearer of the promise in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue); he honored the island Rhode, which was an astrological center of the time, and financed the reconstruction of the Temple of Apollo as a bearer of the Golden Age; he also built a Temple for Apollo near Caesarea.¹⁴ As Abraham Schalit clearly demonstrated,¹⁵ Herod saw himself as the Jewish Messiah who was to establish a divine reign for his people. According to Josephus, Herod said in a speech: "I think that through the will of God I helped the Jewish people to gain a level of wealth that had never been known before" (*AJ* 15.383). And he goes on: "But now, through God's will, I am the emperor, and there will be a long period of piece and abundant wealth and income" (*AJ* 15.387).¹⁶ He saw himself as the new star rising from Israel. Given the astrological orientation of his political program, Herod was extremely sensitive when it came to extraordinary heavenly events.¹⁷ Taking this into account, it is not surprising to find the king aggressively reacting to the challenge to his power during the years 7 and 6 BCE. ¹⁸What at first glance seems to be an outburst of persecution mania turns out to be a 'reasonable' response to the planetary threat. A great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the last decade of Pisces, i.e., exactly on the Vernal Point of that time.¹⁹

For educated astrologers, the interpretation of this event would have been apparent: The last important conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 126 BCE brought forth a Jewish kingdom that was to last for 27 years, during which time its area and influence extended enormously. What more could be expected as a result of a genuine great conjunction on the Vernal Point, stressed further by the planet Mars?²⁰ No doubt, the events called for decided and resolute action, and so Herod went for it. Furthermore, the king was driven by an enigmatic prophecy, once uttered by a Pharisee, that Herod would lose his power

14 For a detailed discussion of astrology in Herodian politics, see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 112–33.

15 Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969).

16 On Herod's Messianism, see Schalit, *König Herodes*, 476.

17 This caused much nervous tension in Rome during his reign, when Virgil's Fourth Eclogue as a prophecy of fundamental change played a significant role; see von Stuckrad, *Frömmigkeit und Wissenschaft: Astrologie in Tanach, Qumran und früh-rabbinischer Literatur* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1996), 68–71; von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 119.

18 Josephus reports these events extensively in *AJ* 16.73–76.328–334.361–394. See also Schalit, *König Herodes*, 620–28.

19 Strobel, "Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern," 1051.

20 See the charts for the various moments of that great conjunction in von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 869–72.

“by God’s decree” (*AJ* 17.43–44). Again, political discourse was deeply saturated with prophecies and astrological notions. Josephus himself raised the question of whether these events were to be regarded as the influence of necessity (*anankê*) or heavenly fate (*heimarmenê*) (*AJ* 16.397).²¹ This interpretation leads us right into the center of ancient discussions and expectations.

The “Star of Bethlehem” in the Christian Imagination

The Christian version of the triple conjunction’s ‘true meaning’ was near at hand. From this perspective, the birth of the Messiah was accompanied by a heavenly sign, and the great conjunction was molded into the ‘Star of Bethlehem’, thus ensuring the belief in Jesus’ divine origin.²² Generally, the stars as signs is a common motif in both canonized and non-canonized writings, and the star of the Messiah intrigued the early followers of Jesus. From the second century on, patristic literature discussed its theological implications. In general, Jewish and Christian attitudes toward the science of the stars were marked by a critical response to the fatalistic and deterministic dimensions of (Stoic) astrology, while the idea that the paths of the stars indicate divine will and cosmic processes was much less controversial. Put differently, the disputes did not touch upon the notion of correspondences, but rather raised the question of how those correspondences were to be explained. Do heavenly signs simply accompany mundane events—the stars as *sêmeia*? Or are they responsible for them—the stars as *poiêtikoi*? And if there is a sympathetic correspondence between the celestial sphere and earthly events, does this necessarily imply a deterministic or fatalistic influence?

Origen (ca. 185–255 CE) had an interesting take on these questions. In his almost-canonical commentary on Gen 1:14, he explained that the movements of the stars were to be regarded as a kind of writing by God’s hand in the sky. They reveal the divine mysteries to the heavenly powers, such as angels. Some people may gain (perhaps inaccurate) insight into those secrets, as well.²³ Thus,

21 See Schalit, *König Herodes*, 627; and Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” 1073.

22 For a detailed analysis of Matthew’s account and its historical context, see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 555–86, and the references provided there.

23 Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.11; *Philocalia* 23.1–21; see also *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* 9.2,112,11ff. The enormous influence of Origen’s commentary is described in Utto Riedinger, *Die Heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie von Origenes bis Johannes von Damaskos: Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und zur Geschichte der Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1956), 177–82; cf. also David Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l’antiquité grecque: Recherches sur la survivance de l’argumentation*

even anti-astrological arguments make use of astrological semantics.²⁴ This is not due to a naïve misunderstanding of astrology's implications, but is rather an attempt to establish an interpretation of astrology that would be acceptable to monotheistic theology. Consequently, Origen also applied his reading of the planetary movements as the writing of God's own hand to the birth of Jesus.

The Bar Kokhba Revolt

If it is right to say that the great conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn had an impact on politics and religious identities, then one can assume that the next great conjunction of the two planets would raise old questions anew. This was the case in the year 134 CE, during the Bar Kokhba revolt; again, astrological interpretation sheds light on the difficult psychological and historical circumstances of the Jewish rebellion. For this purpose, it is helpful to know that Hadrian, who besieged Jerusalem and changed its name into *Aelia Capitolina*—a sanctuary for Jupiter—was an astrologer himself.²⁵ He was by all means a learned expert, and there can be no doubt that he arranged his politics in accordance with astrological calculations.²⁶ Turning to the Jewish rebels, we find a similar involvement. First, the very name of the leader—Bar Kokhba/Aramaic Bar Koseba, i.e., “son of the star”—reveals not only a messianic expectation, but also its astral (or astrological?) connotation. This notion was obviously common, even within Christian circles, as Eusebius of Caesarea noted: “The Jews' leader was [a man] named Bar Kokhba [*Barchôchebas*] which means *star*. Although he was a bloodthirsty and rapacious man, he was, due to his name, slavishly honored as a *lantern* [*phôstêr*] that had come down from heaven to help and illuminate the oppressed” (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.6,2).

During the revolt, several coins were minted with a star as a symbol above the temple front. In some cases, the motif resembled a rosette or a small wave,

morale antifataliste de Carnéade chez les philosophes grecs et les théologiens chrétiens des quatre premiers siècles (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1973), 307–18.

- 24 Tamsyn Barton correctly noted: “Origen thus concedes a good deal to astrology. He says that the stars offer information about a fixed future from beginning to end, and that in some cases they are part of the medium by which fate is played out” (*Ancient Astrology* [London & New York: Routledge, 1994], 75). It is exactly the doctrine of correspondences that goes undisputed in Origen's argument. Or, in the words of John North: “Origen [...] tried desperately to purge astrology of fatalism” (*The Fontana History of Astronomy and Cosmology*, 123).
- 25 The renaming of the city can either be an act of thanks to Jupiter after the victory over the Jews/Saturn or a preparatory act before the siege. Thus, this interpretation does not solve the much-discussed difficulties in the dating of Hadrian's decision.
- 26 Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, 162ff.

so that no final decision is possible about its meaning.²⁷ But the fact that the Jews fashioned their most valuable coins, the silver *tetradrachms*, with a star-rossette in a marked position calls for explanation. The temple—and even more so the *new* temple—was not a mere decoration,²⁸ but represented a program and propaganda. Its interpretation as a star fits the discourses of the day very well, and these discourses were shared by Romans and Jews. What is more, the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn was observable all the time, which enabled those Jews who were not familiar with astronomical calculations to make up their own minds about the quality of time.

Conclusion: Narratives and Claims of Power

When it comes to Jewish and Christian knowledge and practice of astrology, as well as to the interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem in (inter)religious communication, I suggest an indirect line of argument. There is no evidence of serious astrological theory in Jewish and Christian milieus before the third century; astrology was an elite discourse, and only Jews who were immersed in Roman intellectual culture had sufficient education to explicitly use astrology. We can demonstrate that Herod—and to a certain extent also Josephus Flavius and Philo of Alexandria²⁹—had knowledge of astrology and access to the highest educated levels of the astrological craft. Herod most likely used this knowledge and applied it in his political strategy; therefore, we can interpret his actions in the light of the astrology of his time.

When it comes to the Hasmoneans and other Jewish groups, including the early Jesus communities, the case is different. We can better speak of astral symbolism in this case, which at times was merged with some rudimentary knowledge of astrological theory; it was only from the third century on that this knowledge became more common among Jews and Christians.³⁰

27 See Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period*, and *Ancient Jewish Coinage*. Strobel (“Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” 1106) is enthusiastically positive about the star; Leo Mildenberg (*The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War* [Aarau: Sauerländer, 1984], 45) is critical; and Peter Schäfer (*Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand: Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1981], 65) is sure about the star, but not about its messianic connotation.

28 This is what Mildenberg (*The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War*, 45) assumes.

29 See von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 224–310.

30 This was mainly in Manichaean, Mandaean, and Gnostic milieus; see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 624–766.

This means that the narrative in Matthew chapter two must be regarded as fiction, which may be based on a story about the mythical birth of a world leader and Jewish king, probably linked to a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. The story is part of a larger discourse on the star of the Messiah, from the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba. The story has a clear propagandistic function in interreligious discourse. Searching for evidence of a celestial event that corresponds to Matthew's Star of Bethlehem is futile.

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Balaam's 'Star Oracle' (Num 24:15–19) in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Bar Kokhba

Helen R. Jacobus

Introduction

The 'star of Balaam' oracle occurs in three passages in ancient Judaism: in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q175 [4QTestimonia], 4Q266 [4QD^a], and 1QM [1QWar Scroll]) and in one manuscript from the Cairo Genizah¹ (CD-A [Damascus Document^a]), which contains a similar text to the fragment 4Q266 (4QD^a). This essay will examine 4QTestimonia, the Damascus Document^a with 4QD^a and 1QWar Scroll. As will become apparent, the text of Num 24:15–19 was deliberately rearranged in different ways in each text of this group of ancient Jewish sources in very dense, purposeful, and highly intricate patterns. 4QTestimonia may have a critical political subtext relevant to a particular historical point within the Hasmonean period; the Damascus Document^a appears to refer to two messianic figures, and 1QWar Scroll is likely to contain a complex association with a single messianic figure.

Based on the evidence in the Dead Sea Scrolls, I will argue that it is likely that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew would have been aware that the 'star of Balaam' was meaningful in Second Temple Judaism and that the biblical prophecy probably had apocalyptic or messianic significance during the time of Jesus.²

The text of Num 24:15–19 in the Hebrew Bible is as follows:

* I would like to thank the editors for their suggestions and comments on the various drafts of this paper. Any errors are my responsibility.

- 1 The Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo. A *genizah* is a Jewish storeroom where disused manuscripts are kept before they are buried. The Damascus Document, now in the Cambridge University Library (manuscript number: T-S 10K6), was brought to Cambridge from Cairo 50 years before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- 2 See the contribution of Darrell Hannah in this volume; see also T. Nicklas, "Balaam and the Star of the Magi," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (eds. G. H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten; Themes in Biblical Narrative Jewish and Christian Traditions 11; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 233–246, for the argument for and against the possible basis of Matt 2:1–12 on Num 24:17. Nicklas concludes that "there is no safe answer;"

- 24:15a And he uttered his prophecy, and he said:
 24:15b Oracle of Balaam, son of Beor,
 24:15c Oracle of the man whose eye is open
 24:16a Oracle of the one who hears the words of God
 24:16b And knows the knowledge of the Most High
 24:16c Who beholds the vision of Shaddai
 24:16d Fallen down but eyes uncovered:
 24:17a "I see him, but not now"³
 24:17b I behold him, but not near
 24:17c A star has marched forth from Jacob
 24:17d A scepter shall rise from Israel
 24:17e It shatters the [forehead-]temples of Moab
 24:17f And destroys of all the children of Shet
 24:18a Edom will become a possession
 24:18b And Seir, a possession of those who destroy it
 24:18c And Israel performs valiantly
 24:19a One from Jacob shall have dominion
 24:19b He will destroy the remnant from a city

All of these ancient Jewish sources contain the "star" and "scepter" verses of Num 24:17cd, and all take the form of quoting several other biblical extracts, some of which are linked by exegetical literary units. The oracle of Num 24:15–19 is not extant in the fragments of the text of Numbers in the biblical Dead Sea

though it "makes very good sense" on the basis of its intertextual references and allusions, and so on, to the Hebrew Bible.

- 3 The passage is traditionally regarded as prophetic and messianic in later Jewish sources; see A. Houtman and Harry Sysling, "Balaam's Fourth Oracle (Num 24:15–19). According to the Aramaic Targums," in *The Prestige*, 189–212; J. H. Greenstone, *The Holy Scriptures: Numbers with Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1939), 269; M. I. Lockshin, *Rashbam's [1085–c.1158] Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers: An Annotated Translation* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2001), 280–281; C. B. Chavel, *Ramban (Nachmanides) [1194–c.1270] Commentary on the Torah: Numbers* (New York: Shilo, 1975), 283; Y. I. Z. Herczeg et al., *Rashi [1040–1105]: Commentary on the Torah. Vol. 4: Bamidbar/Numbers* (Artscroll series/The Sapirstein Edition; Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1997), 308–311; E. Soloweyczik, *Moses Maimonides [1138–1204] Mishne Torah: Hilchoth Melachim IX:1* (London: Nicholson, 1863), 38–40. Ibn Ezra states that this verse is a prophecy of the appearance of David, an event to come, and the "scepter" is a prophecy of the messiah; see H. Norman Strickland and Arthur Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Numbers (Ba-Midbar)*, (New York: Menorah, 1999), 206–07.

Scrolls.⁴ The non-biblical scrolls that contain it also have interconnections with other scrolls comprising compilations of biblical excerpts. Many of these extracts are followed or preceded by sectarian commentaries that are interpretations referencing the sect's contemporary political environment and perspective. Additionally, there are frequent intra-connections with different passages within the same scroll. Furthermore, the biblical excerpts are often rearranged to be read in a different order than in scripture. Introducing deliberate variants within the citations is another characteristic of the text, such as using word-plays in the excerpts, which are then given a politically oblique interpretation in the attached commentaries. This system of cross-referencing biblical sources, skillfully creating new meanings from the quotations, often using literary techniques, and adding coded interpretations is a feature of much of the literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Regarding sectarian rules from the texts found at Qumran, an interesting point to note is that the author of the Gospel of Matthew may have been aware of the rule in the Damascus Document: "No-one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath day. And if it falls into a well or a pit, he should not take it out on the Sabbath. And any living man who falls into a place of water or into a reservoir, no-one should take him out with a ladder or a rope or a utensil."⁵ In Matt 12:11, Jesus implicitly takes a critical stance towards such extreme Sabbath instructions in this corpus: "He [i.e., Jesus] said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath'" (Matt 12:11–12). Jesus argues that rescue should be permissible if the fallen animal is, for example, the owner's only sheep.⁶

4 For a summary and translation of the Numbers scrolls and their 'variants', see M. Abegg, P. Flint, and E. Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 108–44; for the critical edition of the longest and best-preserved text, see N. Jastram, "4QNum^b (4Q27)" in E. Ulrich, F. M. Cross et al., *Qumran Cave 4: 7, Genesis to Numbers* (DJD 12; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, repr. 1999), 205–68; for all of the Hebrew Numbers biblical scrolls, see, E. Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants. Vol. 1: Genesis–Kings* (VTSup 134; Leiden: Brill, 2010).

5 *4QDamascus Document^e (4QD^e) (4Q270) frag 6, col. v, lines 17b–20a* [part-restored], see *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, eds. F. García Martínez and E. Tigheelaar (Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998) [abbrev. DSSSE], 614–615; it is also extant in *4QDamascus Document^f (4QD^f) (4Q271) frag 5, col. i, lines 8b–9a, DSSSE, 620–621; and Damascus Document^a (from the Cairo Genizah) (CD-A) col xi, 12b–14a, DSSSE, 568–569.*

6 One book detailing the relationship between many Qumran texts and the New Testament is G. J. Brooke, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament: Essays in Mutual Illumination* (London: SPCK, 2005).

If early Christians were offering revised biblical interpretations in their engagement with such early Jewish sources, one may argue that the possible allusion to the star arising from Jacob from Num 24:17c in Matthew 2 rejects the possible Davidic warrior-messiah interpretations that are apparent in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in later Jewish exegesis and replaces them with non-violent, regal star imagery. The gospel story focuses on the Davidic, messianic descendant of David through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: the genealogy of Jesus opens the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 1:1–17) and sets the prophetic background for the Star of Bethlehem.

It seems likely that this passage from Num 24:17c was used in sectarian Jewish texts with regard to actual Jewish conflicts, such as probable statements against the Hasmonean rulership and priesthood combined in a single person. These may have been seen in an apocalyptic light.⁷ Written retrospectively for the period when the Dead Sea Scrolls were still being copied and collected, Jesus challenges mainstream Jewish religious practices and, apparently, sectarian Jewish rules. One may argue, then, that the biblical symbolism of the ‘star of Balaam’ that was appropriated hermeneutically by a sectarian group may have been re-appropriated by Matthew and placed in a different anti-Jewish-establishment, messianic context. Furthermore, it is likely that a heavenly sign signifying the rising or the birth of a new leader was an ancient literary *topos* that would be familiar to readers of Matthew’s Gospel.

We will now examine the network of text-critical intra-connections and interactions between the Qumran texts involving Num 24:15–19 before moving on to the possible use of Num 24:17c by the Bar Kokhba movement and its later witnesses.

Scholars agree that there was no uniform interpretation in antiquity of Num 24:15–19. Writing about the usage of the “star” and “scepter” verse units of Num 24:17cd, George Brooke states: “There is clear evidence of pluralism either at the textual or interpretative level or both. There does not seem to have been a single Qumran scribal school text of Numbers which is used constantly in the community’s exegeses.”⁸ Fitzmyer echoes this observation: “There is no evidence at Qumran of a systematic, uniform exegesis of the Old

7 For the fusion of religion and politics in ancient Judaism with particular reference to Num 24:17, see M. Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement from Herod I until 70 AD* (Trans. D. Smith; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 239, 277, 279 n. 275, 305 n. 417, 384 n. 17, 385 n. 20.

8 G. J. Brooke, “*E Pluribus Unum*: Textual Variety and Definitive Interpretation in the Qumran Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context* (eds. T. H. Lim et al.; T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 2000), 107–19.

Testament. The same text has not always been given the same interpretation.” M. V. Norenson, commenting on G. S. Oegema’s observations, takes this view one step further by citing Oegema and then arguing:

“Those verses that have been interpreted more than once do not present a uniform messianic idea . . . None of the biblical verses lead to specific and definite interpretations. None of the so-called messianic passages of the Hebrew Bible has an intrinsic messianic value” . . . The interesting point is not that the scriptural texts in question received diverse interpretations but rather that such a pool existed.⁹

We will now examine the details of the texts containing Num 24:17cd: 4Q175 (*4QTestimonia*) lines 9–13; 4Q266 (*4QD^a*) fragment 3, column iii, lines 20–21 preserved in CD-A (*Damascus Document^a*) column vii, lines 19–20; and 1Q33 (1QM) (*1QWar Scroll*) col. ix, lines 6–7.

The Use of Balaam’s Star Oracle (Num 24:17c) in the Dead Sea Scrolls

*Num 24:15–19 in the Dead Sea Scrolls: 4Q175 (4QTestimonia)*¹⁰

The first citation¹¹ to be discussed is in a sectarian manuscript¹² consisting of one single leather sheet of 30 lines of text, dated to the Hasmonean period in

9 M. V. Norenson, *Christ Among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60, citing G. S. Oegema, *The Anointed and His People: Messianic Expectations from the Maccabees to Bar Kochba* (Library of Second Temple Judaism 27; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 302–03.

10 Lines 9–13.

11 For the digital image, see Dead Sea Scrolls online: <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-28021>. Transcription: J. M. Allegro, “175. Testimonia,” in J. M. Allegro, ed., *Qumran Cave 4.1 (4Q158–4Q186)*, (DJD 5; Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 57–60, pl. 21; Frank Moore Cross, “Testimonia (4Q175 = 4QTestimonia = 4QTestim)” in J. H. Charlesworth et al., *Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek Texts With English Translations. Vol. 6B: Pesharim, Other Commentaries, and Related English Translations* (PTSDSSP 6B; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck and Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). G. G. Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet: Positive Eschatological Protagonists of the Qumran Library* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 57–58, 160–164; F. García Martínez, “Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 75–82; D. Katzin, “The Use of Scripture in 4Q175,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 20 no. 2 (2013): 200–36.

12 It is regarded as a “Qumran composition,” since it is thought that the scribe is the same as the one who wrote 1QS (The Rule of the Community), and there are similar scribal practices with other texts classified as sectarian; see E. Tigchelaar, “In Search of the Scribe

the mid-first century BCE. It is the oldest and longest extract from Balaam's final oracle, spanning no fewer than 13 out of the 18 lines that comprise the prophecy. There is a large lacuna on the lower right-hand side of the sheet, resulting in the loss of the beginning of lines 25–29. The citation from Num 24:15–19 is the second in a sequence of four biblical extracts: (1) Moses speaking on Sinai;¹³ (2) Balaam's ecstatic declaration about the Star of Jacob (Num 24:15–17); (3) Moses's blessing to Levi (Deut 33:8–11); and (4) Joshua's curse against Jericho (Josh 6:26), followed by its interpretation from a contemporaneous, political sectarian perspective.¹⁴ The passage in 4Q175 that contains Balaam's star oracle reads as follows:

4Q175 lines 9–13

- Vocat. Line 9 [Num 24:15a] And he uttered his poem and said: [Num 24:15b] "Oracle of Balaam, son of Beor, [Num 24:15c] and oracle of the man
- Line 10 of penetrating eye, [Num 24:16a] oracle of him who listens to the words of God [Num 24:16b] and knows the knowledge of the Most High, [Num 24:16c] who
- Line 11 sees the vision of Shaddai, [Num 24:16d] lying down and with an open eye. [Num 24:17a] I see him, but not now,
- Line 12 [Num 24:17b] I espy him, but not close up. [Num 24:17c] A star has departed from Jacob, [Num 24:17d] and a scepter [^] has arisen [^] [supralinear] from Israel. [Num 24:17e] He shall crush
- Line 13 the [forehead-]temples of Moab, [Num 24:17f] and smash all the children of Shet. *Vocat.*¹⁵

of 1QS," in *Emanuel: Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov* (eds. S. M. Paul et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 439–52; B. A. Strawn, "Excerpted 'Non-Biblical' Scrolls at Qumran?" in *Qumran Studies: New Parallels, New Questions* (eds. M. T. Davies and B. A. Strawn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 75–76.

- 13 Deut 5:28–29 and Deut 18:18–19 in the Masoretic Text, which is the same as Exod 20:18 in the Samaritan Pentateuch {abbrev: SP} and in the pre-Samaritan or proto-Samaritan Qumran version in 4Q22 (4Q*paleoExod^m*).
- 14 P. W. Skehan et al. argue that the Moses extract of 4Q175 should be treated as the single excerpt from the pre-Samaritan version of Exodus, since it would appear that the biblical sequence of Exodus-Numbers- [Deuteronomy]-Joshua was being followed. See P. W. Skehan, E. Ulrich, and J. E. Sanderson, eds., *Qumran Cave 4: 4, PaleoHebrew and Greek Biblical Manuscripts* (DJD 5; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, reproduced with corrections 1995), 68 (Deuteronomy was omitted in this list).
- 15 Translation according to García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *DSSSE*, 356–357.

The first three biblical quotations as mentioned above are without commentary. The combination of passages in the first excerpt is not unique to this scroll's fragment. The same extract from the proto-Samaritan/ Samaritan Pentateuch also appears in 4Q158 fragment 6 (*4QReworked Pentateuch A*).¹⁶

It seems that these three biblical quotations—(1) the proto-Samaritan/SP extract in 4Q175, followed by (2) Num 24:15–17 and then by (3) Deut 33:8–11—find their coherence in the addition of, and commentary on, the fourth biblical passage (4) citing Joshua's curse from Josh 6:26 (4Q175 lines 21–23a). The strong military emphasis of the fourth quotation and its subsequent commentary seems to provide the background for how the preceding biblical quotations should be understood, including our Balaam passage. It comprises Joshua issuing a curse on anyone who rebuilds Jericho, "this city," and is followed by a sectarian commentary:

4Q175 lines 23b–30

- Line 23b And now an accursed ^{^ man ^} [supralinear] one of Belial
 Line 24 will arise to be a [fo]wler's tr[ap] for his people and ruin for
 all his neighbours. And
 Line 25 [...]will arise [to b]e the two instruments of violence. And
 they will rebuild
 Line 26 [this city and ere]ct for it a rampart and towers, to make it
 into a fortress of wickedness
 Line 27 [in the country and a great evil] in Israel, and a horror in
 Ephraim and Judah.
 Line 28 [... And they will com]mit a profanation in the land and a
 great blasphemy among the sons of
 Line 29 [Jacob. And they will shed blo]od like water upon the ram-
 parts of the daughter of Zion and in the precincts of
 Line 30 [large blank space] {in} Jerusalem ¹⁷

16 J. M. Allegro, "158. Biblical Paraphrase: Genesis, Exodus," in *Qumran Cave 4.1 (4Q158–4Q186)* (ed. J. M. Allegro; DJD 5; Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1–6, pl.1 (see p.3); M. Segal, "Biblical Exegesis in 4Q158: Techniques and Genre," *Textus* 19 (1998): 45–62 (see 55–56); S. White Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52; M. Zahn, "Building Textual Bridges: Towards Understanding 4Q158: (*4QReworked Pentateuch A*)" in *The Mermaid and the Partridge* (eds. G. J. Brooke and J. Høgenhaven; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 13–32 (see 19–20); Zahn, *Rethinking Rewritten Scripture: Composition and Exegesis in the 4QReworked Pentateuch Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 29.

17 García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *DSSSE*, 356–357.

Indeed, some scholars have argued that the Joshua commentary is a coded anti-Maccabean polemic, specifically against the first Hasmonean ruler John Hyrancus (134–104 BCE), son of Simon Maccabee.¹⁸ John assumed the high priesthood in addition to being the secular political ruler. The Maccabees had taken over the role of high priest, although they were not of the family descended from Zadok, the priestly line. According to J. J. Collins, the scrolls contain content disapproving of “the combination of offices in a single person,” and the Joshua commentary in 4Q175, which very likely focuses on John Hyrancus, who rebuilt Jericho in the Second Temple period, reflects this position.¹⁹

In a different interpretation, García Martínez suggests that the Joshua section of 4Q175 is anti-messianic and antagonistic to the other messianic figures.²⁰ However, aside from the extract from Balaam’s fourth oracle—possibly describing an unnamed messiah or messiahs—the known biblical characters referenced (i.e., Moses, Levi [in Deut 33], and Joshua) are arguably not messianic in the sense of bringing about an apocalyptic war. The commentary on the star oracle of Balaam appears to center on an apocalyptic war between two opposing forces. In the context of the present volume, it is noteworthy that the iconography of the star as a celestial symbol is not given prominence.

The textual history of this manuscript is highly complex. The entire passage, 4Q175 lines 21a–30, is a near-replication of the fragmentary remains of 4Q379 (4Q*Apocryphon of Joshua*^b)²¹ fragment 22, col. ii, lines 7–15.²² The identical commentary on Josh 6:26 in 4Q*Apocryphon of Joshua*^b contains more scribal errors than the version in 4Q175. 4Q*Testimonia* only uses the excerpt from

18 J. J. Collins, “The Nature of Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context* (ed. T. H. Lim; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 199–217 (at 210), following H. Eshel, “The *historical background* of the Peshar: Interpreting Joshua’s curse on the builder of Jericho,” *Revue de Qumran* 15 no. 3 (1992): 409–20.

19 Collins, “Nature of Messianism,” 210; H. Eshel, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 68 n. 15.

20 F. García Martínez, “Two Messianic Figures in the Qumran Texts,” in *Current Research and Technological Developments in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (eds. D. W. Parry and S. D. Ricks; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 14–40 (at 31–32).

21 For the critical edition, see C. A. Newsom, “379. 4Q*Apocryphon of Joshua*^b in *Qumran Cave 4:17, Parabiblical Texts, Part 3* (eds. G. Brooke et al.; DJD 22; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 263–88, pls. 21–25.

22 The first verse of the commentary in 4Q175 lines 23b–24 differs slightly from 4Q379, frag 22, col. ii, line 9b–10: “And [now cursed be the man of Belial who rises to b]e a fowler’s trap for his people and ruin for all his neighbour[s].” García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *DSSSE*, 750–751.

Num 24:15a–17 without Num 24:18–19b. It is a moot point whether the scribe could presume that the absent text that was part of the biblical citation could also be commented upon within the interpretation of Josh 6:26. Interestingly, these missing lines do appear in the 1Q33 War Scroll (also known as 1QM), col. ix, lines 5–8, as part of Balaam's 'star oracle', but not in the same sequence or textual context as the Masoretic Text (see the section below on 1QM).

The main variant in the Balaam extract in 4Q175 as compared to the Masoretic Text is the grammatical tense of the verb in Num 24:17d, written above the line directly over its noun, "scepter" (שֵׁבֶט) at line 12: the scepter "has arisen" (וַיִּקְוֶה), with a medial instead of a final *mem*, and a *vav* consecutive form in the present perfect replaces the future tense "shall rise" in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT). This change makes it possible that the scribe was inferring that the purported messianic figure was already known rather than expected in the future. Since the age of 4Q*Testimonia* is the mid-first century BCE, the original author of this text may be referring to a leading figure in a Jewish sectarian environment. If so, these ideas may have had an indirect impact on the formative stages of the Christian movement or movements.

García Martínez suggests that the supralinear position of the verb may represent "the thinking of the copyist" (possibly meaning that the word is positioned in a visually symbolic place);²³ yet there are also other interlinear words and letters written directly above their place in the text. Each case would need to be considered separately. James VanderKam advocates the expectation of three messianic figures—a prophet, a secular messiah, and a priestly messiah—arguing that the first three extracts deal with the same figures as those indicated in the sectarian manuscript, 1QS (*Rule of the Community*), col. ix, line 11, which was written by the same scribe.²⁴

23 F. García Martínez, "Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Prestige*, 76. Brooke notes that the *vav* consecutive is "neither persistent nor consistent" at Qumran, in "E *Pluribus Unum*," 113–114 and bibliography in n. 24.

24 J. C. VanderKam, "Messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Community of the Renewed Covenant: The Notre Dame Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (eds. E. Ulrich and J. VanderKam; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 226. (Citation in DSSSE 92–93 "until the prophet come, and the messiahs of Aaron and Israel"); G. G. Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet: Positive eschatological protagonists of the Qumran library* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 57–58. Xeravits argues that a single messiah of the "star and sceptre" is referred to; see 160, 170, 208.

*Num 24:17 in the Damascus Document Texts: CD:7 and the Dead Sea
Scrolls: 4Q266 (4QD^a)²⁵ and 4Q269*

Interestingly, star imagery is very much to the fore in a passage known to scholars as the ‘Amos-Numbers Midrash’ (*midrash* means biblical exegesis) in the sectarian text, the *Damascus Document*^a (CD-A) col. vii, 14b–21a. The Damascus Document comprises medieval copies of early Jewish sectarian material, found in Cairo Genizah in the late nineteenth century, some fragments of which were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls some 50 years later.²⁶ This well-known segment is also known by Qumran scholars as ‘CD 7’. The fact that this is regarded as an important (albeit highly intricate) work with interwoven and rearranged biblical verses will be reflected in our examination of the implications of Balaam’s ‘star oracle’ in this passage.

One reason the text is of scholarly interest is the question of whether two messiahs are meant by the separate interpretations of “star” and the “scepter” in the Numbers component (CD 7:18–21) of this highly complex commentary. The first Amos excerpts reference obscure idolatrous practices;²⁷ they may also refer to the vestiges of the worship of the planet Saturn in ancient Israel with the use of the terms “Sikkut” and “Kiyyun” (Amos 5:26).²⁸ The former term is

25 Fragment 3, column iii, lines 20–21, preserved in CD 7:19–20.

26 For a summary and further reading of this history, see C. Hempel, *The Damascus Texts* (Companion to the Qumran Scrolls; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 15–18.

27 “The picture is probably of carrying statues in a procession.” See J. Dines, “Amos,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 586.

28 Some scholars regard the terms as Hebraized nomenclatures for the planet Saturn. See Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentary, 533–534; Akk. *kajamānu*, (fem. *kajamāntu*) CAD K: 36; ‘Saturn’, Clines, DCH, 4.391 s.v. שַׁבָּת; probably ‘Saturn’, Assyrian *kaivānu*, BDB, 475–476; “Akkadian name of Saturn,” HALOT, 2.472. The Septuagint reads, *Raiphān* (preceded by “the tent of Moloch”) an Egyptian name for Saturn; see F. W. Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 395, available online at: <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/Gesenius/>. For other theories, see the online article by G. J. Steyn, “Trajectories of scripture transmission: The case of Amos 5:25–27 in Acts 7:42–43,” *HTS Theologisches Studien/Theological Studies* 69 no. 1 (2013): Art. #2006, 9 pages, available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2006>; Gevirtz rejects the arguments that *Sakkūt* and *Kaywān* are names for the planet Saturn and proposes that they are terms for idolatry; S. Gevirtz, “A New Look at an Old Crux,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 267, bibliography n.1. R. E. Clements argues that “your star-god” should be considered a gloss by a redactor opposing the astral religion of the mixed population of the northern kingdom after 722 BCE, in TDOT 7.84. As the nouns are unique in the Bible and their meanings uncertain, they are not translated in the standard translations.

juxtaposed with a similar Hebrew word, meaning “booth,” (Amos 9:11) which is linguistically paired with King David, *sukkat-David*.²⁹ It apparently draws attention to a biblical pun on “booth” by implying a possible opposite meaning to “Saturn.” Although the arguable nomenclatures for the planet Saturn in Amos 5:26–27 are unclear, these obscure nouns are underscored in the rules of poetic parallelism in biblical Hebrew poetry by the qualifying phrase: “your star-god.” (see below; Amos 5:26c elucidates 5:26a and 5:26b). The biblical passages in the Masoretic Text of Amos 5:26–27 are as follows:

MT Amos 5:26abc reads:

- 5:26a. You shall lift up the סכּוּת *Sikkut* [meaning uncertain] of your king,
 5:26b. and the כּיּוּן *Kiyyun* [meaning uncertain] of your images,
 5:26c. Your star-god which you made for yourselves.³⁰

MT Amos 5:27ab reads:

- 5:27a. And I will send you into exile
 5:27b beyond Damascus.³¹

MT Amos 9:11 reads:

In that day
 I will set up the fallen booth *Sukkat* סכּוּת of David.³²

The sectarian interpretative commentaries of the biblical verses precede the biblical extracts (rather than following immediately afterwards, as with *4QTestimonia* and *1QWar Scroll*, as we shall see) and connect the biblical text with the linking phrase, “As it is said” (כּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר). In this way, the interpretation of Amos 5:26–27 (see below; CD 7:11–14a) concludes with: “the land of the north,” followed by *vacat* (“As it is said, . . .”), and then the rearranged parts of the biblical verses Amos 5:26–27 commence. These are then linked to an interpretation that involves parts of Amos 9:11 (see below; CD 7:16), and that verse section, in turn,

29 In the construct form, Am 9:11b “booth of David” is *Sukkat-David*, (from the unpaired noun, *Sukkah*, booth. BDB defines this as a structure of “interwoven boughs” and that in this verse it is a poetic metaphor for the fallen house (dynasty) of David, BDB, 697. E. Cook translates the noun as ‘tent’ in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (eds. M. Wise, M. Abegg Jr, and E. Cook; New York: HarperCollins), 58.

30 Possible references to Saturn, see n. 27. My translation and textual arrangement.

31 Translation modified from the ESV and JPS.

32 My translation.

is followed by an extensive sectarian interpretation, which is subsequently followed by Num 24:17, its constituent parts arranged as in the MT, with messianic interpretations appended. The literary structure is rather like beads being strung together, each drop linked to the next.

The biblical juxtaposition within the Amos-Numbers Midrash in CD 7:14b–15 and CD 7:15b–18a³³ (see below) does not include the colon from the MT: “Your star-god that you made for yourselves” (Amos 5:26c). This may imply that the astral connotations have been removed in this section; however, in the final unit of CD:7, CD 7:18b–21 (see below), the “star” is apparently brought back in the text (CD 7:18b–20a), although a star had not been mentioned before. García Martínez suggests that it is the absence of Amos 5:26c was probably an accidental omission by the medieval copyist of the Damascus Document, because the linking theme of “star” would be a reason for it to have been present in the text prior to CD 7:18b.³⁴

CD 7: lines 14–21a

- Line 14 escaped to the land of the north. *Vacat*. As it is said: “I will exile [Amos 5:27a is substituted for Amos 5.26a] the ‘*Sikkut*’ [plural] of your king
- Line 15 and the ‘*Kiyyun*’ [meaning uncertain] of your images [Amos 5:26bc worded as in the MT] beyond Damascus” [Amos 5:27b {variant}] *vacat*.

There then follows an exegetical passage in which Amos 9:11 is employed to interpret the reorganized Amos 5:26–27 biblical excerpt:

- Line 15b The Books of the Law are the booth (‘*Sukkat*’)
- Line 16 of the King, as it said: ‘I will raise the fallen booth (‘*Sukkat*’) of David’ [MT Amos 9:11] *Vacat*. The King
- Line 17 is the assembly (‘*Kohel*’) (4Q266: variant: ‘the images’); and the ‘*Kiynaii*’ [meaning uncertain כִּינַיִי] of the images’ (changed from ‘your images’) and the ‘*Kiyyun*’ of the images they are the Books of the Prophets
- Line 18a whose words Israel despised. *Vacat*

33 F. García Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar, DSSSE, 560–561.

34 F. García Martínez, “Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 80.

Next, the text moves on to Num 24:17 via an apparent connection with star imagery from the preceding text.

- Line 18b And the star is the Interpreter of the Law
 Line 19 who will come to Damascus, as it is written: "A star marches forth from Jacob and a scepter shall rise³⁵
 Line 20 from Israel." [Num 24:17cd] The scepter is the prince of the whole congregation and in his rising he will destroy [Num 24:17e]
 Line 21a all the children of Shet [Num 24:17f]. *Vacat*

The prophecy in Num 24:17cdef is clearly cited in CD 7:19–21a, following the two extracts from the book of Amos. The 'star' iconography of Num 24:17c is dependent on the interpretation of the Amos material (CD 7:18b). The biblical excerpts with interpretations quoted in CD 7 are (in order): Amos 5:26–27 (reorganized), Amos 9:11, and Num 24:17. The passage is partially extant in 4Q266 and 4Q269 scrolls with some variants. The fact that it was copied and possibly developed indicates the importance of this text in early Judaism.³⁶

Our approach to the question of messianism in this manuscript will take the form of analyzing its contents from the standpoint of its poetry. The order of MT Amos 5:26 and 5:27 has been rearranged in CD 7 so that Amos 5:27ab has been divided and placed as the first and last units of verse of the CD 7 excerpt: "I will send into exile" replacing "You shall lift up" in the MT. The literary rearrangement of the Masoretic Text in CD 7 is presented in Table 17.1:

35 This is the only textual witness to this verse that has the same construction, the *vav*-consecutive creating the imperfect tense, as the version in the Masoretic Text. The meaning is "shall arise" rather than "has arisen" as in 4Q175 and 1QM. Brooke notes that such a construction is unusual at Qumran; see Brooke, "E Pluribus Unum," 113. This could suggest that this medieval version of the Damascus Document has been edited at a later stage.

36 These are: 4Q266 frag. 3, col. iii, lines 17–25 and 4Q269 frag. 5. The critical editions of the Damascus Document are in J. M. Baumgarten, ed., *Qumran Cave 4:13: The Damascus Document (4Q266–273)*, (DJD 18; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 4Q266: 23–93, 4Q269: 123–136.

TABLE 17.1 *MT AND CD 7 rearranged biblical text. Intersections with Amos 5:26–27 are underlined, and overlaps with Amos 9:11 are in bold*

MT verse numbers	Masoretic Text	CD 7 line nos.	CD 7
Amos 5:26a	You shall lift up <u>the Sakkuth of your king.</u>	CD 7:14 Amos 5:27a (A)	... <i>Vacat</i> . As it is said: 'I will exile
Amos 5:26b	<u>and the Kaiwan of your images.</u>	CD 7:14 Amos 5:26a (B)	<u>the booth ('Sikkut') of your king.</u>
Amos 5:26c	Your star-god which you made for yourselves. ³⁸	[missing]	[missing]
Amos 5:27a	And I will send you into exile	CD:7 line 15 Amos 5:26b (B)	<u>and the 'Kiyyun' of your images.</u>
Amos 5:27b	beyond Damascus. ⁽³⁹⁾	CD:7 line 15 Amos 5:27b (A)	beyond Damascus'
		CD:7 line 16	The Books of the Law are the booth of the King, as it said:
Amos 9:11	In that day I will raise the fallen booth of David	CD:7 line 16 Amos 9:11	'I will raise the fallen booth of David'

37 My translation and textual arrangement.

38 Translation modified from the ESV and JPS.

The middle units of CD 7 lines 14–15, corresponding to Amos 5:26ab–5:27ab, are framed by the reorganization of Amos 5:27ab, concluding with Amos 9:11. Thus, CD 7:14–15 forms an ABBA chiastic structure (indicated in the middle column of Table 17:1), with the reference to Amos 9:11 as a separate, foundational statement.

The 'star' phrase ("the star of your god that you made to yourselves," MT Amos 5:26c) is missing from both the extract and the interpretation. Furthermore, the phrase, "the *Kiyyun* of the images," (CD 7:17, see Table 17.2) is duplicated with an orthographic variant (not shown in Table 17.2). However, "the *Kiyyun* of the images" is given a positive interpretation, in contrast to the pejorative tone in the Masoretic Text. The Amos-Numbers Midrash (CD 7:14b–21a) itself consists of:

- a. "As it is written:" a re-ordered, abbreviated extract of Amos 5:26–27 in a reverse concentric arrangement;
- b. wordplay interpretation between Amos 5:27 and Amos 9:11;
- c. "As it is written:" a citation of Amos 9:11 with a variant;
- d. an interpretation of both Amos extracts;
- e. an interpretation of Num 24:17; and
- f. "As it is written:" a citation of Num 24:17.

There is an overlap between this text and 4QD^a (4Q266, frag 3, col iii, lines 18–22a).³⁹ The exegetical interpretation in CD 7:17 replaces the second-person plural in the "*kiyyun* of your images" in the biblical text (Amos 5:26c cited in CD 7:15) with "the images." It may be suggested that the sectarian composer is making it clear that the new community of the 'Damascus Document' is different from the old Israel, the people "who despised the words of the books of the Prophets" (CD 7: 17–18). There is a general scholarly agreement that in CD 7 two messiahs, referred to as the "Interpreter of the Law" and the "Prince of the whole congregation," are intended.⁴⁰

39 ([The King is the as]sembly; . . . all the sons of Seth," translation, García Martínez and Tigchelaar, DSSSE, 587.) It is a fragmentary text that possibly comprises the vestiges of the interpretation of the Amos extracts and the interpretation of Num 24:17, together with the biblical extract of Num 24:17. J. C. VanderKam, "Messianism in the Scrolls," 218–219, 229; García Martínez, "Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 77. The utterance, "the star is the interpreter of the Law/Torah" (CD-A col. vii, line 18) is attested in 4QD^a (4Q266) frag 3, col. iv, line 7, partly in fragmentary copies 4QD^b (4Q267) frag 2, line 15, and in 4QD^d (4Q269) frag 5, line 2.

40 García Martínez ("Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 80–81) argues that two figures are meant, whereas in the other references in the Dead Sea Scrolls, one messianic figure is

A fresh discussion of the question of whether two messiahs are referenced in this text may be offered by examining a form of Hebrew poetry that I wish to call ‘complementary parallelism’, that is, parallelism in which the nouns or verbs in the connected verses are not synonymous but contrasting, yet in the same category. The striking elements of complementary parallelism in this passage are: the “assembly” and the “whole congregation;” the “books of the Law” and the “books of the Prophets;” the “Interpreter of the Law” and the “Prince of the whole congregation;” and there is also a linguistic parallel in the similarity of *Sikkut/Sukkat*.

In the interpretation, “booth of the King” signifies the “books of the Law/Torah;” the “king” symbolizes the “assembly;” the “*kīyyun* of the images” represent the “books of the prophets;” the “star” means the “Interpreter of the Law;” and the “scepter” is a cognate of the “Prince of the whole congregation.”

With the exception of “scepter” (שבט *shevet*), it is possible that the interpretation could be related to the alliterative vocabulary, so that the coded meaning of the prooftexts containing the consonants *kaf* and *Qof* have a poetic resonance with the substituted words: *Sikkut/Sukkat* represents the “books of the law;” the assembly (*kohel* קהל in CD 7:17) represents the “king” (*melekh* מלך); the *kīyyun* of the images represent “books of the prophets;” the “star” (*kokhav* כוכב) from Num 24:17 is exegeted as “the star is the interpreter of the Law who will come to Damascus” (CD 7:18–19);⁴¹ the “scepter” is the Prince of the “whole congregation” (*kol ha-edah* כל העדה in CD 7:20).

With this method, the sectarian interpreter may be using aural wordplay to pick out the words to be replaced. If one rewrites the stanza according to the sectarian interpretations without the biblical passages, the text reads as follows, with the ‘star’ oracle encoded in the third exegetical unit (the biblical words that are interpreted are in parentheses):

the single subject. John J. Collins argues that the ‘Amos-Numbers Midrash’ “reinforces” the possible dualistic figure or figures of the “messiah” or “messiahs of Aaron and Israel” used in elsewhere in the Damascus Document and 1QS (Community Rule); see *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 78–80; see also VanderKam, “Messianism in the Scrolls,” 228–230; Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 161, 170, 208.

41 The participle הִבָּא, in expressing continuous action, has an ambiguous meaning in this context. It can be understood as “has come” or “will come;” Garcia Martinez, “Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 80–81; Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran*, 200.

Rewritten passage CD 7:15–21a according to its sectarian interpretation

- 1) The Books of the Law/Torah (= fallen *Sikkut/Sukkat*) of the Assembly *kohel* (= *melekh* “king”) (CD 7:15b)
- 2) The Books of the Prophets whose words Israel despised (= *kiyyun of the images*) (CD 7:17)
- 3) The Interpreter of the Law/Torah who will come/ has come to Damascus (= *kochav* “star” *marches out*) (CD 7:18–19)
- 4) The Prince of the Whole Congregation *kol ha-'dah* and in his rising (= *shevet* “scepter” *rises*) (CD 7:20–21)

This section may also be presented in a tabular form for clarity. See Table 17.2:

TABLE 17.2 CD 7:16–21a illustrating the sectarian interpretations of apparent biblical symbolism

MT verse numbers	Biblical symbol	CD 7 line numbers	Interpretation
Amos 9:11 (CD 7:16)	<i>Fallen booth of David</i> <i>The King</i> (synonym for David)	CD 7:15 CD 7:16–17 (A)	The books of the Law The assembly <i>kohel</i>
Amos 5:26 (CD 7:17)	<i>Kiyyun of the images</i>	CD 7:17–18 (A)	The books of Prophets whose words Israel despised
Num 24:17c (CD 7:19)	<i>A star marches out</i>	CD 7:18–19 (B)	The Interpreter of the Law who will come to Damascus
Num 24: 17d (CD 7:19–21a)	<i>A scepter shall rise</i>	CD 7:20 (B)	The Prince of the Whole Congregation and in his rising

In this way, the sectarian interpretation may be read as a multi-layered strophe consisting of several poetic parallel structures, or A and B arrangements

(indicated in the middle column of Table 17.2), composed of complementary and opposing meanings: 1) The “Books of the Law of the Assembly” (A) complements 2) the “Books of the Prophets whose words Israel despised;” 3) The “Interpreter of the Law who will come [or has come] to Damascus” complements 4) the “Prince of the whole congregation and in his rising,” who may represent the new spiritual leader (B). Hence, in this arrangement there is an AABB structure corresponding to verse interpretations 1–4. The passage may be understood in antiquity as prophesying a future religious teacher (indicated by 3), Num 24:17c [the ‘star’]], and a religious leader (indicated by 4), Num 24:17d [the ‘scepter’]], who will restore the reading or the true meaning of the books of the Law and the Prophets to the entire community.

The question of whether two people or two messiahs, or one teacher and one messiah, are being referred to is open to discussion. However, arguing from the form of Hebrew poetry used, since the text makes a distinction between the books of the Prophets and the books of the Law, it would seem that two people could be indicated.

What may be less ambiguous is the notion that the ‘Damascus’ group disparages a former Israel and that there is a prediction that the ‘Damascus’ group has produced, or will produce, someone who can interpret the Law, possibly within a congregational setting (the “assembly”). “Damascus” is referenced twice, first in the reversal of the biblical text of Amos 5:26–27, and second in the interpretation of Num 24:17c, which precedes the biblical citation (CD 7: 18b–20). In this way, “Damascus” seems to be linked with the “land of the North” as a place of exile for an old Israel beyond “Damascus.” Furthermore, “Damascus,” in turn, is apparently taken from the interpretation of Num 24:17a, which predicts that “the Interpreter of the Law (*Torah*)” who is represented by the “star” will come to “Damascus.”

Essentially, the focal point of CD 7 is Balaam’s prophecy of the “star” and the “scepter,” and the material from Amos is used to contemporize the oracle. The Amos verses are taken out of context. The allusion to star worship in the Amos text has been turned around by the sectarian author to specifically highlight the symbolism of the “star” in Num 24:17c. By analyzing the prose as a poetic literary construct, further light may be cast on the perceptions the ‘star of Balaam’ oracle in Second Temple Judaism.

Numbers 24:17–19 in the Dead Sea Scrolls: War Scroll (1Q33 or 1QM)

The detailed reorganization of the Amos extracts in ‘Amos-Numbers Midrash’ (CD 7, col. lines 14–21a) may be compared to the even more complicated reordering of units of verse with some omissions in the sectarian *War Scroll* (1Q33) (1QM), col. xi, lines 6b–7d of Num 24:17–19.

This text comprises a longer passage than that in CD 7.⁴² The context of the *War Scroll* concerns the final days of an apocalypse;⁴³ however, the use of Num 24:17 focuses on the eschatological significance of a single messiah. The issue here is whether the messiah in this sectarian text refers to a military commander.⁴⁴

In this excerpt, the verses in Num 24:17c–f (line 6) are in the same order as in the MT; however, in line 7 Num 24:18–19 has been rearranged: there are deliberate changes and omissions. The whole extract is preceded by the following introduction from the latter part of 1QM, col xi, lines 5–6a: “Thus, you told us from that time, saying. . .” (בְּאִשֶּׁר הִגַּדְתָּה לָנוּ מֵאִזְ לְאִמּוֹר). The excerpt appears in the form: Num: 24:17cdef, 19a, 19b, 18a, 18c, with a possible messianic addition to Num 24:18c from line 6b to the end of line 7. The extract, with the parts of the verses from Num 24:17, 18, and 19, is set out for ease of reading as follows:⁴⁵

1QM column xi:

Line 6b to the end of the line (not rearranged):

- (Num 24:17c) ‘A star has marched forth from Jacob.
 (Num 24:17d) A scepter shall rise from Israel.
 (Num 24:17e) It shatters the (forehead-)temples of Moab.
 (Num 24:17f) And destroys all the children of Shet.

Line 7 the entire line (rearranged):

- (Num 24:19a) One from Jacob shall have dominion.
 (Num 24:19b) He will destroy the remnant from a city.

42 E. L. Sukenik (posthumously edited by N. Avigad and Y. Yadin), *The Dead Sea Scrolls of the Hebrew University* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University and Magnes Press, 1955), pls. 16–34; see García Martínez, “Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 76–77, n.9 for a bibliography of messianism and the use of Num 24:17 in this text.

43 M. Abegg, “11. The War Scroll (1QM, 4Q491–496),” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (eds. M. Wise, M. Abegg Jr., and E. Cook; New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 146–47.

44 C. Evans, “Qumran’s Messiah: How Important Is He?” in *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (eds. J. J. Collins and R. A. Kugler; Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 136, 140; Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 64; M. Knibb, “Eschatology and Messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment* (eds. P. W. Flint and J. C. VanderKam; Leiden, Brill, 1999), 2:292–293.

45 The scroll is clearly digitized on the Israel Museum (Jerusalem) website, and the extended word spaces in line 7 can be seen. Available online at: <http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/war>.

- (Num 24:18a) The enemy [*change from 'Edom'*] will become a possession [Num 24:18b omitted].
- (Num 24:18c) And Israel [*extended word space*] performs valiantly' and in the hand of your anointed ones/messiahs

The reordering of Num 24:18–19 may be for the purpose of connecting a messianic reference at the end of line 7, “and in the hand of your anointed ones/messiahs” (וביִד מְשִׁיחֵיכֶּה) with Num 24:18c. The phrase comes immediately after the end of the citation of Balaam’s prophecy (the Hebrew word for ‘anointed ones’ and ‘messiahs’ is the same).

There is a clear extended word-space in the manuscript after “Israel” in the citation of Num 24:18c (line 7). This may signify a pause; if so, that would support the argument that the “messiahs” phrase is linked to the biblical citation. If “and in the hand of your messiahs” is intended to be attached to Num 24:18–19 in line 7, the final verses (“The enemy . . . your messiahs”) could be understood as both the enemy and Israel becoming a possession. This would echo the disparagement by the sectarian writers of an earlier Israel in the ‘Amos-Numbers Midrash’ of CD 7, in which Amos 5:26–27 was also deliberately reorganized and reversed, as discussed above. The pluralization may be consistent with the scholarly interpretation of CD: 7 in this chapter that two messiahs, of the “star” and “scepter” respectively, are envisaged.⁴⁶ Although the extended word space after “Israel” can have other interpretations, it is valid to argue that “and in the hand of your messiahs” frames the text. Knibb points out that Steudel had emphasized that Num 24:17–19 was not used in a messianic sense in 1QM col. xi, lines 6–7, but that it focuses on Israel performing valiantly in the final biblical reference. He concludes: “Thus messianic ideas cannot be said to be totally absent from the War Rule, but they are presented in a muted form.”⁴⁷

In summary, the recurrence and intricacy with which Num 24:15–19 is treated in the Dead Sea Scrolls tells us that it must have been regarded as a deeply important text, possibly associated with messianic prophecy and combined with the belief in a final war. There are also political and religious indications that the group was imminently expecting that a teacher and/or leader would arrive and restore Israel, the Jewish community, to its pure form. According to many historical hypotheses, the spiritual health of the community had been

46 Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet: Positive*, 46, 78, 160–61, 208–09.

47 M. Knibb, “Eschatology and Messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 2:379–402 (at 393), citing A. Steudel, “The Eternal Reign of the People of God—Collective Expectations in Qumran Texts (4Q246 and 1QM),” *RevQ* 17 (1996): 507–25 (at 523), and H. Stegemann, “Some Remarks to 1QS^a, to 1QS^b, and to Qumran Messianism,” *RevQ* 17 (1996): 479–505 (at 502).

compromised by the Hasmonean rulers combining the office of head-of-state with the high priesthood, a role that previously belonged to the Zadokite line. The anti-Hasmonean polemic contains a message of eschatological hope, at times using word-substitution and other kinds of wordplays. The 'star' oracle appears to be a central running motif in all of these highly complex passages.

There are multiple, interconnected, coded references between the scrolls, which, one assumes, were understood by the sectarian group that wrote these texts. Furthermore, the specific meanings could have changed over time. It is plausible that the excerpted textually linked Dead Sea Scrolls could be an interactive collection of manuscripts. If so, the evolving sectarian concepts of messianism were subsequently transmitted, influenced, and interpreted by specific Jewish groups or leaders.

The Use of Balaam's 'Star Oracle' (Num 24:17) in the Bar Kokhba Material

The imagery and royalistic symbolism in Num 24:17 may have played a part in the identification of Bar Kokhba as a false messiah. Scholarly discussions about the possible messianic interpretation of the prophecy of Balaam's 'star oracle' with respect to the best-known Jewish military leader of the second Jewish revolt (ca. 132–135 CE), Simeon Bar Kosiba, are extensive.⁴⁸ Without discussing what has already been exhaustively explored elsewhere, this section will consider some lesser-known areas of the messianic pool of references to Bar Kokhba (as he is referred to in early Christian sources).

The 'Bar Kokhba' ("son of the star" in Aramaic) appellation exists only in the ecclesiastical literary witnesses, without reference to Num 24:17; but the association with the biblical verse and the 'star' without the explicit designation exists in Jewish sources (see below). Due to the fact that there are corroborative accounts pertaining to Bar Kokhba yet to be explored, it may be proposed that if the Bar Kokhba movement knew of a messianic tradition associated with the 'star of Balaam' oracle, then it is possible that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew did as well. In any event, the amount of secondary source material from late antiquity about Bar Kokhba in Christian as well as Jewish sources

48 Num 24:17 is not the only scriptural source that could have inspired or been used to justify the second Jewish revolt; see also R. Deines, "How Long? God's Revealed Schedule for Salvation and the Outbreak of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," in *Judaism and Crisis: Crisis as a Catalyst in Jewish Cultural History* (eds. A. Lange et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011) 201–34 (esp. 212).

is impressive, particularly in the light of archaeological primary sources that began emerging in the middle of the last century, both in terms of the excavated letters and documents from the Second Revolt and the Dead Sea Scrolls. All of these data have resulted in a serious re-evaluation of the ancient secondary witnesses—that is, the early Jewish and Christian texts that discuss the way he behaved and was perceived.

As we have seen, the interpretive poetry from Qumran pertaining to Num 24:17 was extremely carefully written and arranged in several scrolls. As argued with reference to the instruction forbidding the rescue of a stricken animal on the Sabbath in the Damascus Document, which is arguably revised in Matt 12:11–12, there is no reason to rule out the idea that the author of the Gospel of Matthew was aware of the importance of Num 24:17 among sectarians in Second Temple Judaism. According to Peter Schäfer, although there was no direct link between Bar Kokhba and Qumran, he “shared with his predecessors an ideology that was not invented at Qumran but goes back to the Hebrew Bible.”⁴⁹ The proclamation that Bar Kosiba was the Messiah was evoked through association with Num 24:17 by his contemporary, Rabbi Akiva, in the Jerusalem Talmud. Although there are different versions, clear evidence of editing, and the attributions of the speakers are doubtful, the textual witnesses exist:

R. Shimon b. Yohai taught: “My teacher Aqiva [Heb.] used to expound: ‘A star shall step forth from Jacob’ (Num 24:17) [in this way:] Kozeba/Kozba כּוּזְבָא steps forth from Jacob.”⁵⁰

When R. Aqiva beheld Kozeba/Kozba, he exclaimed: “This one is the King Messiah.” [Aramaic]

R. Yohanan b. Torta said to him: “Aqiva, grass will grow between your jaws and still the son of David will not have come!”⁵¹

49 P. Schäfer, “Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis,” in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (ed. P. Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 19–20, see also p. 15.

50 Jacob Neusner translates Kozeba/Kozba as “a disappointment” in the first line and states that it is contrary to the next statement; in J. Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 94–95.

51 Jerusalem Talmud: *y Ta'anit* 4:8/27, in *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi*, vol.2 (eds. P. Schäfer and H.-J. Becker; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 5–12; see Schäfer, “Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis,” 2. The summary and discussion of the different versions, a text-critical analysis, and the extended rabbinical discourse are on pages 2–7. Maimonides refers to Bar Kokhba being hailed as the Messiah by Akiva and by contemporaneous rabbis in the section of his treatise, *Hilchoth Melachim*, *Laws Concerning Kings and their Wars*, 1X:11,

In another variant, a similar yet anti-Bar Kokhba sentence, punning on his name, precedes these lines, and the name of Rabbi Akiva is not mentioned:

R. Yohanan said: "Rabbi/ my teacher used to expound: 'A star shall step forth from Jacob' (Num 24:17) [in this way:] don't read 'star' (כוכב) but 'liar' (כוזב)."⁵²

Although the authenticity of Akiva as a genuine source has been challenged by Peter Schäfer, there are similar claims of messianism apparently originating from the Bar Kokhba movement in contemporaneous documents, as we will discuss below.

There is also a unanimous rejection of Bar Kokhba's messianic claims in many ancient Jewish and Christian texts alike. For example, Eusebius clarifies the meaning of Bar Kokhba's name (not found in ancient Jewish sources) through the use of irony, declaring that the man was the opposite of an enlightened savior, the 'star': "The Jews were at that time led by certain Bar Cochebas—which means 'star'—a man who was murderous and a bandit, but who relied on his name, as if dealing with slaves, and claimed to be a luminary who had come down to them from heaven and was magically enlightening those who were in misery."⁵³ This text is particularly significant in making an explicit and exegetical 'star' reference. It also supports the 'Akiva' rabbinical texts. Furthermore, it can be seen from Christian sources that there was a view that Bar Kosiba regarded the Jesus movement as a rival to his own: "[Justin] mentions the war of that time against the Jews and makes this observation. "For in the present Jewish war it was only Christians whom Bar Chocheba, the leader of the rebellion of the Jews, commanded to be punished severely if they did not deny Jesus as the Messiah and blaspheme him."⁵⁴ Thus, Bar Kokhba

immediately following his discussion of the two messiahs of Num 24:17 (1X:1), in Moses Maimonides, *Mishne Torah* (ed. E. Soloweyczik; London: William Nicholson, 1863), 41.

52 Midrash Lamentations 2:4, in *Midrash Rabbah* (ed. S. Buber; Vilna, 1898, reprint, Hildesheim 1970), 101; in Schäfer, "Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis," 3. In a later rabbinic tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 93b Bar Koziba announces to the rabbis that he is the Messiah without any reference to Num 24:17; they reject his claim by reinterpreting Isa 11:3–4 and kill him; see Schäfer, "Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis," 5.

53 Eusebius (ca. 260–ca. 339) *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 6, Loeb Classical Library (trans. K. Lake), vol. 1, cited in H. Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 55. See also, Y. Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt Against Imperial Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 258.

54 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 8, op. cit.

was regarded historically in later antiquity as a false messiah both by Jewish and Christian authorities; moreover, he was associated with messianic star symbolism and regarded as anti-Christian. Ecclesiastical sources portray him as more of a thug than a warrior-messiah, and the Jewish and Talmudic sources pun his name with ridicule as “son of the liar” (possibly a reference to him as a false Jewish messiah).

The ancient accounts of his harsh nature and messianic claims are now supported by archaeological finds from the Judean desert caves where the rebels and their families hid during the revolt. Letters associated with him and his followers and legal documents with his name in the dating formula were unearthed in the 1950s in Wadi Murabba’at and in the Cave of Letters in Naḥal Ḥever in the 1960s and 1980s. The letters and legal documents in Hebrew and Aramaic, which the insurgents and refugees preserved very carefully in the caves’ cracks and crevices, show that Bar Kosiba had the title “Nasi (נָסִי) of Israel” appended to his name in the documents’ dating formulas, albeit not in every case and not spelled consistently.⁵⁵ The term *nasi* is found at Qumran, as discussed with reference to the Damascus Document and other texts,⁵⁶ and is translated as “prince” in the context of the “Prince of the Congregation.”

The letters reveal that a punitive and coercive system appeared to be in force under Bar Kokhba’s ‘rule’, corroborating the early Christian accounts of his behavior as bullying.⁵⁷ In rabbinic sources, he is apparently portrayed

55 Examples include Mur 24, a farming contract in Hebrew (c.133), in *Les grottes de Murabba’at* (eds. P. Benoit et al.; DJD 2, 1961), 122–134 (נָסִי), available online at: <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-276955>; this spelling also occurs in P. Yadin 54 (= 5/6 Ḥev 54), “An Aramaic letter from Shimon Son of Kosiba,” in *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean Aramaic Papyri* (eds. Yadin et al.; JDS 3; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2002), (311–305 (נָסִי), pl. 86; and in a “Hebrew Letter from Simon son of Kosba,” from an uncertain site, XḤev/Ṣe 30 in *Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek Documentary Texts from Naḥal Ḥever and Other Sites, With an Appendix Containing Alleged Qumran Texts (The Seiyâl Collection II)* (eds. A. Yardeni and H. Cotton; DJD 27; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 103–104, pl. 20. Legal documents from the Cave of Letters: see, P. Yadin 44 (= 5/6 Ḥev 44) “Three Legal Papyri P. Yadin, 44, 45, 46,” in *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 39–70 (נָסִי), available online at: <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-300483>; P. Yadin 42 (= 5/6 Ḥev 42): “A Lease Agreement in Aramaic,” *Documents*, 142–149 (pl.75) (נָסִי), available online at: <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-300526>.

56 In addition to *The Damascus Document* CD-A col vii, line 20, the term appears in *The Community Rule* 1QSb col. 5 line 20 and *4QSefer ha-Milḥamah* (4Q285) frag 4, line 2. See S. Beyerle, “A Star Shall Come out of Jacob,” 178.

57 Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs*, 56–57; see letters: P. Yadin 49 (= 5/6 Ḥev 49) “A Hebrew Letter from Shim’on, Son of Kosiba,” *Documents*, 279–286, pl. 83; P. Yadin 50 (= 5/6 Ḥev

as cruel⁵⁸ and as a killer, in contrast to being a righteous judge, because he kicked Rabbi Eleazar ha-Modai to death at Bethar.⁵⁹

The archaeological finds in the caves of refuge also support the writings of Jerome, in which he said that the insurgents hid in caves where they died. Jerome, in his commentary on a section of Isaiah chapter two, which describes men entering clefts in the rocks and crevices in the cliffs before the terror of the Lord as a punishment for soothsaying and idolatry, states that that the biblical text was prophetic. Jerome interpreted Isa 2:12–17, the humbling of the lofty, as predicting Jewish fighters and refugees with their families seeking shelter and hiding their valuable possessions deep within caves during both Jewish revolts:⁶⁰

And those who ascribe this [Isa 2:12–17] to the time of Vespasian [First Revolt] and Hadrian [Second Revolt] say that the writing here was completely fulfilled, for no high tower, no most fortified wall, no mightiest navy and not the most diligent commerce, could overcome the might of the Roman army. And the citizens of Judaea came to such distress that they, together with their wives, their children, their gold and their silver, in which they trusted, remained in underground tunnels and deepest caves.⁶¹

Similarly, the Roman statesman Dio Cassius (163–ca. 229 CE) gives an account of the decimation of Judea by the Roman army in the second Jewish revolt,

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- 50) "An Aramaic Letter from Shim'on, Son of Košibah," *Documents*, 287–92, pl. 83; P. Yadin 54 (= 5/6 Hēv 54), "An Aramaic Letter from Shim'on, Son of Kosibah," *Documents*, 305–11, pl. 86; P. Yadin 55 (=5/6 Hēv 55) "An Aramaic Letter from Shim'on, Son of Kosibah," *Documents*, 312–16, pl. 87; P. Yadin 56 (=5/6 Hēv 56) "An Aramaic Letter from Shim'on, Son of Kosibah," *Documents*, 317–21, pl. 88; P. Yadin 57 (=5/6 Hēv 57) "An Aramaic Letter from Shim'on," *Documents*, 322–28, pl. 89.
- 58 Schäfer, "Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis," 5; in the Jerusalem Talmud, he is portrayed as amputating his men's fingers to test their strength, and the rabbis persuaded him to test them by uprooting a Lebanese cedar while riding a horse instead; *y Ta'anit* 4:8/28, Midrash Lamentations, 2:4. See also, Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba*, 255.
- 59 Schäfer, "Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis," 6–7, in the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Lamentations; Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 57–59; Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba*, 255.
- 60 However, Isa 2:12–17 does not mention the caverns, rocks, caves, clefts, and crevices that are described elsewhere in Isaiah chapter two.
- 61 Jerome (fourth century) *Commentary on the Bible*, Isa 2:12–17.

confirming that rebels met “unobserved underground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light.”⁶²

After examining ancient Jewish sources, Stefan Beyerle concluded that there is insufficient evidence to draw an “unequivocal nexus between the so-called messianic interpretation of Num 24:17 and the revolts at Palestine under Bar Kokhba or in the diaspora.” Yet, he adds: “Nevertheless, it would be a misunderstanding to simply deny a religious, or sometimes ‘messianic’ milieu among the insurgents, as it would be wrong to exclude any political aspect from the allusions to the fourth Balaam oracle.”⁶³ We can apply the same reasoning to Matt 2:9: “When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.” Following our examination of Balaam’s ‘star oracle’ as it is used in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we may argue that the Star of Bethlehem narrative seems to be a reference to both the Davidic genealogy of Jesus, through the line of Jacob (Matt 1:1–2), and the messianic prophecy of Num 24:17c, in which a star heralds a king (Num 24:17d). Dale C. Allison notes that Justin Martyr refers to Matt 2:9 as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Num 24:17 (*Dial.* 106),⁶⁴ although Justin interpreted the gospel account literally rather than symbolically.

Its recurrent use in the Dead Sea Scrolls—in an intricate network of variants, cross-references, and traditions of interpretation—provides a historical context for Balaam’s ‘star oracle’ to be employed in the gospel narrative. By taking into account this complex inter-textual tradition and its coded re-use among sectarians in Second Temple Judaism, particularly for political and theological purposes, it can be proposed that Matthew walked in the footsteps of a Jewish exegetical literary method.

Though the comparative contexts are not identical, there is too much corroborating material from the ancient sources after Bar Kokhba’s lifetime to rule out the possibility that he was known as a false messiah. According to some early church sources discussed, he was regarded in some circles as setting himself up as a rival messiah to Jesus. Rabbinical texts indicate that Bar Kokhba had been proclaimed the messiah in connection with Num 24:17, but as a defeated, cruel, self-appointed “prince,” they emphatically repudiated any assertion that he was the “son of the star.”

62 Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LXIX, 12–14 (trans. E. Cary, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 8., cited in Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba*, 257; Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 53–54.

63 Beyerle, “A Star Shall Come Out of Jacob,” 188.

64 D. C. Allison, “Matthew,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 849.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, Num 24:17e–24:19b were included in exegetical, warrior-priest, messianic traditions. In Matthew, only Num 24:17a–24:17d appear to be referenced. The Star of Bethlehem verses indicate the rising of a king and a priest, not the leader of an eschatological army. In conclusion, one cannot dismiss the idea that the Star of Bethlehem has an implicit subtext as a messianic motif based on Num 24:17, and that this biblical verse was likely to have been known and reused by Matthew.

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PART 6

The Early Christian World



The Star of the Magi and the Prophecy of Balaam in Earliest Christianity, with Special Attention to the Lost *Books of Balaam*

Darrell D. Hannah

Numbers 24:17 and Matthew's Star in Second-Century Christianity

Numbers 24:15–24 records Balaam's fourth and final oracle concerning the people of Israel. This oracle proved to be the most significant in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity, because it included a prophecy that easily lent itself to the messianic expectations of the former and to the christological speculations of the latter:

- ¹⁷ I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not nigh:
a star shall come forth out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab,
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
¹⁸ Edom shall be dispossessed,
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed
while Israel does valiantly.
¹⁹ One out of Jacob shall rule,
and the survivors of cities be destroyed.¹

Already in the Judaism prior to the advent of Christianity, Balaam's star and scepter were understood either as a single messiah or two different messianic figures (CD 7.19 A; 1QSB 5.27; 4Q175; cf. Philo *Praem.* 95).² This messianic

¹ RSV (adapted) translation of the Hebrew MT.

² Cf. also 1QM 11.5–7 and the comments of J. J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 58–67. See also F. García Martínez, "Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (eds. G. H. van Kooten and J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten; TBN 11; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 71–82.

tendency continued into the rabbinic period, both in R. Akiva's identification of Bar Kokhba with the star and the King Messiah (jTa'anit 4.5 [68d]; *LamR* 11.2.4) and in the messianic interpretation given in the Targumim.

Early Christians, aided by the LXX's reading ἀνθρωπος ("a man") in place of the Masoretic Text's טבש ("sceptre"),³ very often exploited Balaam's oracle in various ways as a prophecy of Christ, without any reference to Matt 2:1–11. For example, Justin twice identifies the star with Christ himself and the rising of the former with the advent of the latter (*1Apol.* 32.12; *Dial.* 126.1). Origen once cites Num 24:17–19 as one of the messianic prophecies available to the Samaritans (*CommJo.* xiii.154–157) and once cites Num 24:17, 7–9 only to comment on the latter verses (*Comm.Cant.* ii.8). Cyprian (*Test.* ii.10) and Lactantius (*Div.Inst.* iv.13)—and perhaps Athanasius (*De Incar.* 33.4) as well—appeal to Num 24:17 as a proof-text for Christ's divine-human nature, with the star symbolizing the former and the LXX's ἀνθρωπος indicating the latter. Eusebius cites our oracle as a prophecy of Jesus' Jewish descent (*Eclogae Proph.* i.14), while Ambrose once alludes to it as a general prophecy of "the rising of Christ" (*De excessu Fratris* ii.43). However, more specifically, an identification of the star predicted by the pagan Balaam (Num 24:17) with the star which announced Christ's birth in Matthew's Gospel (2:2, 7–9) was made very early and continued to be a favorite exegetical move throughout the patristic period and into the Middle Ages.⁴

We find such an identification already made by three interpreters belonging to the second century: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and, perhaps, the anonymous author of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Probably writing in the second half of the decade of the 150s, Justin affirms:

Moses predicted that he (i.e., Christ) would arise like a star from the seed of Abraham when he said, 'A star shall rise out of Jacob and a leader from

3 Interestingly, the Syriac Peshitta reads "governor, leader" here, a reading which re-occurs in Justin and Irenaeus.

4 Indeed, many interpreters believe that Matthew consciously intended to recall the Balaam narrative. So, e.g., W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew* (3 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 1:230–31. So also R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 190–196, who believes Matthew combined two narratives to create the story of the magi: one, based on stories of Moses' birth, told of Herod's (and the chief priests') opposition to Jesus; the other, based on the Balaam narrative, recounted the coming of the magi. Others, however, question this linkage. So, e.g., U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary* (trans. W. C. Linss; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 131; cf. also T. Nicklas, "Balaam and the Star of the Magi," in *Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 233–246.

Israel' (Num. 24.17). And another passage reads, 'Behold, the Man; the Dawn is his name' (Zech. 6.12 LXX). Therefore when a star arose in the heavens at the time of his Nativity, as the *Memoirs* of his apostles attest, the magi from Arabia knew the fact from this sign, and came to worship him (*Dial.* 106.4).⁵

Justin is probably working from a *Testimonia*, i.e., a collection of Old Testament texts brought together with or without commentary, rather than a copy of Numbers LXX. Both the texts Justin cites and the variant reading, "a leader" (ἡγούμενος; cf. the Syriac and Gen 49:10 LXX), suggest this.⁶ It is not clear, however, whether this interpretation of the star of Num 24:17 as identical with that of Matt 2:1–11 was already found in a comment in Justin's *Testimonia*, was Justin's own deduction, or was already traditional when Justin wrote. It is interesting and perhaps significant that Justin attributes this prophecy not to Balaam, but to Moses (see below). The "Memoirs of the Apostles" is a favorite term of Justin's for the gospels (*1Apol.* 66.3; 67.3; *Dial.* 100.4; 101.3; 103.6, 8; 104.1; 105.1, 5; 106.1, 3–4; 107.1), so there is no doubt that Justin here refers to the gospels and hence to the Gospel of Matthew, which is the only gospel to report this.

Irenaeus, writing some thirty years later, offers a little more detail:

About His star, Balaam prophesied thus, 'A star shall come forth from out of Jacob, and a leader shall rise in Israel' (Num. 24.17). But Matthew says that the magi, on coming from the East, exclaimed, 'For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship Him' (Matt. 2.2), and that, having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by the gifts they offered, who it was that was worshipped: 'myrrh,' because it was He who would die for the mortal human race and be buried; 'gold,' because He was king 'of whose kingdom there is no end' (Luke 1.33); and 'frankincense,' because He was God, who was also 'made known in Judah' (Ps. 76.2) and appeared to those who 'did not seek Him' (Isa. 65.1) (*Adv.Haer.* iii.9.2).⁷

5 Translation from T. P. Falls, trans., T. P. Halton, and M. Slusser, eds., *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 160.

6 See esp. O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study of Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (SupNovT 51; Leiden: Brill, 1987), 50–52, 260–69.

7 Translation from D. J. Unger and I. M. C. Steenberg, trans. and eds., *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 3 (ACW 64; New York: Newman Press, 2012), 46.

We note in passing that Irenaeus is the earliest extant witness to the exegesis which finds in the three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—indications of Christ’s royal status, divinity, and future death and burial. This christological interpretation will be repeated by Origen (*Cels* i.60; *Comm.Matt.* frag. 30), Peter of Alexandria (*Can.Ep.* 13), Didymus the Blind (*Comm.Zech.* on Zech. 10:8–10), Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 38.17), Gregory of Nyssa (*In. natalem Christi* 7),⁸ Basil the Great (*Hom. Gen. Christ* 6), Ambrose (*Expos.Luke* ii.44; *De vid.* 5.30; *De Fide* i.4.31), Augustine of Hippo (*Serm.* 202; the *Opus Imp. Matt.* 2.11) Prudentius (*Cathemerinon* 12), Leo the Great (*Sermo* 31, 33, 34, 36), and Gregory the Great (*XL Hom. Ev.* 8), among others. It remains a popular homiletic move today, not least through the influence of the traditional Christmas carol “We Three Kings.”

Irenaeus also brings Num 24:17 and Matt 2:1–11 together in his other preserved work, the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*:

And again Moses says, ‘A star will rise out of Jacob, and a leader shall spring up from Israel’ (Num. 24.17), clearly announcing that the dispensation of His coming into being according to the flesh would be among the Jews; and from Jacob and the Jewish race He who was born, coming down from heaven, took up the dispensation so laid down. For the star appears in heaven; and ‘leader’ means king, for He is king of all the saved. But the star appeared at His birth to those men, the magi, who dwelt in the East, and through it they learned that Christ was born; and led by the star they came to Judea, till the star reached Bethlehem, where Christ was born, and having entered the house where the boy lay wrapped in swaddling clothes, stood above His head, showing the magi the Son of God, Christ (*Dem.* 58).⁹

Irenaeus had clearly read Justin and, given that he twice quotes Num 24:17 with the same variant found in Justin, “a leader” (ἡγούμενος), probably also depends on him for this exegesis: The star seen by the magi is none other than the star predicted by Balaam in the Book of Numbers.¹⁰

8 PG 46.1144. Gregory’s sermon on the birth of Christ is found on pages 1127–1150. There are no section numbers; the passage in question appears in the seventh paragraph. In Migne’s *PG*, this homily is marked as being of dubious authenticity, but K. Holl has defended its authenticity and, according to Quasten, his arguments have “found approval.” See J. Quasten, *Patrology* (3 vols; Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 111:277.

9 Translation from J. P. Smith, trans., *St. Irenaeus: Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (ACW 16; New York: Newman Press, 1952), 86.

10 So also Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy*, 51, 446.

This identification of the two scriptural stars was thus already established by the end of the second century and made its appearance no later than 155–160 CE in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Can we be more specific about its origins? Probably not. There is, however, the tantalizing possibility that the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* also reflects such an understanding of Num 24:17 and Matt 2:1–11. It is still often held that the *Testaments* were originally a Jewish work, interpolated and revised by a Christian. This, I think, is unlikely. I find the thesis that they are a Jewish Christian work of the second century much more compelling.¹¹ However one comes down on that issue, it is clear that the document as we now have it is a Christian work and belongs to a period not too distant from that of Justin and Irenaeus; moreover, it is even possible that it is contemporary with or pre-dates Justin. The *Testament of Levi* 'predicts' the priesthood of Christ: After the demise of the Jewish priesthood, a new priest will arise, "to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed" and "who will execute true judgment on the earth for many days" (18:1–2). We are told, "his star will arise in heaven, as a king" (ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον αὐτοῦ ἐν οὐρανῷ ὡς βασιλεύς; 18.3), which clearly recalls Num 24:17 LXX: ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐξ Ιακωβ. At the same time, "his star" (ἄστρον αὐτοῦ) could derive from Matt 2:2. Then, in the *Testament of Judah*, we encounter the promise that

after this a star will come forth for you out of Jacob in peace, and a man will arise from among my descendants like the sun of righteousness, living with men in meekness and righteousness, and no sin will be found in him. . . . This is the shoot of God Most High, and this the fountain that gives life to all mankind. Then will the sceptre of my kingdom shine forth, and from your root will come a stem. And from it will spring a staff of righteousness for the Gentiles. To judge and to save all that invoke the Lord (*Test. Judah* 24:1, 4–6).¹²

Here the author is clearly meditating on Num 24:17 in its Hebrew form, as attested by the references to the "sceptre" and the "staff of righteousness," both fair renderings and interpretations of שֵׁבֶט. Moreover, it may be significant that the appearance of the star and scepter inaugurates the incoming

11 For the arguments on each side and a bibliography, see J. Marcus, "The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Common Jewish Christian Milieu?" *JTS* 61 (2010): 596–626.

12 All the material from the *Testaments* is cited from the translation of M. de Jonge, trans., "The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (ed. H. F. D. Sparks; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 505–600.

of the Gentiles, which is also the intention of Matthew. It is possible, then, that the *Testaments* constitute another, independent witness to the exegesis which links Matt 2:1–11 with Num 24:17. If this is indeed the case, then we should probably regard this exegesis as pre-dating Justin. However that may be, the simple identification of Matthew's star with that of Balaam's prophecy is repeatedly made in later centuries (e.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina Theol.* i.5.53–71; Basil the Great, *Hom. Gen. Christ* 5; Ephraem of Edessa, *Hym. Nat.* 24; cf. also Hippolytus, *Comm.Dan.* i.9.2). A more complicated intertextual reading of these two star-passages, however, soon makes its first appearance in the works of the great third-century biblical scholar and theologian, Origen. We must now turn to an examination in some detail of the latter's treatment of Matthew's (and Balaam's) star.

Origen

In his thirteenth homily on the Book of Numbers (on Num 21:24–22:14), probably delivered sometime between the years 238 and 244,¹³ Origen alludes to a detailed tradition about the descendants of Balaam and their connection with the magi of Matthew's Gospel:

For if Balaam's prophecies were introduced by Moses into the sacred books, how much more were they copied by those who were living at that time in Mesopotamia, among whom Balaam had a great reputation and who are known to have been disciples of his art? After all, *it is reported* that from him a race and institution of magicians flourished in parts of the East, which possessed copies among themselves of everything that Balaam had prophesied. They even possessed the following writing: "A star will rise out of Jacob, and a man will spring from Israel" (Num. 24.17 LXX). The Magi had these writings among themselves, and that is why, when Jesus was born, they recognized the star and they understood, more than the people of Israel, who despised hearing the words of the holy prophets, that the prophecy was being fulfilled. Therefore, based only on these writings that Balaam had left behind, when they knew that the time was near, they came looking for him, and immediately worshiped

13 This is based on Pierre Nautin's complicated but plausible re-construction. See P. Nautin, *Origène, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 389–409.

him. And to declare the greatness of their faith, they venerated the small child as a king (*Hom.Num.* xiii.7.4).¹⁴

According to Origen, it is reported—he does not tell us by whom—that 1) there was “a race or institution of magicians” descended from Balaam, 2) that these magicians were situated in the East, and 3) that they possessed all of Balaam’s oracles, including that found in Num 24:17. Moreover, because 4) they copied and preserved these writings, and especially the prophecy concerning the star, they recognized the significance of the star when it appeared centuries later and 5) set out to look for the newborn child. Origen’s *Homilies on Numbers* only survive, except for a few fragments, in the Latin translation of Rufinus. Rufinus, while generally reliable, often proves to be somewhat inexact when compared to the original Greek (where such exists). In this case, we can partially gauge Rufinus’ accuracy through a fragment preserved in a catena commentary:

They say Balaam had pupils in the craft, having been taught by him in the art of magic, and they, regarded as great because of him [lit. having glory on account of him], recorded his prophecies and passed them on, including the one “a star shall arise . . .” The magi, having received this [prophecy] from the tradition and succession of their fathers, came to Bethlehem.¹⁵

This reads like an abbreviation of the text we have from Rufinus, and indeed, compilers of catena manuscripts very often quoted their sources very loosely, nearly always condensing and not seldom rephrasing according to their preferences. In this case, however, Rufinus’ overall accuracy is confirmed, as is his accuracy in one crucial detail. Rufinus’ “it is reported” (*fertur*) is a fair, if not exact, rendering of the Greek fragment’s “they say” (φησι).

In a later homily on Numbers, the fifteenth (on Num 22:31–23:10), Origen again refers back to this detailed tradition when he discusses the magi as Balaam’s “seed, whether by physical descent or by traditional instruction,” who

14 Translation from T. P. Scheck, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Numbers*, (ACT, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 78–79. The emphasis is mine. The Latin can be found in W. A. Baehrens, ed., *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung, Zweiter Teil* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921), 118.

15 My translation. Baehrens prints the Greek text of this fragment but abbreviates it. The full text is found at PG 17.22–24. The emphasis is, of course, not original.

journeyed from the East and worshipped the Christ-child in fulfillment of his prophecy concerning the star that “would rise in Israel” (xv.4.2).¹⁶

These two passages from Origen’s *Homilies on Numbers* together offer the clearest and fullest evidence in Origen’s extant works for this detailed tradition linking Balaam’s prophecy of the star to Matthew’s magi through the former’s descendants or successors. However, intimations of the same tradition also occur in two of Origen’s latest works, his *Commentary on Matthew* and his *Against Celsus*.¹⁷ With regard to the former, Origen’s comments on Matt 2:1–12 are not preserved in their original fullness, but only in the abridged form typical of a catena commentary. Two fragments, numbers 24 and 27 in the edition of Klostermann, connect the magi with Balaam.¹⁸ The first fragment reads as follows:

Magi are Persian sophists, of whom Balaam was one. And perhaps these [[had]] the prophecies by Balaam, when he having taken his place opposite Israel, blessed [them] saying, “A star shall arise from Jacob and a man will spring up from Israel,” and the rest. Accordingly, possessing these and expecting a great king to be born among the Jews, and having been visited by a greater power than they obtained from their ability with rituals and incantations, they were no longer subject to the demons. Just as comets in the sky and suchlike indicate something new in life, how much more admirable appeared the star of the great king Jesus Christ (*Comm. Matt. cat. frag. 24*).

The second fragment similarly declares:

God grants to each his own customs, guiding him to the truth, as also the magi proceeding from [their] home country to the worship of Christ because of astrology. For these had the prophecy of Balaam, and trusting this one [i.e., Balaam], they found the longed-for One and they worshipped the Christ (*Comm. Matt. Cat. frag. 27*).¹⁹

16 Scheck, 90.

17 Both of these works belong to Origen’s final decade, 244–54. See R. E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the service of the Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 219–21.

18 E. Klostermann and E. Benz, eds., *Origenes Matthäuseklärung, Bd. III: Fragmente und Indices*, (GCS; Leipzig: Hinrichs Verlag, 1941). The word in double brackets represents an emendation of Klostermann’s.

19 The above, rather periphrastic translations are my own, although I gratefully record the Revd. Dr. Alistair Stewart’s help deciphering Origen’s (or the catenist’s) convoluted syntax in fragment 24.

Since the second sentence of the second fragment covers the same material as the first, and as both derive from different catena manuscripts, it is altogether possible that they are distinct abbreviations of the same passage from Origen's commentary. This possibility is a reminder of the care with which we must treat catena material. Nonetheless, whether we are ultimately dealing with two passages or one, here again the same detailed tradition appears to be assumed: A close association exists between the magi and Balaam (although, in this case, they are not explicitly said to have been Balaam's descendants), the former possess the latter's prophecy, and this serves as a catalyst to bring them to Jerusalem when the star at last makes its appearance.

In the first fragment, number 24, we also find our tradition combined with another theme typical of Origen: The magi were "in communion with demons" and by means of them exercised their magical practices. However, the incarnation of Jesus, as well as the appearance of the angels at his birth (cf. Luke 2:8–20), robbed the demons of their power and so rendered the magi's incantations and spells impotent. This fact, together with the appearance of the star and Balaam's prophecy, triggered the magi's journey in search of the newborn king. This combination of Balaam's prophecy and star, on the one hand, and the magi being bereft of their magical prowess, on the other, is found more fully in *Against Celsus* i.59–60. The passage is too long to cite in its entirety, but the critical portion seems to assume the same tradition regarding Balaam and the magi:

Seeing a sign from heaven they (i.e., the Magi) wished to see what was indicated by it. *I think that they had the prophecies of Balaam recorded by Moses*, who was also an expert in this kind of thing. They found there the prophecy of the star and the words: "I will show to him, but not now; I call him blessed, though he is not at hand" (Num. 24.17a). And they guessed that the man foretold as coming with the star had arrived; and as they had already found that he was superior to all daemons and the beings that usually appeared to them and caused certain magical effects, they wanted to worship him. They therefore came to Judea, because they were convinced that some king had been born.²⁰

As with the catena fragments from the *Commentary on Matthew*, we do not have here as full a statement of the tradition as that found in the *Homilies on Numbers*. Still, the magi possess the prophecies of Balaam, especially Num 24:17, and this leads them to seeking out the newborn king. However, now

20 Translation from H. Chadwick, trans., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953), 54–55. The emphasis is mine.

Origen cites this tradition as his own opinion and not just as a report he has heard or read. Arguably, the idea that the demons, and consequently the magi, have been stripped of their powers by the events surrounding Christ's birth is more important to Origen. Nonetheless, he does not simply drop the Balaam tradition in favor of the other, but seeks to combine the two.

Whether in his *Homilies on Numbers*, his *Commentary on Matthew* or his *Contra Celsum*, Origen seems to assume a detailed narrative about Balaam, his heirs, and the magi of Matthew's gospel. This narrative spoke of the preservation of Balaam's oracle about the star through the centuries by his descendants or successors who dwelt in the Orient; when the star appears in the latter days, these descendants or successors recognize the fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy and journey to Judea in search of the newborn king. The question inevitably arises: Was this narrative, presumed by Origen, contained in a text of some kind, an apocryphon or a pseudepigraphon attributed to an Old Testament worthy, or perhaps a homily or commentary? Or was it merely an oral exegetical tradition? The words Origen (or Rufinus) uses to introduce the tradition, "it is reported" (*fertur*) and "they say" (*φησι*), are so general as to be applicable to either written or oral communication. So we are left with the question: Did Origen read about Balaam's descendants or successors in a book, or was this imaginative re-telling of Numbers 24 and Matthew 2 merely the kind of extended oral comment beloved of preachers and other expositors of the scriptures?

Other Witnesses

I think there is reason to conclude that Origen was referring to a written text, bearing the name of Balaam, which was also known to other early Christian writers, but which is today lost. Eusebius of Caesarea seemingly refers to such a text in his *Gospel Questions and Solutions*. Eusebius' work, an apologetic attempt to deal with problematic passages in the birth and resurrection narratives, has not survived complete. Moreover, it is of uncertain date, but must belong to the years ca. 300–340, the period of Eusebius' literary activity. Originally the work contained three volumes, the first two addressed to a Stephanus, the third addressed to a Marinus. In the section dealing with the magi, preserved only in Syriac, Eusebius reports that

[a] certain history holds that those who are called Magi are from the sons of Balaam, whom Moses mentions, for he too was a Magus, and makes known concerning himself that he came from mountains in the east (cf. Num. 23.7). From his prophecy it was derived that a star would arise

and a man from the seed of Israel would be born and rule all the nations (cf. Num. 24.17), for Moses writes, as if from Balaam himself, ‘From Mesopotamia Balak, king of Moab, has called me from the mountains of the east’ (Num. 23.7). After that, he says in his prophecy, ‘A star will arise from Jacob and a chief²¹ from Israel, and he will rule over many nations’ (Num. 24.17). These things are preserved among Balaam’s people²² in *books*, and hence it follows that we should understand that the Magi that were around in the days of our Saviour, as Balaam had previously prophesied, when they saw the star, were moved to see the King that had been born, of whom the star was giving indication. So they went out and came to Jerusalem, the star indicating the region, the place, and the child: ‘The star that they had seen in the east was going before them, until it went and stopped where the child was’ (Matt. 2.9) (PG 22.979–982).²³

Eusebius must have known the same tradition as Origen reports in his *Homilies on Numbers*, for he identifies the magi with the descendants of Balaam, whose oracle is preserved among them; because of this, when the star appears “in the days of our Savior,” the magi recognize the star’s significance and set out for Judea. Eusebius, of course, was an admirer of Origen, and it is possible that this reference owes more than a little to the third-century father. However, Eusebius explicitly mentions “books” preserved by Balaam’s people and also informs us that the tradition that the magi were descended from Balaam was found in “a certain history.” The noun used, *tš’yt’*, probably renders *διήγησις*, and so most likely refers to a written narrative.²⁴ If this is correct, then it is no longer a question of merely an exegetical tradition. According to Eusebius, this tradition is contained in “a certain history,” perhaps an apocryphal work related in some way to Balaam or even a pseudepigraphon or, more precisely, pseudepigrapha attributed to him.

Eusebius refers to this tradition on one other occasion, in his *Demonstration of the Gospel*. Here, however, he makes no reference to books related to Balaam

21 Note that here the text follows the Syriac Peshitta (“a ruler”), but earlier the LXX (“a man”).

22 Literally “by the house of Balaam.”

23 The Syriac text and English translation is found in R. Pearse et al., *Eusebius of Caesarea, Gospel Problems and Solutions (Quaestiones ad Stephanum et Marinum)* (Ipswich: Chieftain Publishing, 2010), 322–25. The Syriac texts are translated by A. C. McCollum. I have adapted McCollum’s translation at one point; his translation begins, “A certain tradition . . .” In a footnote, he admits this is not a literal rendering. The emphasis is mine.

24 Cf. 2 Macc 2:32; 6:17, and Luke 1:1 in the Peshitta, where in each case *διήγησις* is translated by *tš’yt’*.

or even necessarily to a written text. After citing Num 24:15–19, Eusebius informs his readers:

[t]hey say that moved by this prophecy Balaam's successors (for it was likely preserved among them), when they noticed in the heavens a strange star besides the usual ones, fixed above the head, so to say, and, vertically above Judaea, hastened to arrive at Palestine, to inquire about the King announced by the star's appearance (*Dem.Evang.* ix.1).²⁵

As noted above, the Greek verb translated “they say” (φησίν) can refer to a written text, but could equally be used for an oral tradition. While his *Demonstration* is a relatively early work, probably dating to the period just after the church's peace was established in 313,²⁶ Eusebius' *Gospel Questions and Solutions* could be a much later work. So it is possible that in his earlier work, Eusebius is merely dependent on the report he found in Origen's *Homilies on Numbers*. However, by the time he returns to the theme of the star in his *Gospels Questions and Solutions*, he has in the meantime come across the “certain history” itself, that is, a Balaam apocryphon or, perhaps, a reference to a work or works of Balaam elsewhere in Origen or in the works of another author.

Further evidence for a Balaam apocryphon is found in a brief notice in Ambrose of Milan. In the latter's *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, dating sometime between 377 and 389,²⁷ we find the following:

But who are these Magi unless those who, as *a certain history* (*historia quaedam*) teaches, derive from the stock of Balaam, by whom it was prophesied “a star shall arise out of Jacob”? Therefore these are heirs not less of faith than of succession. He saw the star in spirit, (but) they saw it with their eyes and believed (*Exp.Luke* ii.48).²⁸

25 Translation (modified) from W. J. Ferrar, trans., *The Proof of the Gospel being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea* (2 vols; London: SPCK, 1920), 150–151.

26 So, e.g., Quasten, *Patrology*, III.332, and F. M. Young and A. Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (2d ed; London: SCM, 2010), 8–9.

27 According to Di Berardino in Quasten (*Patrology*, IV.164), the homilies on which the commentary is based date from 377–378 or 385–389, but the commentary was revised and published about 389.

28 Ambrose's Latin text is found in CSEL 32.4. The above translation is taken from Tim Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 204–05, but continues a sentence longer with my own translation.

Ambrose also knows, directly or indirectly, “a certain history” according to which the magi are descended from Balaam. Ambrose does not explicitly assert that this “history” was preserved among the magi, nor that it contained Balaam’s famous prophecy, also found in Num 24:17. But since he relates that prophecy to Balaam and the magi, it would appear to be a fair assumption that Ambrose has in mind the same (hypothetical) apocryphon as Origen and Eusebius, especially as he—as Eusebius before him—knew that this tradition was found in “a certain history” (*historia quaedam*).

At the very end of the fourth century or early in the fifth, the anonymous author of the incomplete *Commentary on Matthew*, commonly known as the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum* (hereafter *OIM*), in his comments on Matthew 2, claims:

I have read *in someone’s writings* that those magi learned of this star that would appear from *the books of Balaam* the diviner, whose prophecy was placed in the Old Testament: “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a man shall rise out of Israel, and he will rule all the nations” (Num. 24:17) (*OIM* 2.2).²⁹

Here again we encounter a work connected with the name of Balaam which contained, as did the Old Testament book of Numbers, Balaam’s famous oracle concerning the star. Moreover, it was from this oracle, preserved in Balaam’s writings, that the magi first learned about that star and, presumably, waited for its appearance. To be sure, the author of the *OIM* does not have first-hand knowledge of our Balaam apocryphon; he has only read about it “in someone’s writings.” Since the author of this commentary was demonstrably indebted to Origen, and indeed to Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew*,³⁰ it is very probable that the “someone” to whom he refers was none other than the great third-century father. However, in that he explicitly mentions “the books of Balaam,” he goes beyond what Origen actually says—at least in his preserved works—and offers further support to the witness of Eusebius and Ambrose, who

29 The Latin text of the *Opus Imperfectum* is found in *PG* 56.611–946, here at 56.637. The above translation is that of J. A. Kellerman, *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus Imperfectum)* (ACT; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 32. On the date of the *Opus Imperfectum*, see Kellerman, xviii.

30 See especially the conclusions of F. Mali, *Das “Opus imperfectum in Matthaëum” und sein Verhältnis zu den Matthäuskommentaren von Origenes und Hieronymus* (IThS 34; Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag), 324–39.

mention “a certain history” (Eusebius and Ambrose) and “books preserved by Balaam’s people” (Eusebius).

The testimony of the *OIM* is interesting in another respect as well. The author, immediately following the passage quoted above, goes on to cite at length another apocryphal work, the so-called *Apocryphon of Seth*, which is at least formally related to our Balaam text, in that it also tells the story of the magi and links them to an Old Testament figure. If the author knew the “books of Balaam” only indirectly, this is probably not so of the work attributed to Seth, which he seems to have read and summarizes at some length. The matter is complicated in that the (presumably) Greek text, which is attributed to Seth, must be related—if not identical—to a Syriac text attributed to the magi themselves. The latter has been given the title the *Revelation of the Magi* by its modern editor.³¹ Whatever the precise relationship between the two, neither the *Apocryphon of Seth* nor the *Revelation of the Magi* mention Balaam or his oracle concerning the star. For this/these text(s), it is a prophecy of Seth which prepares the magi for the appearance of the star. Nonetheless, in both writings the prophecy is passed down from generation to generation by the descendants of Seth, who are also called “magi” because of their practice of silent prayer. In the *Revelation of the Magi*, the prophecy relates that the star will herald the birth of God in human form. In the *Apocryphon of Seth*, the meaning of the star is not explicitly given, but this may be due to the abbreviated form of the narrative. When the star in due course appears, it leads the magi to Judea and Bethlehem, where they worship the Christ child before being led back to their own land by the same star. That land is not Babylon or Persia, but a mythical land at the farthest reaches of the East, next to the ocean.

What is the relationship of our hypothetical Balaam text to Seth/*Magi*? It is possible that the *Seth/Magi* text(s) was(were) written to correct our Balaam text, attributing the latter’s prophecy to a much more ancient figure, i.e., Seth, one of the sons of Adam. This possibility is strengthened when we remember just how ambiguous a figure Balaam was in ancient Judaism and early Christianity.³² However, the opposite could also be true: The author of the

31 For the *Apocryphon of Seth*, see A. Topel, “The Apocryphon of Seth: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (eds. R. Bauckham, J. R. Davila, and A. Panayotov, vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 33–38. For the *Revelation of the Magi*, see B. C. Landau, “The Sages and the Star-Child: An Introduction to the *Revelation of the Magi*, An Ancient Christian Apocryphon” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2008).

32 Cf. J. Leemans, “‘To Bless with a mouth bent on Cursing’: Patristic Interpretations of Balaam (Num 24:17)” in *Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 287–299, esp. 296–299.

Balaam text may have found his inspiration in *Seth/Magi* and re-written its tale to ground the story in a much more famous biblical passage, one which was widely regarded as a prophecy of the Messiah. That the two (*Seth/Magi* on the one hand, and Balaam on the other) are entirely independent of one another is, perhaps, also possible, but I think less likely. In weighing up these three possibilities, the final lines of Num 24:17 LXX are suggestive and intriguing: “(the man who rises from Israel) will crush the princes of Moab and shall plunder all the sons of Seth.” If our hypothetical Balaam text were the earlier, one could easily imagine an author meditating on the end of the crucial verse and being led to speculate about a Sethian origin for the magi and their journey, and thus re-writing the whole by dropping Balaam and focusing on Seth. If, however, one began with Seth (as does *Seth/Magi*), I think it is less likely one would need to consider Num 24:17 or a role for Balaam. On the whole, although we are on very uncertain ground here, it is more probable that the priority should go to the Balaam text than to *Seth/Magi*.

Five other, less certain witnesses to our hypothetical Balaam apocryphon include Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, the Ps.-Eusebian tract *On the Star*, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, and the *Palaea Historica*. The first two, Gregory and Jerome, can usefully be discussed together. Both certainly seem to be acquainted with the tradition concerning Balaam and the magi, that is, that the latter were descendants or successors of the former, and that they possessed his prophecy and so waited for the appearance of the star and the birth of him whose nativity it heralded. However, neither refers to a text or writing of Balaam, and both could merely be dependent on Origen.

Gregory’s Christmas sermon was preached in the year 386. In a rambling text, when the bishop arrives at the story concerning the magi, he asks his congregation:

[d]o you hear the soothsayer Balaam declaring to the foreigners by a more excellent inspiration that “a Star shall rise out of Jacob”? Do you see the Magi, who are descended from him, observing, according to the prediction of their forefather, the rising of the new star, which, contrary to the nature of all other stars, alone partook of motion and rest, changing (from one to the other) as it had need of either (*In diem natalem Christi* 4)?³³

33 Greek Text from PG 46.1133. There are no section divisions in this sermon; the “4” refers to the fourth paragraph. The translation is my own.

Similarly, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, “dashed off (by his own account) in two weeks” in the spring of 398,³⁴ Jerome affirms that

[t]o the confusion of the Jews, in order that they might learn about the birth of Christ from the Gentiles, a star rises in the east. They [i.e., the Gentiles] had known that this would happen by the prediction of Balaam (whose successors they were). Read the book of Numbers. By the sign of the star the Magi were conducted to Judea, that the priests who had been questioned by the Magi concerning where the Christ was to be born might be without excuse concerning his advent (*Comm.Matt.* 2.2).³⁵

Gregory and Jerome both knew of some connection between Balaam and the magi: For Gregory they are descendants, for Jerome successors. It is to be remembered that Origen affirmed that “from [Balaam] a race and institution of magicians flourished in parts of the East” (*Hom.Num.* xiii.7.4). It is as if Gregory chose to use Origen’s first term, and Jerome his second. Gregory and Jerome also both assert that the magi were familiar with Balaam’s prophecy, and that because of this oracle they, although they were Gentiles, looked for the birth of the Jewish Messiah. Neither Gregory nor Jerome, however, explicitly mentions a book or writing by or connected with Balaam. As they were both steeped in the writings of Origen, it is not impossible that they are merely repeating what they have read there.

A mere dependence on Origen is unlikely for our next work, *On the Star*; here we are dealing with a variant of the detailed tradition we have been examining. *On the Star* is attributed to Eusebius in the unique Syriac manuscript which preserves the work. In the judgement of Noeldeke, it was composed in Syriac and so cannot have been from the hand of the great historian. The work, however, is dependent on Eusebius’ *Chronicon* and so must be later than 303 CE, when the latter was composed. The manuscript which preserves *On the Star*, in the judgment of its editor, cannot be later than the sixth century. So we are dealing with a work that must have been composed sometime between 350 and 600 CE. Wright prefers a date around 400;³⁶ I would not be surprised if it were much later. Aspiring to the style and authority of a historical chronicle, the author asserts that,

34 J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 222.

35 Translation from T. P. Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew* (FC; Washington: CUA Press, 2008), 64.

36 W. Wright, “Eusebius of Caesarea On the star,” *Journal of Sacred Literature*, 4th series, 9 (1866): 117–36 [Syriac text]; 10 (1867): 150–64 [English translation]. For the judgments of Noeldeke and Wright, noted above, see 10 (1867): 150.

as many things, which Moses also neglected, are found in chronicles that were written and laid up, so too the history of the Star which the Magi saw, was found in a chronicle which was written and laid up in Arnon, the border of the Moabites and Ammonites. And this history was taken from the place in which it was written, and was conveyed away and deposited in the fortress of Achmethan (= Ecbatana), which is in Persia.³⁷

The author then continues on to retell the biblical story of Balaam (Num 22–24) according to his own historical and apologetic concerns. For instance, he insists that, at the time of Moses and after, the whole of the East was under the authority of the king of Assyria. In his version of the story, Balaam's oracle about the star is imbedded in a prophecy about Alexander's conquest of the East and its consequences. Balak, on hearing the prophecy, reported Balaam's words to his overlord, the king of Assyria, and the latter commanded that this report be "laid up in his archives." The author adds, "[T]his history [was] handed down and [passed] from people to people through the whole land of the Assyrians."³⁸ The author then lists the kings of the Assyrians and their contemporaries among the Israelites, down to Augustus Caesar, when the promised star finally appears. The "Persian, and the Hūzites, and the other peoples that were around them" were terrified and recognized the star as that foretold by Balaam. So the king of Persia prepared "splendid offerings and gifts and presents, and [sent] them by the hands of the Magi, the worshippers of fire."³⁹ The star then led the magi, after a short detour in Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, where they worshipped the Messiah. The star then led the magi on their return to Persia. On arrival there, they reported to the king what they had experienced. "These things too were written down there in inner Persia, and were stored up among the records of the deeds of their kings, where was written and stored up the history of the legions of the Chittites [i.e., the Greeks] and the account of this Star, that they might be preserved where were preserved the histories of the ancients."⁴⁰ In this curious text, the magi are not descendants or successors of Balaam. Nor is it Balaam or his disciples who preserve his prophecy concerning the star. Rather, Balak, the Assyrian monarch, and eventually the Persian emperors fill this role. Nonetheless, Balaam's oracle still passes from Moab to the East and is there kept for the day of the star and the Messiah's birth. Ps.-Eusebius' *On the Star* may well stand at some remove from our hypothetical Balaam apocryphon, but seems, nonetheless,

37 Wright, "Eusebius," 154.

38 Wright, "Eusebius," 157.

39 Wright, "Eusebius," 162.

40 Wright, "Eusebius," 163.

to be related to it. I would suggest that it may well be a later adaptation of the “Books of Balaam,” just as *Seth/Magi* are(is), presumably, (an) earlier one(s).

The author of the work traditionally known as the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* also knew our apocryphon, or at least a later editor did. This work, which comes down to us in two distinct recensions, probably from a Syriac original, may have been composed in the fifth or sixth century.⁴¹ The shorter recension, which covers only the infancy and childhood of Jesus, simply informs us that the magi “came from the east to Jerusalem, as Zeraduscht (or Zoroaster) had predicted.”⁴² The longer and possibly older recension, which includes the whole life of Christ, goes into far more detail about this Zersduscht or Zoroaster. It begins: “[i]n the days of Moses the Prophet . . . there lived a man called Zoroaster; it is he who revealed the science of the Mazdaism [i.e., Zoroastrianism].” One day, while this Zoroaster sat by a river teaching the people, he predicted the advent of Christ: his birth from a virgin, his career, death, resurrection, and ascension. Zoroaster goes on to speak of the star which will accompany his birth and gives instructions about following the star to Bethlehem and worshipping the newborn king. This introduction to the life of Christ ends: “This speech was in the form of a prophecy. Joshua, the son of Nun, the Metropolitan, said that this Zoroaster was Balaam, the astrologer, and that his prophecy would be fulfilled at the end of time.”⁴³ Now, there is evidence that some Syriac Christian authors in later centuries conflated or identified Balaam with Zoroaster.⁴⁴ Theodore bar Konai termed Zoroaster “the second Balaam” (*Book of the Scholion* vii.21); Ish’odad of Merv explicitly rejected the identification of Zoroaster with Balaam in favor of identification with Baruch, and preferred Zoroaster-Baruch to Balaam as the source of the magi’s knowledge about the significance of the star (*Commentaries* on Matt 2:2); while Bar Hebraeus explicitly conflates the two Eastern sages (*Treasure of Mysteries* on Matt 2:1–12).⁴⁵ These authorities are, to be sure, late: Theodore flourished in the late eighth century, Ish’odad in

41 So C. Genequad, ed. and trans., “Vie de Jésus en arabe,” in *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (eds. F. Bovon and P. Geoltrain; 2 vols; Paris: Gallimard, 1997), I.205–238. Cf. also J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 100.

42 Translation from ANF 8.406.

43 My translation of Genequad’s French version in *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*.

44 J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés* (Paris, 1938), I.47–49.

45 For Theodore bar Konai, see R. Hespel and R. Graguet, eds. and trans., *Théodore bar Koni: Livre des Scolies (recension de Séert)* (2 vols; CSCO 187–88; Leuven: Peeters, 1981–1982), II.52–53. For Ish’odad, M. D. Gibson, *The Commentaries of Ish’odad of Merv* (Cambridge: CUP, 1911), 19, and for Bar Hebraeus, W. E. W. Carr, trans. and ed., *Gregory Abu’l Faraj commonly called Bar-Hebraeus: Commentary of the Gospels from Horreum Mysteriorum* (London: SPCK, 1925), 10.

the mid-ninth, and Bar Hebraeus in the thirteenth. The *Arabic Infancy Gospel* would seem to allow us to take the Balaam-Zoroaster identification back to the fifth or sixth century, for both recensions place Zoroaster in a role filled by Balaam in the tradition and texts we have been examining. One, the shorter, merely replaces Balaam with Zoroaster, while the other, fuller recension explicitly identifies the two prophets. The author of this (infancy) gospel, then, must have known the tradition which linked the magi with Balaam-Zoroaster, but whether or not he knew a Balaam apocryphon cannot be determined. A better case for such knowledge can be made for the fuller recension than for the shorter, because the former portrays Zoroaster-Balaam giving instructions about the star and about Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Nonetheless, neither recension records that these instructions were handed down from generation to generation by Balaam's descendants or students, nor does either recension connect the magi with Balaam's oracle about the star.

Finally, the *Palaea Historica* contains a relatively full account of our tradition, but does not credit a Balaam apocryphon or any other text. The *Palaea Historica*, compiled sometime between the ninth and twelfth centuries, is a virtual compendium of biblical traditions drawn from diverse sources. Necessarily, many of its traditions are much older than the *Palaea* itself.⁴⁶ After re-telling and re-ordering the story of Balaam from Numbers 22–24—among other things, placing the encounter with the Angel of the Lord and Balaam's miraculous talking donkey on the return journey from Moab (109–114)—the author turns to the interpretation of Balaam's prophecy, recorded in Num 24:17:

Concerning his statement, "A star shall rise from Jacob [and a man shall rise up from Israel] and he shall shatter the chiefs of Moab": The [servants of the Persians] and their astronomers recorded this statement, [supposing that the diviner spoke more truthfully than anyone else. As they were expecting the star to shine forth,] at each and every season they would look for it. When Christ was born, Balaam was proved truthful. The wise man alludes to this in his hymns, when he states, "Filling with joy the wise astronomers, initiates into the secret teaching of Balaam the diviner of old, a star arose from Jacob, Lord." That is to say: "See how the words

46 See the helpful introduction and translation of W. Adler, "Palaea Historica ("The Old Testament History"): A New Translation and Introduction," in *OTPMNS*, 1,585–672. The Greek text can be found in A. Vasiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina* (Moscow: Imperial University Press, 1893):188–292.

of the diviner have been fulfilled, when the star arose and the Messiah appeared." So much for this subject (115).⁴⁷

The identity of the "wise" hymnist is uncertain. As Adler notes, the author often cites Andrew of Crete, a famous Byzantine preacher and poet of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, in this manner.⁴⁸ But these words are not found in the hymn the *Great Canon*, which our author usually cites when quoting Andrew. Moreover, the author of the *Palaea* on many occasions quotes material from "a wise man," the source of which is unknown. If the quote is not spurious, invented by the author of the *Palaea*, then we have in this passage two witnesses to our tradition: the author of the *Palaea* and the wise hymnist he cites. Neither refers to a text bearing the name of Balaam, and both could be at some remove from our presumed apocryphon. In other words, the wise man referred to by the author of the *Palaea* is either the spurious creation of the latter or another, unknown witness to the tradition we are investigating. We cannot, on the basis of our current knowledge, decide this question. However, even if the wise hymnist cited here by the *Palaea* were an independent witness to our tradition, we cannot know how early or late a witness he is, nor whether he was a direct or indirect one.

Summary of the Evidence for Lost Books of Balaam

To summarize, in the mid-third century, Origen witnesses to a detailed tradition and narrative about the descendants or successors of Balaam, who through the centuries preserve Balaam's writings, including the oracle also found in Num 24:17 about a star and the coming of the Messiah. These descendants or successors are also magicians; they dwell in the East and hand down the writings and oracles from generation to generation. Eventually, when the star appears, they correctly interpret its significance, journey to Bethlehem, and there worship the Christ-child. In the fourth and early fifth centuries, Eusebius, Ambrose, and the unknown author of the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* repeat (although more briefly) what is reported by Origen and go further in attributing this narrative to a work (or works) bearing the name of Balaam. Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome also know a narrative identifying the magi with

47 Translation from Adler, "*Palaea Historica*," 645. The words in brackets are absent from one manuscript, but present in the other. At one point, I have corrected Adler's placement of the bracket and his translation to bring both into line with Vasiliev's text.

48 See the references in Adler, "*Palaea Historica*," 595, n. 45.

Balaam's progeny, but may not have had direct contact with "the books of Balaam." From the latter half of the fifth and in the following centuries, our witnesses—Ps.-Eusebius, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Palaea Historia*—still attest the detailed tradition about Balaam, his descendants/successors, and the magi, but seem to stand at a much greater distance from our hypothetical text.

In brief, our earliest author, Origen, seems to know a Balaam apocryphon. Such a conclusion could not rest on the evidence of Origen alone, for his language is ambiguous and could be understood as referring to an exegetical tradition, whether oral or written. However, the explicit mention of "books of Balaam" (*OIM*, cf. Eusebius) and "a certain history" (Eusebius and Ambrose) strengthens the case and makes a Balaam apocryphon probable. The later witnesses add little to the argument, for they could possibly be explained away as late survivals of a tenacious exegetical tradition.

Could the evidence presented here be otherwise explained? Is it possible that Origen refers not to a Balaam apocryphon or pseudepigraphon, but rather to an exegetical tradition which he either found in a commentary or treatise, or heard from his Hebrew master or another teacher or preacher? Could Eusebius, Ambrose, and *OIM*'s author have mistakenly supposed that Origen's source was a Balaam text, when in fact it was an exegetical tradition? That three of his readers—Eusebius, Ambrose and the author of *OIM*—independently came to the conclusion that Origen must have meant a text attributed to Balaam is possible, but I would suggest not very likely. Moreover, while it is beyond reasonable doubt that Eusebius and the author of *OIM* received their information about the Balaam tradition from Origen, Ambrose was nowhere near the Origen devotee that Eusebius and *OIM*'s author were. So it is possible that Ambrose offers an independent witness to our Balaam text.

One could go a step further. The agreement of Eusebius and the author of the *OIM*, and perhaps Ambrose as well, suggests that they either had access to the Balaam apocryphon itself or a clear reference to it, which is now lost to us. One candidate for the latter that immediately suggests itself is Origen's complete *Commentary on Matthew* (which now survives only for books 10–17 on Matt 13:36–22:33).⁴⁹ We know that this work was known to the author of *OIM* and to Eusebius, for the former utilized it in his commentary,⁵⁰ and the latter discusses it in his *Ecclesiastical History* (vi.36.2–3). More importantly, as we have seen, Origen's comments on Matt 2:1–12 have not survived,

49 There is also an overlapping but abbreviated Latin translation of Origen's comments on 12.9–27.66.

50 See n. 30 above.

except in abbreviated form through catena manuscripts. Yet, what does survive clearly shows that Origen mentioned the tradition that the magi possessed Balaam's oracle. It would not in any way be surprising if Origen's full commentary on this passage proved to be the missing link, as it were, between the notice in Origen's *Homilies on Numbers*, on the one hand, and those in Eusebius, *OIM*, and possibly Ambrose, on the other.

The Books of Balaam

If the argument presented here is sound, then there circulated among some early Christians an apocryphal text, attributed to or named for Balaam, which told the story of the pagan soothsayer and his descendants or successors, who preserved his writings, including the famous oracle about the star, generation by generation until the birth of the Messiah. Thereupon, some or (perhaps) all of Balaam's heirs journeyed to Judea and worshipped the Christ-child. This was clearly a Christian work, which must have been written prior to Origen's allusion to it. That is about all we can say with certainty. In what follows, I will try to tease out some further probabilities and possibilities, while acknowledging that we must proceed with all due caution in discussing a lost—and still hypothetical—text for which we possess only a handful of patristic testimonies.

Date

If the reconstruction offered above is correct, then a firm *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the *Books of Balaam* is provided by Origen's homilies on the Book of Numbers, which, as we have seen, would have been delivered in his Caesarean period, probably sometime between 238 and 244. A *terminus a quo* is found in the esteem that the author of *Balaam* had for the Gospel of Matthew. In other words, in broad terms, *Balaam* could have been written anytime between 100 and 240 CE. We might be able to narrow this timeframe further if we allow that the work is likely to have been in circulation for some time prior to Origen's allusion to it in his homilies. The way in which he introduces it—"they say" (so the Greek fragment) or "it is reported" (so Rufinus' Latin)—suggests that its general plot was not unknown to Origen's congregation. It is likely, then, that we are dealing with a second-century text or, at the latest, one which stems from the first or second decade of the third century.

Original Language

Given an origin in the second century, our *Balaam* is very unlikely to have been composed in anything other than Greek. The fact that our earliest—and

perhaps our only direct—witness, Origen, read at least some Hebrew⁵¹ means that perhaps we should not rule out Hebrew as the language of composition, especially if our apocryphon stemmed from Jewish Christian circles. Nonetheless, as noted above, Origen expects his audience will know the story of *Balaam*, and in most cases that would have been impossible if the text were only available in Hebrew. It should also be added that Origen makes no claim to read Aramaic. All in all, Greek is almost certainly the language in question.

Provenance

When we turn to the issue of provenance, it must be admitted that, while we are manifestly dealing with a Christian text, deciding on which branch of early Christianity it belonged to is much more difficult. We have so little to go on. The importance the Gospel of Matthew held for its author *could* suggest Jewish Christianity, but this in itself is not sufficient. The fact that the *Books of Balaam* passes so quickly from sight could also point to Jewish Christianity, for as the Nazarenes and Ebionites passed into oblivion sometime in late antiquity, so did nearly all of their literary output. That said, there is no particular reason to rule out composition by a Gentile Christian. Finally, there is nothing in the evidence we have surveyed to suggest a Valentinian or other type of Gnostic origin. Indeed, that can probably be dismissed as highly unlikely. Origen, had he cited a text he regarded as heretical, would not have shied away from labeling it as such.⁵²

Distribution

How widely did our text circulate? If, as suggested above, Eusebius and the author of *OIM* knew our *Balaam* only through Origen's commentary on Matthew, then it is possible that others also knew it in this way. Ambrose, as we have seen, is potentially a different case. He clearly read and admired Origen, but his admiration for the third-century father is much more muted than that of Eusebius or the unknown author of *OIM*. Ambrose *could* be our only indication that *Balaam* was known in the West. The combined testimony of Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ps.-Eusebius, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, and the *Palaea Historica*, even if all of these are indirect witnesses, means that our apocryphon may have had a wide circulation in the East, being attested, even if only indirectly, in Asia Minor (Gregory), Palestine (Jerome, *Palaea Historica*), and

51 On the vexed question of Origen's competence in Hebrew, see most recently N. F. Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible* (trans. W. G. E. Watson; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 204–06.

52 Cf. e.g., his comments in *Hom. Luke* 1.2, or those preserved in Eusebius, *E. H.* vi.38.

Syria (Ps.-Eusebius, *Arabic Infancy Gospel*). On the other hand, if all of these were directly or indirectly dependent on Origen, then *Balaam* may have had a very limited distribution; that is, only in and around Palestine.

Genre

Turning to the question of our text's genre, we must first address the preliminary question of its relation with the person of Balaam. Is he the putative author? That is a natural deduction from the title the author of *OIM* (cf. also Eusebius) gives the work, the *Books of Balaam*. However, for Balaam to be cast as author, the account of the magi's journey must be placed in his mouth as a prophecy *prior eventu*. This, of course, is not impossible. Other possibilities can also be imagined. The text may claim one of Balaam's successors, or all of them, as its author, as is the case for the *Revelation of the Magi*. If this were so, then the title the *Books of Balaam* would have been used to indicate something of the text's content rather than its putative author.

Eusebius and *OIM*'s plural, the *Books of Balaam*, also raises the question of whether we should speak of Balaam apocrypha rather than a Balaam apocryphon. Was there more than one text attributed to or named for Balaam, or only a single text in which the many books or oracles of Balaam figured prominently? Of course, there is no way to be certain, but the narrative, as summarized by Origen and others, does not seem overly long and, while providing enough material for a single narrative, hardly seems sufficient for more than one volume. However, one must exercise a great deal of caution here. There are four oracles concerning Israel ascribed to Balaam in the Bible (Num 23:7–10; 18–24; 24:3–9 and 15–19), and three more concerning other nations (24:20–24). An imaginative Christian exegete and author could have produced enough material to fill a number of volumes of Balaam apocrypha. Possible parallels with other apocrypha and pseudepigrapha are suggestive. The *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, for example, is a lengthy edifice built on a modest scriptural foundation, namely Gen 49:1–27. At the other end of the spectrum, the *Testament of Moses* is a much shorter work based on Deut 34:1–8. Even with these partial answers to these preliminary matters addressed, it must be acknowledged that we still have too little data to decide the question of genre in any definitive way. The portion of the text which dealt with Balaam and his successors through the generations may well be described as an expansion of an Old Testament narrative, while the portion which concerns the magi's journey to (and possibly from) Bethlehem may well be classed as an expansion of a New Testament narrative. But was that it, or did the text include material that could be defined differently? For example, Balaam's oracle may well have given occasion for the inclusion of an apocalyptic revelation of some kind. Moreover,

the narrative about the magi and their visit to Bethlehem may have resembled, at least in part, an infancy gospel. Until such time as more information comes to light, the genre of the *Books of Balaam* will necessarily remain unclear.

Content

Before concluding, however, we must consider the related question of the precise content of the Balaam apocryphon. Did it more or less tell the narrative which Origen summarizes and nothing more? Or, in the midst of recounting that narrative, did it stray into related themes, expressing opinions on various ethical and doctrinal matters at some length? Again, the examples of the *Testament of Moses*, on the one hand, and of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, on the other, are suggestive. While speculation on themes and issues could be endless, and perhaps futile, the patristic notices concerning our tradition suggest at least two themes that might have exercised the author(s) of the *Books of Balaam*. First, it is clear that Matthew's account of the magi raised difficulties for early Christians with regard to the effectiveness and theological correctness of astrology. Did Matthew's narrative offer some justification of astrologers and their art? One need only note the knots Tertullian twists himself into in the ninth chapter of his *De Idololatria* to recognize the fathers' dilemma (cf. also Basil the Great, *Hom. Gen. Christ* 6). In *Hom.Num.* xiii.7.4, Origen emphasizes that the magi based their conclusions about the star "only on these writings that Balaam left behind." In other words, although they were astrologers, astrology itself did not inform their interpretation of the star and its significance. The same is true of Origen's extended treatment in *Contra Celsum* (i.59–60), in which he emphasizes that when Christ was born, the demons upon whom the magi depended were deprived of their powers (cf. also *Comm.Matt.* frag. 24). Did Origen derive this anti-astrological polemic from explicit statements in the *Books of Balaam*? Or were the *Books of Balaam* free of such a theme, although their overall narrative lent itself to Origen's own anti-astrological concerns? Secondly, both Origen and Jerome find in the narrative behind our hypothetical text a weapon with which to strike at the unbelieving Jews. According to the former, the descendants or followers of Balaam "understood, more than the people of Israel, who despised hearing the words of the holy prophets, that the prophecy was being fulfilled" (*Hom.Num.* xiii.7.4). The latter sets the Gentile magi over against the Jews and their priests and begins his whole notice concerning our tradition with the words "To the confusion of the Jews." Again, did Origen and Jerome find this anti-Jewish polemic in the Balaam apocryphon, or did they import such a concern into their summaries of it? We simply cannot know. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that there is nothing implausible about the suggestion that the

Books of Balaam shared both an anti-astrological and an anti-Jewish stance. The latter would not even, necessarily, overrule my speculations above about the text originating within Jewish Christianity. One need only note the polemics aimed at “the scribes and Pharisees,” i.e., the rabbis, in the commentary on Isaiah belonging to the Nazarenes (*apud* Jerome, *Comm. Isa.* iii.26 [on Isa 8:14]; iii.29 [on 8:20–21]; iii.30 [on 9:1–2]; and ix.13 [on 29:20–21]), to recognize how critical Jewish Christians could be of other Jews.

Relationship with Other Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha

It has already been suggested that the *Books of Balaam* had some literary relationship with the *Apocryphon of Seth* and the *Revelation of the Magi* (although these could be the same work), as well as with the Pseudo-Eusebian *On the Star*. I argued above that it is more likely that the *Books of Balaam* served as a source or inspiration for *Seth/Magi* rather than the opposite, and that *On the Star* is likely to have been dependent upon the *Books of Balaam*. I have also suggested that the very different *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Testament of Moses* are helpful comparisons in speculating about the length, genre, and content of our Balaam apocryphon. Mention should also be made about the one ancient text which we know was attributed to Balaam. A fragmentary text painted on plaster was found during excavations at Tell Deir ‘Allā, a site which has been variously identified with biblical Succoth and Peniel.⁵³ This interesting text appears to be independent of the Book of Numbers and offers confirmation that traditions about a seer named Balaam enjoyed wide esteem in the ancient Near East. The Deir ‘Allā text dates from before the eighth century BCE, when the text was painted onto the plaster. It could be much earlier (so Puech). Moreover, the Deir ‘Allā text is manifestly a pagan work, recording a revelation granted to Balaam by the gods. Therefore, no connection between it and our hypothetical Balaam text can be posited. Nonetheless, the distant memory of such a text could have contributed to the inspiration for our text: The memory of texts circulating in the name of Balaam from great antiquity could have led to the idea that Balaam’s oracles were passed down from generation to generation among those who revered him as a father-figure.

53 See E. M. Cook, ed. and trans., “The Balaam Text from Tell Deir ‘Allā: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *OTPMNS*, 236–43; and É. Puech, “Bala’am and Deir ‘Allā,” in *Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 25–47.

Conclusions

When early Christians read Matthew's account of the Star of Bethlehem and of the Christ-child's eastern visitors, they very often recalled the prophecy about a star attributed to a mysterious eastern diviner named Balaam and preserved in the Old Testament scriptures. The route to the prophetic star of Num 24:17 was already prepared by the many messianic interpretations of this passage in pre-Christian Judaism. Indeed, Christians could, and often did, appeal to Num 24:17 as a prophecy of the Christ without any recourse to Matthew's story of the star-led magi. Nonetheless, the first linkage of Num 24:17 with Matt 2:1–12 occurs very early, probably prior to 150 CE. By the end of the second century, equating the two scriptural stars was a well-established exegetical move that continued throughout the patristic period in sermons, scriptural commentaries, theological treatises, and hymns. It also occurred in apocryphal retellings of the magi narrative. If the hypothesis put forward in this paper is correct, the earliest such apocryphal narrative was composed soon after Matthew's star was first brought together with Balaam's: Sometime in the second century, an unknown early Christian composed an account of Balaam's descendants, who preserved his prophecy, looked for the promised star until its appearance, and then journeyed to Bethlehem, having become Matthew's magi. If we can trust the witness of the *OIM*, this account was given the title the *Books of Balaam*. The magi of Matthew inspired many other apocryphal authors, including (in the second or third centuries) the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Apocryphon of Seth*, and the *Revelation of Magi*, although these last two could be the same work. Later, Ps.-Eusebius, the so-called *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, and most probably others again took up and re-told the story of the magi. Of these apocryphal accounts, only the *Protevangelium* and *Ps.-Matthew*, whose narratives about the magi are brief and stick close to the text of Matthew, have no interest in Balaam's star. It was just possible to re-tell the tale of Matthew's magi without recourse to Balaam, but it was not the preferred course.

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Matthew's Star, Luke's Census, Bethlehem, and the Quest for the Historical Jesus

Annette Merz

Is the Star of Bethlehem a historical phenomenon that should be taken into account by historians interested in the historical Jesus, e.g., scholars who, from a strictly historical viewpoint, ask what we can and cannot know about the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth? Many eminent scholars have examined this question before,¹ mostly with a highly skeptical outcome, and the present author is no exception.² Nevertheless, as scholarly discussions develop, old questions have to be rephrased and old answers have to be re-evaluated in the light of the new theories, new sources, and new insights brought forward. The Groningen conference that approached the Star of Bethlehem from an impressive variety of disciplines offered me the opportunity to re-engage with questions about the reliability of some important historical facts (or fictions?) underlying the traditions about Jesus' descent and nativity (see part 3 below). The presence of so many astronomers, scientists working in the so-called exact sciences, called for a systematic treatment of the question of how astronomical data should be integrated into Jesus research and what historical outcomes can be hoped for in the combination of textual and astronomical data (see part 2 below). Before proceeding to address these issues, I begin by giving a short

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- 1 The most important study is still R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977, new updated edition 1993). Other important contributions include J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (vol. 1 of *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 205–52; C. T. Davis, "Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1:18–2:23," *JBL* 90 (1971): 404–21; E. D. Freed, *The Stories of Jesus' Birth: A Critical Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); J. Corley (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009); H. W. Hoehner, "The Chronology of Jesus," in: *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3 (eds. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011), 2315–59; R. T. France, "The Birth of Jesus," in: *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, 2361–81; A. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View* (Fareham: Onus Books, 2013).
 - 2 See my earlier treatment of the Star of Bethlehem and related questions in G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 151–61.

sketch of the main problems the historian faces with regard to the historical evaluation of the sources about Jesus.³

Historical Jesus Research between Overdrawn Historical Skepticism and Unwarranted Confidence

The most detailed sources about Jesus are texts written by believers who wanted to communicate their faith in Jesus Christ the risen Lord; these texts show only a limited historical interest, let alone a critical historical consciousness. Historical Jesus research emerged as a sub-discipline of New Testament studies in the time of the Enlightenment and has continued to refine its insights into the development of Christian literature and its methods of historical evaluation. But ever since Hermann Samuel Reimarus first stated the discrepancy between Jesus' proclamation of the coming kingdom of God and the early Christians' faith in the risen Lord and Savior of humankind, the main challenge has been to navigate between the Scylla of overdrawn historical skepticism⁴ and the Charybdis of unwarranted confidence in the complete reliability of the sources. Recognisance of the heterogeneity of the material preserved in the gospels and other Christian and non-Christian sources, as well as reflection on historical method, is crucial here. I am still convinced that Jesus, just as any other person who made an impact on world history, can be approached with purely historical interests and methods and that it is useful to uphold the distinction between the historical Jesus and Jesus as remembered by the early Christian sources. This is not to say that we can be successful in answering all the questions the historian is interested in; far from it. As with any historical investigation, the age, quantity, (in)dependence, and character of the available sources limit the scope and the precision of our findings as well as the degree of probability that can be reached.

I want to start with two short examples that will take us into the field of the historical facts regarding Jesus' life—as opposed to the field of the historicity of his utterances⁵—and will demonstrate some of the historical principles at

3 See the more extensive treatment in Theissen and Merz, *Jesus*, 1–124.

4 Theissen and Merz, *Jesus*, 90–124. See also M. Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2014); B. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

5 The historicity of the utterances of Jesus is mostly treated under the question of their “authenticity” and has become stuck in the struggle over the so-called criteria of authenticity in Jesus research. The state of the discussion is adequately covered in the volume by

work in evaluating them. Although it might not seem so at first glance, both examples will turn out to be relevant for the historical problems connected to the Star of Bethlehem.

The majority of historical investigators are rightly convinced—to a very high degree of probability—that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person, who died as a religious leader on a Roman cross under the legal responsibility of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, in Jerusalem between the years 26 and 36 CE. Many independent sources that all corroborate this inference lead to this historical assessment, which also fits into the general framework of first-century Jewish history and can explain the subsequent development of Christianity.⁶ Various details, some of which will be dealt with later on in this chapter, remain uncertain, to be sure, due to differences and inconsistencies between the sources or to a lack of specific information. However, based on a critical historical investigation of the sources, the overall picture is not to be doubted.⁷

On the other hand, we do encounter traditions that must clearly be evaluated as legendary, born out of pious imagination, with the intention of filling in blank spots in the hero's biography and illustrating certain theological convictions. For example, consider the following story from Jesus' childhood:

When this boy Jesus was five years old he was playing at the crossing of a stream [...] Having made soft clay he moulded from it twelve sparrows. And it was the Sabbath when he did these things. [...] When a certain Jew saw what Jesus was doing while playing on the Sabbath, he at once went and told his father Joseph, "See, your child is at the stream, and he took clay and moulded twelve birds and has profaned the sabbath."

C. Keith & A. Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2012). As the present contribution is mainly concerned with historical knowledge regarding some basic events of Jesus' life, I will not engage with this important discussion here.

- 6 The criterion used in the evaluation combines source critical aspects—many independent sources can be interpreted coherently as referring to the same historical event—with overall historical plausibility, which has two dimensions: namely, plausibility of influence—which connects Jesus to emerging Christianity—and plausibility of historical context—which shows that the event fits into the constraints of Palestinian Judaism of the first century CE. For this so-called criterion of double historical plausibility, see Theissen and Merz, *Jesus*, 116–18.
- 7 For a more detailed evaluation, see J. B. Green, "The Death of Jesus," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3 (eds. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011), 2383–2408.

And when Joseph came to the place and looked, he cried out to him, saying, "Why do you do on the Sabbath things which it is not lawful to do?" But Jesus clapped his hands and cried out to the sparrows and said to them, "Be gone!" And the sparrows took flight and went away chirping.⁸

There are many conclusive indications proving that this story does not contain any valuable memory from Jesus' life. The story pretends to anticipate (but factually imitates and outweighs) well-known Sabbath conflict stories preserved in the Synoptic Gospels but—presumably unwittingly—contradicts Jesus' characteristic refusal to produce signs for proof. We are dealing with a piece of narrative theology demonstrating Jesus' divine nature, participating in God's creational power, which assumes a developed form of high Christology that does not plausibly fit into early first-century Judaism. It also contradicts the laws of nature that Jesus as a human person would have been subjected to according to critical historical evaluation. That the story comes from a relatively late apocryphal gospel should not count as an (important) argument undermining its claim to factual accuracy. All sources, canonical and apocryphal, Christian and otherwise, must be taken into consideration. There are pious inventions to be found in the canonical Gospels and reliable historical data preserved in apocryphal sources.⁹ What is more relevant than age and provenance is the fact that we are dealing with a story from Jesus' youth—that is, from the time before he began his public career, as is also the case in the birth and infancy stories of the gospels. Historians—correctly, I think—tend to be much more suspicious about the reliability of material from this phase of Jesus' life. As a general rule, we encounter more legendary material in ancient biographical texts in those parts of the narrative that are devoted to the hero's nativity and youth. This is probably due to two factors: (1) the scarcity of relevant data, especially with persons who were not predestined by noble birth

8 The Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:1–4, cited from J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). On this gospel, see also U. U. Kaiser and J. Tropper, "Die Kindheitserzählung des Thomas," in *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, vol. 2 (eds. C. Marksches and J. Schröter; Evangelien und Verwandtes 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 930–59. Only after finishing this chapter did I recognize that A. Adair (*Star of Bethlehem*, 107) in passing uses the same example. This probably indicates that it forces itself on the historically minded as an illuminating comparison!

9 Relatively speaking, there is more potentially reliable material to be found in the canonical Gospels due to their earlier date of composition compared to most apocryphal texts. Nevertheless, we do find some probably very old traditions in the Gospel of Thomas, for example, and some very obvious legendary material in the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., Matt 14:28–32; 17:27).

for future greatness, and (2) the ancient historian's habit of letting the future fortunes and character of the hero be foreshadowed by portents and demonstrations of cataphoric deeds. We will be dealing with this question later on in more detail.

To conclude this introduction: We must be aware of the heterogenic character of the sources at our disposal. The vast majority of data we use in Jesus research is textual data—in the case of the gospels, this is mostly narration of the words of Jesus and recounting of events in his life. We have no possibility of getting direct access to those past events, and there are lots of differences and inconsistencies between traditions as well as clear signs of theological reflection that fuel the suspicion that the traditions have been embellished to a greater or lesser extent. In many cases, we deal with what has been called “refracted memory.”¹⁰ That parts of the Jesus tradition have been completely invented must definitely be taken into account, although overdrawn skepticism seems unjustified.

Do Astronomical Data Have the Potential to Provide a Way to More Historical Certainty in Jesus Research?

In many cases, the historical evaluation of the available textual data about Jesus turns out to be inconclusive or disputed, and so scholars are desperate to lay their hands on other data that may add to our understanding or even provide unquestionable proof. Two sorts of evidence commend themselves for this purpose: archaeological and astronomical data. Before I turn to the latter, let me briefly examine the related field of archaeological data, which has received much scholarly interest in recent decades.¹¹

Archaeology provides evidence in the form of non-textual material remains and documentary textual data (especially documentary papyri and inscriptions) that can be related to the Palestinian Jesus movement and emerging Christianity and helps to embed the textual data in its historical context. It sometimes serves to clarify or even rectify specific textual information. This was the case with the inscription found in Caesarea in 1961 with the name of Pontius Pilate and his military title “prefect” on it, a title not known from

10 I borrow this concept from A. Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009).

11 See especially J. H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (ABRL 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), and Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

the gospels and anachronistically handed down as “procurator” by Tacitus (Ann. 15,44).¹² Archaeological data is especially helpful in enhancing our knowledge of everyday life and underlying socio-economic and cultural patterns that are normally presupposed but not explicitly referred to in texts. Archaeological artifacts have the promise of bringing us in direct (“touchable”) contact with the past, as everybody who has visited the archaeological sites around the Sea of Galilee knows. But while the value of archaeological data in reconstructing the frameworks of life in first-century Palestine can hardly be overestimated, its direct and uncontested usability is generally overrated. A book titled “Excavating Jesus”¹³ promises the impossible: direct, unmediated, and unambiguous contact with Jesus. The reality is that the interpretation of archaeological data is normally as highly disputed as the interpretation of texts.¹⁴ What is more, they can hardly ever be related to a certain person and a certain event in history, especially if we are dealing with ordinary people. Additionally, they always need to be combined with other data from texts and are thus “contaminated” with the tentativeness of the historical evaluation of texts.

Can astronomical data then provide the royal road to historical certainty, at least in some fortunate cases? With astronomical observations and calculations, we can achieve for an admittedly small part of reality what is out of reach in most other parts: a certain event in history—a stellar constellation, the movement of a planet—can sometimes be reconstructed beyond reasonable doubt *post factum*. *Theoretically* astronomical science could provide the historian with unambiguous data, and thus there will certainly be instances where an astronomer really can decide an issue of chronology in historical research. Unfortunately I have not come across any *real case* related to Jesus where it actually works like that. Two reasons for this are obvious: First, there are not many instances where movements in the universe are directly connected to earthly events. Second, if this happens, the astral event must correctly and convincingly be connected to earthly events in order to be of historical significance. Those bygone earthly events are not accessible to direct observation or calculation; they are only indirectly approachable through written sources,

12 See C. E. Evans, “Excavating Caiaphas, Pilate, and Simon of Cyrene: Assessing the Literary and Archaeological Evidence,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, 323–40, especially 334–36.

13 J. D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

14 See S. Freyne (“Archaeology and the Historical Jesus,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, 64–83) on the contested faces of Jesus the Galilean that can be constructed from archaeological approaches to culture, class, and gender.

with all of their obscurities and ambiguities. There are at least three scenarios the historian has to reckon with when there is (or seems to be) an astronomical phenomenon involved in a textually presented chain of events: (a) *no* verifiable astronomical event, but verisimilitude without historical basis; (b) *one* verifiable astronomical event, connected to more or less disputed historical events; or (c) a *variety* of astronomical phenomena that may or may not be connected to historical events that are more or less disputed. In the following, I will discuss all three scenarios and relate them to the case of the Star of Bethlehem.

In scenario a, if we learn about an astronomical event through an ancient text, we first have to evaluate the status of the information. The astronomical phenomenon depicted in a text may or may not turn out to be a real event that took place in history. It might also be a literary invention that either echoes real astral phenomena or is intended to narrate a miraculous manifestation of God's supernatural power in the sky.¹⁵

In the case of the three hours of darkness that fell, according to Mark 15:33 (reproduced by Matt 27:45), on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, an event interpreted as an *eclipse* in Luke 23:44–45, there is a wide consensus that there is little to commend the hypothesis of a real astronomical event,¹⁶ be it only because the darkness induced by eclipses does not last three hours and eclipses do not occur at the time of the full moon, when Passover is celebrated.¹⁷

15 A third option that should be mentioned for the sake of completeness is the possibility of mental delusion or deceit, as often happens with people spotting UFOs nowadays. In antiquity, this might (for example) have been the case with testimonies of celestial observations in connection with the advent to power and the apotheosis of Roman emperors. I am not aware of any case where that possibility has to be considered in Jesus studies.

16 W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison (*The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* vol. 3, Matthew 19–28 [ICC 3; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997], 623) clearly prefer a symbolic interpretation. Nevertheless, they do not want to totally “bar the possibility that the addition was prompted by something that really happened—storm clouds [...] or perhaps a sirocco” and mention that Plutarch's remark on the sun's paleness in the year after Julius Caesar's murder was confirmed by Chinese chronicles. But here we are dealing with meteorological data, which is much more difficult to validate than astronomical data.

17 See A. Demandt, *Verformungstendenzen in der Überlieferung antiker Sonnen- und Mondfinsternisse* (AGSK 7; Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1970), 467–527; D. C. Allison, “Darkness at Noon (Matt 27:45),” in *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (ed. D. C. Allison; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 79–105; A. Merz, “Existentiële duisternis of incident in het heelal. De zonsverduistering tijdens de kruisiging,” *Interpretatie* 20 (2012): 20–23.

Many have argued that the Star of Bethlehem must be explained as an edifying literary fiction that, inspired by popular Jewish haggadic traditions, narrativizes the messianic prediction of “a star that shall come forth out of Jacob” (Num 24:17). Arguments that sustain this interpretation are as follows:

- Matthew is the only ancient source that mentions the star; no other text(s) of Christian, Jewish, or other Near-Eastern origin indicate that contemporaries observed something worth being recorded in the sky during the relevant period and in the relevant region.¹⁸ This dependence on only one—not very precise (see below)—source is a serious impediment for any interpretation that reckons with historical remembrance of a remarkable celestial event.
- Matthew wrote in a cultural climate where proofs from scripture and the interpretation of the present in the light of a normative past were extremely common. The whole infancy story bears numerous traces of legendary retelling of scripture, especially using elements of the Moses haggadah and texts dealing with messianic expectations of a renewed Davidic kingship. Not only the star, but also other (narrative) elements—including the genealogy, Bethlehem, the magi, the theme of true kingship, the slaughter of the innocents, the flight to Egypt, and the return—have been convincingly shown to be part of these two reservoirs of very popular early Jewish traditions.¹⁹
- Messianic interpretations of Num 24:17 are abundantly attested, starting with the LXX and including Qumran and other Palestinian as well as Diaspora evidence.²⁰ This enhances the probability that this text from

18 There are two possible exceptions if we include Chinese sources. They attest a comet, which was seen in March 5 BCE and in April 4 BCE, and Halley’s Comet, which appeared in 12–11 BCE. See A. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 34–35.

19 See J. D. Crossan, “Structure and Theology of Mt. 1.18–2.23,” *Cahiers de Joesphologie* 16 (1968): 119–35; Brown, *Birth*, 45–232; M. Hengel and H. Merkel, “Die Magier aus dem Osten und die Flucht nach Ägypten (Mt 2) im Rahmen der antiken Religionsgeschichte und der Theologie des Matthäus,” in *Orientierung an Jesus* (ed. P. Hoffmann; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder; 1973), 139–69; Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, *Matthew 1–7* (ICC 1. Edinburgh: Clark, 1988), 190–95; D. C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 140–65; U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, vol. 1, *Matt 1–7* (EKK; Düsseldorf: Patmos, Benziger & Neukirchener Verlag, 5th revised edition 2002), 123–26, including the table on 126a.

20 See the articles by F. G. Martínez, E. Tigghelaar, J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, G. H. van Kooten, S. Beyerle, A. Houtman and H. Sysling, R. Nikolsky, T. Nicklas, and J. W. van Henten in G. H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten, eds., *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism*,

scripture was used by those who proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Quite a few verbal and plot agreements between contemporary receptions of Balaam's oracle and Matthew's story exist, the most striking being Balaam's origin ἐξ ὀρέων ἀπ' ἀνατολῶν (out of the mountains of the east, Num 23:7 LXX) and his description as a μάγος/magus (and the father of famous μάγοι/magi),²¹ which could have inspired Matt 2:1: μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν (magi from the East).²² Already by the second century, we find a fully developed interpretation of Matthew 2 in the light of the biblical Balaam account and its postbiblical Jewish interpretation, with Origen explicitly identifying the magi as descendants of Balaam.²³ This does not prove the dependence of the author on this material beyond reasonable doubt, but in my view it makes the hypothesis that those early recipients explicated intertextual connections implied and unostentatiously elaborated by the author very plausible.

- The way the star is depicted in the story clearly gives the impression that the author wants to describe a miraculous manner of moving and guiding the magi, perhaps reminiscent of divine or angelic guidance or other guiding stars extant in ancient literature.²⁴ Especially in verse 9, the supernatural

Early Christianity and Islam (ТВН 11; 2008); K. von Stuckrath, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie: Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 49; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 102–58 (“Num 24, 17 als Agens jüdischer Politik und Herrschaftslegitimation”).

- 21 See Philo, Mos. 1.276 (Balaam). Davies and Allison (*Matthew 1–7*, 231) mention the following sources, which contain references to the magicians Jannes and Jambres as sons of Balaam: Numenius of Apamea (2nd cent. AD) in Eusebius, Praep. ev. 9.8; Tg. Ps.-J. on Exod 1:15 and Num 22:2; Sefer ha-Yashar 61–85; Ambrosiaster, 2 Tim. on 3:8; SB 3; 660–64. Admittedly these latter references postdate Matthew, but the tradition is rooted in pre-Christian Jewish circles, as Philo's testimony on Balaam himself proves.
- 22 Other verbal and plot agreements are: (1) the use of the same Greek root to describe the rising of the star (ἀστήρ) in both—compare ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐξ Ἰακωβ (Num 24:17 LXX) with τὸν ἀστέρα ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (Matt 2:2) and ὁ ἀστήρ, ὃν εἶδον ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (Matt 2:9); and (2) the similar endings of the story—compare Num 24:25 with Matt 2:12.
- 23 See T. Nicklas (“Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 242–46), who discusses Justin (*Dialogus cum Tryphone* 106.4), Irenaeus of Lyon (*Adversus haereses* 3.9.2), Hippolyt (*Commentary on Daniel*), and Origen (*Contra Celsum* 1.60; *Homiliae in Numeros* 13.7; 15.4) as the oldest available interpretations of Matt 2 in the light of the Balaam tradition.
- 24 For example, divine guidance, as presupposed in the Exodus (Exod 13:21; 40:38; see Chrysostom, Hom. on Mt. 6.3), or angelic guidance, as the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy 7 has it. Guiding stars in literature include: *Aeneid* 2.692–704; Diodorus Siculus 16.66.3 (see Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 246).

character of the star is revealed: “it [...] went before the magi until it eventually stood right above the place where the child was (ὁ ἀστὴρ [...] προῆγεν αὐτοῦς, ἕως ἐλθῶν ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον).” This implies a movement not feasible for a real star: observably traveling south for some hours, cognizably stopping, and accurately indicating the place of the child, which requires an extremely low altitude.²⁵ Theories that try to reconcile this description with a plausible movement of planets (‘retrograde motion and stationing’) have to assume that, to a certain degree, Matthew misunderstood the description of the original transmitters, which weakens the hypothesis considerably. This is especially the case as the elements are functional in the present literary context (they are needed to find and identify the child), whereas they are not required in the hypothetically reconstructed description. Given that whoever was searching for the child could not count on the star as his guide for the exact location, and given that a planet becoming stationary in retrograde movement would only be ascertainable in retrospect after quite some time, why would it have been mentioned at all?

Thus there are serious arguments that buttress the interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem as a literary phenomenon. Still, we need to investigate the hypothesis that the text refers to a verifiable astronomical event. If the celestial phenomenon described in a text or presupposed by it is (possibly) thought of as being the reflection of a real astronomical occurrence, there are two scenarios to be considered. The astral event might be one identifiable event in a chain of events that can or cannot be established with reasonable certainty (scenario b), or there might be more than one astronomical phenomenon that could possibly meet the requirements of a given text, in which the other related elements may or may not be evaluated as historically credible (scenario c).

A fairly clear case of scenario b is the so-called *Sidus Iulium* (“Julian Star”), the appearance of a comet in the year 44 BCE, which played a role in the dedication of Julius Caesar. Although many of the historical details surrounding the occurrence and subsequent interpretation of the comet remain disputed

25 See the detailed analyses of A. Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 92–97; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 246–47. From the earliest reception in the Prot. Jas. 21.3 through the church fathers (Adair cites Augustine, Reply to Faustus 2.6f; Davies and Allison cite Chrysostom, Hom. on Mt. 6.3) until Johannes Kepler, the miraculous nature of the star was emphasized. Luz (*Matthäus*, 162) also pleads in favor of an obvious miracle. B. T. Viviano (“The Movement of the Star, Matt 2:9 and Num 9:17,” *RB* 103 [1996]: 58–64) notes an intertextual reference to Num 9:17.

among scholars, there is little doubt as to which celestial event is referred to by historical and poetic texts as well as images and numismatic evidence.²⁶

In Jesus studies, there seems to be no case where scenario b is easily applicable. Quite some effort has been made to identify the day and the year of the last Passover of Jesus by conclusive astronomical calculation.²⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, the hope of achieving historical certainty is futile, as we are not able to acquire answers beyond reasonable doubt with regard to many of the connected events.²⁸ Astronomical computation can narrow down the number of possible years of Jesus' crucifixion by specifying the years in which 14 or 15 Nisan fell on a Friday, but too many associated chronological questions remain unanswerable—most importantly, the questions of when Jesus' public ministry started (Luke 3:1 does not provide an undisputable starting point) and how much time passed before he made his last visit to Jerusalem. It also matters whether Jesus died on the evening before Passover (Johannine chronology) or had a Passover meal with his disciples and died on the first day of the feast itself (Synoptic chronology).²⁹ In the end, this turns out to be what I have called above a case c) scenario—several possible astronomical events have to be matched with contentious and partly conflicting textual data, which leads to a process of weighing probabilities without a conclusive outcome.

In the case of the Star of Bethlehem, the (obvious scenario c) situation is even more complex. Up to the present day, scientists have not even been able to agree on the type of astronomical phenomenon that the text in its ambiguity³⁰ presupposes—a bright star, a comet, a supernova, or a constellation of celestial objects that would have aroused the attention of astrologers and gone unno-

26 J. T. Ramsey and A. Lewis Licht, *The Comet of 44 BC and Caesar's Funeral Games* (American classical studies; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997). One should note, however, that the consensus is not total; some have argued that the *Sidus Julium* could have been a nova or a supernova (*The Comet of 44 BC*, 191–92), and Brian G. Marsden does not even preclude the possibility that the Roman observation is “entirely fictitious” (*The Comet of 44 BC*, xiii, in Marsden's foreword to the book).

27 Cf. Hoehner, “Chronology,” 2339–59 for an overview of all related problems.

28 See my response on C. Humphreys' essay “The Historical Last Week of Jesus,” in *Glimpses of Jesus Through the Johannine Lens* (John, Jesus, and History, vol. 3; eds. P. N. Anderson, F. Just, SJ, and T. Thatcher; Atlanta/Leiden: SBL Press/Brill, forthcoming); and Theissen and Merz, *Jesus*, 157–60.

29 I leave out the complicating matter of potentially conflicting chronologies used by different Jewish groups.

30 The ambiguity is due to the above-mentioned Matthean intention of depicting a miraculous star.

ticed by ordinary people.³¹ Accordingly, the number of proposed resolutions is tremendous, with no consensus within reach. Other contributions in this volume deal with this problem in detail,³² so I will here focus on the accessory issue of the unavoidable conjunction of any proposed astronomical solution with textual data that need to be ascertained historically. It has not been sufficiently recognized in earlier treatments of this question that there has to be a mutual interference between the historical evaluation of the textual data and the astronomical solution promoted. If one favours the hypothesis of a comet or a supernova underlying the Matthean birth story, the minimum requirement of reliable historical details in the story is not very high. Not Bethlehem (place), King Herod (time) and the magi (expert witnesses), or the supposed Davidic descent of Jesus (ideological core of the story) are necessary assets. All that is needed is the remembrance of ordinary people that there had been some remarkable celestial spectacle during the night (or around the time) when Jesus was born. Only ordinary witnesses to the astronomical event are indispensable; all of the rest could have been a later legendary development, as people became increasingly convinced about the significance of Jesus. Things are remarkably different with regard to the sophisticated conjunction and horoscope hypotheses that have been brought forward by Molnar and others. Again, I will not deal with the internal (im)probabilities of these theories, as others in this volume are more competent to do so. I just want to draw attention to the fact that those theories require many more narrative details of the story as substantially reliable historical facts. Because the supposed constellation of planets is meaningful only in a global political frame of reference, as a portent of the birth of a king, the following elements (at a minimum) are part of the indispensable historical requirements: astronomers of some kind, who would note and communicate the extraordinary constellation (the expert witnesses); Bethlehem (the place where the king will be born); Herod (the time period as well as the rival of the new king); and the Davidic descent of Jesus (the ideological core of the story). In the next paragraph, I will ask what a critical historical evaluation can reveal with regard to the last three points. I will not address the question of the magi, as they are the topic of several other

31 There is one other proposed solution that should be mentioned but need not be dealt with here: the star as a "real" miraculous apparition beyond scientific determinability. Historians, natural scientists, and literary scholars are not able to respond scientifically to this claim from within their scientific frames of reference.

32 See especially Michael R. Molnar, Aaron Adair, Bradley E. Schaefer, David W. Hughes, Peter Barthel, and Alexander Jones in this volume.

contributions to this volume.³³ However, my tentative appraisal is that caution is advised regarding a historical core in the depiction of the magi. Besides the meager attestation in only one source (Matthew), there are two reasons for this: the motive fits in several literary contexts that may have been relevant to the development of the story (as mentioned above), and the magi as kingmakers are directly connected to the question of the contested Davidic descent of Jesus, which will be treated below.

My conclusions as to what we can expect from astronomical data in the business of historical Jesus research are quite skeptical so far. The hope of getting verifiable data beyond doubt through astronomy must be recognized as an illusion. It has been shown that the desired scenario b—one verifiable astronomical event indubitably connected to an uncontested historical event—is probably not to be found in the Jesus tradition. All cases where astronomy is relevant are what I have labelled scenario a) or c) cases. They are either clear examples of literary fiction (the darkness/eclipse at the crucifixion) or discom-bobulated historical situations where several astronomical calculations might fit into competing reconstructions of events, with various degrees of historical probability involved (the date of the crucifixion). The decision of whether the Star of Bethlehem should be regarded as an a) or a c) case, in my view, can only be made after a historical evaluation of the connected historical events.

Historical Evaluation of Events Connected to the Star: Refracted Memory or Invented Tradition?

The historical evaluation of data connected to the Star of Bethlehem in Matthew 2 must include the whole of the Jesus tradition. The Lucan birth story will require special attention, because both the agreements and the contradictions with the Matthean narrative are intriguing and provide puzzles for historical reconstruction.³⁴ But the rest of the Jesus tradition is just as relevant. If the birth narratives include some traces of memory with regard to the time, the place, and the religious evaluation of Jesus' birth, those same traces should ideally be present throughout the rest of the material. If, on the other hand, the

33 See especially Mathieu Ossendrijver, Albert de Jong, Roger Beck, and George van Kooten in this volume.

34 Instructive lists of the agreements can be found in J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke 1–IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981), 307; and P. M. McDonald, S. H. C. J., “Resemblances between Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2,” in *New Perspectives on the Nativity*, 200–01.

birth narratives and the rest of the material are divided with regard to essential parts of the data, this enhances the possibility that pious fiction is at work in the traditions about the birth of the hero.

Born in Bethlehem?

All of the canonical and extracanonical reports on Jesus' birth transmit Bethlehem as his place of nativity.³⁵ Some scholars have reconstructed a pre-Matthean version of the birth story not yet connected to Jerusalem and Bethlehem but located in Nazareth, but whether this reconstructed oral version ever existed remains speculation.³⁶ The witnesses differ from each other with regard to the precise location. Whereas Joseph is a resident of Bethlehem according to Matthew, and the birth seems to have taken place at his house, Mary is forced to give birth in a stable in Luke's account and in a cave in the *Protoevangelium of James*, as Joseph and Mary are travelling to Bethlehem due to the imperial census (which will be dealt with below). Outside the Matthean and Lucan birth narratives, Jesus is known as Jesus of Nazareth, and Nazareth is called his πατρις (hometown), which in the oldest source (Mark 6:1) must be understood as a designation of his origin and thus (by implication) as his birthplace.³⁷ In John 7:41–42, we find an unmistakable proof that people in Jerusalem presupposed Jesus' Galilean descent and had never heard of Bethlehem as his place of birth: "Others said, 'This is the Christ.' But some said, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the

35 Besides Matthew 2 and Luke 2, other sources that are sometimes taken into account include the *Protoevangelium of James* (17–21) and Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 78.6), which both give evidence that a certain cave in the vicinity of Bethlehem was venerated in the second century as the place where Jesus was born. The problem with these traditions is that it cannot be shown that they are clearly independent from the biblical accounts, which must have been known to both witnesses. Furthermore, the cave may have been added to the story of the birth in Bethlehem by applying another biblical proof text, Isa 33:16LXX: "He shall live in a lofty cavern of a strong rock." See the discussion in S. Mason and J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Where was Jesus Born? O Little Town of Nazareth or Bethlehem?" *Bible Review* 16 (2000): 31–46.

36 Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 195; Davis, *Tradition*, 421. Brown (*Birth*, 118) reconstructs a pre-Matthean narrative which included Bethlehem from the beginning, whereas Luz (*Matthäus*, 160) does not see sufficient evidence to detect inconsistencies and thus layers within the pre-Matthean story.

37 Note in this regard that Luke changes Mark's expression ἔρχεται εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ (Mark 6:1: he came into his home town) to ἦλθεν εἰς Ναζαρά, οὗ ἦν τεθραμμένος (Luke 4:16: he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up), obviously to exclude the most natural understanding of Nazareth being Jesus' birthplace.

Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" Later on, in 7:52, the argument is reused against Nicodemus, who is told: "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee."³⁸ As the evangelist does nothing to correct the view by adding other information, the most likely interpretation is that, to the author of John's Gospel, the Galilean provenance of Jesus was a given, and the author was aware that it formed a point of criticism against Christian convictions.³⁹ According to the Fourth Evangelist, the misunderstanding lies in the fact that those who stumble over the Galilean origin of Jesus have not understood his true provenance from above, from the Father.⁴⁰ John also shows the way in which the theologoumenon⁴¹ of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem most probably came into being. As Christians were convinced of the messiahship of Jesus, they concluded that he surely had been born in Bethlehem and eventually created birth stories localized in Bethlehem.

The contradictions between Matthew and Luke on the question of how the family happened to be present in Bethlehem and how the course of events developed after the baby's birth count heavily against historicity. Matthew presupposes Bethlehem as the hometown of Joseph, the son of David, and has the family move to Nazareth only much later, after the magi's visit and clandestine return had provoked Herod's slaughter of the innocents, which in turn caused the family's flight to Egypt, which allowed Matthew to cite another biblical proof text from Hos 11: "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Hos 11:1). The relocation of the family to Nazareth is motivated by fear of Archelaos, Herod's son, and is also accompanied by a scriptural proof (which keeps puzzling exegetes): "that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled; 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (2:23). In Luke, the family lives in Nazareth and

38 The same point is already made in John 1:45–46, where Nathanael contested Philip's conviction that "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" was the one "of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" with the words, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" See also John 6:42.

39 Other interpreters presuppose that the readers of John must have been fully aware of the Christian tradition of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and thus the misunderstanding of the Jews must not only be understood as a theological misunderstanding of Jesus' provenance "from above," but also (to the shared knowledge of author and readers) as revealing their ignorance of the facts. I am not convinced by this interpretation. It remains an important piece of historical information that the Davidic descent of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem were explicitly denied by Jews in Jerusalem and that the author of the gospel let this pass unchallenged.

40 See John 1:14; 3:16–17, 31–36; 6:38ff; 7:28, etc.

41 See Brown, *Birth*, 513–16.

comes to Bethlehem, the city of David, in obedience to the decree from Caesar Augustus that they should be enrolled in a world-wide census, and they return to Nazareth very quickly, stopping only to perform the necessary rituals in Jerusalem—the presentation of the child in the temple and the purification of the mother (40 days after birth, according to Lev 12). Within approximately seven weeks, the family was back in their hometown, Nazareth, and on the way back had stayed for several days in Jerusalem, undisturbed by any persecution or threat present there. Of course they never saw a glimpse of Matthew’s magi but enjoyed the visit of some shepherds, who had been informed of the birth by many angels instead. Thus we are dealing with two totally different stories, each with a consistent chronology, which are impossible to harmonize.

To conclude, Bethlehem is present in all versions of the nativity story, but there are also strong indications against historicity: the fact that Jesus’ origin in Bethlehem is explicitly denied in John 7:41–42, and that Nazareth is known as Jesus’ hometown in several sources and as the family’s dwelling place even in Matthew and Luke, who deal with this problem in irreconcilable ways in their arrangement of the plot of the birth stories. So the suspicion that Bethlehem as Jesus’ birthplace is a secondarily added attribute to substantiate the belief in Jesus as the Messiah is certainly warranted, especially as in Matthew’s account the biblical proof text (Micah 5:1,3) is cited alongside other scriptural proofs regarding elements of the story that are clearly theologically motivated and will not stand the test of historical factuality, such as the immaculate conception, the Egyptian episode, and the slaughter of the innocents.

The other point of agreement between Matthew and Luke regarding the historical relevance of Jesus’ birth has to do with the allotted timeframe in the last years of Herod the Great. All astronomical calculation requires a certain time or timeframe to begin with. It is thus especially important to investigate whether critical historical evaluation of the sources can secure this as a fairly reliable date.

In the Time of Herod the King . . . and the Decree of Augustus?

That Jesus was born under the reign of King Herod the Great (who died in 4 BCE)⁴² is often taken for granted, as both Matthew and Luke seem to presuppose it and it fits the incontestable timeframe of Jesus’ crucifixion under the governorship of Pontius Pilate (26–36 CE). But if one looks into it more deeply, serious doubts arise concerning the reliability of this information. I will deal with Matthew and Luke successively.

42 On the date of Herod’s death, see Hoehner, “Chronology,” 2315–20.

Matthew

Mark D. Smith has rightly emphasized that Herod the Great is an indispensable asset to the typological parallel between Jesus and Moses, which is the central theological theme of Matthew's infancy narrative. "If Matthew was to make his parallel with Moses work [...] he needed a tyrannical king willing to kill babies. [...] His parallel will not work without it. The only tyrant in the neighbourhood, both chronologically and geographically, was Herod the Great, who, according to Josephus, even killed three of his own sons. Matthew had every reason, therefore, to place the birth of Jesus in the reign of Herod the Great, whether or not he had any historical evidence on which to base that."⁴³ From a historical point of view, the slaughter of the innocents most certainly must be regarded as a legend mirroring Pharaoh's order to kill the sons of Israel (Ex 1–2) and echoing Herod's infamous cruelty towards his own family and subjects. Add to this the fact that, in common parlance, all the ruling descendants of Herod the Great could be referred to as "King Herod,"⁴⁴ and Jesus could have been born under Herod Archelaus (in Judea between 4 BCE and 6 CE) or under Herod Antipas (in Galilee after 4 BCE) and still would have been known to have been born "in the days of Herod the king (ἐν ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου βασιλέως)," which is the phrase Matt 2:1 and Luke 1:5 have in common, and which therefore could be regarded as the underlying common tradition. To conclude: it is not possible to decide with any certainty whether the references to Herod the Great in Matthew 1:5 and 2:22 are based on precise historical knowledge (identifying Herod the Great), on vague historical knowledge (born under an unspecified Herod subsequently identified with Herod the Great to fit the storyline), or on the narrator's historically informed imagination.

Luke

With Luke the problem is even more difficult, because his dating of the infancy story involves the family's travel to Bethlehem to meet the requirements of the census of Quirinius, which took place in 6/7 CE, a decade after Herod the Great's death (Luke 2:1–2). At the same time, Luke interweaves the stories of Jesus and the miraculous conception and birth of John the Baptist, who, according to Luke 1:5, was conceived under King Herod of Judea (mostly taken

43 Mark D. Smith, "Of Jesus and Quirinius," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 278–93, especially 291–92.

44 In Mark 6:14,22, Herod Antipas, who was not even king, is referred to as "King Herod;" in Acts 12:1, Herod's grandson Agrippa I is called "King Herod;" Archealaos is called "king" by Josephus in Ant 18.93, and he is referred to by the name Herod on his own coins and by Dio Cassius ("Herod of Palestine": 55.27.6); see M. D. Smith, "Jesus," 286, with further references.

to refer to Herod the Great). The angelic announcement of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit occurs when the elderly Elizabeth, who had been barren all of her life, is already six months pregnant (1:26–38). The proposals for solving the chronological problems of the Lucan infancy narrative are too numerous to be dealt with in detail,⁴⁵ but for the present purpose it will suffice to present the three basic possibilities and to point out their merits and demerits. These possibilities are: (a) Luke is not referring to the well-known census of Quirinius, but rather to an unknown earlier census carried out under the reign of Herod the Great; (b) Luke is referring to the census of Quirinius, and thus a major conflict with Matthew's dating must be noted; (c) Luke erroneously refers to the census of Quirinius and to the time of Herod the Great as contemporaneous, which would seriously devalue his historical reliability.

The first option (a) comes in two major variants. Some challenge the usual understanding of the word *πρώτη* (first) in Luke 2:2, taking it to mean *πρότερος* (former, prior), and translate the relevant passage as: "This registration took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria," or "This registration was before (that of) Quirinius governor of Syria."⁴⁶ Grammarians are still divided over the sheer possibility of understanding the sentence this way, but even apart from that issue, this interpretation has rightly been called "a last-ditch solution to save the historicity involved."⁴⁷ Quirinius has no function whatsoever in the story if it is not to provide a time designation. So why would he have been mentioned at all?⁴⁸ The second way of getting rid of the inconsistency has been to conjecture that the same Quirinius had undertaken an earlier census (not mentioned in ancient sources) during the time of Herod. But this is extremely improbable for at least three reasons: it does not fit the well-known

45 See W. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of Luke* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), especially 5–248; E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890), 105–43 (rev. ed. by G. Vermes and F. Millar, 1973, vol. 1, 399–427); A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 162–71; J. D. M. Derrett, "Further Light on the Narratives of the Nativity," *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 81–108; Brown, *Birth*, 547–56, 666–68.

46 This solution seems to have been first proposed by F. M. Heichelheim, "Roman Syria," in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed. T. Frank; Baltimore, 1938), 160–62; for a more recent discussion of this position, see B. W. R. Pearson, "The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 262–82 (especially 278–82 on the grammar of Luke 2:2); Hoehner, "Chronology," 2322–23; and (critically) M. Wolter, "Erstmals unter Quirinius! Zum Verständnis von Lk 2,2," *BN* 102 (2000): 35–41.

47 Fitzmyer, *Luke 1–IX*, 401.

48 This argument is already to be found in Schürer, *History*, vol. 2, 135.

biography of Quirinius, it does not correspond with the Roman policy to leave taxation to their local client rulers, and it is at odds with the fact that the well-known census of Quirinius—which provoked the resistance of Judas Galilaios precisely because it was the first time Judeans were forced to pay their taxes directly to the Romans—suits the Lucan context.⁴⁹ It provides a clearly recognizable point in time (referred to as part of recent Jewish history by the same author in Acts 5:37) and secondarily fulfils the apologetic function of picturing the Christian ancestors as loyal subjects to the emperor who complied with Roman taxation when others revolted. That this question is relevant to Luke can be seen, for example, in the passion narrative, where Luke is the only one of the evangelists to report the false accusation: “We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar (καλύοντα φόρους Καίσαρι διδόναι), and saying that he himself is Christ a king (καὶ λέγοντα ἑαυτὸν χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι)” (Luke 23:2).

So all attempts to deny that Luke is talking about the only census of Quirinius attested by ancient sources are unconvincing, which leaves the other two options (born in the time of the census and not under Herod the Great, or some chronological confusion on Luke’s part) to be investigated.

The solution argued for by Mark D. Smith, among others, (b) must certainly be regarded as a neat one that fits the main data and is conceivable in historical terms (which is not the same as probable, on which see below). He thinks that the reference to the census of Quirinius is part of the factual and easily verifiable memory connected to Jesus’ birth, which actually took place in Bethlehem. The “King Herod of Judea” mentioned in Luke 1:5 must then be identified with Archelaus. Thus this result does not presuppose major anachronisms on Luke’s side, but it does imply a serious conflict with Matthew’s account, which dates the birth of Jesus at least ten years earlier and is, in Smith’s view, based on haggadic story-telling as opposed to the historically sound presentation of Luke. Is this the most probable solution? I have my doubts, which are fuelled by several observations.

Firstly, this solution still does not cohere completely satisfactorily with the other chronological data provided by Luke in 1:5 and 3:1,23. Admittedly, the phrase “King Herod of Judea” (1:5) could be referring to Archelaus, especially if the context provides ample evidence regarding the person referred to or does not require further specification. But Luke does not provide any other details to contextualize this important scene-setting phrase, and thus an unprejudiced reader would automatically think of *the* Herod who gave name to the

49 See Fitzmyer, *Luke 1–IX*, 401–05 for details.

dynasty and was famous beyond the borders of his own country⁵⁰—and this is precisely how readers from antiquity onwards have unanimously understood Luke 1:5. The references to John the Baptist's proclamation in the 15th year of Tiberius⁵¹ (3:1) and Jesus being “about thirty years old” when he began his own ministry (3:23) some (how much?) time later also do not fit well with a birth in 6 CE. With this chronology, Jesus would have been between 23 and 27 years old when he died and somewhat younger when he began his ministry, which remains unsatisfactory.

Secondly, on this basis several features of the story still cannot be fully explained or have to be accounted for by learned conjectures that remain unprovable and seem inept. I will mention two major points of concern here. Luke 2:1 reports an edict of the emperor that announces a world-wide census at the time of Quirinius' governorship of Syria (“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled”). All historians agree that such a decree is unknown and not in accordance with Roman taxation policy and practices. The explanation that this is just another negligent exaggeration by a biblical author⁵² is not satisfying, because the remark clearly aims at connecting world history and the birth of the one who is called a savior and brings peace to earth (Luke 2:11,14). A slightly less unsatisfying explanation has been provided by R. E. Brown, who calls Luke 2:1 an “oversimplified statement,” meaning “that the census conducted (in Judea) by Quirinius as governor of Syria was in obedience to Augustus' policy of getting accurate population statistics for the whole Empire.”⁵³ Still, the problem remains that Joseph, as an inhabitant of Nazareth, would not have been subjected to a census in Judea, let alone his heavily pregnant wife. Scholars have conjectured that Joseph must have had property in Bethlehem (but obviously no real estate, see 2:7), chose “to maintain the legal status of his property,” and took “advantage of a tax loophole” by enrolling in a metropolis. By “registering his newborn child in the same place he would make the child eligible for the same

50 The fact that Luke mentions the brothers of Archelaus, Herod (= Antipas) and Philippus, as tetrarchs (literally: ruling as tetrarchs) in 3:1 in my view also contradicts the hypothesis that he would deliberately have applied the wrong title “king” to Archelaus in 1:5.

51 See Hoehner, “Chronology,” 2329–32 on the different possibilities for reckoning the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign (which is taken for granted as a reliable date without any scrutinizing, however).

52 Smith (“Jesus,” 288) calls it “a simple case of hyperbole akin to Matthew's statement that ‘all Judea was going out’ to be baptized by John (Matt 3.5).”

53 Brown, *Birth*, 548–49.

exemption when he came of age.”⁵⁴ Even apart from its doubtful verifiability,⁵⁵ that kind of reasoning seems misplaced, as the text does provide a clear reason for Joseph’s travel: “Joseph went [...] to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and the lineage of David” (Luke 2:4). The narrator is obviously not interested in providing verifiable details and credible background information but in furnishing particulars of theological relevance: city of David, house and lineage of David. Authors defending the historicity of Bethlehem often point out that no explicit citations of scripture are given that would prove the apologetic function of these story elements. Whoever argues in this way fails to recognize the highly allusive character of Luke’s Gospel and has a far too limited understanding of intertextuality. Davidian coloring is abundantly present and cannot be overlooked by readers acquainted with the scriptures of Israel.⁵⁶

In the end, I am not convinced that Luke had a clear picture regarding the time and circumstances of Quirinius’ census, and the connection to the time designation in 1:5 remains especially doubtful.⁵⁷ That is why I think that those

54 Smith, “Jesus,” 290.

55 I will not go into the details here, but it must be emphasized that all explanations of this kind draw on fragmentary, circumstantial evidence gained from different regions of the Roman Empire and thus must be regarded as highly speculative.

56 See a.o. Brown, *Birth*, 420–24.

57 M. Wolter (“Wann wurde Maria schwanger? Eine vernachlässigte Frage und ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis der lukanischen Vorgeschichte [Lk 1–2],” in *Von Jesus zum Christus. Christologische Studien. Festgabe für Paul Hoffmann* [ed. R. Hoppe & U. Busse; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1998], 405–22; and Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* [HNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 121) has suggested yet another possibility of relating the chronological data provided by Luke. He proposes to see the referent of the phrase “in those days” in Luke 2:1 not in the days of King Herod mentioned in 1:5, but in the sentence directly preceding 2:1, viz. 1:80, which concludes the story of John’s miraculous conception and birth from a barren mother with the summarizing statement: “And the child (John) grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.” Thus, according to Wolter, in Luke Jesus is born some ten years after John, when the census of Quirinius is conducted. Luke may thus be cleared of the accusation of getting the years so very wrong. This is certainly a possibility, but I am hesitant to agree wholeheartedly because it produces a twofold illogicality in the narrative. The annunciation to Mary, according to Luke 1:26, takes place when Elizabeth is six months pregnant, and Mary is then a virgin betrothed to Joseph. With Wolter’s reading, Mary would have gotten pregnant only ten years after the annunciation and must have been betrothed to Joseph for this whole period. So the price for granting chronological logic would be a major narratological flaw produced by Luke.

scholars who have argued for some kind of error regarding the chronological details might still be right.

In the following passage, I want to propose a new (in some aspects) solution to how to understand the difficult passage in Luke 2:1–2 by considering that Luke wrongly combined historical information regarding different kinds of censuses in the time of Caesar Augustus (c). I already mentioned that the formulation ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην (“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled”) in 2:1 has never been explained completely satisfactorily by scholars, who were forced to consider it as an unwarranted exaggeration or an oversimplified statement. But what if Luke actually intended to refer to an empire-wide census in the later years of Herod the Great? My hypothesis is that Luke indeed did some research on the census but did not dig deep enough. If we ask what information about censuses in the time of Augustus was easily accessible to a writer in the last quarter of the first century CE, one document stands out: the *Res Gestae*, Augustus’ own record of his life and accomplishments, published as a monumental funeral inscription engraved on two bronze pillars that stood in front of his mausoleum in Rome, with copies erected by the senate in several public places in the empire. We read about the censuses in this widely known document:

8. [...] in my sixth consulate (28 BCE) I made a census of the people with Marcus Agrippa as my colleague. I conducted a lustrum, after a forty-one year gap, in which lustrum were counted 4,063,000 heads of Roman citizens. Then again, with consular imperium I conducted a lustrum alone when Gaius Censorinus and Gaius Asinius were consuls (8 BCE), in which lustrum were counted 4,233,000 heads of Roman citizens. And the third time, with consular imperium, I conducted a lustrum with my son Tiberius Caesar as colleague, when Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Appuleius were consuls (14 ACE), in which lustrum were counted 4,937,000 of the heads of Roman citizens.⁵⁸

So there was an empire-wide census in 8 BCE (in the later years of King Herod) in which Roman citizens were enrolled. To be sure, Joseph and Mary would not have been Roman citizens and thus not have been obliged (or entitled) to enrol, but that fine distinction might have escaped Luke’s attention.

⁵⁸ *Res Gestae* 8 is quoted from the English translation made by Thomas Bushnell (1998), published at <http://classics.mit.edu/Augustus/deeds.html>. See also the edition by M. Giebel, *Augustus, Res gestae / Tatenbericht, Monumentum Ancyranum* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975).

He might simply not have known that the censuses of Roman citizens should be distinguished from provincial censuses, which were conducted in any province at a given time. Common knowledge among those at least superficially interested in Jewish history would only have been that many Jews resisted the call for enrolment when the first census was conducted in Judea by Quirinius, which is precisely the situation envisaged in Luke 2:2. Luke's second reference to "the days of the census (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς ἀπογραφῆς)" in Acts 5:37 shows that he had no clear idea of when to place Judas Galilaio, who taught that paying tax to the Romans was a violation of the first commandment and therefore opposed the census. Luke, putting words in the mouth of Gamaliel, pairs Judas with Theudas (Acts 5:36), a popular prophet who was eliminated by the Roman governor Cuspius Fadus in the year 44 CE, and wrongly presents Judas as the next imposter coming after Theudas. The only other source that mentions both resistance fighters in the same context and sequence (Judas after Theudas) is Josephus' *Antiquities* 20,97–102, where it is clear, however, that the sons of Judas were crucified after Theudas, whereas their father's activity is also mentioned, but in retrospect. So the assumption that Luke was not all too sure about the chronological details and might partly have misunderstood or wrongly reproduced information provided by literary sources or inscriptions he used for his inquiry is not at all inconceivable.⁵⁹

Thus, my suggestion for the easiest understanding of Luke 2:1–2 is the following: Luke presupposes that the census of Quirinius took place in the later years of Herod I or shortly after his death, when (as he wrongly concluded) Quirinius must have conducted the first census in Judea, which (according to his understanding) was part of one of Augustus' world-wide censuses.⁶⁰ That Luke derived his perception of a world-wide census from readily accessible imperial propaganda, such as the *Res Gestae*, is supported by at least three more points of reference to imperial propaganda in the Lucan story of Jesus' birth, one of them possibly to the *Res Gestae* specifically. In this document, Augustus praises himself five times for having restored peace (*Res Gestae* 12,

59 Another chronological inaccuracy in Luke is to be found in his other important synchronism: in Luke 3:(1–)2, where he speaks of the high priesthood (sg.) of Annas and Caiaphas, while only Caiaphas was high priest then; and in Acts 4:6, where he mistakenly calls Annas high priest, whereas the high priest in charge, Caiaphas, is also mentioned, but as a simple "member of the high-priestly family." Of course, these kinds of errors are not astonishing to the historian; they only count heavily for those who confuse the theological conviction of the inerrancy of scripture with factual accuracy in every detail.

60 He might have confused the uprising after the death of Herod (4 BCE) with the riots evoked by the census in 6 CE, as has been suspected by several scholars.

13, 25, 26), which was to be celebrated yearly at the *ara pacis Augustae* (consecrated by the senate in the field of Mars in 13 BCE) and which was symbolized by closing the doors of the temple of Janus three times within the lifetime of Augustus.⁶¹ We know from several imperial inscriptions that Augustus was honored as savior (σωτήρ) throughout the empire⁶² and that his reign was praised as εὐαγγέλια (good news) for the world (Priene, OGIS II 458, 37–38; 40–41). In the Lucan birth narrative, the setting of the census of the whole world ordered by Augustus, known as savior and bringer of peace by land and sea, provides the stage for the angelic announcement: “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy (εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην) which will come to all people, for to you is born this day in the city of David the *Savior*, who is Christ the Lord (σωτήρ ὃς ἐστὶν χριστὸς κύριος).” (Luke 2:10–11) And the heavenly host appear, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* (ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη) among men” (Luke 2:14).

Where Matthew’s Gospel builds its birth story around the antagonism of the newborn king of the Jews from Davidian royal lineage with the wicked King Herod, Luke chooses to present Jesus as universal savior and bringer of peace on earth, as implicitly opposed to the Roman emperor.⁶³ Whether Luke was aware of the chronological inconsistencies in his story cannot be discerned with certainty; neither can we determine whether mentioning the census under Quirinius was his own redactional choice or was already part of the source he used. If the latter is the case, and if real memory of the upsetting events under Quirinius by those who lived through them was the origin of the information, as Mark D. Smith has argued, the argument for Bethlehem as the place of birth would certainly be strengthened. At the same time, this would rule out the later years of Herod the Great as the timeframe of Jesus’ birth, and with it all astronomical calculations based on this timeframe. As I have

61 *Res Gestae* 12–13: “12 [...] When I returned to Rome from Spain and Gaul, having successfully accomplished matters in those provinces, when Tiberius Nero and Publius Quintilius were consuls (13 BCE), the senate voted to consecrate the altar of August Peace in the field of Mars for my return, on which it ordered the magistrates and priests and Vestal virgins to offer annual sacrifices. 13. Our ancestors wanted Janus Quirinus to be closed when throughout the all the rule of the Roman people, by land and sea, peace had been secured through victory. Although before my birth it had been closed twice in all in recorded memory from the founding of the city, the senate voted three times in my principate that it be closed.”

62 E.g., as “savior of the whole world” in Myra, cited by Fitzmyer, *Luke 1–IX*, 394; also in the Priene Inscription.

63 This position is often expressed, e.g., by Fitzmyer (*Luke 1–IX*, 394) and Brown (*Birth*, 415–16, 420). Wolter (*Lukasevangelium*, 128) is skeptical.

indicated above, I am skeptical about the historicity of the census motif, no matter whether it is regarded as Lucan or of pre-Lucan origin. It serves too many ideological and theological purposes: moving the family from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David; presenting the Christian ancestors as loyal subjects of the emperor and obedient taxpayers, and at the same time subtly demonstrating the surpassing of imperial propaganda by the real savior of the world. Thus, in my view, the time of Herod I can be neither proved nor ruled out on the basis of Luke's story of the nativity. The chronological difficulties must either be regarded as insoluble or compel us to believe that Luke did not have a clear idea of the chronological relationships between the events he narrated.

There is still one more chronologically relevant aspect that both nativity stories agree on, which has to be investigated further before we can draw conclusions about the Star of Bethlehem as a potentially historical or a literary phenomenon. In the last part of my chapter, I will look into the christological core of the stories.

Born and Recognized to Become the Messiah?

The huge discrepancies between the Matthean and Lucan accounts notwithstanding, both nativity stories agree that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was recognized as the future king and Messiah/Christ (Matthew 2:2,4,11) and as savior, Messiah/Christ, and bringer of peace (Luke 2:11,14), respectively. Both agree that in addition to heavenly agents (the Matthean star, the Lucan angel and multitude of the heavenly host), human witnesses (the magi and the shepherds) were involved, interacting with the newborn's parents and making known to them the greatness of the moment and the predicted future significance of their son. As historians, we have to ask whether this picture is best explained as a retrospect projection of messianic beliefs into the youth of the hero or as a refraction of memory. If the latter is the case, the rest of the Jesus traditions should concur with this picture to a certain extent. Thus, the last part of this chapter is dedicated to the question of whether the Jesus tradition as a whole allows for an early anticipation, acceptance, or celebration of the king-/messiahship of the newborn Jesus, as it is depicted in the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. From a historical point of view, and especially with regard to the Star of Bethlehem, this is an important question, because the observation and interpretation of celestial signs in antiquity is nearly exclusively oriented to persons of high standing and especially to (future) rulers. Matthew's storyline, with the clear opposition of the two kings, is in full accordance with this principle, but the question must be: Is it historically plausible that the connection between a heavenly sign and the newborn child of Mary was made by

contemporaries? To answer this question, we must ask who would have known about it, if some heavenly sign had been brought into connection with the newborn Jesus by the supposed historical ancestors of those who later became known as the magi and the shepherds? Obviously the family of Jesus and their social peers would have been informed by the first witnesses. In this light, it is noteworthy that we have several traditions that leave no doubt about the fact that the family of Jesus and his fellow villagers in Nazareth were not among the first followers of Jesus; indeed, on the contrary, we know that they resisted him and tried to bring his mission to an end.

Mark 3:20–21 reports: “And he went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family (οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ) heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying: he is beside himself (ἑξέστη).” When they later call him to come outside, Jesus distances himself from his family, saying: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looking around at those who sat around him, he continued: “here are my mother and my brothers!” (Mark 3:33–34). Luke and Matthew have considerably mitigated this tradition, especially leaving out the family’s comment declaring Jesus mentally ill. But a comparable picture emerges from other texts: John 7:5 states that “even his brothers did not believe in him,” and we have indications that it was only after an appearance of the risen Jesus that James came to believe that Jesus indeed had a divine mandate. The villagers of Nazareth did not even believe that Jesus was a prophet, let alone the Messiah, as we see in Mark 6:1–6. Their unbelief caused Jesus to say, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4). All of those traditions are very hard to explain had there been some early ascertainment of Jesus’ significance in the plan of God. To his fellow villagers, Jesus was, according to Mark 6:3, “the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon,” as well as several unnamed sisters, not some famous child who had been predestined for future greatness by a perceived heavenly sign.

The last point to be addressed is the question of whether Jesus was known to be a descendant of the house of David, which could have kindled messianic expectations. First, it has to be stated that there must have been many families in Jesus’ time that claimed Davidic descent of some kind without having any messianic ambitions.⁶⁴ So it is possible that Davidic lineage was ascribed

64 From rabbinic sources, we know that several rabbis claimed Davidic lineage: Hillel, Judah the Prince, Ḥiyya, and Huna. See J. Neusner, *The Parthian Period* (vol. 1 of *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 190–91, Appendix v: Tannaim and the Davidic line.

to Jesus' family without messianic expectations being necessarily involved. But do we have sufficient evidence to conclude that Joseph would have been addressed as "son of David," as Matthew has it (1:20), or "from the house and lineage of David," as Luke writes (2:4)? Or was the Davidic lineage of the family only secondarily (re-)constructed and connected to the growing awareness of Jesus' messianic character during his public appearances, or even after the resurrection? The evidence is complicated and inconclusive. On the one hand, there is early post-Eastern evidence for the attribution of Davidic origin to Jesus in the formulaic tradition (Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8), and the title "son of David" is present in Mark (10:47–48). On the other hand, there are once again strong indications that we are dealing with a concept which was absent from or debated in the earliest sources. In the Saying Source Q (which predates Mark), no traces of a Davidic ancestry are to be found. The two genealogies provided by Matthew and Luke substantiate this attribution with genealogical 'proof', which was already the source of much derision in antiquity because of the internal inconsistencies and contradictions. To be sure, both genealogies bring home their theological points in a very sophisticated way.⁶⁵ Both evangelists provide a theologically convincing view based on alternative readings of the messianic prediction to David in 2 Sam 7:12LXX ("I will raise up *your seed* [τὸ σπέρμα σου, singular!] after you [...] and I will establish his kingdom"). The Matthean list makes Jesus a descendant of all the kings of Judah who were descendants of David through Solomon, the heir to David's throne. The Lucan genealogy chooses to present him as a descendant of a non-royal branch of David's offspring via David's son Nathan.⁶⁶ This makes Jesus the only true descendant ("semen") of David, as a literal understanding of the singular in 2 Sam 7:12 would require him to be. Historically, the obvious problem remains that those genealogies cannot even agree on the identity of Jesus' grandfather and thereby reveal their secondary character. The probability that both genealogies are fictions is much higher than the assumption of the invention of one contrived ancestral chart when a genuine one was extant. Thus, R. E. Brown's

65 See M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies. With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 2nd ed. 1988); Brown, *Birth*, 57–95, K.-H. Ostmeyer, "Der Stammbaum des Verheißenen: Theologische Implikationen der Namen und Zahlen in Mt 1.1–17," *NTS* 46 (2000): 175–92.

66 According to M. D. Johnson (*Purpose*, 240–52), Luke might have followed Jewish interpretations in identifying David's son Nathan with the prophet of the same name and thereby stresses a prophetic ancestry of Jesus.

conclusion that the tradition of Jesus' Davidic origin was probably older than the attempts of Matthew and Luke to find a Davidic genealogy for Jesus stands.⁶⁷

Of course, there still remains the question of how we are to understand the Johannine denial of the Davidic origin of Jesus (John 7:42) in the light of the early post-Easter confession that Jesus was "from the seed of David according to the flesh" (ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα, Rom 1:3). Mark 12:35–37a (together with Barn 12:10) is another important tradition that has to be considered here. The Davidic sonship of the Messiah seems to be straightforwardly denied, which produces some friction between this account and the earlier positive usages of the acclamation of the Messiah as the Son of David in Mark 10:47–48 and 11:10. This friction serves "both to affirm and to qualify the idea of Davidic messianism" in Mark by strengthening the supremacy and future glory of the Son of God and elevated Son of Man (see the reference to Ps 110:1 in Mark 12:35 and 15:61–62) and by downplaying political associations.⁶⁸ Most certainly, however, the pre-Markan tradition meant what it said—that David calls the Messiah 'my Lord' precludes that the Messiah would be his son. This indicates that the Davidic origin of the Messiah was debated in some strands of Judaism and early Christianity and possibly even ridiculed or relativized by Jesus himself.⁶⁹

One explanation for this somewhat contradictory evidence may be found in the observation that the title "Son of David" was not exclusively connected to the political expectation of a future king from the line of David in Judaism. It has been convincingly shown that Jesus, as a successful exorcist, could have been linked to Solomon, the only person called "the son of David" in the Old Testament, who was also known as the most powerful exorcist and author of exorcistic literature in first-century Judaism.⁷⁰ It is thus possible that the therapeutic (Solomonic) interpretation of the title "Son of David" predated its messianic (Davidic) interpretation when first applied to Jesus.

67 *Birth*, 88.

68 J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (AB 27A; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 850.

69 According to C. Burger (*Jesus als Davidsson* [FRLANT 98; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970], 52–59), who develops a thought from R. Bultmann, the early church disputed that the Messiah had to be the son of David because Jesus did not meet that requirement (see John 7:42). More convincing in my eyes is the view that Jesus himself addressed the issue, as is also argued by Marcus (*Mark 8–16*, 848). A full recent treatment of the Son of David question, which highlights the function of the citation of Ps 110 in the context of Jesus' confrontation with the temple aristocracy and the Messiah's authority over the temple, can be found in Le Donne, *Jesus*, 221–57.

70 D. C. Duling, "Solomon, Exorcism and the Son of David," *HTR* 68 (1975): 235–52; Le Donne, *Jesus*, 137–83; Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 1117–18.

The evidence remains inconclusive, which means that we cannot be sure whether Jesus and his family were prepared to subscribe to a Davidic ancestry during his adult lifetime. His fellow villagers (Mark 6:1–6) and skeptical Jerusalemites (John 7:42) certainly were not, and Jesus' own reflections on the question of whether the Messiah could rightly be called a son of David (Mark 12:35–37) advise caution. Moreover, we have serious reasons to doubt that a family consciousness of Davidic lineage was present at the moment of Jesus' birth.

Conclusion

My investigation of the relevant historical elements connected to Matthew's star has been disillusioning. When Jesus was born—far more probably in Nazareth than in Bethlehem, though his place of birth ultimately remains uncertain—no one among his family or fellow villagers expected anything special from him, and thus nobody paid any special attention to him. No historically reliable traditions of Jesus' childhood have survived, nor would one expect that an ordinary craftsman's family in a collectivistic society (even if it claimed Davidic provenance, which is doubtful) would engage in collecting memories of a family member's individual development. The date of Jesus' birth can only vaguely be attributed to “the days of King Herod”—that is, the later years of Herod the Great or the first years of his sons Archelaos and Antipas, who were also called kings in ordinary language. Again, this should not amaze us. We must not confuse the world of high-ranking persons who documented their important lives with the world of nobodies from which Jesus originated. Of course, things changed when Jesus' career as a prophet of the kingdom of God and a successful healer unfolded. Then ordinary people, and even the Galilean ruler, began to ask, “Who is this man?” (Mark 6:14–16; 8:27–29). The variety of answers presented in the Gospels show how undefined this individual was in the beginning. Is he Elijah? John the Baptist resurrected? The prophet? The Messiah (and if so, what kind of messiah)? It is perhaps impossible to decide whether the title “Son of David” was associated in the beginning with the assumed messiahship of Jesus or with his healing activity, which may have made him a successor of Solomon, the progenitor of Jewish healing traditions. In the first decades after the resurrection, several concepts coexisted in the Christ-believing communities. Memories were refracted, and where no memory was extant—as was probably the case with the birth of the one who was now believed to be the Messiah and thus the Son of David—traditions were invented to meet the requirements of the beliefs that had

developed. Matthew's story is one of these traditions—a great story that appeals to historical imagination. The same is true of Luke's story, which cannot be reconciled with the Matthean account if both are taken as historically correct narrations. One of the problems with taking verisimilitude as evidence for historicity is that we end up with too many stories that are irreconcilable, and we get tangled up in apologetic discussions that lead to a dead end. Matthew's star and Luke's angels are highly loaded traditional elements of edifying stories that proclaim tidings of great joy: the Christ, the Savior, has been born. Luckily, there is no way of hunting down Luke's angels. The search for the Star of Bethlehem, however, is possible today. But if the evaluation given above stands up to scrutiny, the chances of this search yielding positive results are picayune at best, even in the simplest conceivable form of a theory that accounts for a secondary linkage between a widely observable celestial phenomenon (such as a comet or a super nova) and the birth of Jesus. As has been argued above, all astronomical theories that require the royal court context and professional, elite witnesses to a certain celestial constellation unobservable by common people are even less likely to yield widely accepted results. This is because they require many more historical details (time, place, imaginability of future kingship of the newborn) which, given the meagre and conflicting evidence of the sources, are unascertainable. A historian will never venture absolute statements because new evidence may appear. But for the time being, my conclusion is that the Star of Bethlehem most certainly must be regarded as a literary phenomenon and should not be considered a relevant topic in historical Jesus research.

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Matthew, the Parthians, and the Magi: A Contextualization of Matthew's Gospel in Roman-Parthian Relations of the First Centuries BCE and CE

George van Kooten

Consensus and New Questions

The leading question of the first fully interdisciplinary conference on the Star of Bethlehem—with modern astronomers, historians of ancient astronomy, classicists, and historians of religion in attendance—was whether there are contemporary models from the ancient world that could explain the magi's journey from A (“the East”) to B (Syria-Judea). The task falls on me to give a full assessment of the meaning of the magi episode in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 2:1–12), and I will do so by profiting as much as possible from the insights and considerations of the conference while supplementing what seems lacking.¹ First of all, I will indicate where a consensus seems to have arisen regarding the leading question, and also indicate the new questions that this consensus raised or cast in sharper relief (pp. 496–501). Secondly, I will suggest that a treatment of these questions and objections could profit from a detailed chronological stratification of all relevant sources on the magi (pp. 501–85). Thirdly, we will return to the new questions with this stratified information about the magi in mind (pp. 585–601). Fourthly and finally, we shall see how

¹ I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the generous help received from Josef Wiesehöfer (Kiel) and Bruno Jacobs (Basel), who, as experts on Parthia, kindly commented upon my paper and helped me to improve it. Naturally, the responsibility for its contents remains totally mine. I am also very grateful for further discussions that my co-editor Peter Barthel and I had with Stephan Heilen (Osnabrück). Maarten Menken (Utrecht) was so kind as to comment on my section on Matthew and the Jewish Scriptures. Again, I remain entirely responsible for the final outcome. Richard J. Talbert (the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ancient World Mapping Center—AWMC) was very supportive in granting me permission to use his digital map of the Eastern Roman Empire and Parthia, and Gabriel Moss (director AWMC) very kindly adapted this map to fully suit my article. Finally, I wish to thank Herman Paul (Leiden/Groningen) for sharing his reflections on methodological issues pertaining to the field of philosophy of history.

Matthew applied these figures in his gospel, and what significance they acquire against the background of the entire gospel (pp. 602–31).

As regards the leading research question of whether there are contemporary models from the ancient world that could explain the magi's journey from A ("the East") to B (Syria-Judea), the following consensus seems to have emerged. As Alexander Jones, John Steele, and Matthieu Ossendrijver show in their contributions to this volume, no such models are found in Mesopotamian-Babylonian astronomy and astrology. Mesopotamian astrological geography is mainly interested in what happens in "the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu" or in cities within Babylonia. Given the correspondence of the four lands of Akkad, Elam, the Westland, and Subartu to the four parts of the world, a prediction about the Westland could concern a city such as Tyre (see the map in Figure 20.1) on the Mediterranean coast.² Yet, as Steele observes, the geographical spread of cities is quite small and mostly located in the Babylonian heartland.³ This all changed in the Hellenistic-Roman era, as Stephan Heilen showed in his contribution, when areas such as Syria-Judea were also integrated into the system of Greco-Roman astrological geography. In a sense this is not surprising, as Greeks and Romans must have been interested in the areas that they had occupied since Alexander the Great's conquest of the ancient Near East in the 330s BCE and since Pompey laid the foundation of the Roman organization of the East in the 60s BCE. Nevertheless, in the absence of a sustained Mesopotamian-Babylonian astrological interest in the Western territories of Syria-Judea, the existence of Greco-Roman attention to these areas is noteworthy. It means that *if* magi travelled from the East to Syria-Judea, they could only have done so with Greco-Roman astrological models.

Apart from this consensus, it also seems very likely that these magi must be understood as being connected to the court of the Parthians.⁴ The Parthians

2 See Steele, pp. 206–7 with reference to the seventh-century BCE prediction of Mar-Issar; S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), No. 351, Obv. 19—Rev. 11.

3 See Steele, p. 213.

4 Cf. the contributions to this volume by Antonio Panaino, Albert de Jong, and Roger Beck. See esp. Panaino, p. 241: "Although we cannot be certain that the magi in Matthew's Gospel were definitely Persian or Parthian priests, it is clear that many implicit (but very sharp) inferences supported this association". For a general overview of Parthia, see S. R. Hauser, "The Arsacids (Parthians)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. D. T. Potts; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 37; D. T. Potts, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); E. Dabrowa, "The Arsacid Empire," in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* (ed. T. Daryaee; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 163–86; Dabrowa, ed., *Ancient Iran and the Mediterranean World* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo

constitute one phase of the multiple stages of ancient Iran: they were preceded by the Teispids Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE, and his son Cambyses II, who were both succeeded, after the brief reign of the magus Gaumata, by the Achaemenids, “the fictional line of ancestors created by Darius and his descendants,”⁵ from Darius I (522–486 BCE) down to and including Darius III (336–330 BCE), i.e., up to the time of Alexander the Great. The Parthians then, under the guidance of the royal dynasty of the Arsacids, revolted against Alexander’s Seleucid successors, established Parthia around 250 BCE, and reigned for more than four-and-a-half centuries, until 224 CE, when they were subdued by the Sasanids, who reigned until their defeat by the Arabs in 651 CE. Although in Greco-Roman sources the Parthians can also be referred to as “Persians” in a general sense (and also to bring out the old antithesis between Greeks and Persians),⁶ their proper name is “Parthians”. As we shall see in the course of this chapter, the Parthians were closely connected with ancient Babylon and nearby Ctesiphon, the seat of their newly established winter residence, as well as with the Seleucid foundation of Seleucia-on-Tigris (for these three cities, see the map in Figure 20.1).

This consensus regarding the Greco-Roman nature of a kind of astrological geography that includes Syria-Judea, and regarding the Parthian identity of the magi, also raises new questions and objections. These have been expressed in contributions to this volume or during the discussions at the conference. The following six issues in particular seem to require further reflection:

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- Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Jagiellonian University Press], 1998); V. Sarkhosh Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *The Age of the Parthians* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); J. Wiesehöfer, *Iranien, Grecs et Romains* (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iranienne, 2005); M. Karras-Klapproth, *Prosopographische Studien zur Geschichte des Partherreiches auf der Grundlage antiker literarischer Überlieferung* (Bonn: Habelt, 1988); E. Yarshater, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3.1–2: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 5 P. Briant, “Achaemenids,” *OCD*, 4th ed (online). Cf. B. Jacobs, “‘Kyros, der große König, der Achämenide’—Zum verwandtschaftlichen Verhältnis und zur politischen und kulturellen Kontinuität zwischen Kyros dem Großen und Dareios I.,” in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich / Herodotus and the Persian Empire: Akten des 3. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema “Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen”* (eds. R. Rollinger, B. Truschnegg, and R. Bichler; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 635–63.
- 6 Cf. B. Jacobs, “Parthien—Von der seleukidischen Provinz zum unabhängigen Königreich,” in *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches* (eds. U. Hackl, B. Jacobs, and D. Weber; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), vol. 1, chap. 2.1, 31–40 at 31–32.

1. There are no examples in Greco-Roman geographical astrology of initiatives for travel in view of the predicted birth of a ruler; astrology is not prognostic in the sense that astrological search parties set out to find the predicted ruler.
2. Given the fact that the magi are Parthian, their journey into Roman-Herodian territory would have been politically impossible because of Roman border patrols and because of Herod's vigilance in Judea.
3. The magi were 'kingmakers', not astronomers or astrologers, so Matthew wrongly depicts those who journey to Judea as magi.
4. If the only geographical astrology that includes areas such as Syria-Judea must be Greco-Roman, how could the acquaintance of the magi with Greco-Roman astrology be imagined?
5. If the magi used Greco-Roman geographical astrology to journey from the East to Syria-Judea, it seems problematic that the first known Greco-Roman author to include Judea is the second-century CE astrologer Ptolemy, whose *Tetrabiblos* seems highly innovative in certain respects. Although Syria had already long been included in Greco-Roman geographical astrology, Judea hadn't, so that it is unlikely that the magi could have been specifically guided to Judea before Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*.
6. According to Michael Molnar, the astrological portents of an astronomical phenomenon in 6 BCE qualify as the background to Matthew's story of the Star of Bethlehem.⁷ Is there sufficient reason to assume that the magi took action then, in 6 BCE, or would they have been "yo-yoing backwards and forwards through the desert" (to use the evocative imagery of one of the participants in the conference) if they had paid heed to such phenomena?

It is my feeling that these questions can only be adequately answered when we study all the available evidence for the magi and the Parthians in the first centuries BCE and CE, and that is what I have done. I have studied all the available evidence for the magi and Parthians in Greco-Roman writings and have also drawn on the excellent three-volume collection of Parthian sources recently edited by Ursula Hackl, Bruno Jacobs, and Dieter Weber under the title *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*.⁸ This collection not only includes a selection

⁷ See Molnar's contribution to this volume, and M. R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

⁸ Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. Further sources are also provided in J. Wiesehöfer, ed., *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse / The Arsacid empire: Sources and Documentation* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998).

of Greco-Roman sources, but also Parthian sources. In a certain sense, not much evidence from Parthia itself survives, but as the above questions are heavily related to Parthia's relation to the West, the Greco-Roman sources (though one-sided) are very helpful, as they focus precisely on Greek-Parthian and Roman-Parthian relations. Moreover, as we shall see, sometimes it is the extant Parthian sources which testify to interactions with the Greco-Roman world not attested in Greco-Roman writings: for example, the qualification of one Parthian king as "Philorhōmaios" ("fond of Romans"), and the highly visible presence of Greeks in the city of Babylon in the Parthian era are not confirmed in Greco-Roman sources, reminding us that we should take the Greek-Parthian and Roman-Parthian interactions very seriously and not state too quickly that Greco-Roman interest in Parthia was one-sided.

A historical analysis of the Parthians in their relation to the contemporary Greco-Roman West and a contextual approach to Matthew's Gospel implies that we should chronologically stratify the relevant information about the magi and the Parthians as precisely as possible. From the perspective of the interpretation of Matthew's Gospel, three possible strata need to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the level of the assumed visit of the magi in the era of Emperor Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) and King Herod (37–4 BCE), which, according to Michael Molnar, should be dated to 6 BCE. On the other hand, there is the level of Matthew himself, who, according to widespread consensus, wrote in the 80s or 90s CE, in the era of the Flavians (69–96 CE), probably in Syria's capital Antioch. At the same time, however, it could be highly relevant—as Roger Beck's contribution to this volume suggests—to pay attention to the time in between Augustus and Matthew and to consider whether particular events (Beck suggests the journey of the Armenian king Tiridates, of Parthian descent and accompanied by magi, to Nero in Rome in 66 CE) may have influenced Matthew's design of his gospel. So, from the perspective of Matthew's Gospel, at least these three strata need to be differentiated.

From the perspective of the Greco-Roman sources about the magi and the Parthians, the following strata seem to commend themselves. As the Greco-Roman sources already refer to magi before the establishment of Parthia, it seems relevant to specify (1) a pre-Parthian stratum and to see what the image of the magi was like in these sources. Subsequent strata are (2) the establishment of Parthia in the Hellenistic-Seleucid era after Alexander the Great, (3) the beginning of Parthian-Roman relations in the early first century BCE, and (4) the further development of these relations in the pre-Augustan era, followed by (5) the Augustan era, (6) the post-Augustan era of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, (7) the Flavian era, and (8) the post-Flavian era. Such a periodization is of course always slightly arbitrary, but as we shall see, it will

help us to understand the major developments that took place in the course of these eras.

To anticipate our treatment of these periods, and to give a preliminary impression of its relevance, I shall now briefly refer to Ursula Hackl's interpretation of these developments in the introductory volume of the *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*. Hackl differentiates between (a) the early phase of Roman-Parthian contacts and treaties between 96–57 BCE; (b) the first Roman-Parthian confrontation between 54–36 BCE, in the pre-Augustan period; (c) the peaceful consolidation of Roman-Parthian relations between 25 BCE–37 CE, in the eras of Augustus and Tiberius; and (d) the renewed tensions and subsequent confrontations between Romans and Parthians from the end of the Claudian era in 53 CE until the end of the Parthian Empire in 224 CE.⁹ These periodizations coincide largely with the main chronological strata that I distinguish (although my stratification is slightly more detailed). I fully agree with Hackl's characterizations of these periods, and they already indicate how relevant this can be for our understanding of Matthew's magi. Did Matthew rework historical traditions concerning the magi from the Augustan era, when there was peace between Romans and Parthians? Or did he refer to contemporary magi in the Flavian era, knowing that tensions between Romans and Parthians were again increasing, so that in his story of the magi's adoration of Jesus he showed himself in fact pro-Parthian and anti-Roman?

I shall now present, within these chronological strata, the relevant material about the magi and the Parthians and include particularly that information that could help us respond to the questions outlined above. Assisted by this stratified information outlined in the next section, we will then explicitly return to these questions in the third section (pp. 585–601) and see whether we can answer them.

Stratification of the Sources about the Magi and the Parthians

The Magi in the Pre-Parthian Era

It is relevant to note that Greco-Roman authors not only associated the magi with the Parthian kings, to whom the magi were considered to act as court officials, but also connected them with pre-Parthian times and assumed they had

9 See U. Hackl, "Das Partherreich und Rom seit dem 1. Jh. v. Chr.," in *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches* (eds. U. Hackl, B. Jacobs, and D. Weber; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), vol. 1, chap. 2.3, 56–77.

been around since the foundation of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great (ca. 559–530 BCE).¹⁰

According to Xenophon of Athens, it was no less than Cyrus the Great himself who founded “the college of magi”: “then for the first time the college of magi was instituted [...] and he [i.e., Cyrus] never failed to sing hymns to the gods at daybreak and to sacrifice daily to whatsoever deities the magi directed” (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.23).¹¹ The magi who, according to the Greco-Roman sources, guarded Cyrus’ tomb (see, a.o., Strabo, *Geography* 15.3.7 and Pliny, *Natural History* 6.116), are now testified to by the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.¹² Flavius Josephus, in his retelling of the Daniel narrative in his *Jewish Antiquities*, even retrojects the existence of magi into the pre-Persian time of the reign of the Neo-Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE). According to

10 On the magi, see A. de Jong, “The Contribution of the Magi,” in *Birth of the Persian Empire* (eds. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart; London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), vol. 1, 85–99; and A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden/New York/ Cologne: Brill, 1997), esp. chap. 4.7.1, 387–403, as well as his contribution to the present volume. Further, R. Kotansky, “The Star of the Magi: Lore and Science in Ancient Zoroastrianism, the Greek Magical Papyri, and St Matthew’s Gospel,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 24 (2007): 379–421; B. Hjerrild, “The Survival and Modification of Zoroastrianism in Seleucid Times,” in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom* (ed. P. Bilde; Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1990), 140–50; A. Hultgard, “Prêtres juifs et mages zoroastriens: Influences religieuses à l’époque hellénistique,” *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 68 (1988): 415–28; R. C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956). On the magi and the Greeks, see also F. Ferrari, “Rites without Frontiers: Magi and Mystae in the Derveni Papyrus,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 179 (2011): 71–83; P. S. Horky, “Persian Cosmos and Greek Philosophy: Plato’s Associates and the Zoroastrian Magoi,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37 (2009): 47–103; P. Kingsley, “Meetings with Magi: Iranian Themes among the Greeks, from Xanthus of Lydia to Plato’s Academy,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 5 (1995): 173–210; A. D. Nock, “Greeks and Magi,” in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Z. Stewart; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972 [1940]), 516–526. On the magi and the Romans, see S. R. West, “Lo, Star-led Chieftains . . . : Aeneas and the Magi,” *Omnibus* 30 (1995): 29–30.

11 Translations from Greco-Roman literature are taken from the Loeb Classical Library (online), unless otherwise stated, with some minor adaptations. Translations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version, again with some minor adaptations.

12 See W. Henkelman, *The Other Gods Who Are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2008); Josef Wiesehöfer, “Not a God, But a Person Apart’: The Achaemenid King, the Divine and Persian Cult Practices”, in *Divinizzazione, culto del sovrano e apoteosi: tra antichità e Medioevo* (eds. T. Gnoli & F. Muccioli; Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2014), 29–35.

Josephus, Daniel saved the Chaldeans and the magi, who failed to interpret both Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the handwriting on the wall (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 10.195–203, based on Daniel 2:1–49 where, however, mention is made only of the Chaldeans instead of Josephus' pairing of "the Chaldeans and the magi"). The normal view in Greco-Roman writings, however, is that the magi emerged during the Persian Empire and were instituted by Cyrus. Cicero, in his *On Divination*, says that these magi interpreted Cyrus' dreams (*On Divination* 1.46). Greco-Roman authors (although contradicted by Darius I's famous Behistun inscription) tell the story of how Cyrus' son Cambyses was subsequently deposed by the magi and how their period of tyranny was then ended with Darius I's ascent to the throne.¹³

Often the magi also figure in Greco-Roman accounts of the origins of philosophy among the barbarians. Diogenes Laertius reports the views of those who believe "that the study of philosophy had its beginning among the barbarians"—among the Assyrians and Babylonians with the Chaldeans, who "apply themselves to astronomy and forecasting the future," and among the Persians with the magi, who "spend their time in the worship of the gods, in sacrifices and in prayers," "hold discourse of justice," "practice divination and forecast the future," and believe that "men will live in a future life and be immortal, and that the world will endure through their invocations" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, book 1, Prologue and 1.6–9). He adds that, according to some, the Jews are descended from the magi (1.9). Various Greek philosophers are reported to have visited the magi: Pythagoras (born in the mid-sixth century BCE); Democritus of Abdera (b. 460–457 BCE); the Sophist Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490–420 BCE); and the Skeptic Pyrrhon of Elis (ca. 365–275 BCE) are all said to have been instructed by the magi.¹⁴ Valerius Maximus, who compiled his handbook *Memorable Doings and Sayings* during the reign of Tiberius (14–37 CE), explicitly says that Pythagoras "went to Persia and gave himself over to the finished wisdom of the magi for them to mold. His

13 Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 3.61–79; Strabo, *Geography* 15.3.24; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 3.2.24 ext. 2 and 7.3.10 ext. 2; Plutarch, *Precepts of Statecraft* 820D–E; Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, Summary of the Lost Book 2 [LCL 368, pp. 28–29]; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.31; Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 10.434D; Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 11.57.1 and 16.47.2.

14 See Cicero, *On Ends* 5.87, with reference to Pythagoras and Democritus; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 8.1.3, with respect to Pythagoras: "he also journeyed among the Chaldeans and magi," and 9.11.61, with respect to Pyrrho: "he joined Anaxarchus, whom he accompanied on his travels everywhere so that he even forgathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi"; Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 1.494, with regard to Protagoras; and Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 4.20, with regard to Democritus.

docile mind absorbed what they ungrudgingly displayed to him: the motions of the stars, the courses of the planets, the force, individuality, and effect of each one" (*Memorable Doings and Sayings*, book 8.7, ext. 2). For our purposes, it is relevant to note that, regardless of accuracy, Greco-Roman authors roughly contemporary with Matthew, such as Valerius Maximus, could describe the magi as astronomers and astrologers.

Not only are Greek philosophers said to have been educated by the magi, but, for political reasons, some Greeks are also rumoured to have permanently settled with the Persians, as is the case with Themistocles of Athens (ca. 524–459 BCE), who fled to Artaxerxes I (Plutarch, *Themistocles* 27–28; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.29).¹⁵ However, the magi are not only confined to the East, but are also said to have visited the West, a topic that is potentially relevant for our discussion of the magi's visit to Jesus. According to Seneca, magi happened to be in Athens in 347 BCE, at the time of the death of Plato, who died "on his birthday, after exactly completing his eighty-first year," for which reason the magi "sacrificed to him after his death, believing that his length of days was too full for a mortal man, since he had rounded out the perfect number of nine times nine" (Seneca, *Epistles* 58.31). In Plato's (spurious) *First Alcibiades*, the author shows himself to be aware of the existence of such wise men and describes them as royal tutors and kingmakers with expertise in "the magian lore of Zoroaster." According to Plato, the future kings are educated by four tutors:

these are four men chosen as the most highly esteemed among the Persians of mature age, namely, the wisest one, the justest one, the most temperate one, and the bravest one. The first of these teaches him (i.e., the future king) the magian lore of Zoroaster, son of Horomazes; and that is the worship of the gods: he teaches him also what pertains to a king. The justest teaches him to be truthful all his life long; the most temperate, not to be mastered by even a single pleasure, in order that he may be accustomed to be a free man and a veritable king, who is the master first of all that is in him, not the slave; while the bravest trains him to be fearless and undaunted, telling him that to be daunted is to be enslaved. (Plato, *Alcibiades I* 121E–122A)

15 For pre-Hellenistic Greek communities in Babylonia, see J. Monerie, "Les communautés grecques en Babylonie (VII^e–III^e s. av. J.-C.)," *Pallas* 89 (2012): 345–65.

Their picture as philosophers is also drawn in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle emphasizes their reputation as non-mythological thinkers who make "the primary generator the Supreme Good" (*Metaphysics* 14, 1091b).

What is remarkable about the reports of Greek philosophers studying with the Persian magi and about Seneca's report of magi visiting Athens is that these events are said to have taken place without any apprehensiveness about the two Persian attempts to conquer Greece: in 490 BCE under Darius I, and in 480–479 BCE under Xerxes I. The magi are reported to have accompanied Xerxes during his destruction and occupation of Athens in 480–479 BCE, although they warned him to desist from plans to invade Lacedaemon (Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, book 1.6, ext. 1b). According to Cicero, it was the magi who, for religious reasons, advised Xerxes to burn "the temples of Greece, on the grounds that the Greeks shut up the gods within walls, whereas all places consecrated to them ought to be open and free, seeing that this whole universe is their temple and home" (Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.26). Yet despite this involvement in the conquest of Greece, the prestige of the magi apparently justified the alleged relations between Greek philosophers and the magi. Pythagoras' supposed visit to the Persian magi must have preceded the Persian wars, but the alleged meetings of Democritus (b. 460–457 BCE), Protagoras (ca. 490–420 BCE), and Pyrrhon (ca. 365–275 BCE) with the magi followed these wars. Or, in the case of Protagoras, they even took place during the Persian conquest. Although this is chronologically awkward, Protagoras (who was born ca. 490 BCE) is said to have "associated with the Persian magi when Xerxes led his expedition against Greece" in 480–479 BCE and to have "even entertained Xerxes in his house, and [...] obtained his permission for his son to study with the magi" (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 1.494). This lack of apprehension also applies to the magi's visit to Athens in 347 BCE, coinciding with the death of Plato, only 130 years after the Persians had burned and occupied Athens, while still retaining their territory across the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor up until the time of Darius III (336–330 BCE), until the moment of Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia in 334–333 BCE.

The magi also feature subsequently in the reports of (the annunciations of) Alexander's conquest of Asia and Babylon.¹⁶ According to Cicero's *On Divination*, on the night of Alexander's birth "the temple of Diana at Ephesus was burned, and [...] the magi began to cry out as the day was breaking: 'Asia's deadly curse was born last night'" (Cicero, *On Divination* 1.47; cf. *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.27.69), a report also given in the first or early second century CE

16 On Alexander the Great and the Persians, and the specific agendas of the Alexander historians, see S. Müller, *Alexander, Makedonien und Persien* (Berlin: Trafo, 2014).

accounts of Plutarch's *Alexander* (3.3–4, 665–666) and Quintus Curtius' *History of Alexander the Great*. According to Quintus Curtius,

Alexander's birth was preceded and attended by portents. Many even believed that he was the son of Jupiter, who had assumed the form of a serpent and lain with Olympias. She, however, in a letter to her son begged him not to expose her to Juno's hatred as her husband's paramour. On the night when he was born the temple of the Ephesian Diana was destroyed by fire, which the magi interpreted as meaning that a firebrand had appeared somewhere, by which the whole Orient would be destroyed. (Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, Summary of the Lost Book I [LCL 368, pp. 4–5])

I would like to draw attention here to the remarkable parallels with Matthew's accounts of Jesus' conception (1:18–24) and birth and the response of the magi (2:1–12): the conception also results from an encounter between a human mother and a divine procreator, i.e., "the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:18), with the same themes of confusion (1:19) and the response of the magi to the ensuing birth, the main difference being that whereas the magi respond to Alexander's birth with dismay, they are joyous about Jesus' birth. These parallels at least show that Greek readers of Matthew's Gospel would not be surprised about the themes featured here.

According to the same Quintus Curtius, Alexander was also to meet the magi who had decried his birth. When Darius III confidently rushed out in battle against the advancing Alexander, this march started with a ceremonial procession, with the magi in front: "Now the order of march was as follows. In front on silver altars was carried the fire which they called sacred and eternal. Next came the magi, chanting their traditional hymn" (Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander* 3.9–10).

However, when Darius was defeated and Babylon surrendered, the magi— as also related by Mathieu Ossendrijver in his contribution to this volume— were among those who joined the procession that welcomed Alexander into the city in October 331 BCE, along a route adorned with altars with burning frankincense and other perfumes, and brought him presents:

A great part of the Babylonians had taken their places on the walls in their eagerness to become acquainted with their new king, still more had gone out to meet him. Among the latter Bagophanes, guardian of the citadel and of the royal funds, in order not to be outdone in alacrity by Mazaeus, had strewn the whole road with flowers and garlands, and had

placed here and there on both sides silver altars, which he had piled high, not only with frankincense, but with perfumes of all kinds. As gifts there followed him herds of horses and cattle; lions and leopards too were carried before them in cages.

Then came the magi, chanting a hymn after their manner, after them the Chaldeans, and of the Babylonians not only their prophets, but also musicians with their own kind of instruments; the latter were accustomed to sing the praises of the kings, the Chaldeans, to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies and the appointed changes of the seasons. (Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander* 5.19–23)¹⁷

And as Arrian writes in his *Anabasis of Alexander*, Alexander's assumption of the rule of the East was celebrated in joint celebrations of Macedonians and Persians, initiated by Greek soothsayers and Persian magi:

On this Alexander sacrificed to the gods to whom it was his custom to sacrifice, and gave a public banquet, seated all the Macedonians round him, and next to them Persians, and then any persons from the other peoples who took precedence for rank or any other high quality, and he himself and those around him drank from the same bowl and poured the same libations, with the Greek soothsayers and magi initiating the ceremony. Alexander prayed for various blessings and especially that the Macedonians and Persians should enjoy harmony as partners in the government. (Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 7.11.8)

Also after Alexander the Great, when his realm was divided by his successors and the Greek Seleucids gained power over Babylonia, the magi remained in the picture in Greco-Roman writings. According to Appian's *Roman History*, when Seleucus I (ca. 358–281 BCE), the founder of the Greek-Seleucid Empire that included Babylonia, founded Seleuceia-on-Tigris in 305 BCE as a new royal city, only about a hundred kilometers to the north of ancient Babylon, he asked the advice of the magi for a suitable date for its foundation: "the magi were ordered to indicate the propitious day and hour for beginning the foundations of Seleuceia-on-Tigris." Although "they falsified the hour because they did not want to have such a stronghold built against themselves," a divine voice intervened and made the work nevertheless commence "at the true hour of destiny." When the magi acknowledged that "destiny was stronger than crafty magi" and

17 On this episode, see also A. Kuhrt, "Alexander and Babylon", *Achaemenid History* 5 (1990): 121–30.

that “a more powerful race settled alongside of us,” Seleucus showed himself “pleased with what the magi said and pardoned them” (Appian, *Roman History* 11.9.58).

Thus the magi feature in narratives about the foundation of one of the most important Greek cities in the East, which, as we shall see, preserved its Greek heritage also in the Parthian era, after the Greek political power of the Seleucids had come to an end in the course of the second century BCE. Seleuceia-on-Tigris was a prominent city, birthplace of such influential philosophers as Diogenes of Babylonia (ca. 240–152 BCE), who succeeded Zeno of Tarsus as head of the Stoic school in Athens (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16; cf. Lucian, *Octogenarians* 20; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.2.81; Plutarch, *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander I* 328C–E). It is probably his pupil, Archdemus of Tarsus, originally from Athens, who, according to Plutarch, “removed to the country of the Parthians and left a Stoic succession at Babylon” (Plutarch, *On Exile* 604B) and died there in about 140 BCE. This example of the establishment of a Stoic branch in Babylon by someone who came from Athens, had studied in Tarsus (see the map in Figure 20.1), and was the pupil of a native from Seleuceia-on-Tigris also illustrates—at a biographical level—the presence of Greek culture in such cities as Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon.¹⁸

As we shall see, this did not change in the Parthian period, after the Seleucids had lost their political power and the magi continued the role they had enjoyed under the Achaemenids, now serving the Parthians. In the next section, I will first deal with the Parthians in the period before the emergence of Rome in the East (pp. 508–19), and in the section after that with the Parthians in their first encounters with the Romans (pp. 519–25).

The Beginning of the Parthian Era

In the course of the third and second centuries BCE, the Seleucids gradually lost their power in the East to the Parthians, who emerged in former Achaemenid

18 I prefer to speak of the (enduring) presence and accessibility of Greek culture in the East, rather than of “Hellenization”. For the need to avoid the concept and terminology of Hellenization, see S. R. Hauser, “Greek in subject and style, but a little distorted”: Zum Verhältnis von Orient und Okzident in der Altertumswissenschaft, in *Posthumanistische Klassische Archäologie: Historizität und Wissenschaftlichkeit von Interessen und Methoden* (eds. S. Altekamp, M. Hofter, and M. Krumme; Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2001), 83–104; S. R. Hauser, “Der hellenisierte Orient: Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Alter Geschichte, Klassischer und Vorderasiatischer Archäologie”, in *Fluchtpunkt Uruk: Archäologische Einheit aus methodischer Vielfalt, Schriften für Hans Jörg Nissen* (eds. H. Kühne, K. Bartl, and R. Bernbeck; Rahden: Marie Leidorf, 1999), 316–41.

territory. Greco-Roman authors speak of the “revolt” of the Parthians against the Seleucids and normally date this to 247 BCE, the starting date of the reign of the first Parthian ruler, Arsaces I (ca. 247/238–ca. 217 BCE), after whom the Parthian dynasty is called the Arsacids, who ruled until they were replaced by the Sasanids in the third century CE (224–651 CE).¹⁹ This was only a gradual process, however, and other competitors were also involved. The Seleucid ruler Antiochus III (“the Great,” 223–187 BCE), for instance, suppressed the rebellion of the Median Satrap Molon, who had invaded Babylon and seized Seleucia-on-Tigris (222 BCE), and restored Seleucid authority over Parthia and other Eastern areas (210–206 BCE). When Antiochus was confronted with the emerging power of the Romans and was defeated by them in Greece and Asia Minor (191–190 BCE), he consciously went to Babylon and was shown the robes of Nebuchadnezzar (187 BCE), thus confirming his power over the East.²⁰

However, in 141 BCE, the Parthians managed to conquer Seleucia-on-Tigris,²¹ and immediately the Parthian kings, starting with Mithridates I (171–139/8 BCE), started to portray themselves as “Philhellenes” (“those fond of the

19 On the Parthians’ revolt from the Seleucids, see Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, p. 31. For Parthia’s relation to the Seleucids, see also P. Kosmin, “Alexander the Great and the Seleucids in Iran,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. D. T. Potts; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 34; E. Dabrowa, “The Parthians and the Seleucid Legacy,” in *Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt: Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts* (eds. R. Rollinger et al.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 583–590; B. Jacobs, “Parthien—Von der seleukidischen Provinz zum unabhängigen Königreich,” in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 1, chap. 2.1, 31–40; K. Brodersen, “The Date of the Secession of Parthia from the Seleucid Kingdom,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 35 (1986): 378–81; W. W. Tarn, *Seleucid-Parthian Studies* (London: Milford, 1930).

20 Cf. G. T. Griffith, S. M. Sherwin-White, and R. J. van der Spek, “Antiochus III Megas (the Great),” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

21 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 3, p. 5. For Parthians in Seleucia, see Otto Mørkholm, “The Parthian Coinage of Seleucia on the Tigris, c. 90–55 BC,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 20 (1980): 33–47; S. S. Ahmed, “Early Parthians: Philhellenism as Evidenced in Figurines from Seleucia on the Tigris Level III,” *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes* 17 (1967): 85–90; N. C. Debevoise, *Parthian Pottery from Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1934). And for the Parthians as overlords of Greek cities in the Near East, see J. Wiesehöfer, “Greek Poleis in the Near East and Their Parthian Overlords,” in *Urban Dreams and Realities in Antiquities: Remains and Representations of the Ancient City* (ed. A. Kemezis; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 328–46.

Hellenes”), as their coinage with their self-designation as *φιλέλλην* attests.²² It is highly interesting that immediately after ousting the Seleucid rulers from Seleuceia-on-Tigris, Mithridates nevertheless wished to continue the Greek culture that the Seleucids embodied. Babylonia was decisively conquered by the Parthians in 126 BCE, during the reign of Artabanus I (128–124/3 BCE), only after the lengthy struggles (141–127 BCE) of Mithridates I and his successor, Phraates II (139/8–128 BCE). During his struggles, Phraates II also needed to recover Seleuceia-on-Tigris, whose Greek population had welcomed the Seleucid ruler Antiochus VII Sidetes (138–129 BCE) when he had briefly conquered Babylonia (130 BCE).²³ As Diodorus Siculus writes in his *Library of History*, Phraates II

was angry with the people of Seleuceia and bore them a grudge for the despites and punishments that they had inflicted on his general, Enius. When they sent a mission to him, pleading to win pardon for what had taken place, and pressed him for an answer, he led the envoys to the place where blind Pitthides sat on the ground, his eyes gouged out, and bade them report to the men of Seleuceia that they must all suffer the same fate. Thoroughly alarmed, they forgot their former troubles in view of the enormity of the horrors now anticipated. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 34/35.19)

22 For the coinage of Mithridates I, already immediately issued in the first years after the conquest of Seleuceia-on-Tigris (141/140, 140/139, 139/138 BCE), see Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 616–18; for Mithridates II (124/3–88/7 BCE), see vol. 2, pp. 621–22; and for Mithridates III (58/7 BCE), see vol. 2, pp. 625–27. For Parthian Philhellenism, see also J. Wiesehöfer, “Griechenfreunde—Griechenfeinde: Zum Verhältnis der Arsakiden zu ihren griechischen Untertanen,” in *Parthische Kunst—Kunst im Partherreich* (ed. B. Jacobs; Duisburg: Wellem, 2014), 11–32; J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD* (trans. A. Azodi; London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996, repr. 2014); E. Dabrowa, “Philhellèn: Mithridate 1^{er} et les Grecs,” in *Ancient Iran and the Mediterranean World* (ed. E. Dabrowa; Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Jagiellonian University Press], 1998), 35–44. For the relations between Parthia and the Greeks, see J. Wiesehöfer, “Kontaktzonen, Grenzüberschreitungen und Grenzgänger: Kulturkontakte zwischen Parthern und Griechen,” in *Kulturkontakte in antiken Welten: vom Denkmodell zum Fallbeispiel* (ed. R. Rollinger; Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 269–83; E. Dabrowa, *Studia Graeco-Parthica: Political and Cultural Relations between Greeks and Parthians* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011); W. Grajetzki, *Greeks and Parthians in Mesopotamia and beyond: 331 BC–224 AD* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011); B. Jacobs, “Architektur und Kunst im Dienst von Herrscherhaus und Oberschicht,” in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 1, chap. 2.4.6.1, 129–35.

23 Cf. A. Kuhrt, “Babylonia,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

This passage clearly shows that at this time, following their establishment of Parthian rule over Babylonia, the Parthians, despite their declared Philhellenism, still had a tense relation with the Greeks in their territory, and also with the citizens of Babylon. It is Euhemerus (or Himerus), the governor appointed by Phraates II over Babylon, who is called by Posidonius the “tyrant” of Babylonia and Seleuceia (Posidonius, fragm. 65 Edelstein & Kidd) and is said to have “enslaved many of the Babylonians” and “set fire to the agora of Babylon and to some of the temples, and destroyed the best part of the city” (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 34/35.21). Yet, the second successor after Phraates II, Mithridates II (124/3–88/7 BCE), re-emphasizes the Parthians’ Philhellenism, not only calling himself φιλέλλην on his coinage,²⁴ but also in inscriptions put up in Babylon, including an inscription in the local gymnasium.²⁵

In this way, the Parthian kings established themselves over cities such as Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon, continuing their Greek legacy and developing what one could describe as a dual Greek-Iranian identity. According to Josef Wiesehöfer,

Scholarship for a long time classified the Parthians as culturally dependent, without great political aspirations and inferior to Rome in almost all respects. New findings . . . provide a more differentiated view which, e.g., allows us to see the ‘Philhellenism’ of the kings (on their coins and in cultural affairs [. . .]) and the Iranian traits of their rule as ways of ensuring the co-operation of two important groups of subjects.²⁶

Wiesehöfer is also of the opinion that it was not only political astuteness but also real interest in Greek culture that defined Parthian Philhellenism.²⁷ This dual identity then lasts until the 50s–70s CE, when, with the reign of Vologeses I (51/52–79/80 CE), this balance shifts when the Iranian heritage is more strongly emphasized. I shall now zoom in on the cities of Seleuceia-on-

24 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 621–22.

25 For Mithridates II’s inscriptions, see Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, chap. 3.1.3, E4, vol. 2, pp. 462–63; Babylon, 122/1 or 120 BCE; and chap. 3.1.3, E5, vol. 2, pp. 463–64; Babylon, gymnasium, 109/8 BCE.

26 J. Wiesehöfer, “Parthia, Parthian empire,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online). For Parthian coinage, see K. Rezakhani, “Arsacid, Elymaean and Persid coinage,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. D. T. Potts; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 39.

27 J. Wiesehöfer, “‘King of kings’ and ‘Philhellên’: Kingship in Arsacid Iran,” in *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship* (eds. P. Bilde, T. Engberg-Pedersen, L. Hannestad, and J. Zahle; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 55–66.

Tigris and Babylon to get an impression of how the continuation of Hellenistic culture in these cities in the Parthian era needs to be envisaged.

Seleuceia, as we have seen, was founded in 305 BCE by Seleucus I, and, according to Appian, the magi had been involved in determining the most favorable time for its actual foundation. According to Strabo (wrongly, as we shall see), the successful emergence of Seleuceia-on-Tigris corresponded with the decline of nearby Babylon:

even what was left of the city [i.e., of Babylon] was neglected and thrown into ruins, [...] partly by time and by the indifference of the Macedonians to things of this kind, and in particular after Seleucus Nicator had fortified Seleuceia-on-Tigris near Babylon, at a distance of about three hundred stadia therefrom. For not only he, but also all his successors, were strongly interested in Seleuceia and transferred the royal residence to it. What is more, Seleuceia at the present time has become larger than Babylon, whereas the greater part of Babylon is so deserted that one would not hesitate to say what one of the comic poets said in reference to the Megalopolitans in Arcadia: "The Great City is a great desert." (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.5)

From Strabo's perspective in the Augustan era, Seleuceia has, "in the present time," surpassed Babylon in size. According to a different passage in Strabo's *Geography*, Seleuceia is the winter residence of the Parthian kings, whereas in the summer they continue to use the ancient Median royal residence of Ecbatana (see the map in Figure 20.1): "the Parthians continue to use this [i.e., Ecbatana] as a royal residence even now, and their kings spend at least their summers there, for Media is a cold country; but their winter residence is at Seleuceia, on the Tigris near Babylon" (Strabo, *Geography* 11.13.1). Pliny, too, in his *Natural History*, states that Babylon's decline is the result of the foundation of Seleuceia, and that in Pliny's own days, in the first century CE, the latter still retains its Hellenistic character:

the place [i.e., Babylon] has gone back to a desert, having been drained of its population by the proximity of Seleuceia, founded for that purpose by Nicator not quite 90 miles away, at the point where the canalised Euphrates joins the Tigris. However, Seleuceia is still described as being in the territory of Babylon, although at the present day it is a free and independent city and retains the Macedonian manners. It is said that the population of the city numbers 600,000; that the plan of the walls resembles the shape of an eagle spreading its wings; and that its territory is the most fertile in the whole of the east. (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.122)

Tacitus, in his *Annals*, also emphasizes the enduring Hellenistic character of Seleuceia-on-Tigris, despite the “barbarism” surrounding it, and even states that it has its own senate, approved by the Parthians (as long as no tensions between the senate and the populace provoke their intervention):

Seleuceia [is] a walled town which, faithful to the memory of its founder Seleucus, has not degenerated into barbarism. Three hundred members, chosen for wealth or wisdom, form a senate: the people has its own prerogatives. So long as the two orders are in unison, the Parthian is ignored: if they clash, each calls in aid against its rival; and the alien, summoned to rescue a part, overpowers the whole. (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.42)²⁸

This situation of a profoundly Greek city (in the sense of its political institutions, the Greek descent of at least part of its inhabitants, and its long-lasting interest in Greek culture) is still notable at the end of the second century CE. According to Dio Cassius, Seleuceia is “a city in Mesopotamia which even at the present day has a very large Greek population” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 40.16.3). And the Hellenistic, ‘civilizing’ influence of cities such as Seleuceia is commended by Plutarch in his treatise “On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander,” in which he stresses the blessings of Alexander the Great’s cultural and philosophical enlightenment of the barbarians. Ascribing Seleucus’ foundation of Seleuceia-on-Tigris to Alexander himself, Plutarch states,

Alexander established more than seventy cities among savage tribes, and sowed all Asia with Grecian magistracies, and thus overcame its uncivilized and brutish manner of living. [...] Egypt would not have its Alexandria, nor Mesopotamia its Seleuceia [...]; for by the founding of cities in these places savagery was extinguished and the worse element, gaining familiarity with the better, changed under its influence. If, then, philosophers take the greatest pride in civilizing and rendering adaptable the intractable and untutored elements in human character, and if Alexander has been shown to have changed the savage natures of countless tribes, it is with good reason that he should be regarded as a very great philosopher. (Plutarch, *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander I* 328E–329A).

28 For Tacitus’ view of the Parthians, see also N. Ehrhardt, “Parther und parthische Geschichte bei Tacitus,” in *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse / The Arsacid Empire: Sources and Documentation* (ed. J. Wiesehöfer; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 295–307.

Yet at the same time, there were also Greeks and Romans who distrusted the ambiguous status of cities such as Seleuceia on the frontiers of civilization and barbarism. In his *History of Rome*, Livy, writing in the Augustan era, attributes to one of his Roman personages the view that the original Greek inhabitants of Seleuceia have now degenerated into Parthians:

just as, in the case of plants and animals, the seeds have less power to maintain their natural quality than the character of the soil and climate in which they live has power to change it. The Macedonians who hold Alexandria in Egypt, who hold Seleuceia and Babylonia and other colonies scattered throughout the world, have degenerated into Syrians, Parthians, Egyptians. (Livy, *History of Rome* 38.17.10–11)

This contempt for the lesser status of Hellenistic foundations in barbarian hinterlands is also palpable in the episode of the Athenian rhetorician Amphicrates, who came to Seleuceia-on-Tigris after Athens was conquered by the Romans in 86 BCE. According to Plutarch, “when he was exiled from his native city, he went to Seleuceia-on-Tigris, and [...] when the citizens asked him to give lectures there, he treated their invitation with contempt, arrogantly remarking that a stewpan could not hold a dolphin” (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 22.5). Yet however insightful such inner-Greco-Roman snobbishness regarding cities such as Seleuceia-on-Tigris may be, their Hellenistic character is beyond doubt.

With regard to Babylon, as we have already seen above, Greco-Roman authors tend to contrast the emergence and vitality of Seleuceia-on-Tigris with the alleged decline of nearby Babylon. According to Strabo, in a passage already partly quoted above in our discussion of Seleuceia, this decline is the result of Persian and Hellenistic-Seleucid disinterest in Babylon, which accounts for its ruinous condition in the Augustan era:

Here too is the tomb of Belus [i.e., the alleged founder of Babylon], now in ruins, having been demolished by Xerxes, as it is said. It was a quadrangular pyramid of baked brick, not only being a stadium in height, but also having sides a stadium in length. Alexander intended to repair this pyramid; but it would have been a large task and would have required a long time (for merely the clearing away of the mound was a task for ten thousand men for two months), so that he could not finish what he had attempted; for immediately the king was overtaken by disease and death. None of his successors cared for this matter; and even what was left of the city was neglected and thrown into ruins, partly by the Persians and partly by time and by the indifference of the Macedonians to things of

this kind, and in particular after Seleucus Nicator had fortified Seleuceia-on-Tigris near Babylon, at a distance of about three hundred stadia therefrom. For not only he, but also all his successors, were strongly interested in Seleuceia and transferred the royal residence to it. What is more, Seleuceia at the present time has become larger than Babylon, whereas the greater part of Babylon is so deserted that one would not hesitate to say what one of the comic poets said in reference to the Megalopolitans in Arcadia: “The Great City is a great desert.” (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.5)

As we have already seen, this supposedly dilapidated state of Babylon is also emphasized by Pliny the Elder in the first century CE: “The temple of Jupiter Belus in Babylon is still standing—Belus was the discoverer of the science of astronomy; but in all other respects the place has gone back to a desert, having been drained of its population by the proximity of Seleuceia” (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.121–122).

What is interesting in these reports by Strabo and Pliny is that they build such a stark contrast between Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon—the former exhibiting the vitality of Greco-Roman culture, the latter the disintegration of an ancient, vanishing culture. Yet it is precisely Babylonian sources from the Parthian era that show that Babylon, too, had a (perhaps small, but highly noticeable) Greek presence. We have already seen that Mithridates II (124/3–88/7 BCE) erected inscriptions in Babylon that describe him as a Philhellene, including one in the local gymnasium. Furthermore, the so-called Astronomical Diaries (a collection of clay tablets that combine carefully dated astronomical observations with notes about political, cultic, and societal events) of the Parthian era (of which many years of the period between 141 and 63 BCE have been preserved)²⁹ indicate that the satrap of Babylonia, who was resident in Seleuceia, regularly communicated information from the Parthian king to the Greek residents of Babylon, who assembled for that purpose in the theater. Evidence of the public readings of scrolls in the theater of Babylon is present for the timespan between 124 and 87 BCE.³⁰ Moreover, it appears that the governor of Babylon was appointed from among the Greek residents of Babylon.³¹

29 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, chap. 3.4.1.3.3.1, vol. 3, pp. 30–33 (general description) and chap. 3.4.2, vol. 3, pp. 45–127 (text, translation, and commentary).

30 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 4–43, and vol. 3, pp. 42, 46–47 (141 BCE); 68–69, 76, 87 (124BC), 116 (87BC), and 123.

31 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 3, pp. 43, 68–69, and 76.

Hence, there was clearly also a Greek populace in Babylon, which, although smaller than the Greek majority in nearby Seleucia-on-Tigris, was highly visible, inasmuch as the governor of Babylon himself was Greek and the communiqués of the Parthian kings were specially read out to the Greek citizens in the theater. The language of these scrolls would have been Greek, as this was the official language of the Parthian court.³² Furthermore, Babylon not only had a gymnasium and a theater, but also a Stoic school (as we have seen above, see p. 508) founded by the Stoic philosopher Archedemus of Tarsus, who was educated by Diogenes of Babylonia. As Archedemus died in about 140 BCE, just prior to the definitive Parthian conquest of Babylon in 126 BCE, the “Stoic succession” he left in Babylon (Plutarch, *On Exile* 604B) must have persisted into Parthian-dominated Babylon.³³

The Astronomical Diaries also attest to the presence of Greeks in their descriptions of particular events. In 124 BCE, for instance, Greeks in Babylon

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- 32 On Greek as the court language of the Parthians, see J. Wiesehöfer, “Denn Orodes war der griechischen Sprache und Literatur nicht unkundig...”: Parther, Griechen und griechische Kultur,” in *Variatio delectat: Iran und der Westen* (ed. R. Dittmann; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 703–21; G. Rougemont, “The use of Greek in pre-Sasanian Iran,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. D. T. Potts; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 41.
- 33 For Babylon in the Arsacid age, and the continued relevance of Babylonian cults, see R. J. van der Spek, “The Size and Significance of the Babylonian Temples under the Successors,” in *La Transition entre l'empire achéménide et les royaumes hellénistiques (vers 350–300 av. J.-C.)* (eds. P. Briant and F. Joannès; Paris: De Boccard, 2006), 261–307; S. R. Hauser, “Babylon in arsakidischer Zeit,” in *Babylon: Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte, Wiege früher Gelehrsamkeit, Mythos in der Moderne* (ed. J. Renger; Saarbrücken: SDV, 1999), 207–39; R. J. van der Spek, “The Babylonian Temple during the Macedonian and Parthian Domination,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 42 (1985): 541–62. For the presence of Greek culture in Babylon, see D. T. Potts, “The *politai* and the *bīt tāmartu*: The Seleucid and Parthian Theatres of the Greek Citizens of Babylon,” in *Babylon. Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident / Science Culture Between Orient and Occident* (eds. E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, M. van Ess, and J. Marzahn; Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 239–52; R. J. van der Spek, “Multi-ethnicity and Ethnic Segregation in Hellenistic Babylon,” in *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity: The Role of Power and Tradition* (eds. T. Derks and N. Roymans; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 101–15; R. J. van der Spek, “Ethnic Segregation in Hellenistic Babylon,” in *Ethnicity in Ancient Mesopotamia* (eds. W. H. van Soldt, R. Kalvelagen, and D. Katz; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2005), 393–408; R. J. van der Spek, “The Theatre of Babylon in Cuneiform,” in *Veenhof Anniversary Volume: Studies Presented to Klaas R. Veenhof on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (eds. W. H. van Soldt et al.; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 445–56.

reclaimed the Greek throne that a Seleucid ruler had given to a temple.³⁴ That is not to say that the Greeks experienced no tensions in Babylon, as there was an emigration of Greeks from Babylon to Seleuceia in 83 BCE, but this must reflect specific temporary difficulties, since in 77 BCE the Greeks were still present in Babylon and sufficiently strong to allow themselves to indulge in inner-Greek rivalry.³⁵

Finally, the activities of Greeks in Babylon and their engagement with local Babylonian culture are also exhibited in the so-called *Graeco-Babyloniaca*, a collection of clay tablets with Greek transliterations of excerpts from Sumerian-Accadian texts that reflect the curricula of Babylonian schools, all originating from Babylon and dating between the first century BCE and the second century CE. It is assumed that these Greek transliterations are the product of Greek-speaking authors.³⁶

So, differently from Greco-Roman authors such as Strabo and Pliny, who contrast the Greekness and vitality of Seleuceia-on-Tigris with the decline and ruinous state of Babylon, the local sources from Babylon indicate that there was a continued and highly visible presence of Greeks, not only in Seleuceia but even in Babylon itself, who availed themselves of such Greek institutions as theaters, gymnasia, and philosophical schools. This Greek minority in Babylon was respected by the Parthian kings, who also portrayed themselves as Philhellenes on inscriptions in Babylon, appointed the governor of Babylon from among the Greek citizens, and specifically commanded the satrap of Babylonia from Seleuceia to read the royal communiqués to the assembled Greek citizens in the theater of Babylon.

There is thus no profound Greek-Babylonian antithesis in the Parthian era. This can also be shown to be the case for contacts between Greeks and Babylonians in the field of astronomy, something particularly relevant to our present concerns. This example even specifically concerns the relation between Greek astronomers from Seleuceia-on-Tigris on the one hand, and Babylonian, “Chaldean” astronomers on the other hand. According to Strabo in his *Geography*, Seleuceia-on-Tigris was home to the Greek astronomer

34 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 3, pp. 85–88.

35 On the emigration of Greeks from Babylon to Seleuceia, see Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 3, pp. 118–19, and vol. 3, pp. 124–25 on inner-Greek rivalry.

36 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, chap. 3.4.1.3.3.10, vol. 3, pp. 37–38. For references to Greeks in cuneiform writings, see now J. Monerie, *D’Alexandre à Zoilos: Dictionnaire prosopographique des porteurs de nom grec dans les sources cunéiformes* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2014).

Seleucus of Seleuceia (170–125 BCE), who was active ca. 150 BCE.³⁷ Strabo also calls him “Seleucus of Babylon” (*Geography* 1.1.9), but this is in line with the practice, described by Strabo elsewhere in his *Geography*, that inhabitants of cities in the country of Babylonia are not normally called after their city, but rather are called “Babylonians” after their country: “And as we call the country Babylonia, so also we call the men from there Babylonians, that is, not after the city, but after the country; but we do not call men after Seleuceia, if they are from there, as, for example, Diogenes the Stoic philosopher” (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16). Yet in the case of Seleucus, Strabo clearly calls him not only “Seleucus of Babylon” (*Geography* 1.1.9), but also, more precisely, “Seleucus of Seleuceia” (16.1.6). Alternatively, Strabo also refers to him as “the Seleucus from the region of the Erythraean Sea (the Red Sea)” (3.5.9), which must be on account of his observations of the influence of the Moon on the behavior of the tides, the very subject of that passage in Strabo. Seleucus’ hometown was thus Seleuceia-on-Tigris. The level of sophistication of this astronomer can be seen in his views that the universe is infinite and heliocentric and that the tides are the result of the influences of “the phases of the moon in the equinoctial and solstitial constellations of the zodiac.”³⁸

After Strabo has (wrongly) described Babylon as a city “neglected and thrown into ruins” and contrasted it with Seleuceia, which “at the present time has become larger than Babylon” (*Geography* 16.1.5), he draws the following picture of Babylonian astronomers and their contact with Greeks from Seleuceia:

In Babylonia a settlement is set apart for the local philosophers, the Chaldeans, as they are called, who are concerned mostly with astronomy; but some of these, who are not approved of by the others, profess to be genethliologists. There is also a tribe of the Chaldeans, and a territory inhabited by them, in the neighbourhood of the Arabians and of the Persian Sea, as it is called. There are also several tribes of the Chaldean astronomers. For example, some are called Orcheni, others Borsippeni, and several others by different names, as though divided into different sects which hold to various different dogmas about the same subjects. And the mathematicians (οἱ μαθηματικοί) make mention of some of these men; as, for example, Cidenas and Naburianus and Sudinus. Seleucus of Seleuceia is also a Chaldean, as are also several other noteworthy men. (*Geography* 16.1.6)

37 See also D. W. Roller, “Seleukos of Seleukeia”, *L’Antiquité Classique* 74 (2005): 111–18.

38 W. Hübner, “Seleucus [11]”, *Brill’s New Pauly* (online), with references to H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* 328a 5 (infinite universe), Plutarch, *Platonic Questions* 7.1 (1006c; heliocentricity) and Strabo, *Geography* 3.5.9 (tides).

It is particularly noteworthy that Strabo describes Seleucus of Seleuceia as being a Chaldean, thus assuming a high level of integration between Greek astronomers, such as Seleucus, and Chaldean astronomers in Babylonia. The pluriformity of the Chaldean schools of astronomy is emphasized, and the disagreement seen among the Chaldeans regarding genethliological astronomy, which casts individual nativities, is highly interesting. Chaldeans are reported to differ on this point. Greek mathematicians (astronomers) are said to have referred to some of these Chaldean astronomers by name, and Strabo mentions—among others—Naburianus, who probably lived around 500 BCE,³⁹ and Cidenas, a Chaldean astronomer of (at the latest) the second century BCE, whose observations were probably used by Critodemus, an astrologer of the Hellenistic period, and Hipparchus of Nicaea, an astronomer and geographer of the second century BCE.⁴⁰

Strabo's mention of Seleucus of Seleuceia in this passage is highly useful for us, because it gives us a clue to how, at least in the second century BCE, we could imagine the personal contacts between Greek and Babylonian-Chaldean astronomers. Such contacts could explain the exchange of astronomical views and the possible acquaintance of Babylonian-Chaldean astronomers with Greek astronomy. This also shows that Greeks, resident in Seleuceia, continued to engage with their Eastern environment in the Parthian period as well, and that constructive Greek-Babylonian-Parthian ties came to be forged. Now that the Parthians had defined their relation with the Greeks, they were soon to meet the Romans.

The First Encounters of the Parthians with the Romans

Within the 70 years following the Parthians' definitive conquest of Babylonia, the Romans and Parthians came to meet each other for the first time and drew up treaties—one under Sulla in the 90s BCE, when Sulla was proconsul of Cilicia in Asia Minor and shaped Rome's policy regarding the Eastern kingdoms, and later also under Pompey in the 60s BCE, when Pompey "annexed Syria, settled Judea, and laid the foundation of subsequent Roman organisation of the East."⁴¹ For our present purposes, this is the start of an important era of

39 W. Röllig, "Naburianus," *Brill's New Pauly* (online).

40 W. Hübner, "Cidenas," *Brill's New Pauly* (online); W. Hübner, "Critodemus," *Brill's New Pauly* (online).

41 G. E. F. Chilver & R. J. Seager, "Pompeius Magnus, Gnaeus (Pompey)," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online). For Roman treaties with Parthia, see E. L. Wheeler, "Roman Treaties with Parthia: Völkerrecht or Power Politics," in *Limes XVIII: Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (eds. P. Freeman, J. Bennett, Z. T. Fiema, and B. Hoffmann; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002), vol. 1, 287–92. Cf. particularly K.-H. Ziegler,

Parthian-Roman relations in the context of which, as I shall argue, Matthew's narrative of the magi also needs to be understood: the magi of Matthew's Gospel must have been Parthian magi; Herod the Great was a Roman vassal king, appointed by the Roman senate in 40 BCE as part of their strategy with regard to Parthia; and Matthew probably wrote in Syrian Antioch, the epicenter (at least on the Roman side) of Roman-Parthian relations.⁴²

Die Beziehungen zwischen Rom und dem Partherreich: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Völkerrechts (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964).

- 42 For an overview of Roman-Parthian relations, see L. Gregoratti, "In the Land West of the Euphrates: The Parthians in the Roman Empire," in *SOMA 201: Proceedings of the 15th Symposium on Mediterranean Archaeology* (eds. P. M. Militello and H. Öniz; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), vol. 2, 731–5; Gregoratti, "Fighting an Ever Dying Enemy: Western Perspectives on Persians and Parthians," in *Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking in History and the Humanities* (eds. C.-F. Dobre, I. Epurescu-Pascovici, and C. E. Ghită; Bucharest, 2012), 25–36; O. Linz, *Studien zur römischen Ostpolitik im Principat* (Hamburg: Kovac, 2009); F. Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); F. Millar, *Rome, the Greek World, and the East*, vol. 3: *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (eds. H. M. Cotton and G. M. Rogers; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); J. Wiesehöfer, "Images Romaines de l'Orient et Images Parthes de l'Occident à l'Époque d'Auguste," in *Iraniens, Grecs et Romains* (ed. J. Wiesehöfer; Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2005), 111–28; S. Colvin, *The Greco-Roman East: Politics, Culture, Society* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); W. Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000); B. Campbell, "War and Diplomacy: Rome and Parthia, 31 BC–AD 235," in *War and Society in the Roman World* (eds. J. Rich and G. Shipley; London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 213–40; J. Wolski, "Iran und Rom: Versuch einer historischen Bewertung der gegenseitigen Beziehungen," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.9.1 (1976): 195–214; Wolski, "Les Parthes et leur attitude envers le monde gréco-romain," in *Assimilation et Résistance à la Culture Gréco-Romaine dans le Monde Ancien* (ed. D. M. Pippidi; Bucharest: Editura Academiei / Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976), 455–62; Wolski, "Die Parther und ihre Beziehungen zur griechisch-römischen Kultur," *Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 65 (1983): 137–49; J. B. Ward-Perkins, "The Roman West and the Parthian East," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 (1965): 175–99. Cf. also D. L. Kennedy, "Parthia and Rome: Eastern Perspectives," in *The Roman Army in the East* (ed. D. L. Kennedy; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996), 67–90; E. Frézouls, "Les relations romano-parthes avant l'époque flavienne," in *Les relations internationales* (eds. E. Frézouls and A. Jacquemin; Paris: de Boccard, 1995), 479–98; H. Fischer, "Fragen der Beziehungen zwischen Rom und Parthien und ihre Widerspiegelung in der damaligen Literatur (Mitte des 1.Jh.v.u.Z. bis Mitte des 1.Jh.u.Z.)," *Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 71 (1989): 367–73; H. Petersen, "New Evidence for the Relations between Romans and Parthians," *Berytus* 16 (1966): 61–69. For the earliest Parthian-Roman encounters, see M. R. Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 3.4, 311–30; G. F. Assar, "A Revised Parthian Chronology of the period

The first encounter between Parthia and Rome, the latter represented by Sulla, took place during the reign of the Parthian Arsacid King Mithridates II (124/3–88/7 BCE) in 96 BCE. According to the *Summaries* of Pliny's *History of Rome*, "Envoys of the Parthians, sent by King Arsaces [i.e., the Arsacid ruler], came to Sulla to seek the friendship of the Roman People" (Livy, *Summaries of Book 70*). A more detailed description of this meeting is given in Velleius Paterculus's *Compendium of Roman History* and in Plutarch's *Sulla*, and what they write is very relevant for us for an additional reason.

According to Velleius Paterculus,

There came to him [i.e., to Sulla] ambassadors of the Parthians (*legati Parthorum*)—he was the first of the Romans to be so honoured—and among them some magi who, from the marks on his body, foretold that his life and his fame would be worthy of a god (*cum ad eum primum omnium Romanorum legati Parthorum venissent, et in iis quidam magi ex notis corporis respondissent caelestem eius vitam et memoriam futuram*). (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.24.3)

Several aspects of this passage are noteworthy. First, Velleius writes that Sulla is "*the first* of the Romans" to be visited by legates of the Parthians. Velleius probably cherished his own experience of having played a part in subsequent Roman-Parthian encounters, as he had begun his career as a military tribune in the East as a member of the staff of Gaius Julius Caesar, Augustus' grandson, whom Augustus had sent to confirm a peace treaty with the Parthians in 2 CE on an island in the Euphrates. Velleius writes that this meeting of Gaius Julius Caesar and the Parthian king, Phraates V (= Phraataces, 2 BCE–2 CE), was "truly a notable and a memorable sight": "these two eminent leaders not only of the empires they represented but also of mankind thus met in conference (*duo inter se eminentissima imperiorum et hominum coirent capita*)" (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.101). I shall return to this event later when I treat the Augustan era (see pp. 550–54), but now I simply want to call attention to Velleius' personal acquaintance with Roman-Parthian relations.

Secondly, this passage in Velleius shows that the magi had now become fully integrated within the Parthian ruling class. Velleius' portrayal of a Parthian

91–55 BC," *Parthica* 8 (2006): 55–104; A. Keaveney, "Roman Treaties with Parthia circa 95–circa 64 BC," *American Journal of Philology* 102 (1981): 195–212; Keaveney, "The King and the War-lords: Romano-Parthian Relations circa 64–53 BC," *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982): 412–28; J. M. Schlude, *Rome, Parthia, and Empire: The First Century of Roman-Parthian Relations* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009).

delegation that consisted of delegates with some magi “among them” is highly interesting. It challenges us to take a broader view of the phenomenon of travelling magi that Matthew also describes. This passage shows that travelling magi do not necessarily need to travel all by themselves, but could be part of a broader group of Parthian delegates and magi. This could be relevant for our interpretation of Matthew’s magi, as I will suggest in due course.

Thirdly, the Parthians and magi together appear to be monitoring the Roman world. Fourthly, in this episode the magi appear to be interested in foretelling the fortunes of a foreign ruler. They do so by the art of reading body signs (*ex notis corporis*) and conclude from this that Sulla’s life and future memory will be “heavenly-divine” (*caelestis*). The source for this story is Sulla’s own *Memoirs*, as Plutarch seems to imply. Plutarch also narrates this event, although slightly differently. According to Plutarch in his *Sulla*,

As he [i.e., Sulla] lingered on the banks of the Euphrates,⁴³ he received a visit from Orobazus, a Parthian, who came as an ambassador from king Arsaces, although up to this time the two nations had held no intercourse with one another. This also is thought to have been part of Sulla’s great good fortune, that he should be the first Roman with whom the Parthians held conference when they wanted alliance and friendship. [...]

It is also recorded that a certain man in the retinue of Orobazus, a Chaldean, after looking Sulla intently in the face, and studying carefully the movements of his mind and body, and investigating his nature according to the principles of his peculiar art, declared that this man must of necessity become the greatest in the world, and that even now the wonder was that he consented not to be first of all men (εἰπεῖν ὡς ἀναγκαῖον εἶη τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα μέγιστον γενέσθαι, θαυμάζειν δὲ καὶ νῦν πῶς ἀνέχεται μὴ πρῶτος ὢν ἀπάντων). (Plutarch, *Sulla* 5.4–6)

Thus Plutarch also describes the visit of a Parthian delegation to Sulla, but he does not attribute the prophecy about Sulla’s life to the magi, but rather to a “Chaldean,” who is said to have applied the art of physiognomy and to have prophesied that Sulla “must of necessity become the greatest in the world.”

43 For the localization of this meeting on the Euphrates, probably in the area between Melitene (a city in eastern Cappadocia) and Tomisa (an important crossing of the Euphrates), see J. Wagner, *Die Römer an Euphrat und Tigris* (Feldmeilen: Raggi Verlag, 1985), 15 with Fig. 18 (cf. also R. K. Bulin, *Untersuchungen zur Politik und Kriegführung Roms im Osten von 100–68 v. Chr.* [Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 1983], 44); this is followed by, a.o., W. Letzner, *Lucius Cornelius Sulla: Versuch einer Biographie* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000), 100–101.

Perhaps it is possible to argue that Velleius' use of the term "magi" instead of "Chaldeans" is to be preferred because Velleius had first-hand knowledge of the Parthians, unlike Plutarch. Moreover, prediction through reading body signs perhaps fits the magi better than the Chaldeans, who are first and foremost known as astronomers. Whatever the case, this variance between Velleius and Plutarch only serves to show that "magi" and "Chaldeans" could be easily interchanged in Greco-Roman sources.

In Plutarch's *Sulla*, it also becomes clear that Sulla's own *Memoirs* are probably the source of this episode, and that he seems to have derived great inspiration from his encounter with these magi or Chaldeans. Having been appointed dictator in the 80s BCE and having enacted a comprehensive legislative programme, according to Plutarch, he subsequently "not only foresaw his own death, but may be said to have written about it also. For he stopped writing the twenty-second book of his *Memoirs* two days before he died, and he there says that the Chaldeans foretold him that, after an honourable life, he was to end his days at the height of his good fortunes" (Plutarch, *Sulla* 37.1). This first encounter between the Parthians and the Romans thus seems to carry great significance for our understanding of Matthew's magi. Not only does this encounter usher in the new era of direct Roman-Parthian relations that also seems to constitute the background of Matthew's narrative, but the depiction of the magi/Chaldeans as forecasting a foreign ruler's future importance also seems directly relevant. I will return to this in due course.

The second encounter between Parthia and Rome took place during the reign of the Parthian king Phraates III (71/0–ca. 58/7 BCE), in the context of Rome's war with the kingdoms of Pontus and Armenia. The situation was rather confusing, aggravated by the fact that the prince of Armenia, who in the course of events revolted against his father, was the son-in-law of the Parthian king. The encounter between Parthia and Rome at this time consisted of a series of treaties that were restored when they had been broken.

First, when Rome got involved in a war with Armenia in 69/68 BCE, the Armenian king tried to win the kings of Pontus and Parthia as his allies. In response, the Roman military leader Licinius Lucullus—who, by chance, had closely cooperated with Sulla in the East and was the editor of his *Memoirs*⁴⁴—“sent opposing legates asking that the Parthians should either help him or remain neutral. Their king made secret agreements with both, but was in no haste to help either of them” (Appian, *Roman History* 12.13.87), so that Parthia remained effectively neutral. According to Dio Cassius, the Parthians also officially declared their neutrality (*Roman History* 36.1.1–2; 36.3.1–3). It is assumed that the friendship treaty with Sulla from 96 BCE was renewed on this

44 Cf. E. Badian, “Licinius Lucullus, Lucius,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

occasion, the Euphrates being acknowledged as the boundary between Rome and Parthia.

When the Roman general Pompey gets involved against the kingdom of Pontus in 66 BCE, and the king of Pontus tries to win Parthia as an ally, Pompey also renews the Roman treaty with the Parthians: “Pompey anticipated him by quickly establishing friendship with Phraates on the same terms” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 36.45.3). According to Livy’s *Summaries*, “Gnaeus Pompey set out to wage war against Mithridates [of Pontus], renewed the friendship with Phraates King of the Parthians, and defeated Mithridates in a cavalry battle” (Livy, *Summaries of Book 100*). Florus, in his *Epitome of Roman History*, puts these events into the broader perspective of Pompey’s campaign in the East, during which, in 63 BCE, he also intervened in Jerusalem to end a dispute between two Hasmonaean rivals and entered its temple (cf. also Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.152–153; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.9; Appian, *Roman History* 12.16.106). I quote this passage from Florus in full because it shows that, after the vicissitudes of the Hellenistic period, Judea had now become fully encapsulated in the dynamic relations between Rome and Parthia. As we shall see, the Parthians were to intervene in Jerusalem in 40–39 BCE, whereas the Romans had already made their first official appearance in Jerusalem during Pompey’s eastern campaign:

The Jews attempted to defend Jerusalem; but this also he [i.e., Pompey] entered and saw the great secret of that impious nation laid open to view, the heavens beneath a golden vine. Being appointed arbitrator between the two brothers who were disputing the throne, he decided in favour of Hyrcanus and threw Aristobolus into prison, because he was seeking to restore his power. Thus the Roman people, under the leadership of Pompey, traversed the whole of Asia in its widest extent and made what had been the furthest province into a central province; for with the exception of the Parthians, who preferred to make a treaty, and the Indians, who as yet knew nothing of us, all Asia between the Red and Caspian Seas and the Ocean was in our power, conquered or overawed by the arms of Pompey. (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.40 [3.5.30–31])

The reference here is to Pompey’s treaty with the Parthians of 66 BCE, and it is noteworthy that the independence of Parthia is explicitly acknowledged.

Yet in 66/65 BCE, Pompey breaks this treaty by sending his troops under Gabinius, the proconsul of Syria, across the Euphrates through Parthian territory, thus upsetting the Parthian king, who urgently requests a renewal of the treaty (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 37.5.3–7.5). Plutarch records Pompey’s evasive response to the Parthians. According to Plutarch, “Phraates the Parthian sent [...] a proposition that the Euphrates be adopted as a boundary between

his empire and that of the Romans. Pompey replied that [...] as for a boundary, the just one would be adopted” (Plutarch, *Pompey* 33.6). Pompey’s answer is also taken down in the collection of Pompey’s sayings in Plutarch’s *Sayings of Romans*: “When Phraates, king of the Parthians, sent to him [i.e., Pompey], claiming the right to set his boundary at the river Euphrates, he said that the Romans set justice as their boundary towards the Parthians” (Plutarch, *Sayings of Romans* 204A).⁴⁵ After many further developments, a new treaty between Rome and Parthia was finally obtained in 65/64 BCE (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 37.5,1–7.5; cf. Appian, *Roman History* 12.16.106).

However, as we shall see in the next section, Parthia’s independent status was fundamentally challenged when Crassus, a coalition partner of Pompey and Caesar, received special commands for Syria and in 55 BCE left for Syria with the intent of conquering Parthia. Rome and Parthia were now set for a confrontation that would define their future relations.

The First Crisis of Roman-Parthian Relations: Crassus’ War of Conquest, the Parthian Occupation of Jerusalem, and the Romans’ Appointment of Herod

The Parthians’ independence, acknowledged since their first meeting with Sulla, was violated when Crassus led the Roman armies from Syrian Antioch in a war of conquest and crossed the Euphrates in 53 BCE. Roman-Parthian relations then plunged into a crisis.⁴⁶ As a motive for war, Roman historians ascribe to Crassus his “avarice [...], in coveting the gold of Parthia” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.46 [3.11.2]; cf. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 40.12.1). According to Josephus, Crassus financed his campaign by robbing the Jerusalem temple of all of its gold: “The government of Syria now passed into the hands of Crassus, who came to succeed Gabinius. To provide for his expedition against the Parthians, Crassus stripped the temple at Jerusalem of all its gold, his plunder including the two thousand talents left untouched by Pompey. He then crossed the Euphrates” (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.179). Again, this shows how

45 For Plutarch’s view of the Parthians, cf. U. Hartmann, “Das Bild der Parther bei Plutarch,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 57 (2008): 426–52.

46 On Crassus’ attack on Parthia, see also G. C. Sampson, *The Defeat of Rome in the East: Crassus, the Parthians, and the Disastrous Battle of Carrhae, 53 BC* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2008); and P. Arnaud, “Les guerres parthiques de Gabinius et de Crassus et la politique occidentale des Parthes Arsacides entre 70 et 53 av. J.-C.,” in *Ancient Iran and the Mediterranean World* (ed. E. Dabrowa; Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Jagiellonian University Press], 1998), 13–34; D. Timpe, “Die Bedeutung der Schlacht von Carrhae,” *Museum Helveticum* 19 (1962): 104–29.

deeply the first-century BCE history of Judea became dominated by Roman-Parthian tensions.

Once Crassus was on the march, the Parthian king Orodes II (58/7–38 BCE) sent envoys and reminded him of the treaties with Sulla and Pompey: “ambassadors arrived from King Orodes with a message bidding him remember the treaties made with Pompeius and Sulla. Crassus, who coveted the royal treasures, answered not a word that had any semblance of justice, but merely said that he would give his reply at Seleuceia” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.46 [3.11.4–5]).

This response, repeated throughout the work of Greco-Roman historians (see, e.g., Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 40.16), is interesting because it shows that Seleuceia-on-Tigris was seen as the Parthian royal capital. As we shall see shortly, this is almost true, because there is evidence that in this time (the 50s BCE) the Parthians had developed Ctesiphon, just opposite Seleuceia across the River Tigris, as their capital. Ctesiphon, as an expression of Parthian identity, and Seleuceia, the continued Greek presence on the Tigris, converged into a Parthian-Greek amalgam, with Greek being the language of the court.

According to Dio Cassius, at first Crassus’ campaign was going very well, because his attack had been unexpected and because the Greek cities in Parthian territory quickly received him:

Crassus, on his side, quickly won over the garrisons and especially the Greek cities, among them one named Nicephorium. For colonists in great numbers, descendants of the Macedonians and of the other Greeks who had campaigned in Asia with them, readily transferred their allegiance to the Romans, since they were oppressed by the violence [of the barbarians (?)], and placed strong hopes in the invaders, whom they regarded as friends of the Greeks. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 40.13.1)

However, Crassus allowed himself to be sidetracked to Carrhae (see the map in Figure 20.1), where his army was encircled and destroyed by the Parthians under the leadership of the surena, the highest military commander. The Parthians acquired the standards of the Roman legions and took these with them (see, e.g., Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.46 [3.11]; 2.34 [4.12.63]). What follows, at least according to Plutarch, shows the acquaintance of the Parthian court with Greek culture. It is difficult to assess the historicity of Plutarch’s narrative, but it is in tune with the Parthians’ professed Philhellenism. According to Plutarch, Crassus’ head was sent to the Parthian king Orodes II while he was visiting the Armenian court. Armenia had been Crassus’ ally at the beginning of his campaign, but Orodes had forced the Armenian king Artavasdes II (55/4–34 BCE) to change sides, and they were now reconciled,

entertaining each other at banquets. Both kings, whose kingdoms were on former Greek-Seleucid territory,⁴⁷ are described as Philhellenes: “there were reciprocal banquets and drinking bouts, at which many Greek compositions were introduced. For Hyrodes [i.e., Orodes II, the Parthian king] was well acquainted both with the Greek language and literature, and Artavasdes actually composed tragedies, and wrote orations and histories, some of which are preserved” (Plutarch, *Crassus* 33). It was at one of these banquets that the news of the Romans’ defeat was received, confirmed by the presentation of Crassus’ head, which blended in perfectly with the performance of Euripides’ *Bacchae* that happened to be taking place. This performance thus took the form of a re-enactment of a gruesome episode in Euripides’ play (Plutarch, *Crassus* 33). According to Plutarch, Parthians and Armenians present at the event knew the script of Euripides’ *Bacchae* so well that they could spontaneously adapt it to the circumstances of its performance at that time and play their part in it.⁴⁸

At the same time, according to Plutarch, the surena had reached Seleuceia-on-Tigris, where a similar Greek awareness of the Parthians was displayed. Here the object of attention, or rather ridicule, was another piece of Greek literature, the *Milesiaca* of Aristides, found among the belongings of one of the Roman captives. Although this work is no longer extant, Plutarch’s description, corroborated by reports in other literature, makes clear that it is a collection of erotic tales. At a meeting of the assembled senate of Seleuceia, the surena spread out the “wallet of obscenities from the ‘Milesiaca’ in front of him” and heaped “much insulting ridicule upon the Romans, since they could not, even when going to war, let such subjects and writings alone” (Plutarch, *Crassus* 32). It is difficult to assess the historicity of what seems a highly stylized account, yet the Parthians were Philhellenes, and at least Plutarch was prepared to pay heed to this in his depiction of the events following Crassus’ death. Clearly Parthian attitudes towards Roman politics on the one hand, and Greek culture on the other, appear to be two different things.

After the total defeat of Crassus, the Parthians launched a counterattack against the Syrian city of Antioch in 51 BCE, showing that the Parthians now took on the Romans and deepened the crisis with an attack on the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Yet they were warded off by Crassus’ successor Cassius Longinus (53–51 BCE), who—according to Josephus—was “standing in the way of the Parthians who were making incursions into” Syria (Josephus,

47 For the importance of Greek culture in Armenia, see M. S. Drower, E. W. Gray, S. M. Sherwin-White, and J. Wiesehöfer, “Armenia,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

48 Cf. D. C. Braund, “Dionysiac Tragedy in Plutarch, *Crassus*,” *The Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 468–74. See also Wiesehöfer, “Denn Orodes war der griechischen Sprache und Literatur nicht unkundig . . .”

Jewish Antiquities 14.119–120). Cassius was supported in the region by Cicero, who was then proconsul of the Roman province of Cilicia (51–50 BCE) in Asia-Minor, directly bordering on Syria. Cicero must have felt personally very involved in the encounter with the Parthians, as he had just been elected to the prestigious post of augur in Rome in 53/52 BCE, filling the vacancy left by Crassus,⁴⁹ who had just been killed by the Parthians at Carrhae.

Cicero's letters to his friend Atticus from his new post as proconsul give a unique insight into the real threat posed by the Parthians. Whereas on his journey towards Cilicia in July 51 BCE Cicero still writes (from Athens) that "[o]f the Parthians there is no whisper" (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 104.4), in September he alarmingly writes,

the Parthians have crossed the Euphrates under Pacorus, son of King Orodes of Parthia, with almost their entire force. There is no word so far of Bibulus [i.e., the governor of Syria] being in Syria. Cassius is in the town of Antioch with his entire army. I am in Cappadocia in the Taurus region with my army near Cybistra. The enemy is in Cyrrestica, the part of Syria nearest my province. I am writing to the Senate on these matters. (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 111.1)

In a letter from December, Cicero describes how he took on the Parthians in mid-October 51 BCE in the border-area between Cilicia and Syria, likening this encounter with that between Alexander the Great and Darius, whose armies had clashed in the same region, and summarizing the importance of his own contribution to the Parthians' retreat:

Here on 13 October we made a great slaughter of the enemy, harrying and burning places of great strength, Pomptinus coming up at night and myself in the morning. I received the title of general from the army. For a few days we encamped near Issus in the very spot where Alexander, a considerably better general than either you or I, pitched his camp against Darius. There we stayed five days, plundering and laying waste the Amanus, and then left. Meanwhile—you have heard tell of panics and of nerve warfare—the rumour of my advent encouraged Cassius, who was shut up in Antioch, and struck terror into the Parthians. Cassius pursued their retreat from the town and gained a success. Osaces, the highly respected Parthian general, died a few days later of a wound received in the flight. My name stood high in Syria. (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 113.3)

49 See J. P. V. D. Balsdon and M. T. Griffin, "Tullius Cicero, Marcus—Life," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

This passage from Cicero nicely shows how much the Parthians were feared now that they had responded to Cassius' provocation with a full counter-attack, and how this confrontation is captured in the old antithesis between Alexander the Great and Darius, with Cicero now identifying with the Greeks. In February 50 BCE the situation seems improved, as Cicero writes to Atticus that he looks forward to the months of May and June, "I trust without interruption from the Parthians" (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 114.9). Yet in another letter from February, Cicero expresses his fear that "A Parthian war is threatening. [...] The Parthians are wintering in our province and Orodes in person is expected. Yes, it's quite a coil" (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 115.14). However, at the beginning of August 50 BCE Cicero shows himself to be relieved: "by an incredible stroke of luck they [i.e., the Parthians] disappeared" (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 121.3).

In his writings, Cicero also demonstrates his interest in the magi. In his work *On Divination*, having just spoken about the Druids in Gaul, Cicero refers to the magi, whom he closely associates with the Persians (the more general term applied to the contemporary Parthians), depicting the magi as their "king-makers" and differentiating them from the Chaldeans, the astronomers:

Among the Persians the augurs and diviners are the magi, who assemble regularly in a sacred place for practice and consultation, just as formerly your augurs used to do on the Nones. Indeed, no one can become king of the Persians until he has learned the theory and the practice of the magi. [...] In Syria the Chaldeans are pre-eminent for their knowledge of astronomy and for their quickness of mind. (Cicero, *On Divination* 1.90–91)

Hence, Cicero acknowledges the importance of the magi but at the same time also appears very concerned about the threat posed by the Parthians. Crassus' unprovoked attack on the Parthians and their victory and ensuing attack on Syria ushered in an era of Roman-Parthian tensions that constitutes a very relevant background for Matthew's introduction of the magi in his gospel, raising, among others, the question how a visit by the magi into Roman territory could be feasible after the beginning of such hostilities in the 50s BCE.

A decade later, the Parthians were still intent on taking on the Romans, now taking advantage of the civil war of 44–42 BCE that followed Caesar's death, when Octavian and Marc Antony attacked the Caesar-killers Brutus and Cassius Longinus in order to avenge his murder. According to Florus, Brutus and Cassius sent one of their generals, Labienus, to solicit help from the Parthians: "they [i.e., the Parthians] had heard with joy of the internal discords of the Roman people. So, as soon as there was a gleam of hope, they did

not hesitate to break out, being actually invited to do so by Labienus, who had been sent to Parthia by Cassius and Brutus, and—such was their mad fury—had urged the enemies of Rome to assist them” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.19 [4.9.3–4]).⁵⁰ While Labienus was on his way to Parthia, Brutus and Cassius were defeated and killed in the Battle of Philippi (42 BCE). Yet eventually, Labienus still returned from Parthia with an army headed by himself and Pacorus, the son of the Parthian king Orodes II.⁵¹ According to Dio Cassius, Labienus, being aware that Marc Antony, who had become assigned to the East after Caesar’s death, was totally infatuated with Cleopatra and had followed her to Egypt, had been able to persuade

the Parthian king to make an attack upon the Romans. For he declared their armies were either destroyed utterly or impaired, while the remainder of the troops were in a state of mutiny and would again be at war; and he accordingly advised the king to subjugate Syria and the adjoining districts, while Caesar was busy in Italy with Sextus and Antony was indulging his passion in Egypt. He promised to assume command in the war, and assured Orodes that if allowed to follow this course he would detach many of the provinces, inasmuch as they were already estranged from the Romans through the constant ill-treatment they had experienced. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.24.6–8)

Unlike the events of 51–50 BCE, this time (in 41–40 BCE) the Parthians were highly successful. Velleius Paterculus, in his *Compendium of Roman History*, talks of the sheer “panic” into which Labienus threw the Eastern provinces “in consequence of the great movements he had set on foot” (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.78.1). According to Dio Cassius, Labienus, together with Pacorus, invaded Phoenicia, won the Roman garrisons of Syria to his side without resistance (as these garrisons had formally served with Brutus and Cassius), captured the Syrian cities of Apamea and Antioch, pursued the proconsul of Syria, Saxa, into Cilicia, killed him, and took the Roman standards for a second time (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.25.1–4). Pacorus now secured “all the rest of Syria” and then also invaded Judea, where he deposed the Jewish Hasmonean-Maccabean ruler that had been appointed by the Romans

50 Cf. Dio Cassius, who relates that Labienus had “before the battle been sent to Orodes to secure some reinforcements” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.24.5).

51 On Orodes II’s attitude towards Rome between 49 and 42 BCE, see also Dabrowa, “L’attitude d’Orode II à l’égard de Rome de 49 à 42 av.n.è.,” *Latomus: Revue d’Études Latines* 45 (1986): 119–24.

when Pompey intervened in Judean politics in 63 BCE and replaced him with another, pro-Parthian member of this family (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.26.1–2; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.13.9–10 and *Jewish War* 1.13.9–11). This fact again underlines how Judea became entirely involved in contemporary Parthian-Roman power struggles, one time suffering plunder by the Romans when Crassus stripped the Jerusalem temple of its gold for his Parthian war (see above), the other time experiencing the invasion of the Parthians.

Meanwhile, Labienus conquered Cilicia, taking “most of the places [...] without conflict” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.26.3). According to Strabo, some cities (such as Mylasa) tried to withstand Labienus and were heavily destroyed, “while the others, since they were without arms and inclined to peace, yielded to Labienus when he was coming against them with an army and an allied Parthian force” (Strabo, *Geography* 14.2.24). Labienus even issued coins in Cilicia.⁵² Having thus conquered Judea, Syria, and parts of Asia Minor, advancing “as far as Ionia” (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 5.7.65), Labienus and Pacorus were finally stopped by Antony, who dispatched his general Ventidius against this agglomerated Roman-Parthian force under Labienus and Pacorus and defeated them, killing Labienus and Pacorus and driving the Parthians back (39/38 BCE).⁵³ Florus emphasizes that Ventidius did so “with marvelous good luck,” implying that the outcome could have been rather different (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.19 [4.9.5–6]).

According to Dio Cassius, Ventidius was the first Roman to celebrate a triumph over the Parthians (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.41.1–5; 49.19.1–49.21.3). In Florus’ view, this defeat of the Parthians, and in particular the death of the Parthian king’s son Pacorus, was what offered the Romans “compensation for the disaster of Crassus” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.19 [4.9.7]). According to Florus, “Now that the Parthians and Romans had made trial of one another, and Crassus and Pacorus had given proof of the strength of either side, friendship was renewed on the basis of mutual respect, and a treaty actually concluded with the king [i.e., the Parthian king Orodes II] by Antony himself” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.20 [4.10.1]).

52 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 589–90; for coins, vol. 1, table x, illustration 1.

53 For the entire episode of 41–38 BCE, see Livy, *Summaries of Book 127*, who emphasizes that the Parthians “overran that whole province” of Syria; Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.78.1; Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.19–21 [4.9.1–4.12.3], who writes that “At length Syria was snatched from us” (2.19 [4.9.5]); Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 5.7.65; and Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.24–26.

Yet unexpectedly, in 36 BCE, during the reign of the Parthian king Phraates IV, Antony “left Syria and made a sudden attack upon the Parthians.” Florus ascribes Antony’s Parthian campaign to his “vanity” and “desire for fresh titles of honour” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.20 [4.10.2–3]), but according to Appian, it fell to Antony to avenge Crassus: “Antony was to make war against the Parthians to avenge their treachery toward Crassus” (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 5.7.65). This is also the view of Dio Cassius, according to whom Antony nominally negotiated peace with the Parthians on the condition of the return of Crassus’ standards, but was actually preparing for war against the Parthians (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 49.24.5). Antony’s campaign against the Parthians started off smoothly, with his lover Cleopatra escorting him “as far as the Euphrates,” as Flavius Josephus relates (*The Jewish War* 1.362), but went horribly wrong as he saw two of his legions destroyed, with additional severe losses during the march back to Syria due to illness and lack of water, so that, according to Florus, “scarcely a third part of the sixteen legions was left” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.20 [4.10.10]).

Hence the whole situation was aggravated, as not only Crassus’ and Saxa’s Roman standards remained in Parthian possession, but, in addition, the standards of Antony’s lost legions were taken as well. As we shall see in due course, the return of all these standards would be the concern of Augustus, who, however, decided to change the Romans’ policy toward the Parthians and employ diplomatic strategy rather than war. This, as I shall argue in the course of this chapter, is immediately relevant for Matthew’s narrative of the magi. As we shall see, the Augustan peace between the Romans and the Parthians was a very distinctive phase of their relations and contrasted sharply with their violent encounters in the 50s, 40s, and 30s BCE. For our present concerns, there are very relevant issues here on all sides: Parthian, Roman, and Jewish, as I will now briefly indicate.

(1) On the Parthian side, it emerges in the sources relating to the 50s BCE that during this time the Parthians established a new royal capital in Ctesiphon (see the map in Figure 20.1), opposite Seleuceia-on-Tigris, only about 96 kilometers (60 miles) north of Babylon.⁵⁴ Ctesiphon had already been mentioned in earlier Greek sources as the place where the troops of the Median Satrap Molon planned to winter when, in his attack on the Hellenistic-Seleucid kingdom of Antiochus III in the late 220s BCE, he tried to lay siege to Seleuceia-on-Tigris but was thwarted in his attempt to cross the Tigris: “he withdrew to his camp at Ctesiphon and made preparations for quartering his troops there during the winter” (Polybius, *The Histories* 5.45.4). It was only later, however, probably

54 See M. A. R. Colledge and J. Wiesehöfer, “Ctesiphon,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

in the mid-first century BCE, that Ctesiphon became a royal residence of the Parthian kings.⁵⁵ Strabo, writing in the Augustan period, tells us that Ctesiphon used to be “a large village” before the Parthian kings turned it into their winter residence, which, although it was in the direct vicinity of Seleuceia-on-Tigris, relieved Seleuceia from the (logistic) burdens of the court: “This village the kings of the Parthians were wont to make their winter residence, thus sparing the Seleuceians, in order that the Seleuceians might not be oppressed by having the Scythian folk or soldiery quartered amongst them” (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16). As Strabo makes clear, because of its separate location, Ctesiphon, as distinguished from Seleuceia, was also able to express a pronounced Parthian identity:

Because of the Parthian power, therefore, Ctesiphon is a city rather than a village; its size is such that it lodges a great number of people, and it has been equipped with buildings by the Parthians themselves; and it has been provided by the Parthians with wares for sale and with the arts that are pleasing to the Parthians; for the Parthian kings are accustomed to spend the winter there because of the salubrity of the air, but the summer at Ecbatana and in Hyrcania because of the prevalence of their ancient renown. (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16)⁵⁶

Despite the fact that the actual residence of the Parthian court was in Ctesiphon on the other side of the Tigris, because of its very proximity to Seleuceia, the latter is often seen as the capital of the Parthians. Hence, as we have seen, Crassus answered the envoys from the Parthian king Orodoos II, who asked him for the causes of the war, that “he would tell him in Seleuceia” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 40.16.3). And, in another passage, Strabo also simply says that the Parthians’ winter residence was at Seleuceia-on-Tigris, while omitting any reference to Ctesiphon: “the Parthians continue to use this [i.e., Ecbatana] as a royal residence even now, and their kings spend at least their summers there, for Media is a cold country; but their winter residence is at Seleuceia, on the Tigris near Babylon” (Strabo, *Geography* 11.13.1). Pliny the Elder ascribes

55 For Ctesiphon, see also A. Heller, “Griechen in Babylonien: War Ktesiphon eine griechische Gründung?” in *Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt: Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts* (eds. R. Rollinger et al.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 519–32; and Hauser, “The Arsacids.”

56 On Strabo’s view on Parthia and the Parthians, see also J. W. Drijvers, “Strabo on Parthia and the Parthians,” in *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse / The Arsacid Empire: Sources and Documentation* (ed. J. Wiesehöfer; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 279–93.

a very different function to Ctesiphon, stating that it is the latest capital of the Parthians, and that it was founded to draw citizens away from Seleuceia (although unsuccessfully), causing the Parthian king Vologeses I (51/52–79/80 CE) to build yet another city in competition with Seleuceia: “For the purpose of drawing away the population of Seleuceia [...], the Parthians founded Ctesiphon, which is about three miles from Seleuceia in the Chalonitis district, and is now the capital of the kingdoms of Parthia. And after it was found that the intended purpose was not being achieved, another town was recently founded in the neighbourhood by King Vologesus, named Vologesocerta” (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.122–123). It seems, however, that Pliny retrojects the anti-Hellenistic intentions that his contemporary Vologeses I seems to have had in mind with the foundation of Vologesia⁵⁷ onto the foundation of Ctesiphon as a royal place of residence in the mid-first century BCE. Josephus must be equally mistaken, on the other end of the spectrum, when he describes Ctesiphon as “a Greek city situated near Seleuceia, where the king spends the winter each year and where most of his baggage is stored, as it happens” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 19.377). This description of Ctesiphon as a Greek city seems to be a confused reflection of its proximity to Seleuceia-on-Tigris. On account of Strabo, it seems best to regard Ctesiphon as a Parthian city in the direct vicinity of Seleuceia-on-Tigris. It is Seleuceia, according to the Astronomical Diaries, the Babylonian sources referred to earlier, that functioned as the seat of the satrap of Babylonia, who, on behalf of the Parthian kings, communicated with the Greek citizens of Babylon (see above, pp. 515–16).

As we have just seen, the Parthian kings thus operated in the triangle of three important cities.⁵⁸ First, Ctesiphon, which may be seen as the Parthian foundation and was the place of their winter residence. According to Tacitus, as the seat of government, Ctesiphon was also the place where the Parthian kings were crowned (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.42). Secondly, Seleuceia, the city with a continued Greek majority. And thirdly, the ancient city of Babylon, with its notable Greek minority (for this triangle of cities, see the map in Figure 20.1).⁵⁹

57 See M. S. Drower, E. W. Gray, and B. M. Levick, “Vologeses I,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online): “In his reign too began a strong reaction against Hellenic influences: Pahlavi first appears along with Greek on his coins. He founded Vologesia near Seleuceia as a commercial rival.” For Vologesia, see also A. Maricq, “Classica et orientalia: Vologésias, l’emporium de Ctésiphon,” *Syria* 36 (1959): 264–76.

58 For an extensive treatment of Seleuceia, Ctesiphon, and Babylon, see also W. Grajetzki, *Greeks and Parthians in Mesopotamia and beyond: 331 BC–224 AD* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2011).

59 On Babylon, see also E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, M. van Ess & J. Marzahn (eds.), *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011).

These three cities together express a triangulation of Parthian-Greek-Babylonian culture. Although the individual cultures of Parthians, Greeks, and Babylonians could be identified with one city in particular, the influences of these cultures permeated each other deeply. This was the scene where the Parthian kings operated; here, the magi, who had served the Achaemenids as kingmakers, survived through the Hellenistic period, and continued their service to the Parthian Arsacids, must also be situated. The Parthian kings operated from their residence in Ctesiphon, but with direct access to Seleuceia and Babylon. To a certain extent, the leading culture in this triangulation was probably Greek, because not only was Seleuceia Greek, but Babylon was ruled by a governor of Babylon who was appointed from among the Greek citizens of Babylon (see above, pp. 515–16); this seems to be confirmed by the fact that Greek was the official court language of the Parthians. This Parthian-Greek-Babylonian culture was now challenged by Rome's political power, which, in the person of Crassus, showed its aggressive face.

(2) On the Roman side, the loss of the Roman standards to the Parthians—by Crassus in 53 BCE, by Saxa in 41–40 BCE, and by Antony in 36 BCE—was a very sensitive issue.⁶⁰ Even Julius Caesar planned to recover Crassus' standards and to avenge his death. After he had emerged as the victor of the great Roman Civil War of 49–45 BCE between himself and Pompey, Caesar “planned and prepared to make an expedition against the Parthians” (Plutarch, *Caesar* 58; cf. Appian, *Roman History* 10.3.13).⁶¹ According to Dio Cassius, “a longing came over all the Romans alike to avenge Crassus and those who had perished with him, and they felt some hope of subjugating the Parthians then, if ever. They unanimously voted the command of the war to Caesar” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 43.51.1–2). The preparations were so well advanced that Caesar had already “sent across the Adriatic in advance sixteen legions of foot soldiers and 10,000 horses” (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 2.16.110). These plans, however, were cut short by Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE (cf. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 1. *The Deified Julius* 44.3–4). According to the historians Suetonius, Appian, and Dio Cassius, it was precisely this intended Parthian campaign that provoked Caesar's assassination, because the Sibylline books expressed the belief that it would demand a monarch, and not just a head of the republic, to conquer Parthia. According to Suetonius, “the report had

60 For the importance of the Roman standards, see K. M. Töpfer, *Signa Militaria: Die römischen Feldzeichen in Republik und Prinzipat* (Mainz: Schnell & Steiner, 2011).

61 For Julius Caesar's projected anti-Parthian campaign, see also J. Malitz, “Caesars Partherkrieg,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 33 (1984): 21–59; and W. C. McDermott, “Caesar's Projected Dacian-Parthian Expedition,” *Ancient Society* 13–14 (1982–83): 223–31.



FIGURE 20.1 *Map Eastern Roman Empire and Parthia.*
 © ANCIENT WORLD MAPPING CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL (ORIGINAL RICHARD J. TALBERT, ADAPTED BY GABRIEL MOSS, WITH THE CONSULTANCY OF JOSEF WIESEHÖFER, KIEL).

spread in various quarters [...] that at the next meeting of the senate Lucius Cotta would announce as the decision of the Fifteen, that inasmuch as it was written in the books of fate that the Parthians could be conquered only by a king, Caesar should be given that title" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 1. *The Deified Julius* 79.3). The same view is expressed by Appian, who emphasizes that Caesar was assassinated immediately prior to the scheduled beginning of the Parthian campaign:

And now another rumour gained currency that the Sibylline books had predicted that the Parthians would never submit to the Romans until the latter should be commanded by a king. For this reason some people ventured to say that Caesar ought to be called dictator and emperor of the Romans, as he was in fact, or whatever other name they might prefer to that of king, but that he ought to be distinctly named king of the nations that were subject to the Romans. Caesar declined this also, and was wholly engaged in hastening his departure from the city in which he was exposed to such envy. Four days before his intended departure he was slain by his enemies in the senate-house. (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 2.16.110–111)

Dio Cassius also stresses that the fear of a public vote on this issue prompted Caesar's conspirators to act swiftly:

For a report, whether true or false, got abroad, as reports will spread, that the priests known as the Quindecimviri were spreading the report that the Sibyl had said the Parthians would never be defeated in any other way than by a king, and were consequently going to propose that this title be granted to Caesar. The conspirators believed this to be true, and because a vote would be demanded of the magistrates, among whom were Brutus and Cassius, owing to the importance of the measure, and they neither dared to oppose it nor would submit to remain silent, they hastened forward their plot before any business connected with the measure should come up. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 44.15.3–4)

These reports show how much the Romans were obsessed with the Parthians' defeat of Crassus, and that, in historical accounts, Caesar's anti-Parthian campaign becomes part of the transition from the republic to the empire.

Also highly noteworthy for our purposes is that the young Octavius Augustus was implicated in Caesar's Parthian campaign. Velleius Paterculus, Plutarch, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius all relate that Caesar had already sent Augustus

in advance to the East, to study at Apollonia, while awaiting the beginning of the Parthian campaign, for which he was to join Caesar.⁶² Hearing of Caesar's murder, Octavius immediately returned to Rome to take charge of the situation. What is highly noteworthy, however, is that, as we shall see in the next section, Augustus took a very different approach to Parthia once he himself was in full command and walked the path of diplomatic rather than military solutions. After Caesar's death, Rome's humiliation by Parthia remained pressing; this problem was only solved when the Roman civil wars that followed Caesar's death had come to an end and the Principate of Augustus had been firmly established.

(3) Finally, on the Jewish side, the conflict between Rome and Parthia had an enormous impact on Judea. This warfare entirely subsumed Judean history in international Roman-Parthian relations. This can be demonstrated in at least two respects.

(a) Firstly, the Parthian conquest of Judea and Jerusalem in 40 BCE, which was part of the Parthians' larger invasion of Syria and Asia Minor, made a big impact on the Jews. This can also be gleaned from an apocalyptic passage in the Jewish pseudepigraphon *1 Enoch*, in the so-called "Book of Similitudes" in *1 Enoch* 37–71. Various scholars agree that this passage, which depicts the struggle of Israel with its enemies and reads as follows, was written with the Parthian invasion of 40 BCE in mind:

56.5 In those days, the angels will assemble and thrust themselves to the East at the Parthians and Medes. They will shake up the kings [of the Parthians and Medes?] (so that) a spirit of unrest shall come upon them and stir them up from their thrones; and they will break forth from their beds like lions and like hungry hyenas among their own flocks. And they will go up and trample upon the land of my elect ones, and the land of my elect ones will be before them like a threshing floor or a highway. But the city of my righteous ones will become an obstacle to their horses. And they shall begin to fight among themselves; and (by) their own right hands they shall prevail against themselves. A man shall not recognise his brother, nor a son his mother, until there shall be a (significant) number of corpses from among them. Their punishment is (indeed) not in vain. In those days, Sheol shall open her mouth, and they shall be swallowed

62 See Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.59.4; Plutarch, *Brutus* 22; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 2. *The Deified Augustus* 8.2; and Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 45.3.1.

up into it and perish. (Thus) Sheol shall swallow up the sinners in the presence of the elect ones. (*1 Enoch* 56:5–8; trans. E. Isaac)

Scholars such as Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins share the broad consensus that this passage entails a description of the Parthian conquest of Jerusalem in 40 BCE, during the reign of Orodes II (58/7–38 BCE), focusing on the Parthians' failure to keep "the city of [God's] righteous ones" under control and on the subsequent beginning of inner-Parthian strife.⁶³ These latter inner-Parthian tensions could relate to the long period—from 31 to 25 BCE—in which Orodes II's successor Phraates IV (38–2 BCE) saw his rule contested by his fellow Parthian, Tiridates. In this way the Jewish authors of the Enochic "Book of Similitudes," who describe the Parthian invasion and its aftermath, drew the apocalyptic background against which they believed the so-called "Son of Man," the pre-existent heavenly Messiah, would establish his rule, possessing all dominion and sitting on his "throne of glory." What is particularly noteworthy is that the way these Enochic authors describe the Messiah seems to be echoed in Matthew's description of Jesus. According to Collins and Collins, Matthew's depiction of Jesus as "the Son of Man" who is seated "on the throne of his glory" (Matt 19:28; 25:31) is dependent on the "Book of Similitudes" in *1 Enoch*. If Matthew was indeed dependent on *1 Enoch*, it seems that he somehow continued the Parthian contextualization of the "Book of Similitudes" while changing its anti-Parthian tone by bringing the Parthian magi into a positive relationship with Jesus. Jewish judgments about the Parthians vary greatly. Josephus, like the Enochic authors, is very negative about their conquest

63 See A. Y. Collins and J. J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 87. For a discussion of this passage, see also T. M. Erho, "Historical-allusional Dating and the Similitudes of Enoch," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 493–511; Erho, "The Ahistorical Nature of *1 Enoch* 56:5–8 and Its Ramifications upon the *Opinio Communis* on the Dating of the Similitudes of Enoch," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 (2009): 23–54; L. Arcari, "A Symbolic Transfiguration of a Historical Event: The Parthian Invasion in Josephus and the Parables of Enoch," in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man* (eds. G. Boccaccini, J. von Ehrenkrook, and J. H. Ellens; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007), 478–86; H. Eshel, "An Allusion in the Parables of Enoch to the Acts of Matthias Antigonus in 40 BCE.?" In *Enoch and the Messiah*, 487–91; G. Bampfyld, "The Similitudes of Enoch: Historical Allusions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 15 (1984): 9–31; M. Delcor, "Le livre des paraboles d'Hénoch Éthiopien: le problème de son origine à la lumière des découvertes récentes," *Estudios Bíblicos* 38 (1979–80): 5–33; G. Widengren, "Iran and Israel in Parthian Times with Special Regard to the Ethiopic Book of Enoch," *Temenos* 2 (1966): 139–77.

of Jerusalem and emphasizes their pillage of Jerusalem (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.268–270). Babylonian Jews, however, would have been more positive about their Parthian ruler Phraates IV, as he released Hyrcanus II, the deposed Jewish high priest from Jerusalem whom the Parthians have taken with them, “and permitted him to settle in Babylon, where there was a great number of Jews. These men honoured Hyrcanus as their high priest and king” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.14–15).⁶⁴

(b) Secondly, the subsumption of Judea under Roman-Parthian relations is also clear from the emphatically anti-Parthian nature of the Romans’ appointment of Herod.⁶⁵ His father, Antipater, had already been appointed as part of Pompey’s organization of the East in 63 BCE as Rome’s political intermediary, alongside the aforementioned Jewish Hasmonean-Maccabean ruler Hyrcanus II, whom Antipater had served as adviser, but whose rule was now limited to religious matters. When Herod fled Jerusalem at the moment of the Parthian invasion that granted Hyrcanus’s brother Antigonus both religious and political authority (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.330–491; *The Jewish War* 1.248–357; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 48.26.2), he traveled to Rome, where Antony and Octavian presented him to the Roman senate and had him declared king of the Jews (cf. Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.46; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.9) as part of Rome’s anti-Parthian strategy (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.381–389). Herod indeed won Jerusalem back from the Parthians in 38/37 BCE (*Jewish Antiquities* 14.476–481; cf. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 49.22). The Roman historian Appian clearly shows how the appointment of new vassal kings such as Herod fit the preparations of Antony’s anti-Parthian campaign:

64 For the Jews in Parthian Babylonia, see D. Goodblatt, “The Jews in the Parthian Empire: What We Don’t Know,” in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (eds. B. Isaac and Y. Shahar; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 263–78; L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, vol. 2: *The Early Hellenistic Period (335–175 BCE)* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), chap. 6.3.1.2; I. Gafni, “The Jewish Community of Babylonia” (trans. J. Scharz), *Immanuel* 8 (1978): 58–68; J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 1: *The Parthian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1965). Jewish-Parthian relations are also discussed in S. Shaked and A. Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica III: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994); and M. Aberbach, “Did Alexander Yannai Negotiate an Alliance with the Parthians?,” in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (eds. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 1–4.

65 For Herod and the Romans, cf. P. Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

Antony started the war against the Parthians. The Senate having voted to ratify all that he had done or should do, Antony again despatched his lieutenants in all directions and arranged everything else as he wished. He set up kings here and there as he pleased, on condition of their paying a prescribed tribute: in Pontus, Darius, the son of Pharnaces and grandson of Mithridates; in Idumea and Samaria, Herod; in Pisidia, Amyntas; in a part of Cilicia, Polemon, and others in other countries. (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 5.8.75)

Josephus, in his account of Herod's appointment by the Roman senate, also emphasizes the usefulness of this move for Rome's anti-Parthian campaign: "Antony came forward and informed them [i.e., the members of the Senate] that it was also an advantage in their war with the Parthians that Herod should be king. And as this proposal was acceptable to all, they voted accordingly" (*Jewish Antiquities* 14.385). It is thus intriguing that Matthew, in his narrative about the Parthian magi, narrates the encounter between these Parthians and King Herod, who had been installed as part of Rome's anti-Parthian campaign. Herod also had first-hand knowledge of the beginning of Antony's war against Parthia, as Cleopatra, who had escorted Antony up to the Euphrates, travelled straight from the Euphrates to Herod, via Apamea and Damascus, and came to Judea in order to claim part of Herod's possessions, which he was allowed to lease back from her (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.361–363). Yet as we shall see, a relatively peaceful encounter between Herod and the Parthian magi later in time is not inconceivable, as the tense Roman-Parthian relations were to change in the reign of Augustus.

The Augustan Restoration of Peace with Parthia

As we have seen, the young Augustus had already taken part in the preparations for Caesar's anti-Parthian campaign, which, however, did not materialize because of Caesar's death. But new developments on the Parthian side meant that Augustus could choose the path of diplomacy, rather than that of military force, in order to settle Rome's troublesome relation with the Parthians and to have the lost Roman standards returned.⁶⁶ This is of great importance to us

66 On Augustus' Parthian policy, see Wiesehöfer, "Augustus und die Parther," in *Imperium—Varus und seine Zeit* (eds. R. Aßkamp and T. Esch; Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2010), 187–95; Dabrowa, "... ostentasse Romana arma satis . . .": The Military Factor in Roman-Parthian Relations under Augustus and Tiberius," in *Limes XVIII: Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (eds. P. Freeman, J. Bennett, Z. T. Fiema, and B. Hoffmann; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002), vol. 1, 275–80; D. Timpe, "Zur

as the Augustan era is, potentially, the first level at which Matthew's narrative of the magi can be understood. Alternatively, this narrative could be understood at the level of Matthew's own time, the Flavian era, or at that of the intermediary period between Augustus and the Flavians. We shall see whether there is sufficient material to decide which layer can be detected in Matthew's narrative.

The opportunities that presented themselves for Augustus' diplomacy consisted of the rivalry that broke out between the ruling Parthian king Phraates IV (ca. 38–3/2 BCE), who had ward off Antony's attack in 36 BCE and annihilated two of his legions, and the aforementioned contender Tiridates, who challenged him for the entire period of 31–25 BCE. This must have been a nasty struggle, as the following passing remark that Isidore of Charax makes in his topographical description of Parthia indicates: "Beyond is an island in the Euphrates [...]; there was the treasure of Phraates, who cut the throats of his concubines, when Tiridates who was exiled, invaded [the land]" (Isidore of Charax, *The Parthian Stations*; trans. W. H. Schoff). According to Dio Cassius, both Phraates and Tiridates sought the alliance of Augustus. Just as Roman civil wars had offered the occasion for Romans to ask for Parthian support, now internal Parthian strife caused the Parthian factions to turn to the Romans. According to Dio Cassius, Augustus decided to let the Parthians exhaust themselves as long as he had to deal with Antony in Rome's own civil war, but after the latter's defeat in 30 BCE, Augustus established friendly relations with Phraates IV, who had so far proven himself successful in clinging to the Parthian throne, but he allowed Tiridates to settle in Syria:

he [i.e., Augustus] went through Syria into the province of Asia and passed the winter there settling the various affairs of the subject nations as well as those of the Parthians. It seems there had been dissension among the Parthians and a certain Tiridates had risen against Phraates; and hitherto, as long as Antony's opposition lasted, even after the naval battle, Caesar had not only not attached himself to either side, though they sought his alliance, but had not even answered them except to say that he would think the matter over. His excuse was that he was busy with Egypt, but in reality he wanted them in the meantime to exhaust themselves by fighting against each other. But now that Antony was dead and of the two combatants Tiridates, defeated, had taken refuge in Syria, and Phraates, victorious, had sent envoys, he entered into friendly negotia-

augusteischen Partherpolitik zwischen 30 und 20 v.Chr.," *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, New Series 1 (1975): 155–69; A. Oltramare, "Auguste et les parthes," *Revue des Études Latines* 16 (1938): 121–38.

tions with the latter; and, without promising to aid Tiridates, he permitted him to live in Syria. He received from Phraates one of his sons by way of conferring a favour upon him, and taking him to Rome, kept him as a hostage. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 51.18.1–3)

This event is reflected in Augustus' *Res Gestae* when he writes: "Tiridates [...] took refuge with me as (suppliant)" (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.32).

Hence from 30 BCE on, a Parthian—Tiridates—was living in Syria, probably in Antioch, under Roman protection, while Augustus supported the continuation of the rule of Phraates IV. It is not unlikely, however, that Augustus' policy was less peaceful at this stage than has been suggested. As Parthian numismatic evidence shows, in 26 BCE Tiridates appears to have resurfaced in Parthian territory, reached some kind of independence from Phraates IV, and even, in 26 BCE, minted his own coinage on which he portrays himself explicitly as "Philrōmaios," "fond of Romans," a term otherwise not attested in extant Greek literature.⁶⁷ This could, of course, reflect Tiridates' own strategy of appealing for further Roman support, but according to Daniel Keller, it could also imply that Tiridates was indeed supported by Augustus in order to break Phraates IV's rule over Parthia.⁶⁸

Whatever the case, in 23 BCE Tiridates and envoys from Phraates met with Augustus and the senate in Rome in order to settle their enduring dispute, which was settled in favor of Phraates. Again Tiridates was not surrendered by the Romans to Phraates, but received Roman protection, while Phraates received back the son that had apparently been in custody in Rome since 30 BC:

when Tiridates in person and envoys from Phraates came to settle their mutual recriminations, he [i.e., Augustus] brought them before the senate; and afterwards, when the decision of the question had been referred to him by that body, he did not surrender Tiridates to Phraates, but sent back to the latter his son whom he had once received from him and was keeping, on condition that the captives and the military standards taken in the disasters of Crassus and of Antony should be returned. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 53.33.1–2)

The intensity of Roman-Parthian diplomacy kept increasing, and from this point, for the first time, Augustus also seized the opportunity to press the Parthians to return to the Romans the standards seized from Crassus, Saxa, and

67 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 627–29 (26 BCE), and vol. 2, p. 270 (for coins, see vol. 1, tables X–XIV).

68 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, p. 628.

Antony. Antony had started similar negotiations to have the Roman standards of Crassus returned in 36 BCE, after his attempt to have an important Parthian, Monaeses, defect to the Roman side was detected. But Antony had only done this to disguise his plans for an attack on Parthia: “Nominally he [i.e., Antony] was negotiating peace, on the condition of getting back the standards and the prisoners captured in the disaster of Crassus and with the purpose of taking the king off his guard because of his hope of reaching a settlement; but, as a matter of fact, he was getting everything in readiness for war” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 49.24.5). It was this attack that went horribly wrong and led to a further loss of Roman standards. However, Augustus’ negotiations for the return of all the standards—of Crassus, Saxa and Antony—proved successful, although only after what was perceived as a threatening display of Roman power in the region, as the following incident makes clear. It was only in 20 BCE that the Parthians’ promise to restore the Roman standards materialized, when Augustus visited Greece, Asia Minor, and Syria, settling remaining issues and disputes and implementing reforms along the way. According to Dio Cassius, Augustus’ advance into Syria caused Phraates IV to fear preparations for an anti-Parthian campaign because of the Parthians’ failure to honor the 23 BCE agreement:

Phraates, fearing that Augustus would lead an expedition against him because he had not yet performed any of his engagements, sent back to him the standards and all the captives, with the exception of a few who in shame had destroyed themselves or, eluding detection, remained in the country. Augustus received them as if he had conquered the Parthian in a war; for he took great pride in the achievement, declaring that he had recovered without a struggle what had formerly been lost in battle. Indeed, in honour of this success he commanded that sacrifices be decreed and likewise a temple to Mars Ultor on the Capitol, in imitation of that of Jupiter Feretrius, in which to dedicate the standards; and he himself carried out both decrees. Moreover he rode into the city on horseback and was honoured with a triumphal arch. Now all this was done later in commemoration of the event. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 54.8.1–4)

Apart from its factual information about the return of the Roman standards, Dio Cassius’ passage is also relevant for at least two further reasons.

Firstly, it reflects Rome’s obsession with the loss of its standards and the importance attached to their return, which was regarded as an indication of

the avenging justice of the god of war, Mars. Hence a temple in his name was to be built at the forum Augustum in Rome, where the standards of Crassus, Saxa, and Antony were to be placed, just as would be the case—as Dio Cassius makes clear in his description of the consecration of the Temple of Mars in 2 BCE—for any future lost and recovered standards: “in case military standards captured by the enemy were ever recovered they should be placed in the temple” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 55.10.4).

Secondly, it also shows Augustus’ manipulation of what was in essence a diplomatic success, but was now presented as a military success, as Dio Cassius aptly notes: “Augustus received them [i.e., the standards returned by the Parthians] as if he had conquered the Parthians in a war.” This was certainly an ideological presentation of the state of affairs.⁶⁹ As Josef Wiesehöfer rightly

69 For the representation of the Parthians in the Augustan age, see M. R. Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 4.1, 334–40; C. Lerouge-Cohen, “L’image de Parthes à l’époque d’Auguste: tentative de confrontation des sources littéraires et iconographiques,” in *Figures de l’étranger autour de la Méditerranée antique: Actes du Colloque International Antiquité méditerranéenne: à la rencontre de “l’autre”. Perceptions et représentations de l’étranger dans les littératures antiques* (eds. M.-F. Marein, P. Voisin, and J. Gallego; Paris: L’Harmattan 2009), 295–304; H. Richter, “Das Angesicht des Feindes—Beobachtungen an parthischen Münzen zur Zeit des Oktavian / Augustus,” in *Augustus—Der Blick von außen: Die Wahrnehmung des Kaisers in den Provinzen des Reiches und in den Nachbarstaaten* (eds. D. Kreikenbom, K.-U. Mahler, P. Schollmeyer, and T. M. Weber; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 271–96; C. B. Rose, “The Parthians in Augustan Rome,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 109 (2005): 21–75; Wiesehöfer, “Die ‘Sklaven des Kaisers’ und der Kopf des Crassus: Römische Bilder des Ostens und parthische Bilder des Westens in augusteischer Zeit,” in *Limes XVIII*, 293–300; Wiesehöfer, “Images Romaines de l’Orient et Images Parthes de l’Occident à l’Époque d’ Auguste,” *Iranien, Grecs et Romains*, 111–28; C. U. Merriam, “Either With Us or Against Us: The Parthians in Augustan Ideology,” *Scholia: Natal Studies in Classical Antiquity* 13 (2004): 56–70; J. W. Rich, “Augustus’s Parthian Honours, the Temple of Mars Ultor and the Arch in the Forum Romanum,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 66 (1998): 71–128; H. Ingholt, “The Parthian on the Augustus Statue of Prima Porta,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 64 (1960): 187. Cf. also, more generally, Lerouge-Cohen, *L’image des Parthes dans le monde gréco-romain: Du début du 1^{er} siècle av. J.-C. jusqu’à la fin du Haut-Empire romain* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007); Lerouge-Cohen, “Comment se construit une image des Parthes à Rome,” in *Identités Romaines: Conscience de soi et représentations de l’autre dans la Rome antique (1^{er} siècle av. J.-C.–VIII^e siècle apr. J.-C.)* (ed. M. Simon; Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2011), 147–56; R. M. Schneider, “Die Faszination des Feindes: Bilder der Parther und des Orients in Rom,” in *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse / The Arsacid Empire: Sources and Documentation* (ed. J. Wiesehöfer; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 95–146; Schneider, “Friend and Foe: the Orient in Rome,” in *The*

states, “Augustus’ request for the lost Roman standards and the prisoners of war were fulfilled by Phraates, but not until 20 BCE and in return for Roman renunciation of an offensive Eastern policy.”⁷⁰

Strabo, as Augustus’ contemporary, already confirms that Augustus tampered with the results. According to Strabo, the Roman-Parthian peace was due to Phraates IV, who

was so eager for friendship with Caesar Augustus that he even sent him the trophies which the Parthians had set up as memorials of their defeat of the Romans. And, having called Titius to a conference, who was at that time praefect of Syria, he put in his hands as hostages four of his legitimate sons, Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes and Phraates and Bonones, and two wives and four sons of these, for fear of seditions and attempts upon his life; for he knew that no person could prevail against him unless that person supported some member of the house of Arsaces, because of the fact that the Parthians were extremely fond of the house. Accordingly, he got rid of his children, seeking thus to deprive evil-doers of that hope. Now all his surviving children are cared for in royal style, at public expense, in Rome, and the remaining kings [i.e., his successors] have also continued to send ambassadors and to go into conferences [i.e., with Roman praefects]. (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.28)

In Strabo’s eyes, Augustus profited from Phraates’ need to protect himself against inner-Parthian strife, for which reason he sought to befriend Augustus.

Augustus’ one-sided presentation of his success is proven by his own *Res Gestae*, as well as by the coins that he produced on the occasion of the retrieval of the banners. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus emphasizes his superiority over the Parthians by stating: “The Parthians I compelled to restore to me the spoils and standards of three Roman armies, and to seek as suppliants the friendship of the Roman people. These standards I deposited in the inner shrine which is in the Temple of Mars Ultor” (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.29). Moreover, in his *Res Gestae*, not only Tiridates, Phraates IV’s rival for the Parthian throne, but also Phraates himself is described as taking refuge with Augustus: “Kings of the Parthians, Tiridates, and later Phrates, the son of King Phrates, took refuge with me as suppliants” (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.32). This refers to

Age of the Parthians (eds. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart; London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 50–86.

70 See J. Wiesehöfer, “Phraates IV,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

the events of 26 BCE and 20 BCE respectively, so that Phraates' return of the Roman standards is described as an act of supplication.

Augustus, however, shows himself restrained in his description of Phraates' subsequent offer, in 10/9 BCE, of his four sons as hostages: "Phrates, son of Orodes, king of the Parthians, sent all his sons and grandsons to me in Italy, not because he had been conquered in war, but rather seeking our friendship by means of his own children as pledges" (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.32). It is indeed important to note that the sending of Phraates' sons to Rome was not part of the negotiations of 23 BCE, but that the reason for this arose only later, and the explanations for it given in the Greco-Roman sources vary greatly. According to Augustus himself, it was out of friendship, confirming the existing treaties with Rome (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.32). This view was repeated by Tacitus, according to whom Phraates wished to befriend Augustus, especially because of fear of his own Parthian compatriots: "to the emperor Phraates had observed every point of respect, and, to knit the friendship closer, had sent him part of his family, more from distrust of his countrymen's loyalty than from any awe of ourselves" (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.1). Indeed, according to Strabo, as we have just seen, in this way Phraates protected himself against inner-Parthian strife (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.28). According to Josephus, however, Phraates IV actually removed his legitimate sons from Parthia in order to allow his son Phraataces (the offspring of his relation with an Italian slave girl, Thesmusia, who had been sent as a gift by Augustus and had first been his concubine before becoming his wife after Phraataces' birth) to become his heir: "she [i.e., Thesmusia], eager to procure for her son the rule over the Parthians but realizing that this could happen only if she could first contrive to get rid of the legitimate children of Phraates, persuaded him to send his legitimate children away to Rome as hostages. And so they were sent off to Rome, inasmuch as Phraates did not find it easy to gainsay the dictates of Thesmusia" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.41–42). But, as claimed by Velleius Paterculus, the Parthian king sent his children as hostages to Augustus, "awed by the reputation" of Tiberius, when Augustus sent him to visit the Eastern provinces (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.94). In Suetonius' view, it was part of the surrendering of the standards: "The Parthians, too, readily yielded to him [i.e., Augustus], [...] and at his demand surrendered the standards which they had taken from Marcus Crassus and Marcus Antonius; they offered him hostages besides" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 2. *The Deified Augustus* 21.3). Whatever the exact reasons for Phraates IV offering his legitimate sons as hostages to Rome in 10/9 BCE, this is highly relevant for our topic, as it shows how close the links between Parthia and Rome had become in the Augustan era.

By 10/9 BCE, just a few years before the supposed visit of Matthew's magi to Roman-Herodian Judea, there was a Parthian elite resident in Rome; some of them were to be recalled to occupy the Parthian throne (although unsuccessfully), as we shall see later, and archaeological evidence of the tomb inscriptions of Phraates' sons Seraspadanés and Rhodaspés in Rome confirms their presence, and decease in the city.⁷¹

Despite Augustus' self-restraint in his description of Phraates' submission of his sons to Rome as an act that confirmed the existing friendship between Parthia and Rome, the general tendency of Augustus' depiction of the return of the Roman standards is to frame it as a military rather than a diplomatic success. This is also clear from the coinage minted by Augustus on the occasion of the retrieval of the standards. Coinage issued by Augustus in 19–17 BCE in Rome, Asia Minor, Spain, Gaul, and Italy depicts the Roman standards and the Parthians, the latter in a clearly subservient, kneeling position (see Figure 20.2).⁷² This was how the return of the standards was publicly represented—as an act of submission, capturing the moment of the handing over of the Roman standards, with the Parthians kneeling, probably as part of the well-known Eastern full prostration, the *proskynēsis*, that the Parthians would have performed as an act of obeisance.⁷³

This view that Augustus forced the Parthians to surrender is taken over by various Roman historians. As we have already seen, Suetonius, for instance, writes: “The Parthians, too, readily yielded to him [i.e., Augustus] [...] and at his demand surrendered the standards which they had taken from Marcus Crassus and Marcus Antonius” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 2. *The Deified Augustus* 21.3). Interestingly, the Roman historian Florus, in his *Epitome of Roman History*, shows himself more nuanced, and emphasizes that the Parthians did so voluntarily, as they were not subjugated, as “all the races of the West and South,” and as other races of the North and of the East, but belonged to those nations “who were not under the rule of the empire, yet felt the greatness of Rome and revered its people as the conqueror of the world”:

71 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 2, pp. 436–37. See also M. Strothmann, “Feindeskinder an Sohnes statt: Parthische Königssöhne im Haus des Augustus,” in *The Parthian Empire and its Religions: Studies in the Dynamic of Religious Diversity / Das Partherreich und seine Religionen* (ed. P. Wick; Gutenberg: Computus, 2012), 83–102.

72 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, chap. 3.3.1.2, vol. 2, pp. 590–593; for coins, see vol. 1, table x, illustration 2.

73 See bibliography in footnote 91 below.



FIGURE 20.2

Augustus, Denarius (Rome, struck 19 BCE), reverse: CAESAR AVGVSTVS SIGN(is) RECE(PTIS) ("Augustus received the [captured] standards"), Parthian kneeling on the right knee, presenting a Roman standard (RIC I 287).

PHOTO: GORNY & MOSCH GIESSNER MÜNZHANDLUNG, AUCTION 229, LOT NUMBER 1620.

The Parthians too, as though they repented of their victory, voluntarily returned the standards which they had won at the time of Crassus' defeat. Thus everywhere throughout the inhabited world there was firmly-established and uninterrupted peace or truce, and Caesar Augustus ventured at last, in the seven hundredth year since the foundation of the city, to close the double doors of the temple of Janus, which had previously been shut on two occasions only, in the reign of Numa and after the first defeat of Carthage. (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.34 [4.12.63–64])

Although Florus is mistaken about the date of the closing of the doors of the Temple of Janus, which took place in 29 BCE (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 51.20.4–5) and again in 25 BCE (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 53.26.6–27.1), before the return of the Roman standards in 20 BCE, this passage nicely captures the atmosphere of the Roman peace that Augustus established and that certainly characterized Roman-Parthian relations from 20 BCE onwards and contrasted sharply with the preceding era of Crassus, Caesar, and Antony. Livy also emphasizes that the Romans had brokered peace with the Parthians: "Peace was made with the Parthians, on the restoration by their king of the standards captured from Crassus and later from Antony" (Livy, *Summaries of Book 141*; wrongly listed under the events of 11–10 BCE). Despite the fact that Augustus seems to have tried to destabilize the Parthians before 20 BCE, and although he ideologically portrayed the diplomatic success of the Parthians' return of the Roman standards as an act of submission and *proskynēsis*, the peaceful relationship between Parthia and Rome that begun in 20 BCE was an exception to the general rule of the tensions that dominated their relations both before and after. It seems that Phraates IV's return of the Roman standards

inaugurated a Roman-Parthian peace that lasted for the rest of Phraates' long reign (38–2 BCE), enduring for almost two decades until his death in 2 BCE, a period that encapsulated the probable date of the supposed visit of the magi to Judea. This peace would also have been binding for Rome's vassal kings, who needed Rome's authorization for any war. When Herod the Great started an unauthorized war in 9 BCE against the Nabataeans, he was severely rebuked by Augustus, making it absolutely clear that he should not act on his own volition.⁷⁴

It seems that this Roman-Parthian peace in the Augustan age did not apply to the entire Augustan era until Augustus' death in 14 CE, but particularly characterized the equilibrium between Augustus and his Parthian counterpart Phraates IV, and hence applied particularly to the time between 20 BCE and 2 BCE, the period between Phraates' return of the Roman standards and his death. Immediately after the death of Phraates, who had been murdered and succeeded by his son Phraataces (with the help of his mother Thesmusa), Augustus needed to reach an understanding with the new claimant to the Parthian throne. This proved to be an immediate challenge, as Phraataces became involved in internal struggles in Armenia shortly after his ascension, despite it being a Roman protectorate. In response, in 1 BCE, Augustus, after much deliberation, sent his young grandson and intended heir, Gaius Caesar, to the East. According to Dio Cassius, "When the Armenians revolted and the Parthians joined with them, Augustus was distressed and at a loss what to do. For he himself was not fit for campaigning by reason of age, while Tiberius, as has been stated, had already withdrawn, and he did not dare send any other influential man; as for Gaius and Lucius, they were young and inexperienced in affairs. Nevertheless, under the stress of necessity, he chose Gaius" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 55.18). As Velleius Paterculus relates, "Shortly after this Gaius Caesar, who had previously made a tour of other provinces, but only as a visitor, was dispatched to Syria" (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.101.1).

As we have seen, Augustus' Roman-Parthian peace of 20–2 BCE was built on his renunciation of an offensive Eastern policy. The prospective resumption of such a policy was welcomed by some. Sending Gaius Caesar to the East aroused hopes of a long-awaited Roman conquest of Parthia. Antipater of Thessalonica, a Roman ex-consul and the author of many epigrams, writing in Rome, expresses such expectations when he addresses Gaius Caesar in the following epigram, probably written on the spur of the moment: "Hie thee to the Euphrates, son of Zeus; already in the East the feet of the Parthians hasten

74 See T. Rajak, "Herod (1) the Great," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

to desert to thee. Hie thee on thy way, O prince, and thou shalt find, Caesar, their bow-strings relaxed by fear. But base all thou dost on thy father's instructions. The Ocean is Rome's boundary on every side; be thou the first to seal her domination with the rising Sun" (*The Greek Anthology* 9, *Epigram* 297). Clearly, Antipater expresses the Roman wish to extend Rome's rule to the East, the land of "the rising Sun." We find the same aspirations in Ovid's *The Art of Love* (*Ars Amatoria*), the first parts of which are datable to about 1 BCE (1.171 ff.) and also offer insight into the excitement felt by at least some Romans, again in a description of Gaius Caesar's departure to the East and the expectation that he will realize Augustus' plans for the incorporation of Parthia: "Lo! Caesar [i.e., Augustus] is preparing to add what was lacking to the conquered world: now, farthest East, shalt thou be ours. Parthian, thou shalt pay penalty; rejoice, ye buried Crassi, and ye standards that shamefully endured barbarian violence. Your avenger [i.e., Gaius Caesar] is at hand, and, though his years be few, proclaims his captaincy, and, though a boy, handles wars that no boy should handle" (Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.177–182). The reference to the Crassi (plural) concerns Crassus and his son; the latter had accompanied his father in their attack on Parthia and had also died.

Interestingly, in the continuation of his poem, Ovid does not regard Parthia's involvement in Armenia's internal unrest as constituting the cause of the war, but rather the usurpation of the Parthian throne by Phraataces, who killed his father and ignored the rightful claims to the throne by his half-brothers, who had been resident in Rome for nearly a decade. Ovid shows himself indignant over the violation of their rights and consequently exhorts the young Gaius Caesar to avenge the murder of Phraates IV and the violation of the succession rights of his legitimate sons. Despite his young age, with the assistance of his grandfather Augustus, Gaius Caesar will be able to accomplish this task: "With the authority and experience of thy sire shalt thou, O youth, make war, and with the experience and authority of thy sire shalt thou conquer: such, bearing so great a name, should by thy earliest exploit, prince now of the youth, but one day of the elders; since thou hast brothers, avenge wrongs done to brothers, and since thou hast a sire, guard the rights of a sire" (Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.191–196). Yet it is of course Rome's interests that Ovid has in mind, not those of Parthia, as this war aimed to defeat the Parthians and to add "the riches of the East":

Thy father and the father of thy country hath girded thee with arms: thy enemy seized the throne from his unwilling sire; rightful weapons shalt thou bear, dastardly arrows, he; right and duty shall stand to defend thy cause. The Parthians are defeated in their cause: let them be defeated in

battle also; let my prince add to Latium the riches of the East. Father Mars and father Caesar, vouchsafe him your presence as he goes; for one of you is, and one will be, a god. (Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.197–204)

With this support, Gaius Caesar's victory over the land of the Euphrates and the Tigris, Persia, and rebellious Armenia, as well as his triumphant procession in Rome, are ascertained:

Lo! I prophesy: victory shall be thine, and I shall duly pay my votive song, and owe thee loud utterance of praise. Thou wilt stand and in my own words exhort thy warriors; O let not my words fall short of thy valour. I shall tell of Parthian backs and Roman breasts, and of the weapons which the foe shoots from his retreating steed. Thou who dost flee to conquer, what, O Parthian, dost thou leave the conquered? Already, O Parthian, hath thy warfare an evil omen. Therefore that day shall dawn whereon thou, fairest of beings, shalt ride all golden behind four snow-white steeds. Chieftains shall go before thee, their necks laden with chains, lest they be able to save themselves by the flight they used before. Joyous youths shall look on and maidens with them, and that day shall make all hearts o'erflow. And when some girl among them asks the names of the monarchs, or what places, what mountains, what rivers are borne along, do you answer everything, nor only if she ask you; ay, even if you know not, tell her as if you knew it well. That is Euphrates, his forehead fringed with reeds; he with the dark blue locks down-hanging must be Tigris. These, say, are Armenians, here is Persia, sprung from Danae; that was a city in the Achaemenian valleys. That one, or that, are chieftains; and you will have names to give them, correct, if you can, but if not, yet names that are fitting. (Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.205–228)

Herewith ends Ovid's large digression in his *Ars Amatoria* on contemporary political events, but later on he connects its loosely with the main theme of his book, the art of love, when he exhorts his readers to battle not in love, but only with Parthians: "Battle with Parthians, but with a cultured mistress have peace and mirth and whatever is the cause of love" (Ovid, *The Art of Love* 2.175–176).

Both Antipater of Thessalonica's epigram and Ovid's digression in his *Ars Amatoria* offer a glimpse of insight into the expectations that Rome, in the figure of Augustus' grandson and prospective successor, would finally conquer Parthia, thus sealing Rome's "domination with the rising Sun" (Antipater of Thessalonica) and adding "to Latium the riches of the East" (Ovid). However, Antipater and Ovid's hopes of a resumption of Rome's offensive Eastern policy

proved to be in vain. Against their hopeful expectations, Augustus once again brokered peace with the Parthians, as described in Dio Cassius' *Roman History* and in Velleius Paterculus' eyewitness account of the signing of this peace in his *Compendium*. Dio Cassius focuses mainly on the Armenian aspects of the conflict, but also describes how the Parthian king Phraataces himself hastens to Gaius Caesar to explain Parthia's involvement, and how Augustus, when petitioned by the strongest, Parthia-supported Armenian party headed by Tigranes, expresses his goodwill to him, also out of fear of a Parthian war, and orders him to convene with Gaius Caesar:

When the barbarians heard of Gaius' expedition, Phraataces sent men to Augustus to explain what had occurred and to demand the return of his brothers on condition of his accepting peace. The emperor sent him a letter in reply, addressed simply to 'Phraataces,' without the appellation of 'king,' in which he directed him to lay aside the royal name and to withdraw from Armenia. Thereupon the Parthian, so far from being cowed, wrote back in a generally haughty tone, styling himself 'King of Kings' and addressing Augustus simply as 'Caesar.' Tigranes did not at once send any envoys, but when Artabazus somewhat later fell ill and died, he sent gifts to Augustus, in view of the fact that his rival had been removed, and though he did not mention the name 'king' in his letter, he really did petition Augustus for the kingship. Influenced by these considerations and at the same time fearing the war with the Parthians, the emperor accepted the gifts and bade him go with good hopes to Gaius in Syria. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 55.10.20–21)

In order to sign their peace treaty, Gaius Caesar met with the Parthian king Phraataces on an island in the Euphrates near Zeugma (see the map in Figure 20.1) in 2 CE, as Velleius Paterculus describes in his eyewitness account:

On an island in the Euphrates, with an equal retinue on each side, Gaius had a meeting with the king of the Parthians, a young man of distinguished presence. This spectacle of the Roman army arrayed on one side, the Parthian on the other, while these two eminent leaders not only of the empires they represented but also of mankind thus met in conference—truly a notable and a memorable sight—it was my fortunate lot to see early in my career as a soldier, when I held the rank of tribune. (...) As for the meeting, first the Parthian dined with Gaius upon the Roman bank, and later Gaius supped with the king on the soil of the enemy.

It was at this time that there were revealed to Caesar, through the Parthian king, the traitorous designs, revealing a crafty and deceitful mind, of Marcus Lollius, whom Augustus had desired to be the adviser of his still youthful son; and gossip spread the report abroad. In regard to his death, which occurred within a few days, I do not know whether it was accidental or voluntary. (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.101.1–102.1)

In this way, peaceful Roman-Parthian relations were re-established, on the condition that the Parthians would not interfere in Armenian affairs again.⁷⁵

Yet Parthia itself proved very unstable, and the stability that characterized the relations between Parthia and Rome during Phraates IV's reign from 20 BCE until his death in 2 BCE was not revived and came to a definitive end when Phraataces was deposed in 4 CE. Both Tacitus and Josephus emphasize the role that the Parthian nobles played in Phraataces' deposition. According to Josephus, the Parthian nobles became increasingly discontented with the degeneration of the current members of the Arsacids on the Parthian throne and replaced them with other members, first inviting to the throne Orodes III, who reigned from 4–6 CE:

Those of the Parthians who were of the highest birth were of one mind that no form of government but the monarchical was manageable, and that it was necessary that the occupant of the throne should belong to the lineage of the Arsacids, since custom did not permit others to rule. But they had had enough, over and over again till now, of the upstart degradation to which the throne had been subjected by the marriage with the Italian concubine and by her offspring. The elders therefore sent envoys and offered the throne to Orodes, who, though the populace had no friendly eye for him among other reasons because he had some responsibility for acts of extreme cruelty, being indeed utterly gauche and viciously prone to anger, was still a member of this family. He, however, was slain by a concerted attack, according to one version, amidst drinking and feasting, for it is customary for everyone to carry a sword at such affairs. But according to the generally received account, they lured him into a hunting party. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.44–45)

75 Cf. J. Wiesehöfer, "Phraates v (Phraataces)," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online). On Gaius Caesar, see F. E. Romer, "Gaius Caesar's Military Diplomacy in the East," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 109 (1979): 199–214.

Following Orodes' death in 6 CE (and perhaps also after the deposition of other successors, according to Tacitus), the Parthian nobles invited one of Phraates IV's legitimate sons, Vonones, to return from Rome and take the Parthian throne. This he did, as Vonones I, in 8/9 CE. According to Josephus, "When they sent envoys to Rome and asked release of one of the hostages as their king, Vonones was chosen in preference to his brothers and was sent. For he seemed to be worthy of the lot that was conferred upon him by the two greatest empires under the sun, one his own, one foreign" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.46–47).

Tacitus confirms this, and also stresses the role of the Parthian nobles in the replacement of Phraataces and his successors in his version of events: "After domestic murders had made an end of Phraates and his successors, a deputation from the Parthian nobility arrived in Rome, to summon Vonones, as the eldest of his children, to the throne. The Caesar [i.e., Augustus] took this as an honour to himself and presented the youth with a considerable sum. The barbarians, too, accepted him with the pleasure they usually evince at a change of sovereigns" (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.2). Augustus, in his *Res Gestae*, proudly refers to the Parthian request to grant the return of Vonones from Rome to the Parthian throne: "From me the (people) of the Parthians [...] received the (king) for whom they asked through ambassadors, the chief men of those peoples; the Parthians Vonones, son of King Phrates, grandson of King Orodes" (Augustus, *The Acts of Augustus* 1.33).

It is this deposition and appointment of Parthian kings by a class of Parthian nobles that seems to confirm the correctness of Strabo's report, drawn from the Stoic Posidonius, on the Parthian political system. According to Strabo, "the Council of the Parthians, according to Posidonius, consists of two groups, one that of kinsmen [i.e., of the Parthian king], and the other that of wise men and magi (τὸ δὲ σοφῶν καὶ μάγων), from both of which groups the kings were appointed" (Strabo, *Geography* 11.9.3; Posidonius, fragm. 282 Edelstein & Kidd). As H. L. Jones interprets this passage, it "appears that the kings were chosen from the first group by the members of the second."⁷⁶ Posidonius' report, on which Strabo is dependent, could well be accurate, because Posidonius (ca. 135–ca. 51 BCE) himself could have gained such information from his fellow Stoics at the Stoic School of Babylon, established there in the second century BCE, as we have seen above, by Archedemus of Tarsus, who was a pupil of the Seleuceia-born Diogenes of Babylonia (see p. 508). It does not seem

76 LCL 211, 276–77n3. On this passage, see also B. Jacobs, "Herrscherhaus und Hof," in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 1, chap. 2.4.1, 77–84 at 78; Lerouge-Cohen, *L'image des Parthes dans le monde gréco-romain*, 251–54.

unlikely that the magi, if they were indeed the kingmakers of the Parthians (see also Cicero, *On Divination* 1.90–91; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.100–101; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 49.7; and see Albert de Jong's contribution to this volume), were closely connected with the Parthian nobility. In this respect, we recall that Sulla, already at the beginning of the first century BCE during the first encounter of the Romans with a Parthian ambassadorial delegation, met with magi, who were part of the delegation.

As regards the Parthian nobles' invitation to Vonones I, however, this appointment proved no more successful than the previous brief appointments. Vonones also reigned for only a short period, in the years 8/9 CE, before being deposed and replaced by Artabanus II. The latter was to reign for almost the entirety of the next three decades (10/1–38 CE), only briefly overlapping with the reign of Augustus and largely coinciding with that of Tiberius (14–37 CE). Interestingly, the reason for Vonones' brief reign was, at least according to the Roman historians, the fact that he had become too Greco-Roman in Parthian eyes. According to Tacitus, the Parthians' joy at having recovered one of the Parthians from his Roman exile soon ceased as they became sensitive to the implications of Parthian inferiority vis-à-vis Roman rule that this appointment might entail and furthermore realized that this particular Parthian exile had become alienated from Parthian customs and had developed a Greek way of life instead:

It quickly gave place to shame:—"The Parthians had degenerated: they had gone to another continent for a king tainted with the enemy's arts, and now the throne of the Arsacids was held, or given away, as one of the provinces of Rome. Where was the glory of the men who slew Crassus and ejected Antony, if a chattel of the Caesar, who had brooked his bondage through all these years, was to govern Parthians?"

Their contempt was heightened by the man himself, with his remoteness from ancestral traditions, his rare appearances in the hunting-field, his languid interest in horseflesh, his use of a litter when passing through the towns, and his disdain of the national banquets. Other subjects for mirth were his Greek retinue and his habit of keeping even the humblest household necessities under seal. His easy accessibility, on the other hand, and his unreserved courtesy—virtues unknown to Parthia—were construed as exotic vices; and the good and ill in him, as they were equally strange to the national character, were impartially abhorred.

Consequently Artabanus, an Arsacid of the blood, who had grown to manhood among the Dahae, was brought into the lists, and, though routed in the first engagement, rallied his forces and seized the kingdom. (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.2–3)

According to Tacitus, these events—which started in the last years of the Augustan era and continued into the reign of Tiberius—caused unrest and instability in the East and constituted a breach with the previous positive relations between Phraates IV and Augustus, despite the former's defeat of Antony's armies in 36 BC:

With the consulate of Statilius Sisenna and Lucius Libo [i.e., in 16 CE, after the death of Augustus in 14 CE, in the reign of Tiberius] came an upheaval among the independent kingdoms and Roman provinces of the East. The movement started with the Parthians, who despised as an alien the sovereign whom they had sought and received from Rome, member though he was of the Arsacid house. This was Vonones, once given by Phraates as a hostage to Augustus. For, though he [i.e., Phraates] had thrown back Roman armies and commanders, to the emperor Phraates had observed every point of respect, and, to knit the friendship closer, had sent him part of his family, more from distrust of his countrymen's loyalty than from any awe of ourselves. (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.1)

The second thoughts that the Parthians developed with regard to Vonones are also reported by Josephus, who equally mentions their embarrassment at having appealed to Rome (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.47–48) and describes the ensuing military clashes between Artabanus and Vonones, in which the former eventually triumphed, settling, with the majority of his troops, in Ctesiphon, whereas the latter escaped to Seleuceia-on-Tigris (18.48–49). From there, Vonones fled to Armenia, from where he unsuccessfully appealed to Rome to be awarded the vacant Armenian throne, but was instead granted permission to settle in Syrian Antioch because of his Roman education:

Artabanus, having gathered together his forces, engaged and defeated Vonones, who rode off with a small body of followers to Seleuceia. Artabanus, who, in order to intimidate the barbarians, had wrought much slaughter during the rout, withdrew with the majority of his troops to Ctesiphon. Artabanus now ruled the Parthians, while Vonones escaped to Armenia. Vonones' original design was to possess that territory, and so he sent an embassy to the Romans to ask for it. But Tiberius, in view of the man's cowardice and the menace of the Parthian king, for the latter had in fact countered with his own envoys and a threat of war, refused his request. Having no alternative means to secure the throne, since the Armenian grandees who dwelt around the Niphates had joined forces with Artabanus, Vonones threw himself on the mercy of Silanus the governor of Syria. Vonones was safeguarded in Syria in deference to his

education in Rome, while Artabanus gave Armenia to Orodes, one of his own sons. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.49–52; cf. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 3. *Tiberius* 49.2)

Interestingly, Josephus mentions that the emperor also withdrew his support from Vonones because Artabanus threatened Rome with war in case they would support Vonones. Thus Parthian-Roman relations changed at the turn of the Augustan-Tiberian age.

In passing, I want to briefly reflect on Josephus' great, remarkable interest in Parthian affairs in his *Jewish Antiquities*, as this might also have a bearing on our understanding of Matthew. It seems that Josephus was interested in Parthia because of the broader context of Roman-Parthian relations in which Judea was framed, and also because of the fact that the large and important Jewish community in Babylon, which had remained present there after the Babylonian Exile, lived under Parthian rule.⁷⁷ As we shall see in due course, this also seems to be of interest to Matthew, who is the only evangelist to depict the life of Jesus within the larger framework of the Babylonian Exile, the (Parthian) magi, and Syrian interest in Jesus' public performance.

In conclusion, it is clear that Roman-Parthian relations were rather peaceful in the Augustan era, particularly in the period between 20 and 2 BCE, during the second half of the reign of Phraates IV (38–2 BCE). After that, relations again became increasingly difficult. Although they were temporarily restored with the treaty of 2 CE, it seems that they deteriorated at the turn of the Augustan-Tiberian age when the Parthians deposed Phraates IV's son Vonones, who had been recalled from Rome but was not able to secure the sustained support of the Parthian nobles, and even threatened Rome with war if they continued to back him.

It is noteworthy that Augustan interest in Parthia is also reflected in two topographical descriptions of the route from Syria (Antioch) to Parthia (Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon) by two authors of the Augustan era, Strabo and Isidore of Charax. The former's description seems to reflect the perspective

77 Cf. also L. H. Feldman in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 8 (LCL 433), 33 note b. For an assessment of Josephus and the Parthians, see T. Rajak, "The Parthians in Josephus," in *Das Partherreich*, 309–24; Goodblatt, "Josephus on Parthian Babylonia (*Antiquities* 18.310–379)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 605–22; M. Pucci, "Jewish-Parthian Relations in Josephus," *Jerusalem Cathedra* 3 (1983): 13–25; C. Colpe, "Die Arsakiden bei Josephus," in *Josephus-Studien: Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und dem Neuen Testament* (eds. O. W. Betz, K. Haacker, and M. Hengel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1974), 97–108.

of merchants, while the latter's description seems to serve military purposes, as we shall now see.

Strabo describes the route from Syria to Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon and weighs the advantages of two alternative routes in fiscal terms, considering what is "advantageous to the merchant." According to Strabo, the route from Bambycê/Edessa/Hierapolis to Scenae through the desert is to be preferred over the route that entirely follows the Euphrates and runs through territory where the inhabitants impose high taxes, whereas the Scenitae along the desert route ask only moderate taxes:

The road for people travelling from Syria to Seleuceia and Babylon runs through the country of the Scenitae, now called Malians by some writers, and through their desert. Such travellers cross the Euphrates near Anthemusia, a place in Mesopotamia; and above the river, at a distance of four schoeni, lies Bambycê, which is also called Edessa and Hierapolis, where the Syrian goddess Atargatis is worshipped; for after they cross the river, the road runs through the desert to Scenae, a noteworthy city situated on a canal towards the borders of Babylonia. The journey from the crossing of the river to Scenae requires twenty-five days. And on that road are camel-drivers who keep halting-places, which sometimes are well supplied with reservoirs, generally cisterns, though sometimes the camel-drivers use waters brought in from other places. The Scenitae are peaceful, and moderate towards travellers in the exaction of tribute, and on this account merchants avoid the land along the river and risk a journey through the desert, leaving the river on the right for approximately a three days' journey. For the chieftains who live along the river on both sides occupy country which, though not rich in resources, is less resourceless than that of others, and are each invested with their own particular domains and exact a tribute of no moderate amount. For it is hard among so many peoples, and that too among peoples that are self-willed, for a common standard of tribute to be set that is advantageous to the merchant. Scenae is eighteen schoeni distant from Seleuceia. (Strabo, *Geography* 16.27)

Hence, Strabo's perspective seems to be that of merchants who travel between Syria and Babylonia. Isidore of Charax's perspective is different.⁷⁸ Isidore describes the route from Syrian Antioch (as is apparent from the reference

78 On Isidore of Charax's route, see M. L. Chaumont, "Études d'histoire Parthe 5: La route royale des Parthes de Zeugma à Séleucie du Tigre d'après l'Itinéraire d'Isidore de Charax," *Syria* 61 (1984): 63–107. See also the forthcoming article by S. R. Hauser in S. Müller and

to Antioch in the middle of his description), via Zeugma, to Seleuceia-on-Tigris. The purpose of his description seems to be military, at least if Isidor—as some scholars, including Wilfred H. Schoff, argue⁷⁹—is identical with the Dionysius of Charax to whom Pliny the Elder refers. According to Pliny, this “Dionysius, the most recent writer dealing with the geography of the world, [...] was sent in advance to the East by his late majesty Augustus to write a full account of it when the emperor’s elder son [i.e., his adopted son, his grandson Gaius Caesar] was about to proceed to Armenia to take command against the Parthians and Arabians” (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.31.141). What Pliny refers to here is the campaign of Gaius Caesar, Augustus’ grandson, which ended with the peace treaty of 2 CE, as discussed above (see pp. 550–54). If this Dionysius of Charax is indeed identical with Isidore of Charax, the following description of the route from Antioch to Seleuceia-on-Tigris (measured in “schoeni,” measures of approximately 3.5 miles or 5.6 km) seems connected with the preparations of Gaius Caesar’s Eastern campaign, as ordered by Augustus:

For those who cross the Euphrates, next to Zeugma is the city of Apamia, and then the village of Daeara. It is 3 schoeni distant from Apamia and the river Euphrates. Then Charax Sidae, called by the Greeks the city of Anthemusias, 5 schoeni: beyond which is Coraea, in Batana, a fortified place: 3 schoeni. To the right of this place is Mannuorrha Auyreth, a fortified place, and a well, from which the inhabitants get drinking water, 5 schoeni. Then Commisimbela, a fortified place: by which flows the river Bilecha, 4 schoeni. Then Alagma, a fortified place, a royal station, 3 schoeni; beyond which is Ichnae, a Greek city, founded by the Macedonians: it is situated on the river Balicha: 3 schoeni. Then Nicephorium by the Euphrates, a Greek city, founded by King Alexander, 5 schoeni. Farther on, by the river, is Galahatha, a deserted village, 4 schoeni. Then the village of Chumbana, 1 schoenus; farther on Thillada Mirrhada, a royal station, 4 schoeni. Then a royal place, a temple of Artemis, founded by Darius, a small town; close by is the canal of Semiramis, and the Euphrates is dammed with rocks, in order that by being thus checked it may overflow the fields; but also in summer it wrecks the boats; to this place, 7 schoeni. Then Allan, a walled village,

J. Wiesehöfer (eds.), *Images of the Parthians in Greco-Roman Parthika-literature* (Classica et Orientalia series, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz).

79 See W. H. Schoff, *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax: An Account of the Overland Trade Route between the Levant and India in the First Century BC—The Greek Text with a Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Commercial Museum, 1914).

4 schoeni. Then Phaliga, a village on the Euphrates (that means in Greek half-way), 6 schoeni. From Antioch to this place, 120 schoeni; and from thence to Seleuceia, which is on the Tigris, 100 schoeni. Nearby Phaliga is the walled village of Nabagath, and by it flows the river Aburas, which empties into the Euphrates; there the legions cross over to the Roman territory beyond the river. Then the village of Asich, 4 schoeni; beyond which is the city of Dura Nicanoris, founded by the Macedonians, also called by the Greeks Europus, 6 schoeni. Then Merrha, a fortified place, a walled village, 5 schoeni. Then the city of Giddan, 5 schoeni. Then Belesi Biblada, 7 schoeni. Beyond is an island in the Euphrates, 6 schoeni; there was the treasure of Phraates, who cut the throats of his concubines, when Tiridates who was exiled, invaded [the land]. Then Anatho, an island in the Euphrates, of 4 stadia, on which is a city, 4 schoeni; beyond which is Thilabus, an island in the Euphrates; there is the treasure of the Parthians, 2 schoeni. Then Izan, a city on an island, 12 schoeni. Then Aipolis, [the city of Is] where there are bituminous springs, 16 schoeni. Beyond is the city of Besechana, in which is a temple of Atargatis, 12 schoeni. Then Neapolis by the Euphrates, 22 schoeni. From that place those leaving the Euphrates and passing through Narmalchan come to Seleuceia-on-Tigris, 9 schoeni. To this place [extend] Mesopotamia and Babylonia; and from Zeugma to Seleuceia there are 171 schoeni. (Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations* 1; trans. W. H. Schoff)

Gaius Caesar was never to travel this route, because he agreed a peace treaty with the Parthians on an island in the Euphrates near Zeugma, as we have seen. However, such descriptions of the Augustan era (to which, in the Flavian era, we can add Pliny's more general descriptions of distances between Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Syria)⁸⁰ indicate that such routes were well-trodden and not too

80 In his *Natural History*, Pliny gives descriptions of the distances from Seleuceia-on-Tigris to Damascus and the Syrian coast, but no detailed topographical description of the route: "Palmyra [...] is 337 miles distant from Parthian Seleuceia, generally known as Seleuceia-on-Tigris, 203 miles from the nearest part of the Syrian coast, and 27 miles less from Damascus. [...] At a point 594 miles from Bridgetown (i.e., Zeugma), the Euphrates divides round the village of Massice, the left branch passing through Seleuceia itself into Mesopotamia and falling into the Tigris as it flows round that city, while the right-hand channel makes for Babylon, the former capital of Chaldea, and passing through the middle of it" (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.88–90). Cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 6.125–126: "the winding course of the Euphrates is occupied by the Nomads of Arabia right on to the desert of Syria, where, as we have stated, the river makes a bend to the south, quitting the uninhabited districts of Palmyra. The distance of Seleuceia from the beginning of Mesopotamia

difficult. They linked Seleuceia explicitly to Syria and Antioch, and vice versa. This route would also have been used by Jews from Babylonia who visited Jerusalem on particular occasions. They would not have travelled the entire route up to Antioch, but, in the last part of their journey, would have travelled directly via Apamea and Damascus to Jerusalem.⁸¹

The descriptions of Strabo and Isidore of Charax demonstrate the Greco-Roman interest of the Augustan era in the routes between Syria and Seleuceia-on-Tigris. Moreover, regardless of whether Isidore of Charax is indeed to be identified with Dionysius of Charax, Augustus' order to Dionysius "to write a full account of it [i.e., of the East] when the emperor's elder son [i.e., Gaius Caesar] was about to proceed to Armenia to take command against the Parthians and Arabians" (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.141), shows that despite the long-standing peace between Augustus and Parthia, Augustus was strategically interested in a thorough reconnaissance of the East. It is probably precisely this Augustan Roman-Parthian peace that allowed the Romans to move into the East and undertake their reconnaissance. It is not unlikely that the Parthians, on their side, used the existing peace for the same purpose and explored political developments in Syria, the place where Rome and Parthia connected.

This mixture of Augustan-Parthian peace and, at the same time, ongoing strategic considerations could indeed explain the interest of magi in Syria. As I will argue below, the astrological phenomena of 6 BCE on which Michael Molnar bases the main part of his argument, and the power of which is confirmed by Stephan Heilen in his contribution to this volume (see pp. 300–301 above), would have drawn the magi's attention to Syria, in which they were already interested. The connection that Molnar forges between these phenomena and Judea in particular, however, is not convincing, because Heilen has shown that it was probably only Ptolemy in the second century CE who included Judea in his specific development of existing geographical-astrological models. This specific link with Judea, however, is, above all, unnecessary, because the magi's interest in Syria explains everything that requires explanation. The magi were fully focused on Syria, and Syria could also include Judea and other territories between Seleuceia-in-Pieria (the harbour of Syrian Antioch near the mouth of the River Orontes) and Egypt; these territories could be called "Coelê-Syria," as Strabo indicates: "Now the whole of

is a voyage by the Euphrates of 1125 miles; its distance from the Red Sea, if the voyage be made by the Tigris, is 320 miles, and from Bridgetown [i.e., Zeugma] 724 miles."

81 This is the route attested in Josephus' description of the route taken by Cleopatra after she had accompanied Antony up to the Euphrates, at the onset of his Parthian campaign in 36 BCE. See Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.362–363.

the country above the territory of Seleuceia [i.e., Seleuceia-in-Pieria], extending approximately to Egypt and Arabia, is called Coelê-Syria; but the country marked off by the Libanus and the Antilibanus is called by that name in a special sense" (Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.21).⁸² It is not surprising, then, if the magi, in their focus on Syria, would have included the surrounding territories that could be implied in a broad definition of the name Coelê-Syria, and especially Herodian Judea, which was probably the most powerful Roman vassal state in the region of Syria. Under the pretext of the existing Roman-Parthian peace, the Parthians, whose embassies—as we have seen in the case of Sulla—could include magi, could have travelled to Syria, just as the Romans, on the order of Augustus, explored the East under the same favourable conditions. These conditions, however, deteriorated in the post-Augustan era.

The Intermediate Period between Augustus and the Flavians

The Time of Tiberius (14–37 CE)

In the post-Augustan period, Roman-Parthian relations never again reached the height of peacefulness that characterized the Augustan era, especially the years between 20 BCE and 2 BCE. In 14 CE, Augustus was succeeded by Tiberius, not by his intended heir, his grandson Gaius Caesar, who had died in 4 CE as a result of his implementation of Rome's decisions with regard to Armenia, two years after the signing of the peace treaty with Parthia.⁸³ Tiberius had himself been part of Augustus' successful diplomacy with Parthia, as it was Tiberius who, according to Suetonius, "recovered the standards which the Parthians had taken from Marcus Crassus" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 3. *Tiberius* 9.1).⁸⁴

The Parthian counterpart for Tiberius' entire reign (14–37 CE) was Artabanus II (10/1–38 CE), who, in contrast to his immediate predecessors, was able to hold on to the Parthian throne. Yet his reign was far from stable. Parthian-Roman relations deteriorated. As we have seen, at the turn of the Augustan-Tiberian era, Artabanus had already threatened to attack the Romans when they continued to support his Parthian opponent, Vonones (see pp. 557–58). Parthia then became further destabilized, with the Romans supporting another contender for the Parthian throne. In 35 CE, according to Tacitus and Dio Cassius, a secret delegation of Parthian nobles came to Rome

82 On the relation between Judea and Syria, see also W. Eck, *Judäa—Syria Palästina: Die Auseinandersetzung einer Provinz mit römischer Politik und Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

83 See G. W. Richardson, T. J. Cadoux, and E. Badian, "Iulius Caesar, C., Gaius," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

84 For Tiberius and the Parthians, see also Dabrowa, "... ostentasse Romana arma satis..."

to request the appointment of Phraates, another son of Phraates IV who had been sent to Rome (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.31; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 58.26.2). They deplored Artabanus' arrogance and cruelty towards the Parthians and his disdain for Tiberius, whom he considered too old to reign. Furthermore, according to Tacitus, it was Artabanus' ambitions that should worry Rome: "he referred in boastful and menacing terms to the old boundaries of the Persian and Macedonian empires, and to his intention of seizing the territories held first by Cyrus and afterwards by Alexander" (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.31). It seems unlikely that Artabanus identified himself with Cyrus since the Parthian Arsacids seem to have known little of the Achaemenids.⁸⁵ What they would have known would probably have been mediated through their acquaintance with Greek education and historiography. Artabanus' positive identification with Alexander, however, is not altogether inconceivable, as Artabanus' Greek orientation seems to be confirmed by his surviving Greek correspondence in stone, as well as the depiction of himself kneeling for Apollo on one of his coins, although here there may be an *interpretatio Parthica* of Greek gods involved.⁸⁶

The replacement of Artabanus with a Parthian candidate from Rome, however, remained unsuccessful. When Phraates died on his way to Parthia, Tiberius sent another Parthian royal man from Rome, Tiridates (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 58.26.2–3). According to Tacitus, this Tiridates gradually took over cities, both old Macedonian and Parthian towns, and was gladly welcomed because of his refined Roman cultural manners, which contrasted sharply with Artabanus' partly Scythian background: "with the acquiescence of the Parthians, Tiridates took over Nicephorium, Anthemusias, and the other cities of Macedonian foundation, carrying Greek names, together with the Parthic towns of Halus and Artemita; enthusiasm running high, as Artabanus, with his Scythian training, had been execrated for his cruelty and it was hoped that Roman culture had mellowed the character of Tiridates" (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.41). Eventually, Tiridates was also admitted to Seleuceia-on-Tigris, where he re-balanced the powers of the people and the senate of the aristocrats, which had been disturbed by Artabanus, who—according to Tacitus—had "con-

85 B. Jacobs, "Verwaltung," in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 1, chap. 2.4.2.1–5, 84–100 at 85, with footnote 269.

86 See Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, chap. 3.1.3, EII, vol. 2, pp. 486–90 (Greek correspondence on stone, 21 CE); and vol. 1, p. 152 (coin). For the *interpretatio Parthica* of Greek gods, cf. B. Jacobs, "Zur Religion der Parther," in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches*, vol. 1, chap. 2.4.7.1, 145–54 at 152.

sulted his own ends by sacrificing the populace to the aristocrats": "They now celebrated the arrival of Tiridates with the honours paid to the ancient kings, along with the innovations of which a later age has been more lavish: at the same time, they poured abuse on Artabanus as an Arsacid on the mother's side, but otherwise of ignoble blood. Tiridates handed over the government of Seleuceia to the democracy" (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.42). Yet, Tiridates also proved unsuccessful against Artabanus: "nevertheless, Tiridates reigned only a short time, for Artabanus enlisted the aid of the Scythians and easily expelled him" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 58.26.3). Consequently, as Josephus reports, Tiberius ordered the Roman governor of Syria, Vitellius, to re-establish friendly relations with Artabanus: "Now Tiberius sent a letter to Vitellius bidding him to establish friendship with Artabanus, the king of the Parthians; for Artabanus, who was hostile to him and who had already detached Armenia, inspired in him the fear that he would do further mischief. But he instructed Vitellius to put faith in a treaty of friendship only if hostages, and especially the son of Artabanus, should be given to him" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.96–97).

Interestingly, it was Herod the Great's son Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee before whom (according to Luke) Jesus appeared during his trial (Luke 23:6–12), who was involved in bringing Vitellius and Artabanus together (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.101–105); the lives of the Parthians, Romans and Herodians remained intertwined.⁸⁷ When Artabanus was pressured again by Parthian nobles, it was Izates, king of Adiabene, a convert to Judaism, who persuaded the Parthians to reinstate Artabanus (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.54–65).⁸⁸

This also touches upon the vicissitudes of the Jews in Parthian territory during Artabanus' reign and directly thereafter. The internal instabilities in Parthia had rather diverse effects on the Jews. These chaotic times allowed the Jewish brothers Asinaeus and Anilaeus to establish a quasi-independent Jewish rule within Babylonia, independent of the Parthian rulers (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.314–370), which ended only in 35 or 36 CE.

The Time of Caligula (37–41 CE)

However, once these Jewish leaders had passed away, it was in the time of Caligula that, according to Josephus, the "Jews of Mesopotamia and especially those inhabiting Babylonia now met with a terrible and unparalleled

87 On Herod Antipas, see T. Rajak, "Herod Antipas," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

88 On Adiabene and Judea in the context of the relations between Rome and Parthia, see M. Marciak, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene: A Study on Literary Traditions and History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), chap. 13, 247–64.

disaster and were massacred in such numbers as never before in recorded history" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.310–311). The Jews were attacked by the Babylonians and felt forced to migrate from Babylon to Seleuceia-on-Tigris where the Greeks and Syrians united to murder them. Even when the Jews withdrew to Ctesiphon, the inhabitants of Seleuceia assailed them, which was possible because the Seleuceians are said to have had "no respect for the authority of the [Parthian] crown" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.377), a reference to their seven-year revolt against the Parthians in the years 35–42 CE (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.9), so that the Jews fled once again, to Nearda and Nisibis, where they were safe (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.371–379). Hence, the Mesopotamian-Babylonian Jews suffered rather diverse fates during these years.

All of these upheavals—both between Parthia and Rome and within Parthia, between Parthians, Seleuceians, Babylonians, and Jews—suffice to demonstrate that Parthia was highly unstable in the time of Tiberius and at the beginning of Caligula's reign. They confirm the judgement of Josephus that, during the reign of Artabanus, "the land of the Parthians [was] overwhelmed with war, in the battles of which men of the highest standing were killed, all their land ravaged" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.98–99).

For no obvious reason, in 39 CE, after Vardanes I (38–45 CE) had succeeded his father Artabanus, Caligula seems to have celebrated a mock Parthian triumph, with substitute Parthian victims in the procession and Caligula identifying himself with Alexander the Great, claiming to wear his breastplate: "A long train of what purported to be spoils followed him, including Darius, a member of the Arsacid family, who was one of the Parthians then living in Rome as hostages. His friends and associates in flowered robes followed in vehicles, and then came the army and the rest of the throng, each man dressed according to his individual taste" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 59.17.5). And in 40 CE, the Parthians planned to attack Syria but were quickly deterred by Vitellius, the Roman governor of Syria. According to Dio Cassius,

in addition to his other brilliant achievements during his term of office, he [i.e., Vitellius] forestalled Artabanus, who was planning an attack on that province also [...]. He terrified the Parthian by coming upon him suddenly when he was already close to the Euphrates, and then induced him to come to a conference, compelled him to sacrifice to the images of Augustus and Gaius [i.e., Gaius Caligula], and made a peace with him that was advantageous to the Romans, even securing his sons as hostages. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 49.27.2–3; cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.101–105 who dates this event under Tiberius)

Suetonius offers a slightly different version, dating this incident to the time of Vardanes' father, Artabanus, and emphasizing that Artabanus voluntarily sought Caligula's friendship, but he agrees about the homage that Artabanus paid to the statues of the emperors. According to Suetonius, "Artabanus [...], king of the Parthians, who was always outspoken in his hatred and contempt for Tiberius, voluntarily sought Caligula's friendship and came to a conference with the consular governor; then crossing the Euphrates, he paid homage to the Roman eagles and standards and to the statues of the Caesars" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 4. *Gaius Caligula* 14.3). Although stating that Artabanus did so voluntarily, Suetonius equally credits Vitellius for this: "Lucius [i.e., Lucius Vitellius] [...] was made governor of Syria, where with supreme diplomacy he not only induced Artabanus, king of the Parthians, to hold a conference with him, but even to do obeisance to the standards of the legion" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 7.3. *Vitellius* 2.4). Vardanes seems to have persisted in this subservient attitude towards Caligula, and is even said to have deplored his death. According to Suetonius, after receiving the news of Caligula's death, "even the king of kings [i.e., the Parthian king] suspended his exercise at hunting and the banquets with his courtiers, which among the Parthians is a sign of public mourning" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 4. *Gaius Caligula* 5).

The Time of Claudius (41–54 CE)

After Caligula's death, during the reign of Claudius, Vardanes eventually managed to put down the seven-year revolt of Seleuceia-on-Tigris (35–42 CE), which had started during the reign of his father. According to Tacitus, Vardanes had been angered by its long insurrection and had tried to subdue this Greek city previously, but in vain, when the aspirations of his successor Gotarzes II (43/4–51 CE) made him abandon the siege of Seleuceia:

Vardanes [...], with his usual alacrity for great adventures, covered three thousand stadia in two days; drove the unsuspecting and terrified Gotarzes into flight, and without hesitation seized the nearest satrapies— Seleuceia alone refusing to acknowledge his supremacy. Less from considerations of his immediate interest than from anger at a community which had also deserted his father, he hampered himself with the siege of a powerful city, secured by the barrier of an intervening river, fortified, and provisioned. Meanwhile, Gotarzes, strengthened by the forces of the Dahae and Hyrcanians, renewed hostilities; and Vardanes, compelled to abandon Seleuceia, pitched his camp opposite to him on the plains of Bactria. (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.8)

Eventually, however, in 42 CE, Vardanes managed to subdue the city, and Tacitus emphasizes the shame this long revolt must have caused for the Parthians: “On the return of Vardanes, Seleuceia capitulated in the seventh year after its revolt; not without some dishonour to the Parthians, whom a single town had so long defied” (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.9). Although it is too easy to assume a causal relation, it is nevertheless noteworthy that after this long and vehement estrangement between Greek Seleuceia and the Parthian kings, it was—as we shall see later—one of Vardanes’ successors, Vologeses I (51/52–79/80 CE), who seems to have adopted an anti-Greek attitude and founded Vologesia (or Vologesocerta) in the vicinity of Seleuceia as a commercial competitor (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.122–123).

In the last years of his reign, Vardanes tried to start a war against the Romans and sought to gain the support of Izates of Adiabene, who, however, tried to dissuade him from attacking the Romans. When Vardanes’ fellow-Parthians heard of his plans, they killed him. According to Josephus,

Vardanes [...], contemplating war on the Romans, came to Izates and urged him to take part in the campaign and to prepare an auxiliary force. He failed, however, to convince him. For Izates, knowing well the might and Fortune of the Romans, thought that Vardanes was attempting the impossible. [...] He therefore dissuaded Vardanes by constantly describing the resources and achievements of the Romans, supposing that such accounts would be enough to frighten him and curb his will to make war on them. The Parthian, however, exasperated at this, forthwith declared war on Izates. Nevertheless, he did not derive any advantage from his campaign against Izates, since God cut short all his expectations. For the Parthians, on hearing of Vardanes’ intention and of his decision to march against the Romans, put him to death and delivered the government to his brother Cotardes [i.e., Gotarzes]. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.69–74; cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 11.10)

The cruelty of Vardanes’ successor, Gotarzes II (43/4–51 CE), however, led some Parthians to send another secret embassy to Claudius in 49 CE, to request the release of another member of Phraates IV’s descendants living in Rome, Meherdates. According to Tacitus,

By the murder of Vardanes Parthian affairs were thrown into confusion, as there was no unanimity with regard to his successor. Many leaned to Gotarzes; some to Phraates’ descendant Meherdates, who had been given

in hostage to ourselves. Then Gotarzes carried the day, made himself master of the palace, and by dint of cruelty and debauchery drove the Parthians to send a secret petition to the Roman emperor, pleading that Meherdates might be set free to ascend the throne of his fathers. (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.10)

As this attempt proved unsuccessful, it apparently provided the ground for Seneca's disparaging, sarcastic remark about Claudius, "Rebellious Parthians he did defeat" (Seneca, *The Pumpkinification of Claudius* [*Apocolocyntosis*] 12, poem line 8).

Soon, Seneca himself had to share responsibility for Rome's policy towards Parthia, as adviser of the young Nero.

The Time of Nero (54–68 CE)

When Gotarzes was succeeded by Vologeses I (51/52–79/80 CE), the latter provoked Rome by deposing the Armenian king Radamistus and setting his own brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne (Tacitus, *Annals* 12.50). These Parthian-Armenian problems arose at the beginning of Nero's rule (54–68 CE). Assisted by Seneca, among others, the young Nero took action, also mobilizing one descendant of the Herodian family, Herod the Great's great-grandson Herod Agrippa II, king of Chalcis and controller of the Jerusalem temple (cf. Acts 25.13–26.32):

At the close of the year, rumour brought the disturbing news that the Parthians had again broken out and were pillaging Armenia after expelling Radamistus [...]. But Burrus and Seneca were well known for their great experience of affairs [...]. [...] Nero gave orders that both the recruits levied in the adjacent provinces to keep the Eastern legions at strength were to be moved up, and the legions themselves stationed closer to Armenia; while the two veteran kings, Agrippa [i.e., Herod Agrippa II] and Antiochus [i.e., Antiochus Epiphanes IV of Commagene], prepared their forces, so as to take the initiative by crossing the Parthian frontier. (Tacitus, *Annals* 13.6–7)

It is highly noteworthy that the Herodians still acted as Rome's vassal kings in the strife with Parthia, just as Herod the Great had served Rome earlier. Judean history remains fully encapsulated in contemporary Roman-Parthian relations.

A long, multifarious struggle between Rome—represented by Nero's general Corbulo—and Parthia about supremacy over Armenia followed and

lasted for almost a decade.⁸⁹ Finally, in 62/63 CE, Corbulo and the Parthian king Vologeses reached an understanding, which was, however, interpreted in Rome as a Roman victory over the Parthians. As Tacitus writes,

Vologeses sent emissaries to Corbulo, proposing that he should withdraw his posts across the Euphrates and make the river as formerly a line of delimitation. The Roman demanded that Armenia should be similarly cleared of the various scattered garrisons. In the long run, the king gave way: Corbulo demolished his defensive works beyond the Euphrates, and the Armenians were left to their own devices. But at Rome trophies over the Parthians and arches were being erected in the middle of the Capitoline Hill: they had been voted by the senate while the issue of the war was still open, and now they were not abandoned—appearances being consulted, though known truth had to be ignored. (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.17–18)

According to Dio Cassius, these stipulations between Corbulo and Vologeses were carried out provisionally, until Nero officially replied “that he would bestow Armenia upon Tiridates if that prince would come to Rome,” with Corbulo “privately [...] advising the [Parthian] king to send his brother to Rome, a suggestion that the other followed” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 62.22.3–23.2). Official peace was subsequently made at the conference of Rhandaia (see the map in Figure 20.1) in 63 CE, with Tiridates showing himself willing to acknowledge Rome’s confirmation of his power. This confirmation was carefully orchestrated in two events: one in the region, when Tiridates was to remove his diadem; the other in Rome, where he was to receive it back from Nero. At the first event, in 63 CE, Tiridates performed *proskynēsis* before the images of Nero and took off his diadem:

Accordingly, Corbulo and Tiridates held a conference at Rhandaia [...]. Indeed, the proceedings of the conference were not limited to mere conversations, but a lofty platform had been erected on which were set images of Nero, and in the presence of crowds of Armenians, Parthians, and Romans Tiridates approached and paid them obeisance (καὶ προσεκύνησεν); then, after sacrificing to them and calling them by lauda-

89 On Nero and the Parthians, see also M. Heil, *Die orientalische Außenpolitik des Kaisers Nero* (Munich: Tuduv, 1997); S. Müller, “Nero und Domitian im Licht östlicher Monarchien,” in *Nero und Domitian: Mediale Diskurse der Herrschaftsrepräsentation im Vergleich* (eds. S. Bönisch-Meyer et al.; Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2014), 283–315.

tory names, he took off the diadem from his head and set it upon them. Monobazus and Vologeses also came to Corbulo and gave him hostages. In honour of this event Nero was saluted as imperator a number of times and held a triumph, contrary to precedent. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 62.23.2–4)

Tacitus also describes this event, emphasizing Tiridates' strategic considerations in seemingly submitting to Nero: "He would go, he said, 'to Rome and carry the Caesar a new distinction—an Arsacid in the guise of a suppliant, though the fortunes of Parthia were unclouded'" (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.29; cf. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63.[62].5.1–2).

The second part of this ceremony took place in Rome in 66 CE, which Tiridates, with a great entourage (including his own sons as well as the sons of his brothers Vologeses, king of Parthia, Pacorus, king of Media Atropatene, and Monobazus, king of Adiabene), reached after a nine-month journey, almost entirely over land:

Tiridates presented himself in Rome, bringing with him not only his own sons but also those of Vologeses, of Pacorus, and of Monobazus. Their progress all the way from the Euphrates was like a triumphal procession. Tiridates himself was at the height of his reputation by reason of his age, beauty, family and intelligence; and his whole retinue of servants together with all his royal paraphernalia accompanied him. Three thousand Parthian horsemen and numerous Romans besides followed in his train. They were received by gaily decorated cities and by peoples who shouted many compliments. Provisions were furnished them free of cost, a daily expenditure of 800,000 sesterces for their support being thus charged to the public treasury. This went on without change for the nine months occupied in their journey. The prince covered the whole distance to the confines of Italy on horseback. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].1.2–2.3)

Pliny the Elder says that Tiridates travelled over land to Rome because he was a magus and was also accompanied by other magi, who, according to Pliny, preferred, for religious reasons, not to travel over water: "Tiridates the Magus had come to him [i.e., Nero] bringing a retinue for the Armenian triumph over himself, thereby laying a heavy burden on the provinces. He had refused to travel by sea, for the magi hold it sin to spit into the sea or wrong that element by other necessary functions of mortal creatures. He had brought magi with him, had initiated Nero into their banquets" (Pliny, *Natural History* 30.16–17).

Tiridates is called a magus because, although being installed on the Armenian throne, he was a Parthian, brother of the Parthian king Vologeses, and as the Parthian kings were appointed by their 'kingmakers', the magi, and, according to Philo of Alexandria, "no one in that country is promoted to the throne unless he has first been admitted into the caste of the magi" (Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.100–101), Tiridates, too, is characterized as a magus himself. As we shall see later, in the treatment of Pliny's full descriptions of the magi, Pliny depicts the magi in a very negative way, as fraudulent charlatans and magicians (see pp. 581–85), and this view also colors his presentation of Tiridates in the passage under consideration here.

In Dio Cassius' account, the inbound and outbound journey of Tiridates is described with some, but not full precision. He is said to have progressed "all the way from the Euphrates," being "received by gaily decorated cities" along the route, although which cities is not stipulated. The reference to the Euphrates seems to imply that Tiridates travelled from Armenia, not along the northern route along the Black Sea, but via Syria. This seems to be consistent with Tacitus' report that, before setting off for Rome, Tiridates first visited his Parthian family: "Tiridates applied for a respite in which to visit his brothers and his mother before embarking upon so long a journey [. . .]. On his departure, he found Pacorus in Media and Vologeses at Ecbatana [i.e., the summer residence of the Parthian kings]—the latter not inattentive to his brother" (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.30–31). This makes it not unlikely that Tiridates journeyed to Rome not from Armenia, but from Parthia, and if that is the case, then he probably travelled through Syria. Hence the cities that welcomed him may have included Syrian Antioch, although this is not specified. It seems that after crossing the Hellespont (the only water that could not be avoided), Tiridates took the Via Egnatia through Macedonia, and after that travelled "through Illyricum and north of the Ionian Sea" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].7.1), entering Italy from the north, "by way of Picenum" (Epitome of Book 63[62].2.3–4), meeting Nero at Neapolis, and being accompanied by him to Rome (Epitome of Book 63[62].2.3–3.4). On his journey back from Italy to Armenia, Tiridates, according to Dio Cassius, "did not return by the route that he had followed in coming,—through Illyricum and north of the Ionian Sea,—but instead he sailed from Brundisium to Dyrrachium" (Epitome of Book 63[62].7.1), taking a shortcut from Italy to Greece, where he probably again joined the Via Egnatia, back through Macedonia, to Asia Minor. This time, Tiridates "viewed also the cities of Asia, which served to increase his amazement at the strength and beauty of the Roman empire" (Epitome of Book 63[62].7.1). Again, it remains unclear whether Tiridates' journey ran through Syria.

This is all relevant, because if this journey (either inbound or outbound, or both) in 66 CE ran through Syrian Antioch, it could have been witnessed by Matthew, whom scholarly consensus situates in Antioch. A strong link between Matthew's journey of the magi to Jesus, on the one hand, and the journey of Tiridates the magus to Nero, on the other, has been advocated by scholars such as Rod Jenkins and Roger Beck, the latter in his contribution to this volume.⁹⁰ Yet it is doubtful how much this specific story could have influenced Matthew. Even if it were to be accepted that Tiridates' route ran through Antioch, how would Matthew have been aware of Tiridates' status as a magus and of the presence of magi in the entourage that followed him? Of the ancient authors that comment on Tiridates' visit to Nero in Rome, Pliny and Dio Cassius, it is only the former who characterizes Tiridates as a magus, and as we shall see from the discussion of Pliny in the next section, it seems to be consistent with his strong dislike of magi that he does so: even Nero, Pliny seems to argue, was aware of the fraud of the magi. Moreover, this story actually serves to show that magi normally came from Parthia, and that this was the exception, as Tiridates, although appointed by Nero to the throne of Armenia, had a Parthian background. It seems unlikely that Matthew, when describing the magi as coming "from the East" (Matt 2:1), had this Armenian magus in mind, who, as king of Armenia, was rather from the North. The parallel that, just as Tiridates the magus "did not return by the route that he had followed in coming" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].7.1), Matthew's magi also returned by a different route (Matt 2:12), seems rather coincidental and can be fully explained from the stories themselves. Dio Cassius wants to state that, despite the magi's religious scruples that made them travel to Rome over land and take the detour "through Illyricum and north of the Ionian Sea," travelling to Rome via the north of Italy, on their journey back they took a short-cut over the sea to Greece. In Matthew's narrative, the return via a different route is caused by the threat posed by Herod, of which the magi had become aware. It seems rather unlikely, therefore, that Matthew made the magi's return journey resemble that of Tiridates, as the reasons for taking a different route are entirely determined by the particulars of the individual stories. A specific relation between Dio Cassius' report of Tiridates' journey and Matthew's narrative is lacking, in my view.

There are, however, general resemblances with regard to the act of *proskynēsis*, the Eastern practice of doing obeisance by kneeling and prostrating oneself in

90 R. M. Jenkins, "The Star of Bethlehem and the Comet of AD 66," *Journal of the British Astronomy Association* 114 (2004): 336–43.

front of a ruler, which was also performed by the Parthians.⁹¹ Just as the magi perform a *proskynēsis* before Jesus (Matt 2:11), so Tiridates made obeisance to Nero in a similar fashion. According to Dio Cassius, when, after his long journey, he met Nero for the first time, in Napels, “he knelt upon the ground (καίτοι καὶ ἐς γῆν τὸ γόνυ καθείς), and with arms crossed called him master and did obeisance (καὶ προσκυνήσας)” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].2.4–3.1). This act of obeisance is repeated in Rome, at the Forum, at Tiridates’ coronation as king of Armenia, and is underlined by the words that, according to Dio Cassius, Tiridates spoke and Nero uttered in reply:

at daybreak Nero, wearing the triumphal garb and accompanied by the senate and the Praetorians, entered the Forum. He ascended the rostra and seated himself upon a chair of state. Next Tiridates and his suite passed between lines of heavy-armed troops drawn up on either side, took their stand close to the rostra, and did obeisance to the emperor (προσεκύνησαν αὐτόν) as they had done before. [...] These were his words:

Master, I am the descendant of Arsaces, brother of the kings Vologeses and Pacorus, and thy slave. And I have come to thee, my god, to do obeisance to thee (προσκυνήσων σε) as I do Mithras. The destiny thou spinnest for me shall be mine; for thou art my Fortune and my Fate.

Nero replied to him as follows:

Well hast thou done to come hither in person, that meeting me face to face thou mightest enjoy my grace. For what neither thy father left thee nor thy brothers gave and preserved for thee, this do I grant thee. King of Armenia I now declare thee, that both thou and they may understand that I have power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them.

91 On *proskynēsis*, see T. Witulski, “Jesus und der Kaiser: das Ritual der Proskynesis,” in *Christ and the Emperor: The Gospel Evidence* (eds. G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden; Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 101–46; H. Bowden, “On Kissing and Making Up: Court Protocol and Historiography in Alexander the Great’s ‘Experiment with Proskynesis,’” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 56 (2013): 55–77; Wiesehöfer, “Proskynesis,” *Brill’s New Pauly* (online); Wiesehöfer, “Denn ihr huldigt nicht einem Menschen als eurem Herrscher, sondern nur den Göttern’: Bemerkungen zur Proskynese in Iran,” in *Religious Themes and Texts of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia* (eds. C. G. Cereti, M. Maggi, and E. Provasi; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2003), 447–52; G. C. Richards, “Proskynesis,” *The Classical Review* 48 (1934): 168–70; L. Ross Taylor, “The ‘Proskynesis’ and the Hellenistic Ruler Cult,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 47 (1927): 53–62.

At the close of these words he bade him ascend by the approach which had been built in front of the rostra expressly for this occasion, and when Tiridates had been made to sit beneath his feet, he placed the diadem upon his head. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].4.3–5.4)

According to Suetonius, Tiridates even made obeisance twice to Nero in Rome, first at the Forum during the actual coronation, and subsequently again in the Theater of Pompey, after which Nero could close the doors of the Temple of Janus because of universal peace:

As the king approached along a sloping platform, the emperor at first let him fall at his feet, but raised him with his right hand and kissed him (*Et primo per devexum pulpitem subeuntem admisit ad genua adlevatumque dextra exosculatus est*). Then, while the king made supplication, Nero took the turban from his head and replaced it with a diadem, while a man of praetorian rank translated the words of the suppliant and proclaimed them to the throng. From there the king was taken to the theatre, and when he had again done obeisance, Nero gave him a seat at his right hand (*perductum inde in theatrum ac rursus supplicantem iuxta se latere dextro conlocavit*). Because of all this Nero was hailed as Imperator, and after depositing a laurel wreath in the Capitol, he closed the two doors of the temple of Janus, as a sign that no war was left anywhere. (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 13.1–2)

It is this *proskynēsis* before Rome's power that seems relevant for our understanding of the magi's *proskynēsis* before Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (2:11). Yet this *proskynēsis* is not specific to this instance of the Parthian Tiridates prostrating himself to receive the Armenian crown. As we have seen, Augustus had already had the Parthians' return of the Roman standards in 20 BCE depicted on his coins as an act of obeisance, with the Parthians kneeling while handing over the standards (see above, pp. 548–49). This indicates that it is not the specific Tiridates episode that must be exclusively drawn upon for our understanding of Matthew. It is merely one instance of the Roman-Parthian relations that seem to constitute the historical background of Matthew's Gospel.

It is noteworthy that the display of Nero's power on this specific event further incited Seneca's criticism of Nero. Seneca, who, at the very beginning of Nero's career, probably advised him with regard to the course to be taken after Vologeses' appointment of his brother Tiridates to the Armenian throne, but was later fully estranged from his former pupil, writes the following:

Though he [i.e., Nero] may pile up a palace of marble and cover it with gold in his arrogance, though armed squadrons guard their commander's door, though the depleted world sends him its immense resources, though Parthians seek to kiss his bloody hand in supplication (. . . *supplices dextram petant Parthi cruentam* . . .), though kingdoms bring him their riches, there will come a day and time when he will pay for his crimes with his guilty spirit and pay his enemies with his throat, deserted and thrown down and utterly destitute. (Seneca, *Octavia* 624–631)

Seneca here clearly refers to the building of Nero's Golden House, begun after the fire of Rome in 64 CE, and to the coronation of Tiridates in 66 CE, who, although appointed as king of Armenia, was correctly seen as a Parthian by descent. The reference is not to the king of Parthia, however. Whereas Tiridates gave heed to Nero's summons to come to Rome, Vologeses, the Parthian king, according to Dio Cassius, maintained a very independent attitude towards him:

But Vologeses, though often summoned, refused to come to Nero, and finally, when the latter's invitations became burdensome to him, sent back a despatch to this effect: "It is far easier for you than for me to traverse so great a body of water. Therefore, if you will come to Asia, we can then arrange where we shall be able to meet each other." Such was the message which the Parthian wrote at last. Nero, though angry at him, did not sail against him. (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63. [62].7.2–8.2)

Ironically, Nero's demanding attitude towards Vologeses was inverted when, in 68 CE, Nero's position in Rome had become untenable and he was contemplating his options, including flight, "as a suppliant to the Parthians" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. *Nero* 47.2).

As Vologeses' reign lasted from 51/52–79/80 CE, predating and outlasting that of Nero (54–68 CE), Seneca could have had in mind no other Parthians seeking to kiss Nero's "bloody hand in supplication" than Tiridates and his (at least partly) Parthian entourage, although Seneca seems to have ignored the strategic purposes of the subservient attitude that Tiridates adopted, and of which Dio Cassius shows himself aware. According to Dio, Tiridates, during his coronation at the Roman Forum, "quelling his pride, made himself subservient to the occasion and to his need, caring little how humbly he spoke, in view of the prize he hoped to obtain" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63. [62].5.1–2; cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.29). Moreover, Dio pictures Tiridates' contempt for Nero as corresponding inversely with his respect for Corbulo, and

emphasizes Tiridates' skilful self-ingratiation by flattering Nero, "with the result that he received all kinds of gifts, said to have been worth 200,000,000 sesterces, and obtained permission to rebuild Artaxata. Moreover, he took with him from Rome many artisans, some of whom he got from Nero" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63.[62].6.3–6). In contrast to Tiridates, it is indeed only Vologeses who remains fully independent of Nero, although at the latter's death, according to Suetonius, "Vologeses, king of the Parthians, when he sent envoys to the senate to renew his alliance, earnestly begged this too, that honour be paid to the memory of Nero" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. *Nero* 57.2).

So indeed, Seneca's reference to Parthians "seek[ing] to kiss [Nero's] bloody hand in supplication" must concern the episode of Tiridates' visit to Nero. What Seneca criticizes, is Nero's arrogance, which, in Seneca's prophetic foresight, could only end in his murder: "there will come a day and time when he will pay for his crimes with his guilty spirit and pay his enemies with his throat, deserted and thrown down and utterly destitute" (Seneca, *Octavia* 629–631). Seneca's description of Nero as one whom "the depleted world sends [...] its immense resources," whose "[bloody hand] Parthians seek to kiss [...] in supplication," and to whom "kingdoms bring [...] their riches," captures the atmosphere that was also evoked in Dio Cassius' description of the words that Nero spoke to Tiridates in reply, after the latter's obeisance: "King of Armenia I now declare thee, that both thou and they may understand that I have power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63.[62].5.3–4). As I will argue in the last section of this chapter, when I analyze how Matthew addresses his political context, Matthew develops a view that is very similar to that of Seneca, in the sense that he shows himself equally critical of the vanity of the power of earthly kingdoms (see below, pp. 624–25). In the remainder of the current section and in the evaluation of the next section, however, it remains to be seen at which chronological level Matthew's magi are best understood: the Augustan era, the Neronian era, and/or the Flavian era.

With regard to the Neronian era, one final relevant issue needs to be addressed. Two occurrences during the reign of Nero give us an impression how the physical boundaries between Parthia and Rome functioned. It appears that the boundaries were indeed being watched and guarded on both sides. When, in the time of Nero, the Parthians were engaged in a war with Hyrcania and the Hyrcanians sent an embassy to Nero, there was the real fear that, on their return, "by crossing the Euphrates [they] might have been intercepted by the enemy's outposts," so that, as a precaution, they wholly avoided Parthian territory and took a detour (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.25). Also on the Roman side there

was vigilance. When a particular opponent of Nero's reign, a certain Rubrius Fabatus, attempted to flee to the Parthians, he was caught while he was underway: "Rubrius Fabatus was placed under surveillance on the ground that, in despair at the state of Rome, he was contemplating flight to the mercy of the Parthians. Certainly he was discovered in the neighbourhood of the Sicilian Strait, and, when haled back by a centurion, could give no plausible reasons for his distant pilgrimage" (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.14). This shows that crossing the Roman-Parthian boundary was not easy during a time of tension.

The Time of the Flavians (69–96 CE)

After the death of Nero and the ensuing brief (but powerful) civil war in the "year of the four emperors," the Flavian era (69–96 CE) begins.⁹² This era has particular relevance for us, as this was the time during which Matthew's Gospel was written, probably in the 80s or 90s CE. As we have already seen, upon Nero's death the Parthian king, Vologeses, "sent envoys to the senate to renew his alliance" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 57.2). When during his campaign in the Jewish War, Vespasian is proclaimed emperor by his troops and engages in the civil war of 68/69 CE, he dispatches embassies to the Parthians and Armenians, making "provision [...] to avoid leaving their rear exposed when the legions were drawn off to civil war" (Tacitus, *Histories* 2.82). In response, Vologeses offered Vespasian 40,000 cavalry, which, however, Vespasian no longer needed: "Envoys also came from King Vologaesus with an offer of forty thousand Parthian horse. It was glorious and delightful to be courted with such offers of assistance from the allies and not to need them: he thanked Vologaesus and instructed him to send his envoys to the senate and to be assured that the empire was at peace" (Tacitus, *Histories* 4.51).

Yet it remained necessary for Rome to watch Parthia closely, as in 72–73 CE the governor of Syria warned Vespasian, whose rule (69–79 CE) was by then firmly established, that the king of Rome's protectorate Commagene, Antiochus, was preparing to revolt against Rome, with the assistance of Parthia. According to Josephus,

92 On the Flavians and the Parthians, see also Dabrowa, "Les rapports entre Rome et les Parthes sous Vespasien," *Syria* 58 (1981): 187–204 (Vespasian); B. W. Jones, "Titus in the East, AD 70–71," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 128 (1985): 346–52 (Titus); A. Gebhardt, "Numismatische Beiträge zur spätromischen Ostpolitik—Vorbereitungen eines Partherkrieges?" in *Grenzüberschreitungen: Formen des Kontakts zwischen Orient und Okzident im Altertum* (eds. M. Schuol, U. Hartmann, and A. Luther; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 35–60 (Domitian).

Caesennius Paetus, then governor of Syria (whether speaking sincerely or out of enmity to Antiochus, was never clearly ascertained) sent letters to Caesar stating that Antiochus with his son Epiphanes had determined to revolt from Rome and was in league with the king of Parthia; it, therefore, behoved Caesar to forestall them, lest they should be beforehand in creating trouble and convulse the whole Roman empire with war. Such a report, thus conveyed to him, Caesar could not afford to overlook, seeing that the proximity of these princes to each other made the matter deserving of special precaution. For Samosata, the chief city of Commagene, lying on the Euphrates, would afford the Parthians, if they harboured any such designs, a most easy passage and an assured reception. (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 7.220–225)

The prospect for Rome that, after the bloody and exhausting Jewish War, Parthia would pose an acute threat on its Eastern frontier was rather serious. Yet Vespasian did not lose his sense of humor as, according to Suetonius, “He did not cease his jokes even when in apprehension of death and in extreme danger; for when among other portents [. . .] a comet appeared in the heavens, he declared that [. . .] [it applied] to the king of the Parthians, who wore his hair long” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 8.1. *Vespasian* 23).

Also in the Flavian era, numerous Parthian hostages continued to live in Rome, as Josephus’ eyewitness account demonstrates: “the Parthians themselves, that race of finest warriors, lords of so many nations, provided with so vast an army, send hostages to the Romans, and the nobility of the east may be seen in Italy, under the pretext of peace, bending to the yoke” (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.379–380). When Titus succeeded his father, during his brief reign (79–81 CE) he showed himself unwilling to get closely involved with Parthia, which was then ruled by Pacorus II (77/8–108/9 CE), who would far outlast the Flavian dynasty (69–96 CE). Being asked to assist the Parthians in a particular war, he declined. According to Dio Cassius, “When the Parthians, who had become involved in war with some neighbours, asked for his help, he would not go to their aid, declaring that it was not proper for him to interfere in others’ affairs” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 66[65].15.3).

During Domitian’s reign (81–96 CE), the threatening presence of Parthia on Rome’s Eastern frontier was suddenly felt again when the Parthians showed themselves prepared to support the claims of a pseudo-Nero, who tried to take advantage of the obscure circumstances of Nero’s death, capitalizing on a popular belief that Nero had not died but had fled to the East, from where

he would organize his return.⁹³ Nero himself had indeed contemplated fleeing “as a suppliant to the Parthians” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 47.2). The Parthians had somehow valued the figure of Nero, and—as we have already seen—although Vologeses (unlike his brother Tiridates) had declined Nero’s summons to travel to Rome (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63.[62].7.2–8.1), he nevertheless wrote to the Roman senate to beg them “earnestly [...] that honour be paid to the memory of Nero” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 57.2). When, in 88 CE, right in middle of Domitian’s reign, a pseudo-Nero surfaced in Parthia, he briefly received the support of the Parthians, who were apparently willing to aid the beginning of a new civil war and to render military support—just as in the 40s BCE the Parthian king Orodes II had sent his son Pacorus with a Parthian army under the shared command of Brutus and Cassius’ general Labienus into the Roman civil war of that moment and had captured Syria, Judea, and parts of Asia Minor before being stopped (see above, pp. 529–31). Now the same threatened to happen again in the time of Domitian, and Tacitus, at the beginning of the first book of his *Histories*, includes it in his summary of the events of “a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace” that starts with the succession of Nero. According to Tacitus, “even the Parthians were almost roused to arms through the trickery of a pretended Nero” (Tacitus, *Histories* 1.2). Interestingly, Suetonius remembers this threat from his youth and connects it with the sympathy that Vologeses had expressed at Nero’s death: “Vologeses, king of the Parthians, when he sent envoys to the senate to renew his alliance, earnestly begged this too, that honour be paid to the memory of Nero. In fact, twenty years later, when I was a young man, a person of obscure origin appeared, who gave out that he was Nero, and the name was still in such favour with the Parthians that they supported him vigorously and surrendered him with great reluctance” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 57.2). It must have served as an important reminder to Domitian that Parthia would waste no opportunity to meddle in Roman affairs and take advantage of it, just as Vespasian had been warned by the Roman governor of Syria in 72–73 CE that Parthia was willing to support the revolt of Commagene against Rome.

It seems that in the Flavian era, Parthia remained a threatening reality for Rome in the East. Culturally, the Parthians appear to have been moving in

93 On this expectation, shared by Romans, Jews, and Christians, see G. H. van Kooten, “‘Wrath Will Drip in the Plains of Macedonia’: Expectations of Nero’s Return in the Egyptian *Sibylline Oracles* (Book 5), 2 Thessalonians, and Ancient Historical Writings,” in *The Wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen* (eds. A. Hilhorst and G. H. van Kooten; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 177–215.

another direction. As the authors of the lemma on Vologeses I in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* remark, during his reign (51/52–79/80 CE) there “began a strong reaction against Hellenic influences: Pahlavi first appears along with Greek on his coins. He founded Vologesia near Seleuceia as a commercial rival” (see Pliny, *Natural History* 6.122–123).⁹⁴ And as Josef Wiesehöfer states about the Parthians, “A stronger emphasis on the Iranian heritage is characteristic of the second half of their empire”, although he warns that “it is very dangerous to see this as a consequence of the revolt of Seleuceia, the reasons for which are not known to us.”⁹⁵ So it is probably best to regard Vologeses’ actions not so much as anti-Hellenic, but rather as expressing a heightened interest in Iranian culture.

Rome seems to have been aware of this increasing mutual cultural alienation and expressed its distrust in Parthia by describing it as a country whose leaders were dominated by dark magicians, the magi. This view is clearly expressed in the encyclopedia of the Flavian era, Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, which is dedicated to Titus. Pliny was in direct contact with the Flavians and was a member of the council of Vespasian and Titus.⁹⁶ Pliny’s view that Parthia’s leaders were ruled by magic comes clearly to the fore in his account of the Parthian Tiridates’ journey to Nero in Rome to receive from him the crown of Armenia. We have already studied the end of the following passage (see pp. 571–72 above), but it is now time to highlight Pliny’s strategic depiction of Tiridates as a magus, accompanied by fellow magi, who initiated Nero into their dark art. Such is the negative portrayal of the magi that Pliny, working in the immediate context of the Flavian court, states, in a rhetorical mode, that even Nero detected that the magi’s art consisted merely of “lies and frauds.” The entire passage in which the report of Tiridates’ visit to Nero is encapsulated runs as follows, starting with a reference to a certain Osthanes, a Persian magus of the fifth century BCE:

As Osthanes said, there are several forms of magic; he professes to divine from water, globes, air, stars, lamps, basins and axes, and by many other methods, and besides to converse with ghosts and those in the underworld. All of these in our generation the Emperor Nero discovered to be lies and

94 M. S. Drower, E. W. Gray, and B. M. Levick, “Vologeses I,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online). On the Iranian revival in the Parthian period, see also V. S. Curtis, “The Iranian Revival in the Parthian Period,” in *The Age of the Parthians* (eds. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart; London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 7–25.

95 J. Wiesehöfer, “Parthia, Parthian empire,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

96 N. Purcell, “Pliny the Elder,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

frauds. In fact his passion for the lyre and tragic song was no greater than his passion for magic; his elevation to the greatest height of human fortune aroused desire in the vicious depths of his mind; his greatest wish was to issue commands to the gods, and he could rise to no nobler ambition. No other of the arts ever had a more enthusiastic patron. Every means were his to gratify his desire—wealth, strength, aptitude for learning—and what else did the world not allow! That the craft is a fraud there could be no greater or more indisputable proof than that Nero abandoned it; but would that he had consulted about his suspicions the powers of Hell and any other gods whatsoever, instead of entrusting these researches to pimps and harlots. Of a surety no ceremony, outlandish and savage though the rites may be, would not have been gentler than Nero's thoughts; more cruelly behaving than any did Nero thus fill our Rome with ghosts.

The magi have certain means of evasion [i.e., evasive responses to those who criticise the ineffectiveness of their magic]; for example that the gods neither obey those with freckles nor are seen by them. Was this perhaps their objection to Nero? But his body was without blemish; he was free to choose the fixed days, could easily obtain perfectly black sheep, and as for human sacrifice, he took the greatest delight in it. Tiridates the Magus had come to him bringing a retinue for the Armenian triumph over himself, thereby laying a heavy burden on the provinces. He had refused to travel by sea, for the magi hold it sin to spit into the sea or wrong that element by other necessary functions of mortal creatures. He had brought magi with him, had initiated Nero into their banquets; yet the man giving him a kingdom [i.e., Nero] was unable to acquire from him [i.e., Tiridates] the magic art. Therefore let us be convinced by this that magic is detestable, vain, and idle. (Pliny, *Natural History* 30.14–17)

In this passage, Pliny clearly utterly demonizes the Parthian magi, and by doing so, he draws a picture of Tiridates that is very different from that of Dio Cassius, who, as we have seen, leaves the magi unmentioned in his account of Tiridates' coronation by Nero. Given Pliny's highly tendentious account from the Flavian era, dominated by his interest in picturing Tiridates as a magus, it must be highly doubted that Tiridates' journey to Nero was already seen in the Neronian era as a procession of magi to Nero, as Jenkins and Beck seem to claim. Pliny's intention in his *Natural History* is to discredit not only Tiridates, but the Parthian kings in general, who have such magi as their advisers (26.18–19) and kingmakers (37.147). The magi's magic, according to Pliny, dominates medicine, religion, and astrology, "holding men's emotions in a three-fold bond," and "in the East commands the Kings of Kings" (30.1–2). Thus, the final goal of Pliny's invective is to discredit the Parthian kings, whose title is "king of kings."

By associating the Persian-Parthian magi with magicians of a dark and fraudulent magic, Pliny goes against the grain of earlier Greek interpretations of the magi, which emphasize that they were not involved in magic in the common sense of the word. According to Diogenes Laertius, Aristotle, in his now-lost “Magicus,” stated that “(with) the art of magic they [i.e., the magi] were wholly unacquainted” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Prologue 8). Aristotle’s view is in line with the dominant positive view of the magi that we encountered in reports about Greek philosophers who had studied with the magi (see above, pp. 503–504). Such a positive view of the magi’s magic is also still maintained by Philo of Alexandria. Although he criticizes the Egyptian magicians (μάγοι; *Moses* 1.91–92) and the “magus” Balaam (*Moses* 1.276–277) of Moses’ days,⁹⁷ just as he criticizes “magicians and poisoners” in general (*On the Special Laws* 3.93–94), the Persian magi are principally different in his view (*On the Special Laws* 3.100–101; *Every Good Man is Free* 74). According to Philo, the Persian magi teach “true magic” and not magic of the degenerate sort:

Now the true magic, the scientific vision by which the facts of nature are presented in a clearer light, is felt to be a fit object for reverence and ambition and is carefully studied not only by ordinary persons but by kings and the greatest kings, and particularly those of the Persians, so much so that it is said that no one in that country is promoted to the throne unless he has first been admitted into the caste of the magi. (Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.100–101)

With Pliny, however, a fundamental change in the appreciation of the Persian magi seems to have taken place, as he depicts the magi as magicians of a bad sort of magic. Dio Chrysostom, writing just after the Flavian period, seems to be aware of this difference in meaning when he states that the term “magi,” which the Persians use in order to refer to their wise men, is inappropriately

97 On Philo’s criticism of Balaam, see G. H. van Kooten, “Balaam as the Sophist *Par Excellence* in Philo of Alexandria: Philo’s Projection of an Urgent Contemporary Debate onto Moses’ Pentateuchal Narratives,” in: *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (eds. G. H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 131–61, esp. 135–42. Given this criticism of Balaam it is doubtful whether, as Stephan Heilen suggests, the depiction of Balaam as a “magus” in Jewish sources (i.e., in Philo, *Moses* 1.276–277) is an argument for Matthew’s dependence on the Balaam narrative in Numbers 22–24 (see Heilen, p. 346 note 205 above). Balaam’s negative reputation only further diminished by the later association in Jewish sources with the troublesome magicians Jannes and Jambres, see A. Pietersma, “Jannes and Jambres,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 (1992), 638–40. On the Balaam narrative, see pp. 600–18 below.

applied by the Greeks “to denote wizards” (Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 36: *The Borysthenitic Discourse* 41).⁹⁸ Although the term *magos* (μάγος) has been ambiguous in Greek literature from early on,⁹⁹ the specific reference to the Persian magi as magicians in a negative sense seems to be especially characteristic of Pliny. Pliny appears to be one of the first to depict these magi categorically as magicians. It is in the refutation of “the (abominable) falsehoods of the magi” that Pliny confesses to take great pleasure (37.118; 37.192), and he has particularly the Parthian magi in mind. Although Pliny can speak in a general sense of “the magi of Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia and Egypt” (25.12–14), he normally uses the name magi to refer to the Parthian-Babylonian magi: magi accompany the kings of Parthia (21.62), they are custodians of the tomb of Cyrus, inhabitants of the Parthian town of Ecbatana (6.114–116), advisers of the Parthian kings (26.18–19), and involved in the installation of kings, in which they use a particular stone, atizoe (37.147). As an example of a magus, Pliny refers to one Zachalias of Babylon, who, “in the volumes which he dedicates to King Mithridates, attributes man’s destiny to the influence of precious stones” (37.169).

In agreement with the (appreciative) view of Greek philosophers studying with the magi, Pliny still acknowledges that the magi were followed by Pythagoras and Democritus as their authority (24.156; 24.160). Yet according to him, the magi are first and foremost magicians: they use a particular plant (aglaophotis) “when they wish to call up gods” (24.160), and another plant (theangelis) “to gain power to divine” (24.164). As we shall see below, in their pharmacological recommendations the magi are said to also demonstrate acquaintance with astronomy (see below, p. 593). Notably, Pliny depicts the magi as “fraudulent charlatans” (28.94) and as notorious liars, tricksters, and sorcerers (28.47; 28.86; 28.89–90; 29.67–68); he also notes, “in very many of their statements about gems they have gone far beyond providing an alluring substitute for medical science into the realms of the supernatural” (37.54).

The problem with their magic, according to Pliny, is that it is fraudulent, poisonous, detestable, vain, and idle, as Nero discovered when the Parthian king of Armenia, Tiridates, brought magi with him to Rome in 66 CE and Nero was initiated into their knowledge (30.14–18), only to find that their magic was worthless. As we have seen, with his passage on Tiridates and his general remark

98 On Pliny’s view of the magi, see W. H. S. Jones, “The Magi in Pliny,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 181 (1950–51): 7–8; and on the magi and the emergence of the term “magic,” see J. N. Bremmer, “Persian *Magoi* and the Birth of the Term ‘Magic,’” in *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. N. Bremmer; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 235–48; cf. also A. Merkt, “Augustinus, die Magie und die ‘Magi ex Oriente,’” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 24 (2007): 463–83.

99 See de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 221–22, 387–88.

about the dominance of the magi over the Parthian kings, Pliny expresses the anti-Parthian feelings that seem to be prevalent during the Flavian era. Under subsequent Roman rulers, Parthia was finally attacked by Emperor Trajan in 115–116 CE; Seleuceia-on-Tigris, Ctesiphon, and Babylon were captured, and Seleuceia was burned (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 68.28.2–3, 68.30.1–3). Under emperor Lucius Verus, in 165–166 CE, both Seleuceia and Ctesiphon were destroyed and razed to the ground (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 71.2.3), and Ctesiphon was again sacked and plundered by Emperor Septimius Severus in 197–198 CE (*Historia Augusta: Septimius Severus* 16.1–6; Oppian, *Cynegetica, or The Case I*, lines 30–31; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 75[76].9.3–4). Finally, during another Roman attack in 363 CE, Emperor Julian the Apostate was killed under the walls of Ctesiphon (Libanius, *The Autobiography [Oration 1]* 133–134 [R90–91 / F147–148]).

Against this background, it is noteworthy that Matthew shows no such negative feelings in his narrative about the magi. In his contribution to this volume, Antonio Panaino has rightly drawn attention to this important fact and also referred to the negative appreciation of the term “magus” in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles (see Panaino, p. 242 above). Whereas Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ nativity does not mention the magi, he does refer to magi in his writings, as the opponents of early Christians (see Acts 13:6, 8; cf. 8:9–11). These magi were no native Parthians, but Luke uses the term, just as Dio Chrysostom noted, “to denote wizards” (Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses 36: The Borysthenitic Discourse* 41). Against the background of our enquiry into the Flavian era, we can now say that Luke, in his negative use of the term “magus”, was fully in line with the Flavian period, whereas Matthew’s positive use is remarkable and highly relevant, as I will suggest in the following section.

The Stratified Sources about the Magi and the Parthians Applied to Matthew’s Magi

Having stratified all relevant information about the Parthians and the magi, we will now return to the questions about Matthew’s magi outlined in the first section (see pp. 496–501, esp. p. 499), with the expectation that this stratification will help us to answer these questions as precisely as possible.

Parthian Embassies-with-Magi in Roman Territory: The Case of Sulla

Unlike earlier Mesopotamian-Babylonian astrology, Greco-Roman geographical astrology specifies Syria-Judea as a possible area where astrological determination takes place, but there are no examples in Greco-Roman geographical astrology of initiatives to travel in view of the predicted birth of a ruler (see

p. 499 #1). Yet, although we have no astrological search parties on the basis of prognostic astrology, the sources offer us an analogy that could help us interpret the magi's quest for Jesus as described in Matthew's Gospel. As we have seen, the first encounter between the Parthians, magi, and the Romans in the 90s BCE presents us with an intriguing event that could shed light on Matthew's story (see above, see pp. 521–23). According to Velleius Paterculus, a Parthian embassy travelled to visit Sulla, the proconsul of Cilicia in Asia Minor, and it is one of the magi who form part of this embassy, "who, from the marks on his [i.e., Sulla's] body, foretold that his life and his fame would be worthy of a god" (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.24.3). This event shows that magi were part of Parthian embassies and that, apparently as kingmakers, they were also interested in the fate of foreign rulers. Sulla described this encounter in his own *Memoirs*, and it seems to have deeply influenced him during his life.

The parallels between this history and the magi's encounter with Jesus are intriguing. There are also differences, both with regard to the method of the magi's prediction and with regard to the foreign ruler's age. Whereas in the case of Sulla the magi apply the method of physiognomy, basing their prediction on the outer physiological appearance of the foreign ruler, in the case of Jesus they follow an astrological method. These issues will be further discussed below, when we will address the relation between the magi and the Chaldean astronomers (see p. 594), and in the conclusion, when we will deal with the function of the narrative of the magi's visit in the entirety of Matthew's Gospel. The similarities, however, concern the magi who appear to be monitoring the Roman world and the impact their prediction has on the foreign ruler, either in the memoirs of this ruler (as in the case of Sulla) or in the biography of this ruler (as in the case of Matthew's description of Jesus).

Certainly, for both narratives, that of Sulla and that of Jesus, we have, in each instance, only one source, either Sulla's *Memoirs* or Matthew's biography of Jesus. This raises the question of whether we can sustain the saying, maintained by various historians, that "one source is no source." This view, however, has increasingly been criticized by philosophers of history, such as Herman Paul, who has rightly argued (to my mind) that what matters is not whether an event has multiple attestations, but rather which interpretative hypothesis offers the best explanatory inferences. According to Paul, such inferences are "hypotheses that are based on the source material and say something about the reality behind the source. They are statements about the past which are supported by sources from the past, but do not themselves occur in these sources. They presume to say something about the past, based on what is left in the present as relics from the past (texts, images, artifacts)." Such inferences are "inferences to the best possible explanation of what we can extract from

the sources."¹⁰⁰ Applied to the case of the magi, this means that, although it cannot be proven on the basis of one surviving text (the *Memoirs* of Sulla, or the Gospel of Matthew) that the magi really met Sulla, or that the magi really visited the newborn Jesus, yet the fact that their visit is only described in one text cannot be held up as proof against its historicity. Hence, the fact that the magi's visit to Jesus is only narrated in the Gospel of Matthew, and not in the Gospel of Luke, does not necessarily imply a lack of historicity. As the Greek-language gospels are best viewed not as a genre *sui generis*, but as instances of Greco-Roman biographies, also in the case of the gospels we should indeed reflect on the value of the information offered, even if it is attested in only one particular biography.¹⁰¹ Regarding Matthew's unique narrative of the magi's visit to Jesus, I would suggest that this event seems to make sense against the background of how the magi are described in another text, that of Sulla's *Memoirs*. Moreover, as I will argue below, the magi's visit to Jesus also makes sense in the historical context of Parthian-Roman relations in the Augustan era.

With regard to the statement that there are no examples in Greco-Roman geographical astrology of initiatives to travel in view of the predicted birth of a ruler, we can now suggest, on the basis of the Parthians' encounter with Sulla, that the historical reality behind Matthew's narrative of the magi's visit to Jesus seems to be first and foremost the phenomenon of Parthian embassies that connect with the Roman world. Because of their function as kingmakers, magi, who were part of such embassies, were also interested in the fate of a foreign ruler and communicated their views to him. The observation of a lack of attestation of astrological search parties that acted on the basis of prognostic astrology is actually very helpful and encourages us to look into another direction, helped by the occurrence of the magi's meeting with Sulla. Against this background, the magi's visit to Jesus is not to be understood primarily

100 See H. Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York / London: Routledge, 2015), chap. 7.3 and 7.5, quotes from pp. 88, 93.

101 For the gospels as ancient biographies, see T. Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148–86; R. A. Burrige, "Reading the Gospels as Biography," in *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (eds. J. Mossman and B. McGing; Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 31–49; Burrige, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); A. Pilgaard, "The Classical Biography as Model for the Gospels," in *Beyond Reception: Mutual Influences Between Antique Religion, Judaism and Early Christianity* (eds. D. Brakke, A.-C. Jacobsen, and J. Ulrich; Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 209–26; C. H. Talbert, "Biography, ancient," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (1992), 745–49; Talbert, *What Is a Gospel?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); H. Cancik, "Die Gattung Evangelium," in *Markus-Philologie* (ed. H. Cancik; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1984), 85–113.

as an astrological search party, but as a Parthian embassy travelling in Syria-Judea. As we shall see in the course of our discussion of the other questions, this insight need not exclude all astrological aspects of the narrative; just as magi applied physiognomy in the case of Sulla, it is not unlikely, for reasons to be explored below, that they used astrology in the case of Jesus. But against the background of Sulla, the magi need to be primarily understood as part of Parthian embassies and as kingmakers. This would mean that Matthew, in his narrative of the magi's visit to Jesus, has simplified historical reality and turned one such Parthian embassy that travelled in the Roman territory to the west of Parthia into an embassy that consisted exclusively of magi. Because *astrological* search parties that set out to other territories are not otherwise attested, whereas Parthian *political* embassies-with-magi are, it makes sense to understand Matthew's narrative against the latter background.

The Augustan Era as a Time of Roman-Parthian Peace and Mutual Reconnaissance

The second issue that calls for reflection is the assertion that, given the fact that Matthew's magi are Parthians (not in an ethnic sense, but in the sense of being connected to the Parthian court), their journey into Roman-Herodian territory would have been politically impossible because of Roman border patrols and because of Herod's vigilance in Judea (see p. 499 #2). It is here that the stratification of our sources about the Parthians and the magi proves particularly useful. I will first briefly indicate why this is the case, before elaborating on it in more detail.

To put it briefly, the stratification of the available sources suggests that it is very unlikely that Matthew, writing in the time of the Flavians, would have invented his narrative of the magi's visit in the Flavian era, because at that time the relations between Rome and Parthia were full of tension, and the Flavian depiction of the magi was that of obscure, malevolent, and deceitful magicians. Neither is it likely that Matthew's own depiction of the magi "from the East" is dependent upon the visit that the Parthian-born Armenian king Tiridates paid to Nero, from whom he (nominally) received the crown of Armenia after the Roman-Parthian struggles over Armenia. Armenia is to the north of Judea, not to the east, so if Tiridates provided the pattern for Matthew's magi, it would have been odd to emphasize their provenance from the East. The only fully suitable stratum for Matthew's magi is the Augustan era, when there was a unique peace between Rome and Parthia, and magi could travel more freely in Roman territory than in other eras. I will now add some detail to this stratification and work my way from the Augustan to the Flavian era.

The peace of the Augustan era was an important break with the tensions and traumas of the immediately preceding period and was never really matched in

the times that followed it. Roman-Parthian relations had started off peacefully in the encounter between the Parthian embassy-with-magi and Sulla in the 90s BCE, but were thrown into a crisis because of Crassus' unprovoked attack on Parthia in 54/53 BCE. As Ursula Hackl confirms in her periodization of Roman-Parthian relations, the first Roman-Parthian confrontations between 54–36 BCE in the pre-Augustan period was followed by the peaceful consolidation of Roman-Parthian relations between 25 BC and 37 CE, in the eras of Augustus and Tiberius, before a renewed confrontation between Romans and Parthians took shape from the end of the Claudian era in 53 CE until the end of the Parthian Empire in 224 CE.¹⁰² Crassus' attack on Parthia began a period of Roman trauma, during which Rome lost its military standards on three occasions. The first time was when the Parthians captured the standards of Crassus. The Romans' attack on Parthia elicited a Parthian counter-attack against Antioch, thwarted by, amongst others, Cicero, who, in his letters from October 51 BCE, depicted the battle between him and the Parthians in terms of the famous battle between Alexander the Great and Darius. In 41–40 BCE, the Parthians, taking advantage of the civil war that raged between Roman factions, attacked the Romans again, this time under the co-leadership of the Roman general Labienus, and were highly successful, causing sheer panic among the Romans, capturing Roman standards—now those of Saxa—for a second time, and conquering parts of Syria (including its capital, Antioch), Judea (including its capital, Jerusalem), and Asia Minor.¹⁰³ They were stopped by Antony and Ventidius, who killed Labienus and the Parthian king's son, thus—as Florus remarks—offering the Romans “compensation for the disaster of Crassus” (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.19 [4.9.7]). Yet shame about the lost standards of Crassus and Saxa remained, aggravated by the third loss of Roman standards when Antony suddenly attacked Parthia in 36 BCE and was defeated. It was Augustus who was determined to win all of these standards back, if not through military action, then through diplomacy. Although Augustus had first taken part in the preparations for Caesar's anti-Parthian campaign and had later tried to undermine Parthia by supporting a contender for the Parthian throne, he seized the opportunity for diplomatic success when it presented itself.

In 20 BCE, Augustus received the standards back from the Parthian king Phraates IV. Although he was keen to portray (on Roman coins and monuments)

102 See U. Hackl, “Das Partherreich und Rom seit dem 1. Jh. v. Chr.,” 56–77.

103 For the Parthian conquest of Jerusalem, see J. Gaslain, “Les ‘Elites militaires’ des Parthes Arsacides et la conquête de la Judée au 1^{er} siècle av. J.-C.,” in *Les Élités dans le Monde Biblique* (ed. J. Riaud; Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 75–98; cf. B. Isaac and Y. Shahar, eds., *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

the Parthians' return of the Roman standards as an act of Parthian submission and obeisance (*proskynēsis*) and built the Temple of Mars the Avenger (Mars Ultor) at the Forum of Augustus in Rome as a home for the retrieved standards, in order to claim Mars' avenging triumph over the Parthians, Augustus ushered in an era of peaceful Roman-Parthian relations. In 10/9 BCE, this peace was further strengthened by Phraates IV when he sent his legitimate sons to Rome.

This Roman peace would also have determined Herod the Great's relation to the Parthians. Although Herod's appointment by the Roman senate in 40 BCE was part of Rome's anti-Parthian strategy, it was Rome that had then, in 20 BCE, forged peace with the Parthians. Herod would have been very much aware that, as a vassal king of the Romans, he could do nothing without Roman approval. He had actually experienced this when, in 9 BCE, he had started an unauthorized war against the neighboring Nabataeans that so angered Augustus (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.289–293) that he “wrote to Herod in a harsh tone throughout and particularly in the main point of his letter, which was that whereas formerly he had treated him as a friend, he would now treat him as a subject” (16.290–291). Although Herod had consulted the Roman governors of Syria, according to Josephus (16.277, 282–283, 285) and as Herod's court historian, Nicolaus of Damascus, also said before Augustus in Herod's defense (16.344), Augustus' indignation over Herod's actions would have made the latter very cautious, even after Augustus' reconciliation with him (16.351–355). This experience from 9 BCE would have deterred Herod from taking any unauthorized action against visiting Parthians and magi. Moreover, the Roman-Parthian peace also seemed to have taken root and instilled some trust among Romans, Parthians, and Herodians: Herod, for instance, employed the service of a mixed Jewish-Babylonian cavalry group that had, for reasons not reported by Josephus, crossed the Euphrates, was by chance staying in Syrian Antioch, and was invited by Herod to aid in the protection of Jews on pilgrimage from Parthian Babylonia to Jerusalem (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.23–31).

The Augustan peace with the Parthians also endured after the death of Phraates IV in 2 BCE, although it was then briefly challenged by Phraates' successor. On the Roman side, voices were raised in favor of a Roman conquest of Parthia. Antipater of Thessalonica exhorted Augustus' grandson and intended heir to be the first to “seal [Rome's] domination with the rising Sun,” just as, according to Ovid, Augustus “is preparing to add what was lacking to the conquered world: now, farthest East, shalt thou be ours.” Yet Augustus showed himself restrained and re-established and continued the peace that had characterized Roman-Parthian relations since 20 BCE.

Yet this peace between the super-powers of Rome and Parthia was also, naturally, ambiguous. As we have seen, it was during this time that, according

to Pliny, Augustus ordered Dionysius of Charax to perform a reconnaissance of the East in view of possible military action. In the description of the East by Isidore of Charax (who is probably identical with this Dionysius), we have just such a geographical survey, depicting the route from Antioch to Seleuceia-on-Tigris and beyond. It would not be surprising if the Parthians also used this time of unparalleled peace to perform a reconnaissance of the Roman territories of the Near East and to watch its political developments. It would have been particularly easy for them to travel to Syria and its capital, Antioch. Moreover, the presence of so many Parthian royals in Rome would have given a simple pretext for travelling through the Roman world. There was a continuous Parthian royal presence in Rome in later periods as well, and as we have seen, Parthian embassies regularly travelled to Rome to request the availability of a member of the Parthian royal family resident in Rome and for Rome's support of these candidates, although such embassies often needed to be secretive. But compared with other periods, travelling in Roman territory was never easier for the Parthians than in the Augustan era.

After Augustus, much changed. Although Tiberius, on the Roman side, followed largely in Augustus' footsteps (he was also the Roman who, on Augustus' behalf, had received the standards from the Parthians in 20 BCE), Parthia itself became destabilized by internal strife, with Rome supporting a Parthian contender to the throne and the Jews even enjoying independence within Babylonia. Under Caligula, the destabilization of Parthia continued, as Seleuceia-on-Tigris persisted in its revolt (35–42 CE) against the Parthian king, started at the end of Tiberius' reign. In 40 CE, the Parthians even planned to attack the Romans. Hence, Parthian-Greek and Parthian-Roman relations did not prosper. Under Claudius, Rome again supported a Parthian contender for the throne.

It seems highly questionable to me whether the following era, that of Nero, could indeed explain Matthew's interest in the magi. According to some scholars, including Roger Beck in his contribution to this volume (but cf., critically, Albert de Jong), it is the (feigned) servitude of the Armenian king Tiridates to Nero—expressed in his journey to Rome in order to receive, at least nominally, the Armenian crown—that sets the pattern for Matthew's picture of the magi. In the view of these scholars, Jesus' adoration by the magi is modelled on Nero's adoration by Tiridates and his fellow magi. Yet, as we have seen, this is debatable. The motif of the Parthians' obeisance (*proskynēsis*) to the emperor begins already with Augustus, who, in his ideological portrayal of the Parthians' return of the Roman standards, depicted them in a position of subservience and *proskynēsis*. There is no indication that Matthew's narrative should be regarded as particularly dependent on the Tiridates event. Rather,

Pliny's depiction of Tiridates as a magus, followed in his retinue by other magi who try to deceive Nero with their dark magic, seems to be part of the anti-Parthian propaganda of the Flavian era. Moreover, Tiridates, although of Parthian descent, is king of Armenia to the north of Judea, whereas Matthew explicitly says that his magi are from the East, which is best taken as a reference to Parthian Babylonia.

Hence, the Neronian age is not (directly) relevant for our understanding of Matthew's narrative about the magi. Moreover, as is already implied in my reference to Pliny's depiction of Tiridates, neither is the Flavian era in which Matthew wrote. Pliny's negative portrayal of the magi as dark magicians seems to express the views of the Flavian period, when Rome, despite initially positive contacts between Vespasian and the Parthians, was aware of the threat that Parthia posed on its Eastern frontier, and in particular after the support that a pseudo-Nero received in Parthia showed that the Parthians were willing to meddle in Roman affairs. It is the magi's magic, according to Pliny, that not only dominates medicine, religion, and astrology, "holding men's emotions in a three-fold bond," but also "in the East commands [the Parthian kings]" (30.1–2). If this reflects the attitudes of the Flavian era towards the Parthian magi, it seems extremely unlikely that Matthew, if he had invented his narrative about the magi, would have called them magi. Matthew's positive view of the magi stands in marked contrast to the views of Pliny and Luke and is totally unaffected by the negative connotations that seem to dominate the Flavian era. Rather, his narrative seems to reflect an event that suits the conditions of the Augustan era.

The Magi's Astrological Connotations

As we have seen above, and as is emphasized in Albert de Jong's contribution to this volume, the magi are first and foremost kingmakers (see p. 499 #3)—a function that, as we shall see in the last section of this chapter, is not alien to their role in Matthew's gospel. Yet that does not mean that Matthew's simultaneous depiction of the magi as astrologers is without parallel. Greco-Roman authors also describe the magi as astrologers. Valerius Maximus, for instance, who writes during the reign of Tiberius, states that the magi teach "the motions of the stars, the courses of the planets, the force, individuality, and effect of each one" (*Memorable Doings and Sayings*, Book 8.7, ext. 2). Later, Appian, in his *Roman History*, which was written in the time of Emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE), compares the Brahmins of India with the magi and depicts them as astronomers: "the Brahmins [...] seem to be the astronomers and learned men of that country, like the Magi among the Persians" (Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 2.21.154). This view is echoed by Ammianus Marcellinus

in the fourth century CE, when he connects the magi with Zoroaster, who had learned from the Indian Brahmins “the laws regulating the movements of the earth and the stars, and of the pure sacrificial rites,” which he communicated to the magi, and “which they, along with the art of divining the future, hand on from generation to generation to later times” (Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 23.6.33).¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, according to Strabo, writing in the Augustan era, the magi lead the Persians’ worship of the Sun, the Moon, and the four elements:

Now the Persians do not erect statues or altars, but offer sacrifice on a high place, regarding the heavens as Zeus; and they also worship Helios [i.e., the Sun], whom they call Mithras, and Selenê [i.e., the Moon] and Aphrodite, and fire and earth and winds and water; and with earnest prayer they offer sacrifice in a purified place, presenting the victim crowned; and when the magus, who directs the sacrifice, has divided the meat the people go away with their shares, without setting apart a portion for the gods, for they say that the god requires only the soul of the victim and nothing else; but still, according to some writers, they place a small portion of the caul upon the fire. (Strabo, *Geography* 15.3.13)

Moreover, according to Pliny, in their pharmacological recommendations the magi demonstrate acquaintance with astronomy. For instance, they proscribe that the *hiera botane* (“sacred plant”) “must be gathered about the rising of the Dog-star without the action being seen by moon or sun” (Pliny, *Natural History* 25.105–107). Likewise, in their remedies from the hyena, they say “that the hyena should be captured when the moon is passing through the constellation of the Twins” (28.94), or, in the case of the medicinal uses of other animal products, they recommend that a particular snake’s egg “must be caught at a fixed period of the moon” (29.53). With regard to the so-called chelonia or ‘tortoise-stone’, “they claim that the stone, if it is placed on the tongue after the mouth has been rinsed with honey, confers powers of prophecy—at full moon or new moon, during the whole of the day; when the moon is waning, before sunrise only; and at other times, from dawn to midday” (37.155–156). As we have already seen, according to Pliny, the magi’s magic dominates not only medicine and religion, but also astrology (30.1–2). Given this strong association

104 On Ammianus Marcellinus and the Parthians and the magi, see J. den Boeft, “Pure Rites: Ammianus Marcellinus on the Magi”, in *The Late Roman World and its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus* (eds. J. W. Drijvers and D. Hunt; London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 207–15 (magi) and J. W. Drijvers, “Ammianus Marcellinus’ Image of Arsaces and Early Parthian History,” in *The Late Roman World, 193–206* (Parthians).

between the magi and astronomy/astrology in Greco-Roman literature, it is not strange that Matthew, too, writing between Valerius Maximus and Appian, depicts the magi not only as kingmakers, but also as astrologers.

Besides, the magi are also closely associated with the Chaldeans, who are known as astronomers. Sometimes the magi and Chaldeans are easily interchanged. Whereas, according to Velleius Paterculus, it was the magi in the Parthian embassy who predicted Sulla's future (Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.24.3), according to Plutarch, it was a Chaldean who foretold his fame (Plutarch, *Sulla* 5.4–6). The closeness of magi and Chaldeans is also expressed by the fact that the combined reference to “magi and Chaldeans” occurs throughout Greek literature from the second century BCE until the third century CE, in such diverse writings and authors as the Septuagint (the Jewish Scriptures in Greek) and Polybius in the second century BCE; Strabo in the Augustan era; Josephus in the Flavian era; Plutarch, Celsus, and Lucian in the second century CE; and Diogenes Laertius and Iamblichus in the third century CE.¹⁰⁵ It is quite understandable, because of this close connection between the Chaldeans and magi, that the boundaries between them could be easily blurred. The Chaldeans usually represent the astronomers. According to Strabo, as we have seen, the Greek astronomer Seleucus of Seleuceia-on-Tigris apparently cooperated so closely with the Chaldeans that he himself was called a Chaldean (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.6). Interestingly for our present purposes, Strabo also remarks that the Chaldean astronomers were divided in their support of genethliology, the casting of individual nativities, thus implying that at least some of them approved of it: “In Babylonia a settlement is set apart for the local philosophers, the Chaldeans, as they are called, who are concerned mostly with astronomy; but some of these, who are not approved of by the others, profess to be genethliologists” (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.6).

So even if magi were primarily kingmakers, they clearly rubbed shoulders with the Chaldean astronomers, who were also in contact with Greek astronomers in the region. Their mutual encounters in Parthia could be easily imagined, as we shall see directly below. Magi, Chaldeans, and Greeks all readily met one another within the geographical triangulation of the Parthian winter capital of Ctesiphon, ancient Babylon, and the Greek foundation of Seleuceia-on-Tigris.

105 See Daniel 2:2, 10 LXX; Polybius, *The Histories* 34.2.7; Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.15; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 10.195, 198–199, 203, 234; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 370C; Celsus, apud Origen, *Against Celus* 6.80; Lucian, *The Runaways* 8; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.1, 1.6, 8.3 and 9.34 (9.34 = Democritus, *Testimonia*, frags 1, 2); and Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 28.151.

The Triangle of Seleuceia-on-Tigris, Ctesiphon, and Babylon

In the current argument, this is a suitable point to address the question of how the acquaintance of the magi with Greco-Roman astrology should be imagined (see p. 499 #4), if indeed the only geographical astrology that includes areas such as Syria-Judea is Greco-Roman. In our stratified sources we have seen multiple interconnections between magi, Greeks, Babylonians, and Chaldeans, taking place within the triangulation of the cities of Seleuceia-on-Tigris, Babylon (and its surrounding territory of Babylonia), and Ctesiphon. That is not to say that such interactions were limited to this triangle, but these cities were particularly important.

Already in the Seleucid, pre-Parthian era, we have seen evidence of relations between magi and Seleuceia-on-Tigris. According to Appian, one of Alexander the Great's direct successors, Seleucus I, founded Seleuceia-on-Tigris in 305 BCE with the (reluctant) aid of the magi (see above, pp. 507–508). During the Seleucid era, there were also links between Seleuceia-on-Tigris and Babylon. Seleuceia-born Greek philosophers educated pupils who settled in Babylon and started a Stoic school there. This was the case with Diogenes of Babylonia, who, born in Seleuceia, succeeded Zeno of Tarsus as head of the Stoic School in Athens (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16) and taught Archedemus of Tarsus, who, as Plutarch writes, “removed to the country of the Parthians and left a Stoic succession at Babylon” (Plutarch, *On Exile* 604B).

During the subsequent Parthian era, the Parthian kings, such as Mithridates I and II, portray themselves as “Philhellenes” on coinage minted in Seleuceia-on-Tigris and in inscriptions preserved from Babylon (see above, pp. 509–11). According to Pliny, Tacitus, and Plutarch, Seleuceia-on-Tigris upheld its Hellenistic character in the Parthian era, maintaining its “Macedonian manners” (Pliny), not degenerating into barbarism, and enjoying its senate (Tacitus) as a civilized foundation in the midst of barbarian Mesopotamia (Plutarch). This despite the arrogance of the Athenian rhetorician Amphicrates, who likened himself in Seleuceia to a dolphin crammed into a stew-pan, and the snobbery of Livy in the Augustan era, who deplored the fact that Greek Seleuceians had degenerated into Parthians.

Babylon also continues in the Parthian era, not without a Greek presence. Despite negative comments by Strabo and Pliny on the supposed contrast between flourishing Seleuceia and dilapidated Babylon, the Babylonian sources of the Parthian era themselves show that Babylon had perhaps a small but highly noticeable Greek presence. The Greeks assembled in the theater, and the governors of Babylon were appointed from among its Greek residents. It was the place where the Stoic succession took place in the Stoic school of Babylon, founded by Archedemus of Tarsus, and where, from the first

century BCE to the second century CE, Greek-speaking authors produced the *Graeco-Babyloniaca*, with its Greek transliterations (see above, pp. 514–17).

Moreover, and very relevant for our purposes, we noted above the contacts between Greek astronomers and Chaldean astronomers in Babylonia, as illustrated in the life and work of the Greek astronomer Seleucus of Seleucia, active at the turn of the pre-Parthian and Parthian periods in Seleucia and entertaining such close contacts with the Chaldean astronomers that Strabo mentions that he is called a Chaldean himself (see above, pp. 517–19). This gives us a very vivid impression of how Greek astronomy (and the Greek astrology intertwined with it) could have travelled to the Chaldeans, some of whom accepted genethliology and were in touch with the magi.

The Parthians' acquaintance with Greek culture was also evident after the defeat of Crassus in 53 BCE, from their adaptation of the performance of Euripides' *Bacchae* at the Armenian court to suit the occasion of their triumph, but also from the ridicule which they, in the senate of Seleucia-on-Tigris, heap on the Romans because of their possession of Aristides' *Milesiaca*, a collection of Greek erotic tales (see above, p. 527).

The establishment, in the mid-first century BCE, of Ctesiphon as their winter capital, opposite Seleucia across the River Tigris, allows the Parthians to articulate the Iranian component of their dual Greek-Iranian identity. According to Strabo, Ctesiphon "has been equipped with buildings by the Parthians themselves; and it has been provided by the Parthians with wares for sale and with the arts that are pleasing to the Parthians" (Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.16).

Thus, the magi, as the kingmakers of the Parthian kings, were wholly subsumed in this triangulation of cities: Ctesiphon, the Parthian-style winter residence of their kings; Seleucia-on-Tigris, with its predominantly Greek presence (including astronomers), directly on the other side of the river; and Babylon, one of the centers of the Chaldean astronomers of Babylonia, yet with an important Greek minority. Within this triangulation, the magi's acquaintance with Greco-Roman astrology can be easily imagined. That does not mean that they, as kingmakers, were professional astronomers; yet they could easily have picked up debates about Greek astrological issues in their social networks, which comprised both Greeks and Chaldeans.

Judea as Part of Syria's Topography and Parthia's Recent History

If the magi's acquaintance with Greco-Roman astrology can be so easily imagined, the question of how they could have possibly used it to travel from the East to Bethlehem in Judea is relevant (see p. 499 #5). As Stephan Heilen has shown in his contribution to this volume, the first known Greco-Roman author to include Judea is the second-century CE astrologer Ptolemy. Although Syria

does feature in previous Greco-Roman geographical astrology, Judea does not, so Matthew's magi would not have possessed the refined knowledge of Ptolemy to enable them to travel to Bethlehem. The answer to the above question, however, seems to be that the magi did not travel directly from the East to Judea, but that they travelled to Syria, which—as we have seen—demanded their political attention.

This view is fully coherent with Heilen's observation that in Greco-Roman geographical astrology the most frequent association with the constellation of Aries, in which remarkable astronomical phenomena occurred in 6 BCE, was with Syria and Persia. As Heilen acknowledges, the alignment of all five known planets with the Sun and Moon in the zodiacal sign of Aries in an almost perfect distribution on 17 April 6 BCE could, according to Greco-Roman astrological theories, as attested by Ptolemy and Antigonus of Nicaea, be interpreted as a royal birth; the reference of Aries to Syria or Persia in geographical astrological theories would mean that such a birth would take place in one of these areas. However, Heilen eloquently uses this double reference of Aries to Syria and Persia against the historicity of the magi's visit to Judea:

Persia and Syria are the most frequent associations with Aries, both before and after the beginning of the Christian era. [...] If such Persian magi really noticed a portent in Aries, why wouldn't they conclude that a king had been or would be born in Persia [...]? They would have rejoiced and stayed home in Persia instead of traveling to Judea. But even if they opted, for whatever reason, for the other most frequently named country, Syria, they should have traveled to Antioch, the capital of Syria, not to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. (Heilen, p. 333 above)

On the basis of my sources about the magi, however, I argue rather differently, building on the following observations. Firstly, as we know from the Sulla episode, magi travelling in Parthian embassies were interested in the fate of foreign rulers. Secondly, the Parthians in the Augustan period, a unique phase in Roman-Parthian history, were very interested in the further development of the relations between Parthia and Rome. Thirdly, central to these developments was the area of Syria, with its capital Antioch, from where the Roman armies had marched against Parthia and which had also been attacked by the Parthians; it was in Syria that the Parthian East met the Roman West. Hence, the Parthians did not need to decide between Persia and Syria as the two possible areas to which the astronomical phenomena in Aries were thought to refer. They didn't rejoice and "stay at home" in Persia (which was part of the Parthian empire) instead of travelling to Judea, because it is very likely that they were already

travelling in Syria. They were not interested in the birth of a *Parthian* king (as they themselves were entirely loyal to the Parthian dynasty of the Arsacids), but given the current relevance of Parthian–Roman relations, and travelling in Syria, they would have been interested in the birth of a *foreign* ruler in Syria who could potentially change Rome’s power in the East. Just as the Romans used the Augustan peace for their reconnaissance of Parthia, so the Parthians would have been keen to strategically monitor the developments in Syria, and—as in the case of Sulla—would have been genuinely interested in it.

It is exactly these travels in Syria that would have made them interested, not only in Syria itself, but also in Judea, for the following two reasons. Firstly, Judea was actually part of Syria’s topography. In Strabo’s geographical definition, Syria could also include Judea and other territories between Seleuceia in Pieria (the Mediterranean harbor of Syrian Antioch) and Egypt; these areas were called Coelê-Syria: “Now the whole of the country above the territory of Seleuceia [i.e., Seleuceia in Pieria], extending approximately to Egypt and Arabia, is called Coelê-Syria; but the country marked off by the Libanus and the Antilibanus is called by that name in a special sense” (Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.21). It is not surprising then if the magi, in their focus on Syria, would have included the surrounding territories that could be implied in a broad definition of the name Coelê-Syria.

Secondly, Judea was also part of Parthia’s recent history. As we have seen, in 40 BCE the Parthians had conquered Syria, Judea, and parts of Asia Minor; so they knew Judea. Moreover, Judea under the Herodians was one of the most important kingdoms in the direct vicinity (or even within the geographical territory) of Syria. As we have seen, Rome had drawn Judea into its tension with Parthia as early as Crassus, who had plundered the gold of the Jerusalem temple to finance his anti-Parthian campaign in 53 BCE, and after Parthia’s conquest of Judea in 40 BCE—remembered in the “Book of Similitudes” in the Jewish text of *1 Enoch*—Rome had appointed Herod as a Roman vassal king as part of its anti-Parthian strategy. So the Parthians still had at least some recollection of Judea; it wasn’t totally unknown territory to them.

For these reasons, it is only natural that, travelling in Syria, the magi (most likely, as in the case of Sulla, not travelling by themselves but as part of a Parthian embassy) would also have been interested in Judea and its capital about thirty years after their conquest and temporary occupation. Precisely the fact that the association between Aries and Judea is late and post-Matthaeian—as Heilen demonstrates that it is probably only Ptolemy, in the mid-second century CE, who introduces Judea as distinct from Syria in his geographical astrology—confirms the relevance of Syria, and that of Roman–Parthian relations, for our understanding of the historical background of Matthew’s narrative about the

magi. If the magi visited Judea, it was not because they travelled directly from Parthia in the East to Bethlehem in the West, as Matthew's narrative runs. Nor did they stay at home. Rather, with their political attention and curiosity being drawn to Syria, where they probably travelled not alone but as part of a Parthian embassy, they explored Syria in the broadest sense of the word, taking advantage of the unique peace of the Augustan era. This is even more likely if their interest was further heightened by the uniqueness of the 6 BCE astronomical phenomena that were observed in the sign of Syria, Aries, and signalled what they assumed to be a change of political leadership: a newborn king.

The Uniqueness of the 6 BCE Alignment of the Sun, Moon and Planets in Aries

The uniqueness of the 6 BCE astronomical phenomena is the central issue of the last question (see p. 499 #6). According to Michael Molnar, as put forward in his *The Star of Bethlehem*¹⁰⁶ and in the summary statement of his theory in his contribution to this volume, the astrological portents of an astronomical phenomenon in 6 BCE qualify as the background to Matthew's story of the Star of Bethlehem. The question is whether this would have been sufficient reason for the magi to take action then, in 6 BCE, or whether they would have been "yo-yoing backwards and forwards through the desert" if they would have paid heed to such phenomena. The importance of the 6 BCE phenomenon is indeed confirmed by Stephan Heilen in his contribution to this volume: the alignment of all five known planets with the Sun and Moon in the zodiacal sign of Aries, in an almost perfect distribution, on 17 April 6 BCE could indeed, according to Greco-Roman astrological theories, as attested by Ptolemy and Antigonus of Nicaea, be interpreted as a royal birth (see Heilen, pp. 300–301 above, with reference to Ptolemy, *Apotelesmatika* 4.3.1–2 and Antigonus of Nicaea apud Hephaestio of Thebes, *Apotelesmatika* 2.18.26–28). The reference of Aries to Syria or Persia in geographical astrological theories would mean that such a birth would take place in one of these areas. And, as I have added, contemporary Parthian-Roman relations in the Augustan era would have drawn the magi's attention to Syria, the current peace allowing them to travel there.

As regards the uniqueness of this event, Peter Barthel and Bradley Schaefer, in their contributions to this volume, show that the event of 17 April 6 BCE occurs roughly only once in 3,000 years (see Barthel, p. 167 above; cf. Schaefer, pp. 93–94 above). This is the great advantage of the 6 BCE theory over the alternative theory of the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurs

106 Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

roughly every twenty years. A triple occurrence of this conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE, to which both Kocku von Stuckrad and David W. Hughes refer in their contributions, is of course more unique than a single conjunction, but the main drawback of this interpretation remains that this theory lacks geographical-astrological elements that explain where the predicted event is taking place, and that are a constitutive element of Matthew's narrative.

The theory of the alignment of the Sun, Moon and all the planets in Aries in 6 BCE, however, appears to give the fullest explanation for Matthew's narrative about the magi. The combination of the astrological importance of this event according to Greek astrology; its uniqueness; the fact that (the findings of) such Greek astrological theories could have been easily known to the Parthian magi because of their being embedded in a network of Greeks, Greek astronomers, and Chaldeans within the triangle of Seleucia-on-Tigris, Ctesiphon, and Babylon; and the contemporary Parthian-Roman relations in the Augustan era that formed the motive for their interest in astrological phenomena pointing to Syria makes this theory very plausible. The calculation or observation of this phenomenon many not have sent the magi off on an exclusive tour, but it is feasible that those magi who had joined a Parthian embassy to Syria would have born it in mind during their reconnaissance of Syria. They were primarily kingmakers, and also interested in the fate of foreign rulers, as the case of Sulla showed. In Sulla's case, they based their predictions on physiognomy; in this case, they were informed by astrology. It can easily be imagined that their visit to Syria included Judea, given the nearness or even geographical inclusion of Judea in Syria, and also given their familiarity with Judea. This doesn't prove that physiognomy and astrology work, but rather that such predictions could have an impact on the (self-)understanding of the individuals concerned. The magi's predictions made an impact on Sulla, as his autobiographical *Memoirs* attest, and also on Matthew, as his biography of Jesus shows.

As we shall see in the next and final section, this historical background of the Parthian magi influenced Matthew's narrative in two ways: the absence of Matthew's usual inner-biblical references in his narrative about the magi, and the way in which the magi episode is adapted in Matthew's Gospel and is brought into synergy with other Matthaean issues.

Firstly, unlike his frequent custom, Matthew does not characterize this episode in Jesus' life as the fulfillment of a prediction from the Jewish Scriptures. Many scholars believe that Matthew's narrative of the magi is the fruit of the author's intertextual dependence on the star prophecy of the pagan prophet Balaam, recorded in the Pentateuch, in the book of Numbers (Num 24:17–19), which speaks of "a star [that] shall dawn out of Jacob":

**Numbers 24:17–19 in the Masoretic
(Hebrew) Text (trans. NRSV)**
**Numbers 24:17–19 in the Septuagint
(Greek text) (trans. NETS)**

I see him, but not now;
 I behold him, but not near—
 a star shall come out of Jacob,
 and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;
 it shall crush the borderlands of Moab,
 and the territory of all the Shethites.
 Edom will become a possession,
 Seir a possession of its enemies,

 while Israel does valiantly.
 One out of Jacob shall rule,
 and destroy the survivors of Ir.

I will point to him, and not now;
 I deem him happy, but he is not at hand.
 A star shall dawn out of Jacob,
 and a person shall rise up out of Israel,
 and he shall crush the chiefs of Moab,
 and he shall plunder all Seth's sons.
 And Edom will be an inheritance,
 and Esau, his enemy, will be an
 inheritance,
 and Israel acted with strength.
 And one shall arise out of Jacob,
 and he shall destroy one being saved from a
 city.

If this passage indeed formed the background of Matthew's narrative about the magi and the Star of Bethlehem, Matthew would have had serious difficulty in explaining in what sense this star, if it were to be identified with Jesus, could be said to act so violently against foreign nations and their rulers. Although she believes this Balaam passage was drawn upon by Matthew, Helen Jacobus, in her contribution to this volume, does recognize the important difference between quotations of Numbers 24:17–19 in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include the full warrior language of this passage, and Matthew's Gospel. According to Jacobus, Matthew "rejects the possible Davidic warrior-messiah interpretations that are apparent in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in later Jewish exegesis" (see Jacobus, p. 402 above; cf. p. 425). Yet, in my view, very significantly, Matthew doesn't even quote this text and doesn't apply his characteristic fulfillment formula, which he normally uses to signal that prophecies from the Jewish Scriptures are taking effect.

Secondly, we shall also see that Matthew's narrative about the magi does not remain an isolated instance in which contemporary Parthian-Roman relations become visible in Matthew's Gospel, but that the issue of the magi is connected with many other closely related themes.

Matthew and the Magi

The relevance of contemporary Roman-Parthian relations for the understanding of Matthew's narrative about the magi, as shown in the previous section, seems to be confirmed by the lack of attestation of Matthew's interest in the Balaam narrative from Numbers 22–24, with Balaam's oracle of the star that will arise out of Jacob (Num 24:17)—a passage that is usually taken as the literary background of the Star of Bethlehem. I will discuss this issue first (pp. 602–18). Subsequently, I will argue that the relevance of the proposed Parthian background also seems supported by the way Matthew embeds the magi story into the entire make-up of his gospel (pp. 618–31).

The Absence of References to the Balaam Narrative

Matthew's Fulfillment Formulas

Matthew is unique among the gospel writers in his practice of explicitly using so-called fulfillment formulas to highlight that a particular episode in the life of Jesus is the fulfillment of a prophecy in the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁰⁷ In the earlier written sources on which Matthew relies, the Gospel of Mark and the

107 For Matthew's use of the Jewish Scriptures, see M. Müller, "The Reception of the Old Testament in Matthew and Luke-Acts: From Interpretation to Proof from Scripture," *Novum Testamentum* 43 (2001): 315–30; R. S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of St Matthew* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1969); R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St Matthew's Gospel, with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); H. A. Kent, Jr., "Matthew's Use of the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (1964): 34–43; K. Stendahl, *The School of St Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1954); S. E. Johnson, "The Biblical Quotations in Matthew," *Harvard Theological Review* 36 (1943): 135–53. For Matthew's fulfillment formulas, see M. J. J. Menken, "Messianic Interpretation of Greek Old Testament Passages in Matthew's Fulfillment Quotations," in *The Septuagint and Messianism* (ed. M. A. Knibb; Leuven: Leuven University Press—Peeters, 2006), 457–86; J. Miler, *Les citations d'accomplissement dans l'évangile de Matthieu: quand Dieu se rend présent en toute humanité* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1999); W. Rothfuchs, *Die Erfüllungszitate des Matthäus-Evangeliums: Eine biblisch-theologische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969). Specific studies on the quotations in Matthew 2 include T. R. Hatina, "From History to Myth and back Again: The Historicizing Function of Scripture in Matthew 2," in *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels*, vol. 2: *The Gospel of Matthew* (ed. T. R. Hatina; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 98–118; J. L. Capshaw, *A Textlinguistic Analysis of Selected Old Testament Texts in Matthew 1–4* (New York/Bern: Lang, 2004); R. T. France, "The Formula-quotations of Matthew 2 and the Problem of Communication," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 233–51; G. M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press,

so-called sayings source Q (for “Quelle”, i.e., “Source”), the fulfillment formulas occur only once, in Mark 14:49, in the form “so that the Scriptures may be fulfilled” (ἵνα πληρωθῶσιν αἱ γραφαί), applied to the arrest of Jesus. It is taken over in Matthew as “so that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled” (ἵνα πληρωθῶσιν αἱ γραφαὶ τῶν προφητῶν; Matt 26:52–56), and it seems that Matthew has turned it into a unique standard formula that he applies throughout his gospel, the formula “in order that what had been spoken (by the Lord) through the prophet may be fulfilled” (ἵνα / ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν [ὑπὸ κυρίου] διὰ τοῦ προφήτου). Most times, Matthew uses this formula preceded by the final conjunction “in order that” (ἵνα or ὅπως), but he also uses the formula without a conjunction, as a simple statement of what has been fulfilled: “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through . . . the prophet” (τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ . . . τοῦ προφήτου). In half the cases, the prophet in question is explicitly mentioned by name, but in the other half not, and in one case the reference is to “the prophets” in the plural. This can all be visualized as follows:

(1) “in order that may be fulfilled what had been spoken (by the Lord) through the prophet (Isaiah)”

ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν	ὑπὸ κυρίου	διὰ	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 1:22–23; quoting Isaiah 7:14)
ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν	ὑπὸ κυρίου	διὰ	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 2:14–15; quoting Hosea 11:1)
ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν		διὰ Ἡσαΐου	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 4:13–16; quoting Isaiah 8:23–9:1)
ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν		διὰ Ἡσαΐου	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 12:15–21; quoting Isaiah 42:1–4)
ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν		διὰ	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 21:4–5; quoting Isaiah 62:11 & Zechariah 9:9)

1976). The text of Matthew's quotations is studied by M. J. J. Menken, *Matthew's Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist* (Leuven: Leuven University Press—Peeters, 2004).

(2) “in order that may be fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet(s) (Isaiah)”

ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν	διὰ	τῶν προφητῶν ὅτι (Matt 2:22–23; quoting Isaiah 11:1)
ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν	διὰ Ἡσαΐου	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 8:16–17; quoting Isaiah 53:4)
ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν	διὰ	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 13:34–35; quoting Psalm 78:2)

(3) “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah”

τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν	διὰ Ἰερεμίου	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 2:17–18; quoting Jeremiah 31:15)
τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν	διὰ Ἰερεμίου	τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος (Matt 27:9–10; quoting Zechariah 11:13)

The formula is indeed very frequent, as it occurs ten times, and is applied throughout the gospel, rather evenly distributed over the different relevant phases of its biography of Jesus. Firstly, Matthew applies it to issues concerning the birth and infancy of Jesus, either with regard to the angelic annunciation of Mary’s pregnancy to Joseph (Matt 1:22–23), Jesus’ flight into and return from Egypt (2:14–15), Herod’s massacre of the infants of Bethlehem (2:17–18), or Jesus’ relocation with his parents to Galilee after their return from Egypt (2:22–23). Matthew also uses a different formula, “for so it has been written by the prophet” (οὕτως γὰρ γέγραπται διὰ τοῦ προφήτου) to highlight that Jesus’ birthplace, Bethlehem, was in accordance with prophetic prediction (2:5–6). Secondly, Matthew applies his standard formula to Jesus’ adult life: to his resettlement in Capernaum (4:13–16) at the beginning of his public ministry; his mission, expressed in his Sermon of the Mount, to fulfil the law and the prophets (5:17); his healing of the sick (8:16–17); the continuation of his mission after he becomes aware that the Pharisees conspire against him and want to destroy him (12:15–21); and his use of parables (13:13–15; 13:34–35). Finally, Matthew also applies the fulfillment formula to the events of Jesus’ last days: his entrance into Jerusalem (21:4–5), his arrest (26:52–56, with the formula derived from Mark 14:49), and the use to which the thirty pieces of silver for which Judas betrayed Jesus are put (27:9–10). Moreover, Matthew supports this correspondence between Jesus’ life and the predictions of the prophets through a different formula, “as it is written” (καθὼς γέγραπται)

or “for it is written” (γέγραπται γάρ), which he derives from Mark and applies to Jesus’ betrayal by one of his disciples (26:24) and the subsequent desertion by all of his disciples (26:31).

Hence, Matthew explicitly highlights the fulfillment of the Jewish prophecies in Jesus’ life with the aid of a unique and frequently applied fulfillment formula. For that reason, it must be deemed significant that the Star of the Magi has not been formally acknowledged by Matthew as the star mentioned in the oracle of the pagan prophet Balaam in Numbers 24:15–19.

Nonetheless, it seems to be the consensus in New Testament studies that Balaam’s reference to the dawning (ἀνατέλλειν) of a star (ἄστρον) “out of Jacob” in Numbers 24:17 provides the proper intertextual background for Matthew’s story of the magi’s star.¹⁰⁸ The relevant information from Matthew 2 that needs to be compared with Numbers for this purpose is as follows:

108 See, for instance, R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 190–96, but cf. the reservations of T. Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (eds. G. H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 233–46. The literature of New Testament scholarship on the magi is abundant, and includes M. Reiser, “‘Siehe, da kamen Magier aus dem Osten nach Jerusalem. . . .’ Zu welcher literarischen Gattung gehört die Geschichte in Mt 2?” *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 122 (2013): 34–47; R. Pesch, *Die matthäischen Weihnachtsgeschichten: Die Magier aus dem Osten, König Herodes und der bethlehemitische Kindermord; Mt 2 neu übersetzt und ausgelegt* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2009); B. P. Robinson, “Matthew’s Nativity Stories: Historical and Theological Questions for Today’s Readers,” in *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (ed. J. Corley; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 110–31; T. Hegedus, “The Magi and the Star in the Gospel of Matthew and Early Christian Tradition,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59 (2003): 81–95; Hegedus, “The Magi and the Star of Matthew 2:1–12 in Early Christian Tradition,” *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006): 213–17; T. Holtmann, *Die Magier vom Osten und der Stern: Mt 2, 1–12 im Kontext frühchristlicher Traditionen* (Marburg: Elwert, 2005); R. A. Horsley, “Messiah, Magi, and Model Imperial King,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture* (eds. R. A. Horsley and J. Tracy; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 139–61; M. A. Powell, “The Magi as Wise Men: Re-examining a Basic Supposition,” *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 1–20; T. T. Maalouf, “Were the Magi from Persia or Arabia?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 423–42; J. Nolland, “The Sources for Matthew 2:1–12,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60 (1998): 283–300; G. Dorival, “‘Un astre se lève de Jacob’: L’interprétation ancienne de Nombres 24,17,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 13 (1996): 295–352; H. Kruse, “Gold and Weihrauch und Myrrhe (Mt 2,11),” *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 46 (1995): 203–13; R. D. Aus, “The Magi at the Birth of Cyrus, and the Magi at Jesus’ Birth in Matthew 2:1–12,” in *Religion, Literature, and Society in Ancient Israel: Formative Christianity and Judaism* (ed. J. Neuser; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 99–114; J. D. M. Derrett, “Further Light

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi (μάγοι) from the East (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν) came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews (ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων)? For we observed his star (εἶδομεν γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα) at its rising (ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ), and have come to pay him homage.” [...] 7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time (ἠκρίβωσεν παρ’ αὐτῶν τὸν χρόνον) when the star had appeared (τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρος). [...] 9 When they [i.e., the magi] had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising (ὁ ἀστὴρ ὃν εἶδον ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ), until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (Matt 2:1–2, 7, 9–10)

Despite the general similarity that they both talk about the rising of a star, the difference between the passages in Numbers and Matthew is significant. Whereas the reference to the star in Balaam’s oracle is first and foremost metaphorical, as a star is said to “dawn out of Jacob” and is directly paralleled by the statement that “a person shall rise up out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17), in Matthew’s passage the star is a real heavenly body. Of course, it could well be that Matthew uses Balaam’s metaphorical utterance about a star and applies it in a non-metaphorical way, but nevertheless the difference between the two meanings is noteworthy.

There are also small differences in the actual terminology. Numbers uses the term *astron* (ἄστρον) for “star,” while Matthew uses the synonymous term *astēr* (ἀστὴρ); Numbers uses the verb *anatellein* (ἀνατέλλειν) to describe the rising of the star, Matthew uses the noun *anatomē* (ἀνατολή). On the one hand, he uses this noun in the plural to designate the geographical origins of the magi: they are “from the East” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν; Matt 2:1; see LSJ s.v. ἀνατολή sub A3). This use is also attested in Numbers where Balaam, too, is said to be “from the East (ἀπ’ ἀνατολῶν): “from mountains *from the East* (ἀπ’ ἀνατολῶν)” (Numbers 23:7), from Pethor (22:5) in Mesopotamia (23:7). Yet, given the ubiquity of the (geographical) localization “from the East” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν or ἀπ’ ἀνατολῶν), also in the Septuagint, this similarity does not prove Matthew’s dependence on Numbers, unless one is already convinced of the connection between the Star of the Magi and the Star of Balaam. On the other hand, Matthew consistently uses the singular to say that the magi have seen the star “at its rising”

on the Narratives of the Nativity,” *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 81–108; M. Hengel and H. Merkel, “Die Magier aus dem Osten und die Flucht nach Ägypten (Mt. 2) im Rahmen der antiken Religionsgeschichte und der Theologie des Matthäus,” in *Orientierung an Jesus: zur Theologie der Synoptiker* (eds. P. Hoffmann, N. Brox, and W. Pesch; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1973), 136–69.

(ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ; Matt 2:2,9; see LSJ s.v. ἀνατολή sub A1). As we have seen, unlike Numbers, Matthew uses this terminology in a literal, non-metaphorical way, in the same way as Greco-Roman astronomical descriptions of a star “at its rising (ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ)” (see, e.g., Manetho, *Apotelesmatica*, Book 2 line pinax7).

As regards Matthew’s use of “the East” (his plural application of the term *anatolē*), it is noteworthy that the East is important to him in a way which far exceeds the relevance of Balaam’s provenance from the East in Numbers. That “the East”—as well as its opposite, “the West”—has significance for Matthew is apparent from his reworking of a particular saying of Jesus that he found in the sayings source Q, which is assumed to underly the material that is not found in the Gospel of Mark but that Matthew and Luke have in common, despite their independence from one another, hence pointing to an underlying source. According to Luke, in this saying Jesus, who is on his way to Jerusalem (13:22), tells the Jews he meets:

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come (καὶ ἔξουσιν) from East (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν) and West (καὶ δυσμῶν), and from North (καὶ ἀπὸ βορρᾶ) and South (καὶ νότου), and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. (Luke 13:28–30; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #211)

In Matthew’s version, however, the references to North and South are absent, and the only focus is on East and West. Moreover, the saying is embedded in a story about Jesus’ encounter with a Roman centurion (ἐκατόνταρχος) in Galilean Capernaum (see the map in Figure 20.1), who asks Jesus to heal his son (Matt 8:5–9). Jesus is so impressed by the centurion’s trust in him that, just before healing the man’s son (8:13), he says the following to those who follow him:

Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from East and West (πολλοὶ ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν καὶ δυσμῶν ἔξουσιν) and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs (sons) of the kingdom (οἱ δὲ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας) will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 8:10–12; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #85)

Matthew is thus very interested in those who come “from East and West (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν καὶ δυσμῶν),” and it seems very likely that in this narrative he identifies the Roman centurion with “the West,” just as he identifies the magi with the East, since he depicts them explicitly as coming “from the East

(ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν)” (2:1).¹⁰⁹ They are contrasted with “the heirs (sons) of the kingdom (οἱ δὲ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας),” i.e., the Jews who do not follow Jesus. Clearly, Matthew’s pretence is that the kingdom of Jesus, which he—with his distinctively Matthean phrase—calls “the kingdom of heaven” (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν; e.g., 4:17), surpasses the political realms of the East (Parthia), the West (Rome), and Judea. This alternative kingdom of heaven comprises those who are prepared to meet Jesus, whether magi (2:1–12), Romans such as this centurion (8:5–13), or Jews such as Matthew himself, scholars who have been instructed with regard to “the kingdom of heaven” (13:52). Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven,” which he—again in a uniquely Matthean fashion—contrasts with “the kingdoms of the world (αἱ βασιλείαι τοῦ κόσμου)” (4:8), is conceived of as a supra-political, supra-ethnic kingdom comprised of people from East and West.

Matthew’s picture of Jesus’ universality, which encompasses East and West, is also expressed in his description of Jesus’ warnings against the expected local appearances of pseudo-messiahs in Matthew 24:23–26, with which the return of Jesus is contrasted: “For as the lightning comes from the East (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν) and flashes as far as the West (ἕως δυσμῶν), so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (24:27). This passage, which surpasses the underlying passage from the sayings source Q that is without geographical references (see Luke 17:24; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #235), seems to confirm Matthew’s vivid interest in East and West. This interest must have been nurtured by the place where scholarly consensus locates Matthew’s Gospel: in Syrian Antioch. It is this place *par excellence* where the Parthian East often met and clashed with the Roman West; hence Matthew’s interest in magi and Roman centurions as representatives of the “many” who come “from East and West” to Jesus’ rather different kingdom of heaven. For all of these reasons, it seems that Matthew’s story of the magi “from the East” and their star is more complex than a simple resonance with Balaam’s oracle from Numbers 24.

Most importantly, however, Matthew’s dependence on Balaam’s oracle seems unlikely because he doesn’t refer to it. If he had had it in mind, it would have gone against his well-attested custom (discussed above) if he did not explicitly acknowledge the fulfillment of a prophecy from the Jewish Scriptures by an event in Jesus’ life. But there is no fulfillment formula in the narrative about the magi, even despite the fact that Matthew uses the formula several times in his narrative about the birth and infancy of Jesus.

Perhaps it may be the case that not every quotation from the Jewish Scriptures that is applied to Jesus’ life is introduced by a formal fulfillment formula. This is indeed the case in several instances in Matthew’s Gospel, but

109 For an analysis of Galilee “Between Rome and Parthia,” see also J. A. Overman, “Between Rome and Parthia: Galilee and the Implications of Empire,” in *A Wandering Galilean* (eds. Z. Rodgers, M. M. Daly-Denton, and A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 279–99.

all of these passages concern instances in which Matthew follows his written sources, the Gospel of Mark or the sayings source Q.¹¹⁰ In all cases, however, where Matthew introduces new quotations from the Jewish Scriptures that he sees fulfilled in Jesus' biography, he uses his explicit fulfillment formulas.

Alternatively, one could also object that since the fulfillment formulas introduce quotations from the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Zechariah) and the Psalms, a reference to the Torah, the books of Moses, would have been out of place. But this objection is not convincing, as the Psalms are also referred to only once (Matt 13:34–35, quoting Psalm 78:2). Moreover, Moses himself is regarded as a prophet (Deut 18:18), and Matthew's frequent combined references to "the law and the prophets" (Matt 5:16; 7:12; 11:12; 22:39) suggests that he would not have refrained from quoting from the books of Moses even just once, if he would considered this relevant.

It is thus very likely that, had Matthew considered the Star of the Magi as the fulfillment of the star announced by Balaam, he would have used his formula to highlight this. This is particularly likely since the magi narrative does not constitute a subordinate, isolated episode in his gospel, but is connected with some of the main issues: the narrative of the magi (coming from contemporary Parthian Babylonia) resonates with the interest Matthew expresses in the Babylonian exile of the Jews (see Matt 1:11–12, 17), as we shall see in more detail in the last section of this chapter (see pp. 619–20); additionally, the magi perform before Jesus the *προσκύνησις*, the Eastern custom of prostrating oneself before kings and superiors (2:2; 2:11; cf. 2:8), a custom that becomes, in Matthew's Gospel, the mark of true discipleship of God (4:9–10) and Jesus (8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9,17; for full detail, see pp. 624–25 below). The magi are the first to perform this prostration. In that sense, they are exemplary in Matthew's Gospel, and had Matthew regarded the star they saw as the fulfillment of Balaam's oracle, then he would have adduced the relevant passage from Numbers and introduced it with his distinctive formula.

The Fulfillment of a Prophecy in Isaiah about a Different Light?

Apparently Matthew didn't have the Balaam prophecy in the book of Numbers about a star coming out of Jacob in mind. Rather, he explicitly connects Jesus' life with the fulfillment of the dawning of a light foretold by the prophet Isaiah, as we can see in Matthew 4:13–16, in the episode in which Matthew tells about Jesus' move, within Galilee, from Nazareth to Capernaum at the beginning of his public ministry:

110 See the Gospel of Mark (Matt 26:64 = Mark 14:62, Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #332; Matt 27:46 = Mark 15:34, Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #347) and the sayings source Q (Matt 10:34–36 = Q in Luke 12:51–53, Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #102; Matt 11:4–6 = Q in Luke 7:22–23, Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #106).

He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled (ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος): “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the nations—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the country and shadow of death light has dawned on them (ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθήμενος ἐν σκότει φῶς εἶδεν μέγα, καὶ τοῖς καθημένοις ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς).” (Matt 4:13–16)

In this passage, Matthew quotes Isaiah 8:23–9:1 almost verbatim, as the following synopsis of the Greek and its English translation shows.

Matthew 4:15–16 (Greek + NRSV trans., with adaptations)	Isaiah 8:23–9:1 (LXX + NETS trans., with adaptations)
Γῆ Ζαβουλῶν καὶ γῆ Νεφθαλίμ, ὁδὸν θαλάσσης,	Τοῦτο πρῶτον ποίει, ταχὺ ποίει, χώρα Ζαβουλων, ἡ γῆ Νεφθαλιμ ὁδὸν θαλάσσης
πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν,	καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ τὴν παραλίαν κατοικοῦντες καὶ πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν, τὰ μέρη τῆς Ἰουδαίας.
ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθήμενος ἐν σκότει φῶς εἶδεν μέγα, καὶ τοῖς καθημένοις ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς.	ὁ λαὸς ὁ πορευόμενος ἐν σκότει, ἴδετε φῶς μέγα· οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου, φῶς λάμψει ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς.
Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea,	Do this first; do it quickly, O country of Zebulun, the land of Nephthali, on the road by the sea and the rest who inhabit the seashore and
across the Jordan, Galilee of the nations	across the Jordan, Galilee of the nations,
— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the country and shadow of death light has dawned on them.	the parts of Judea. O you people who walk in darkness, see a great light! O you who live in the country and shadow of death, light will shine on you!

As we see from this comparison, Matthew slightly abbreviates the text of Isaiah in his quotation by leaving out the introduction (“Do this first; do it quickly”) and by omitting two of the geographical areas addressed. The first omitted area is probably regarded as redundant and irrelevant (“and the rest who inhabit the seashore”), as Matthew merely wants to depict Jesus’ settlement in “Capernaum by the sea (Καπερναούμ, ἡ παραθαλάσσιος)” (Matt 4:13), on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy for those who live “on the road by the sea” (ὁδὸν θαλάσσης). The other omitted area, “the parts of Judea,” is clearly regarded as unsuitable here, because Matthew, in the episode in Matt 4:12–17, tells how Jesus, after his temptation in the wilderness (4:1–11), begins his public ministry in Galilee, not in Judea. Hence the reference to Judea, included in the areas addressed by Isaiah, is now left out. Otherwise the text of the quotation is largely the same, with some mostly minor differences that are irrelevant for our present purposes. There are two relevant exceptions, however.

Firstly, whereas Isaiah, in 9:1, addresses the people with the imperative “see a great light (ἴδετε φῶς μέγα)” and talks of the shining of this light in the future tense: “light will shine on you (φῶς λάμψει ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς),” Matthew, in 4:16, states that the people addressed “have seen a great light (φῶς εἶδεν μέγα)” and that this “light has dawned on them (φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς).” The difference in tenses is what one expects, as Matthew sees the imperative and future tenses of Isaiah fulfilled in Jesus’ appearance in “Galilee of the nations.” With Jesus’ arrival, the “great light” prophesied by Isaiah has dawned upon the people there, and they have seen it. Hence, these witnesses are no longer described in the present tense, as in Isaiah, as the people “who walk” (ὁ πορευόμενος) in darkness and as those “who live” (οἱ κατοικοῦντες) in the country and in the shadow of death, but in the perfect tense as “those who sat” (ὁ καθήμενος) in darkness and as those “who sat” (οἱ καθήμενοι) in the region and shadow of death. These changes are part of Matthew’s application of Isaiah’s prophecy to the appearance of Jesus, which is explicitly seen as the fulfillment of his prophecy: “so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled (ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος)” (Matt 4:14).

Secondly, and most importantly, in the very last segment of his quotation from Isaiah, Matthew uses a different verb to describe the activity of the great light. He doesn’t use the verb “shine” (λάμπειν) that Isaiah uses when he says that “light will shine on you (φῶς λάμψει ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς),” but he uses the verb “dawn” (ἀνατέλλειν): “light has dawned on them (φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς).” This doesn’t seem to be an insignificant difference, because further on in Isaiah, in so-called Trito-Isaiah (Isa 56–66), the combination of light and dawning occurs twice: once directly (58:10), and once more indirectly (60:1–2). As we shall see,

it seems that Matthew's quotation of Isaiah is a conflation of the main text of Isaiah 8:23–9:1 with the notion, derived from Trito-Isaiah, that this light, or its splendor, "has dawned." The direct combination of "light" and "dawning" is found in Isaiah 58:10, where Trito-Isaiah, addressing Jerusalem, and apparently echoing the wording of Isaiah 8:23–9:1, prophesies: "then your light shall dawn in the darkness (τότε ἀνατελεῖ ἐν τῷ σκότει τὸ φῶς σου)" (58:10). The same notion re-occurs, somewhat less directly, in Isaiah 60:1–6, where Trito-Isaiah describes the return of exiles to Jerusalem, where the glory and splendor of God's light dawns upon them: "Shine, shine, O Jerusalem, for your light has come (ἤκει γὰρ σου τὸ φῶς), and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you (καὶ ἡ δόξα κυρίου ἐπὶ σέ ἀνατέταλκεν). Look, darkness and gloom shall cover the earth upon the nations, but the Lord will appear upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you" (Isa 60:1–2). In this passage, the "glory" or "splendor" (δόξα) of the Lord is said to have dawned, but as this statement occurs in parallel with the proclamation that Jerusalem's "light" (φῶς) has come, this light must be identical with the "glory" or "splendor" of God, so that it is the light that also dawns. Hence, it seems that Matthew, in his quotation of Isaiah 8:23–9:1, includes the notion of the dawning of the light, which he derives from Trito-Isaiah, where the notion occurs in two instances: either directly, or more indirectly.

The latter instance, in Isaiah 60:1–2, deserves our attention for a specific reason: we must consider whether the direct continuation of this passage may have influenced or even occasioned Matthew's narrative about the magi. Although Matthew clearly contextualizes the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah's dawning light (Isa 8:23–9:1, with tinges of 58:10 and 60:1–2) in the context of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (Matt 4:12–17), the question arises whether the direct continuation of Isaiah 60:1–2 in 60:3–6 may have affected or even generated the pericope about the magi in Matthew 2:1–12. Having talked about the dawning of Jerusalem's light in Isaiah 60:1–2, Trito-Isaiah continues with the description of the return of the exiles from their Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem and describes how they will receive "the wealth of nations," including gold and frankincense:

Kings shall walk by your light (καὶ πορεύσονται βασιλεῖς τῷ φωτί σου), and nations by your brightness. Lift up your eyes round about, and see your children gathered together; look, all your sons have come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on shoulders. Then you shall see and be afraid and be amazed in your heart, because the wealth (πλοῦτος) of the sea and of nations and of peoples shall change over to you. And there shall come to you herds of camels (καὶ ἤξουσίν σοι ἀγέλαι καμήλων), and

the camels (κάμηλοι) of Madiam and Gaiphar shall cover you. All those from Saba (Σαβα) shall come, bringing gold (φέροντες χρυσίον), and they shall bring frankincense (και λίβανον οἴσουσιν) and announce the good news of the salvation of the Lord. (Isa 60:3–6)

What we have here is a possible background for Matthew's magi narrative, as the magi, after they have found the infant Jesus, are said to have given him gold, frankincense, and myrrh: "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests (και ἀνοίξαντες τοὺς θησαυροὺς αὐτῶν), they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ δῶρα, χρυσὸν και λίβανον και σμύρναν)" (Matt 2:11). In this way, Matthew's acquaintance with Trito-Isaiah, implied in the terminological coloring of his quotation of Isaiah 8:23–9:1 in the description of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee in Matthew 4:13–16, could have influenced him in writing the narrative about the magi. The rising (ἀνατολή) of a star (ἀστήρ) (Matt 2:2,9) would then have been Matthew's application of Isaiah's notion of the dawning (ἀνατέλλειν) of a light (φῶς) (Isa 58:10; 60:1–2). This is a possibility, and it certainly makes more sense that the assumption that Matthew's magi narrative reflects the prophecy of Balaam's star, yet I regard it as extremely unlikely for the following reasons.

Firstly, as I have already noted in my criticism of the Balaam hypothesis, Matthew's use of the term "rising" (ἀνατολή) is literal, in contrast to the occurrence of the metaphorically used verb "to rise/to dawn" (ἀνατέλλειν) in the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17, where Balaam says that "A star will dawn out of Jacob (ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐξ Ιακωβ)." This also holds true for the occurrence of this verb in the prophecy of Trito-Isaiah, who says that Jerusalem's light (φῶς) "shall dawn in the darkness (ἀνατελεῖ ἐν τῷ σκότει)" (Isa 58:10) and that God's splendor (δόξα) "has dawned (ἀνατέταλκεν)" upon Jerusalem (60:1–2). As we have seen, Matthew's use of "rising" (ἀνατολή) is non-metaphorical in its description of a star "at its rising (ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ)" (Matt 2:2,9) and in agreement with Greco-Roman astronomical phrases (see, e.g., Manetho, *Apotelesmatica*, Book 2 line pinax7).

Secondly, as in the case of the Balaam prophecy, in Isaiah we also have only a metaphorical light, not, as in the narrative of the magi, the physical light of a star. Interestingly, in the case of his application of the prophecy from Isaiah 8:23–9:1 to the episode of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee in Matthew 4:13–16, Matthew retains Isaiah's metaphorical light: it is the appearance of Jesus in Galilee which, in a figurative sense, is described as the dawning and perception of a great light (4:16). In Matthew 2, however, in the narrative of the magi, no attempt is made to understand the star in such a symbolic way, as

for instance occurs elsewhere in the New Testament writings when they symbolically depict Jesus as “the bright morning star (ὁ ἄστηρ ὁ λαμπρὸς ὁ πρωϊνός)” (Rev 22:16; cf. 2:28) and speak about the rising (ἀνατέλλειν) of the “light-bringer,” the morning star (φωσφόρος [sc. ἄστήρ]), in one’s heart (2 Peter 1:19: ἕως [...] φωσφόρος ἀνατείλει ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν). Although Matthew’s description of Jesus’ Galilean ministry shows that Matthew is fully capable of speaking about the dawning of Jesus’ light in a metaphorical way (4:16), there is no indication that Jesus’ star functions for him in the same way. Rather, the narrative of the star seems to stand for itself.

Thirdly, this impression that Matthew’s narrative of the magi and their star is independent of the narrative of the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry can be further confirmed as follows. The magi story concerns Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and is described without any reference to the fulfillment of a prophecy, whereas the story about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, for which the prophecy of Isaiah 8:23–9:1 is explicitly invoked, concerns the adult Jesus. As we have seen, Matthew’s adaptation of Isaiah’s prophecy, which already prominently mentions “Galilee of the nations,” is entirely geared towards Galilee, as Matthew assures its exclusive reference to the Sea of Galilee by omitting the wider reference to “the rest who inhabit the seashore” and especially by cutting out the mention of Judea altogether. Clearly, in Matthew’s mind, the Galilean ministry of the adult Jesus, which is regarded as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies regarding “Galilee of the nations” and the dawning of a great light (Isa 8:23–9:1; 58:10; 60:1–2), is an episode that is entirely different from the magi story, which is unlikely to have been affected by these prophecies from Isaiah and seems to stand on its own.

Fourthly, and finally, the independence of the magi story from Isaiah’s description of foreign kings and presents in Isaiah 60:1–6 can be attested as follows. According to this Isaiah passage, foreign kings (βασίλεις) and nations are said to start walking “by the light” (τῷ φωτί) of Jerusalem (Isa 60:3) that has now dawned (60:1). The author doesn’t say that these kings come to Jerusalem, but that they follow its example. After he remarks that Jerusalem’s exiles will return to Jerusalem (60:4), it is stated that, apparently in their wake, “the wealth (πλοῦτος) of the sea and of nations and of peoples shall change over” to Jerusalem (60:5). Examples of this transfer of wealth are then given, and consist in the arrival of herds of camels (κάμηλοι) (60:5–6), which are probably primarily the mode of transport used in this transfer, and the actual bestowal of gold (χρυσίον) and frankincense (λίβανος), brought by people who come from Saba (Σαβα) (60:6).

One can easily see how these loosely connected issues have become powerfully unified in later early Christian exegesis and imposed upon the magi story

of Matthew 2: the magi were turned into kings, who rode on camels, bringing the gifts of gold and frankincense, supplemented with the gift of myrrh (not mentioned in Isaiah's list) in view of Jesus' prospective burial. Yet, it is very much the question whether Matthew himself had this background in mind.¹¹¹ He never mentions camels, as he appears not to be interested in specifying the magi's mode of transport. Nor does he call the magi "kings." If Matthew had had Isaiah 60 in mind, his purpose may have been better served by retaining this designation of kings instead of introducing the enigmatic figures of the magi, particularly as, in the Flavian era in which he was writing, the magi had acquired the bad reputation of dark magicians (see pp. 581–85). Later Christian exegesis indeed preferred to replace the magi with kings or priests (*Sibylline Oracles* 1.334–335: ἱερεῖς χρυσὸν προφέροντες, σμύρναν ἀτὰρ λίβανον).

But what about the reference to the gifts of gold and frankincense in Isaiah 60? Is that not the model on which Matthew drew in his description of the magi's gift to Jesus? According to Isaiah, "All those from Saba (Σαβα) shall come, bringing gold (φέροντες χρυσίον), and they shall bring frankincense (καὶ λίβανον οἴσουσιν)" (Isa 60:6). What we have here is the same motive as in the story of the visit which the Queen of Sheba/Saba made to King Solomon according to 1 Kings 10:1–13 (= 3 Kings 10:1–13 LXX). It seems likely that Trito-Isaiah is dependent on this story, as also in this text from 3 Kings camels, spices, and gold feature together:

and she [i.e., βασίλισσα Σαβα, the queen of Saba] came to Jerusalem with a very weighty force, and there were camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stone (καὶ κάμηλοι αἴρουσαι ἡδύσματα καὶ χρυσὸν πολὺν σφόδρα καὶ λίθον τίμιον) [...] And she gave Solomon one hundred twenty talents of gold (χρυσίον) and very much spices (ἡδύσματα) and precious stone. Like those spices, which the queen of Saba gave to King Solomon, there have not come again in quantity. (3 Kings 10:2,10 LXX; = 1 Kings 10:2,10 MT; cf. also 2 Chron 9:1–12)

Psalm 71 (72), a Psalm regarding Solomon (71:1), also echoes this narrative: "Kings of Tharsis and the isles will present gifts; kings of Arabs and Saba will bring gifts (βασιλεῖς Ἀράβων καὶ Σαβα δῶρα προσάξουσιν). And all kings shall do obeisance to him (καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν αὐτῷ πάντες οἱ βασιλεῖς); all nations shall be subject to him (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη δουλεύσουσιν αὐτῷ)" (Psalm 71:10–11 LXX; = Psalm 72:1–2 MT). Yet although Trito-Isaiah—in his specific configuration of camels, gold, and spices from Saba—seems to be dependent on this tradition of the visit of the Queen of Sheba/Saba to Solomon and uses it to express his

¹¹¹ But cf. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 187–88.

hope for the revivification of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, that does not mean that the depiction of Arabian Saba as a land of precious metals and spices is exclusively biblical imagery. It is, for instance, Aristotle's associate and successor Theophrastus (ca. 372/1–ca. 288/7 BCE) who, in his botanical works, talks of Saba as one of the places in the Arabian peninsula where the spices of frankincense and myrrh grow in abundance: “Now frankincense (λίβανος), myrrh (σμύρνα), cassia and also cinnamon are found in the Arabian peninsula about Saba (Σαβά), Hadramyta, Kitibaina and Mamali. The trees of frankincense and myrrh (τὰ τοῦ λιβανωτοῦ καὶ τῆς σμύρνης δένδρα) grow partly in the mountains, partly on private estates at the foot of the mountains; wherefore some are under cultivation, others not” (Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 9.4).

This passage from Theophrastus is directly relevant to our interpretation of Matthew 2, where frankincense and myrrh are also mentioned together as the spices the magi gave: “they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ δῶρα, χρυσὸν καὶ λίβανον καὶ σμύρναν)” (Matt 2:11). It is noteworthy that “myrrh” (σμύρνα) is not found among the presents in Isaiah 60. It has often been suggested that Matthew consciously adds “myrrh” as a symbolic reference to Jesus’ burial, but this assertion cannot be maintained, because the term “myrrh” (σμύρνα) does not reoccur in the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. Myrrh, the gum of an Arabian tree, can be used for embalming the dead, but is also used as an unguent or salve and burnt as incense (LSJ s.v. σμύρνα). There is no indication in Matthew’s Gospel that he connected myrrh with burial practices. The woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany as a preparation for Jesus’ burial (Matt 26:12; cf. Mark 14:8) does so with a very costly ointment (μύρον) (26:7; cf. Mark 14:3), not specifically with myrrh. And Matthew does not even say that the women who set out to visit Jesus’ tomb after his burial have taken spices with them to tend to Jesus’ body; the only motivation that Matthew ascribes to them is that they come out “to see the tomb” (28:1), unlike Mark, who says that they “bought spices (ἀρώματα), so that they might go and anoint him” (Mark 16:1). But no myrrh is mentioned in Mark, either. Among the gospel writers, it is only John who mentions myrrh (σμύρνα) as one of the spices that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea use to prepare Jesus’ body (John 19:39–40). But it would be very wrong to suggest that Matthew, with a similar reflection about Jesus’ burial, adds myrrh to Isaiah’s list of gold and frankincense. There is no evidence that Matthew had Isaiah 60 in mind.

Rather, his reference to gold, frankincense, and myrrh seems to be an allusion to well-known precious metals and spices from the Arabian East. As regards the spices, frankincense from Saba, for instance, was not only used by the Parthians and magi—whose altars, according to Claudian, were “sweet with the fragrance of incense and the harvests of Saba” (Claudian, *On Stilicho’s Consulship*, Book 1

[21] lines 51–63)—but, according to the prophet Jeremiah “frankincense from Saba” was also used in the Jerusalem temple (Jeremiah 6:20).

Precious metals and spices from Arabia could indeed also be offered to foreign rulers, as the story of Antiochus III the Great, king of the Seleucid empire (222–187 BCE), in Polybius’ *Histories* makes clear. After the rebellion in the East, led by the satrap Molon (222 BCE), he gradually regains his power and restores Seleucid rule over, among others, Parthia and Bactria (210–206 BCE) and leads an expedition to the Persian Gulf, where, on the Arabian coast of the Persian Gulf, he reconfirms the independence of the Gerrhaeans. To show their appreciation, these Gerrhaeans honor him “with the gift of five hundred talents of silver (ἀργύριον), a thousand talents of frankincense (λιβανωτός), and two hundred talents of the so-called stacte [i.e., oil of myrrh]. [...] The spices were from the Persian Gulf” (Polybius, *Histories* 13.9.4–5).

Taking all of this into consideration, there is no need to regard the reference to gold, frankincense, and myrrh in Matthew’s pericope of the magi as an intertextual reference to Isaiah 60. Such intertextuality was only forged in later Christian interpretation, but is unlikely to reflect Matthew’s praxis. Although it can be shown that in his description of Jesus’ adult ministry Matthew colored his quotation of Isaiah 8:23–9:1 with the notion of the “dawning” of the light from Trito-Isaiah (Isa 58:10), it cannot be shown that he is dependent on Trito-Isaiah’s depiction of kings bringing gold and frankincense (Isa 60:1–6) for his narrative of the magi.

Conclusion: The Need for a Different Interpretation

Hence, it seems that the story of the magi in Matthew 2:1–12 indeed stands by itself. For the reasons explored above, there are no grounds that urge us to read it as a fulfillment of the Balaam prophecy. Most importantly, a typically Matthean fulfillment formula is lacking in Matthew 2. If Matthew would have had the connection with Balaam’s oracle in mind (a prophecy by a gentile prophet), it would have served his purposes, but he doesn’t use it (in contrast to the dominant early Christian interpretation of the magi, as the contribution of Darrell Hannah in this volume shows). In fact, it seems to be this nearly homogenous early Christian interpretation of the magi story in terms of the Balaam prophecy that obscures Matthew’s original setting in his contemporary Roman-Parthian world; it seems that the early Christian interpreters of Matthew’s magi episode had anti-astrological reasons for denying the magi’s use of astrology and made them solely dependent on Balaam’s prophecy as allegedly handed down to them in written form (see Hannah, pp. 440, 457–58 above). By doing so they blind us for Matthew’s contemporary Parthian-Roman context and sidetrack us into an inner-biblical trajectory. Nor can the magi

story be connected with the prophecies of the dawning of a light in Isaiah. These prophecies are explicitly referred to in Matthew 4:12–17 with regard to the beginning of the ministry of the adult Jesus in Galilee (and supplied with an explicit Matthean fulfillment formula), but are not connected with his birth narrative. It must be regarded as highly significant that the episode of the magi is not supported by any fulfillment formula that claims this story as a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, and, for that reason, it *allows* for a different interpretation. Indeed, as Stephan Heilen acknowledges, “we are left with the following alternatives to choose from: If the prophecy of Balaam is relevant to the star of the magi in Matthew chapter two [...], then the traditional metaphorical explanation of the star makes perfect sense. If, however, the prophecy of Balaam is not relevant, one needs a different explanation for Matthew’s inspiration to tell the story of the magi” (Heilen, p. 346 above).

In my view, the magi episode even *calls* for a different interpretation, because Matthew introduces the figures of the magi, who are absent from both the prophecies of Balaam and Isaiah. As we have seen, in the Jewish Scriptures the magi only occur in the Greek version of Daniel, where they are mentioned together with the Chaldeans (Dan 2:2,10 LXX). Both in the Greek version of Daniel and in Matthew’s Gospel, however, the magi are figures from the contemporary world. In the final section of this paper, we shall now explore how these figures are adapted in Matthew’s Gospel.

Matthew, the Magi, and the Gospel

The magi that Matthew adduces in his gospel cannot derive from the Jewish Scriptures. They are figures that derive from Greco-Roman traditions and from contemporary Roman-Parthian politics. As we have seen, in Greco-Roman writings there was a conception that “the college of magi” had first been instituted by Cyrus the Great. For a Greek readership of Matthew’s Greek-language Gospel, the magi were a well-known phenomenon from the beginning of the Persian Empire. They feature in Greco-Roman accounts of the origins of philosophy. According to Seneca, they visited Athens at the time of the death of Plato. Despite their involvement in the conquest of Greece, the prestige of the magi apparently justified the alleged relations of Greek philosophers with them. If compared with Matthew’s Gospel, the magi’s distress about the birth of Alexander the Great, who will defeat the Persians, contrasts sharply with their delight at the birth of Jesus. Moreover, in contemporary Roman-Parthian relations, the magi function as the kingmakers of the Parthian kings, travel in Parthian embassies, and, as the case of Sulla illustrates, are also interested in the fate of foreign rulers. And so they occur in Matthew’s Gospel, not as figures that Matthew uses to embellish the intertextuality between his gospel and the narrative of Balaam and his star, but rather, as we have seen,

the magi reflect a contemporary reality from the Augustan era that Matthew integrates into his gospel. Although they only figure in the narrative of Jesus' birth in Matthew 2, the theme of the magi fits the setting of Matthew's Gospel and resonates with many issues in the gospel, as I will now explore. This seems to indicate that the narrative of the magi was not marginal in the composition of Matthew's gospel, but is actually very close to Matthew's concerns and interests and provides for him a direct link with the contemporary world.

The first issue in Matthew's Gospel that resonates with the magi from the East seems to be his portrayal of Jesus as "the son of Abraham." Only in Matthew's Gospel is Jesus depicted, in the very opening statement of the gospel, as "the son of Abraham": "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). Abraham, according to the Jewish Scriptures (Gen 11:27–31), was originally from the land of the Chaldeans, a view that was repeated in Jewish and Greek writings in the time immediately preceding Matthew. According to Philo of Alexandria, Abraham "migrated from Chaldea;" Philo went on to remark, "The Chaldeans have the reputation of having, in a degree quite beyond that of other peoples, elaborated astronomy and the casting of nativities. They have set up a harmony between things on earth and things on high, between heavenly things and earthly" (Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 177–180; cf. *On the Giants* 62 and *On Dreams* 1.52–53).

Greek historians also noticed the Chaldean background of Abraham. Nicolaus of Damascus, the Greek court philosopher and historian of Herod the Great, who subsequently worked in Rome,¹¹² described Abraham's migration as follows in his *Histories*, in a fragment preserved by Flavius Josephus:

Nicolaus of Damascus, again, in the fourth book of his *Histories* makes the following statement: "Abram(es) reigned (in Damascus), an invader who had come with an army from the country beyond Babylon called the land of the Chaldees. But, not long after, he left this country also with his people for the land then called Canaan but now Judea, where he settled, he and his numerous descendants, whose history I shall recount in another book. The name of Abram is still celebrated in the region of Damascus, and a village is shown that is called after him 'Abram's abode.'" (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.159 = Nicolaus of Damascus, Fragment 30)

Against this background, it seems likely that Matthew depicts Jesus as "the son of Abraham," and subsequently supports this through his depiction of Jesus' genealogy (Matt 1:2–17; see 1:2 and 1:17), in order to evoke the ultimate roots of

112 On Nicolaus as part of the circle of Herod, see J. Geiger, *Hellenism in the East: Studies on Greek Intellectuals in Palestine* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2014), 48–49.

Jesus in the Babylonian-Chaldean East. In this way, he seems to prepare the magi's visit from Parthian Babylonia, which is inhabited by magi and Chaldeans.

This Eastern background is further evoked when the genealogy of Jesus is chronologically divided with references to the deportation of the Jews to Babylon: of Jesus' father in the 13th degree, Jechoniah, it is said that he lived "at the time of the deportation to Babylon," and that "after the deportation to Babylon" he fathered Shealtiel (1:11–12). This reference to the Babylonian Exile reoccurs at the end of Jesus' genealogy, when the three-times-fourteen generations between Jesus and Abraham appear to be structured as follows: "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations" (Matt 1:17). In this way, Matthew's depiction of Jesus as "the son of Abraham" and his repeated references to the deportation to Babylon work together to draw attention to the East, from where the magi will depart to visit Jesus, this descendant of Abraham, who himself was from the East and whose offspring had been temporarily brought back to the East during the Babylonian Exile. I'm inclined to see these motives as reflections of the importance that Matthew attaches to the magi and as paving the way for this episode.

The contextualization of Matthew's magi narrative in the context of Greco-Roman culture, and in particular in the context of contemporary Roman-Parthian relations, allows us to see the interlinking of history and Matthew's narrativization. The unique alignment, in 6 BCE, of the Sun, Moon, and the five planets, including the regal planet Jupiter, refers in contemporary Greek astrology to the birth of an important king. Because of their close relation with Greek and Chaldean astronomers and astrologers in the triangle of Seleucia-on-Tigris, Ctesiphon, and Babylon, it is probable that magi would have been aware of the uniqueness of this event. The unique alignment of the Sun, Moon, and planets in the Zodiacal sign of Aries, which in Greek astrological geography was particularly connected with Persia and Syria, would have drawn their interest to Syria. The relevance of contemporary Parthian-Roman relations, and the likelihood that the magi, as members of Parthian embassies, connected with Roman Syria in the peaceful Augustan era between 20 and 2 BCE, will have made them particularly curious about events in Syria, which, taken in a geographical sense, would also have included Judea. As kingmakers, they would have been especially interested in events that concerned the birth of a powerful king.

That such magi, travelling in Parthian embassies in Syria, would have come to Bethlehem (Matt 2:3–8) is not inconceivable. Bethlehem (see the map in Figure 20.1) was the birthplace of the Davidic dynasty. This dynasty ended with the Babylonian Exile. Some members of this dynasty returned out of exile,

including Zerubbabel, who was appointed governor of the Persian province of Judea. According to Josephus, “Zorababēlos, son of Salathiēlos, [...] was of the tribe of Judah, being one of the descendants of David” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.72–73).¹¹³ In Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:12–13), this Zerubbabel, now called “Zorobabel,” is mentioned as one of Jesus’ forefathers. However, the Davidic dynasty lost its rule over Judea, which, after the turn from the Persian to the Hellenistic era, was eventually ruled by the Maccabean-Hasmonean dynasty, which was ultimately replaced by Herod. It is not unconceivable that the offspring of the Davidic dynasty, ousted from government, would have settled again in its place of origins, in Bethlehem. That Jesus was a descendent of the Davidic family seems to be confirmed, in my view, by Paul’s early attestation, at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans, that Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3), information that Paul would have probably received from the earliest inner circle around Jesus, the circle of Peter and Jesus’ brother James, both of whom Paul had met (Galatians 1:18–19, 2:9).

As we have seen, the Parthians were very loyal to the members of their own Arsacid dynasty, so it would have been natural for the magi, as the kingmakers of the Parthian kings, to have been interested in old royal dynasties. If their embassy in Syria also brought them to Jerusalem—which is to be expected, given the facts that Judea belonged to Syria (broadly defined) and that the Parthians knew Jerusalem quite well—it is but a small step to nearby Bethlehem as the original hometown of the old Davidic dynasty, where they found a newborn in a Davidic family. In historical terms, such a meeting between the magi and Jesus would have been a chance meeting, such as that between the magi and Sulla. But just as the magi’s visit to Sulla made an enormous impact on the latter, as his *Memoirs* attest, so did the magi’s visit to Jesus, as Matthew’s Gospel shows. Historically speaking, communication between the magi and Jesus’ family would not have been a problem, because of the common use of Aramaic.¹¹⁴ Matthew’s depiction of Jesus’ family as resident in Bethlehem in their own house (Matt 2:11) and only later moving to Nazareth (2:22–23)—in contrast to Luke, who believes that Jesus’ family only visited Nazareth because of the Roman census (Luke 2:1–4)—is probably more historically accurate. Matthew’s chronology is consistent, unlike that of Luke, who wrongly believes that Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2) in the days of Herod the Great (Luke 1:5) and mistakes Quirinius’ census of 6 CE, which was occasioned by the incorporation of Judea into Syria after the deposition of Herod’s son Archelaus,

113 Cf. 1 Esdras 5:5, but the Davidic lineage is not mentioned in Ezra 2:2.

114 Cf. S. Haruta, “Aramaic, Parthian and Middle Persian,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. Daniel T. Potts; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 40.

for an empire-wide census order by Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1).¹¹⁵ Hence, Luke is historically less accurate than Matthew, so that we should prefer the latter's account. Matthew's account is all the more probable because a literary, intertextual explanation in terms of a modelling of the Star of Bethlehem on the Star of Balaam seems closed off.

In Matthew's narrative, these historical elements receive the following narratological adaptation. The magi are still called "magi," which is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, the framing of the Bethlehem narrative within the context of Matthew's depiction of Jesus as "the son of Abraham" would have made it very easy for Matthew to have styled the magi as Chaldeans, who were primarily known as astronomers and would also have better fitted Abraham's original background amongst the Chaldeans. Secondly, as we have seen, the magi were receiving bad press in the Flavian era as magicians. The fact that Matthew did not use the term "Chaldeans" seems to suggest that he received earlier, specific information about magi and consciously decided to maintain it. He also seems to have been aware of the primary identity of the magi as kingmakers, as his further adaptation shows.

Their journey, however, now takes the form of a direct journey to Jerusalem (not via Syrian Antioch), and their company now consists exclusively of magi. The alignment of the Sun, Moon and the five planets now becomes reduced to the essential planet, the regal planet Jupiter. That Matthew's star is indeed a planet is clear from his description of its movement as moving and standing still (Matt 2:9–10)—features that characterize the (apparent) movements of the outer planets Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn (see Peter Barthel's contribution to this volume, pp. 166, 169)—and the reference to Jesus' star as "his star" (Matt 2:2) makes sense as a reference to the regal planet Jupiter that lends the astrological interpretation of the alignment of 6 BCE its relevance for the birth of a king. The magi had witnessed the rising of this planet in the East (2:2,7,9; cf. 2:16). Now, however, these features, which have a background in astrological theory, are adapted in a narratological way, as if the star leads the magi on the way, going ahead of them and stopping over the relevant house in Bethlehem (2:9–10). Yet the relevant elements from astrological theory still remain visible, and the uniqueness of the event and the political situation of Parthian-Roman relations in Syria lend credibility to the essence of the narrative. What is very relevant for Matthew's further reflection on this episode is the magi's *proskynēsis* before Jesus (Matt 2:11). As we shall see further below, in Matthew's view, this prostration becomes the hallmark of true discipleship.

What also fits the historical context in Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth is Herod's restrained response to the magi's quest for the newborn King of

¹¹⁵ See R. Syme and B. M. Levick, "Sulpicius Quirinius, Publius," *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

the Jews. Herod, as a vassal king to the Romans, would not have dared to hurt Parthians, who were now, in the Augustan era, at peace with the Romans. As we have seen, Rome's indignant response to Herod's unauthorized war against the Nabataeans in 9 BCE had reminded Herod that he could not act on his own volition. Moreover, Herod was not entirely suspicious with regard to the Parthians, as he had employed Jewish-Babylonian cavalry from Parthian Babylonia. Matthew's description of Herod's surveillance of the magi is exactly what you would expect—not killing them, but surveilling them, and taking action when they do not return to him.

It could also well be that Matthew's story of Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem (Matt 2:16–18) resonates with Roman history.¹¹⁶ According to Suetonius, a similar incident threatened to occur at the very end of the Roman Republic in its transition to the empire. Suetonius writes,

According to Julius Marathus, a few months before Augustus was born a portent was generally observed at Rome, which gave warning that nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people; thereupon the senate in consternation decreed that no male child born that year should be reared; but those whose wives were with child saw to it that the decree was not filed in the treasury, since each one appropriated the prediction to his own family. (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars 2. The Deified Augustus* 94.3).

Whereas this murder was prohibited, Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem was not. Normally, scholars refer to the massacre of the Jewish boys by the Egyptian Pharaoh in the days of Moses (Ex 1:8–22) and suggest that Matthew's narrative of Herod's massacre of the boys of Bethlehem is literally modelled on this event. Yet this is not so self-evident. In the case of the Pharaoh's order to kill the newborn Hebrew boys, there is no age-qualification, but rather all newborn boys are to be killed immediately: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (Ex 1:22). Matthew's narrative and that of Suetonius, however, share the explicit qualification of the age of the boys concerned, and both are based on the portent involved. According to Matthew, Herod ordered his soldiers to kill "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi" (Matt 2:16). According to Suetonius, "the senate in consternation decreed that no male child born

¹¹⁶ For Herod and the children of Bethlehem, cf. J. W. van Henten, "Matthew 2:16 and Josephus' Portrayal of Herod," in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity* (eds. R. Buitenwerf, H. W. Hollander, and J. Tromp; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 101–22; R. T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem," *Novum Testamentum* 21 (1979): 98–120.

that year should be reared.” These two narratives resemble each other closely, although Suetonius wrote after Matthew. It is not unthinkable that the resemblance goes back to the historical contact between Herod and Augustus, who had befriended each other when the latter had the former appointed by the senate as king of the Jews. It is therefore rather likely that Augustus himself had related to Herod this autobiographical account about the portent that had predicted his birth as future emperor and about the (thwarted) attempt of the Republican senate to have the newborn male offspring of the senators killed. It is the appearance of the portent (not specified in the case of Augustus, but identified as the rising of his star in the East in the case of Jesus) that prompts the decision that all boys up to one or even two years old should be killed.

As I have already suggested, Matthew’s narrative about the magi does not remain isolated, but is taken up in the entire make-up of his gospel. Not only is this narrative preceded by the depiction of Jesus as “the son of Abraham,” his Chaldean ancestor, and the explicit inclusion of Babylon in his genealogy, but key issues in the narrative are taken up throughout the gospel. The magi’s *proskynēsis*, their Eastern prostration, before Jesus (Matt 2:11) is contrasted with the *proskynēsis* that the devil demands from Jesus during the temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11). Matthew takes up this theme from the sayings source Q. According to Matthew, the devil promises Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus will only perform one *proskynēsis* before the devil: “the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me (ἐάν πεσῶν προσκυνήσῃς μοι).’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God (Κύριον τὸν θεόν σου προσκυνήσεις), and serve only him”’” (Matt 4:8–10, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13; 32:43 LXX, 5:9; see Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #20). Taken up in Matthew’s framework of multiple *proskynēsis* passages, starting with the exemplary *proskynēsis* of the magi before Jesus, this passage about the *proskynēsis* that the devil demands of Jesus acquires specific significance. At the level of Matthew’s Gospel, and given his awareness of Roman-Parthian relations, it seems that the devil here gains the characteristics of Rome, insofar as it was Augustus who ideologically portrayed the Parthians’ voluntary surrender of the Roman standards in 20 BCE as their *proskynēsis* to the power of Rome, just as Nero also demanded that the Parthian-born Armenian king Tiridates would perform *proskynēsis* towards him. According to Dio Cassius, on the occasion of Tiridates’ coronation, Nero proclaims: “King of Armenia I now declare thee, that both thou and they may understand that I have power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].5.3–4). Within the framework of his gospel, Matthew’s criticism of the devil’s invitation to perform *proskynēsis* before him, drawn

from the sayings source Q, is reminiscent of that of Seneca in his *Octavia*, as we have already seen, in which he criticizes Nero, who forces Parthians “to kiss his bloody hand in supplication”:

Though he [i.e., Nero] may pile up a palace of marble and cover it with gold in his arrogance, though armed squadrons guard their commander’s door, though the depleted world sends him its immense resources, though Parthians seek to kiss his bloody hand in supplication (“*supplices dextram petant Parthi cruentam*”), though kingdoms bring him their riches, there will come a day and time when he will pay for his crimes with his guilty spirit and pay his enemies with his throat, deserted and thrown down and utterly destitute. (Seneca, *Octavia* 624–631)

At the level of Matthew’s Gospel, Seneca’s tyrant and Matthew’s devil seem conflated, and in this way the magi’s exemplary *proskynēsis* before Jesus is sharply contrasted with the *proskynēsis* before the absolutist, totalitarian power that Rome unduly claims. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ Sermon of the Mount (Matt 5:1–8:1), which immediately follows his description of Jesus’ temptation (Matt 4:1–11) and the beginning of his ministry (4:12–25), Jesus’ “kingdom of heaven” (a distinctively Matthean phrase) is fully contrasted with “the kingdoms of the world” (4:8). In contrast to the latter, the kingdom of heaven is a possession of “the poor in spirit” (5:3) and of “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (5:10); it is the meek who will inherit the earth (5:5) and the peacemakers who will be called children of God (5:9). In view of the importance of Matthew’s notion of the kingdom of heaven, the magi, in their function as kingmakers who are also interested in the fate of foreign rulers, fit his gospel particularly well.

Very relevant for our purposes is also the fact that Matthew explicitly says that this message resonates with the people of Syria: “his fame spread throughout all Syria [. . .]. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (Matt 4:24–25). It seems that Matthew takes Syria here in the broad geographical sense that we have also encountered in Strabo’s writings and includes in its definition, among others, the territories of Galilee, the Decapolis, and Judea. Matthew is the only gospel writer to refer to Syria as the area of Jesus’ activity, and this seems to confirm our contextualization of Matthew’s Gospel in the context of Syria as the area where Roman-Parthian relations were particularly relevant.

It is these crowds that Jesus is said to address from the mountain (Matt 5:1), from which he only descends after he has finished his instructions (8:1). Usually scholars say that Matthew depicts Jesus here as a second Moses, who instructs the Israelites in the laws of God after he has received them on the

Mount Sinai. Yet given Matthew's interest in the magi, another possibility could be contemplated. According to Dio Chrysostom, in a passage that we have partly seen before, it is Zoroaster (Zarathuštra)—the (alleged) founder of Zoroastrianism, which “made great advances” in the reign of the Parthian king Vologeses I (51/52–79/80 CE)¹¹⁷—who has received enlightenment on a mountain and shares his knowledge with the magi when he descends from it:

the Persians say that Zoroaster, because of a passion for wisdom and justice, deserted his fellows and dwelt by himself on a certain mountain; and they say that thereupon the mountain caught fire, a mighty flame descending from the sky above, and that it burned unceasingly. So then the king and the most distinguished of his Persians drew near for the purpose of praying to the god; and Zoroaster came forth from the fire unscathed, and, showing himself gracious toward them, bade them to be of good cheer and to offer certain sacrifices in recognition of the god's having come to that place. And thereafter, so they say, Zoroaster has associated, not with them all, but only with such as are best endowed with regard to truth, and are best able to understand the god, men whom the Persians have named magi, that is to say, people who know how to cultivate the divine power, not like the Greeks, who in their ignorance use the term to denote wizards. (Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 36: *The Borysthenitic Discourse* 40–41)

Is it conceivable that Matthew, by locating Jesus' instruction on a mountain, places his teaching in juxtaposition to Zoroaster's instruction of the magi? In Greco-Roman sources, Zoroaster is seen as the instructor into kingship and the giver of constitutions and laws. As we have already seen, according to (Pseudo-) Plato's *Alcibiades 1*, the magi, as the royal tutors of the Persian kings, teach their pupils “the magian lore of Zoroaster, son of Horomazes,” i.e., “the worship of the gods,” but also “what pertains to a king” (Plato, *Alcibiades 1* 121E–122A). And according to Plutarch, Zoroaster indeed ranks among “Zaleucus, Minos, Zoroaster, Numa, and Lycurgus, who piloted kingdoms and formulated constitutions” (Plutarch, *Numa* 4.7). Jesus' Sermon of the Mount also seems to be such a constitution, in which Matthew describes the constitution of Jesus' kingdom of heaven (for another Parthian element, see note 121 below). As we shall see, it is no coincidence that at the end of Matthew's Gospel the disciples are invited back to this mountain, where they perform their final *proskynēsis* before Jesus.

Despite Matthew's criticism of contemporary politics in Jesus' constitution of the kingdom of heaven, it would be wrong to describe Matthew as anti-Roman. As we have seen above, in his adaptation of the Q-narrative about the

¹¹⁷ Drower, Gray, and Levick, “Vologeses I,” *OCD*, 4th ed. (online).

Roman centurion of Capernaum (Matt 8:5–13 = Luke 7:1–10; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #85), Matthew seems to regard this Roman convert to Jesus as exemplifying those who come to Jesus from the West: “I tell you [—Jesus says to the centurion—], many will come from East and West and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:11–12). Whereas Luke talks here of “people [...] from East and West, from North and South” (Luke 13:29), Matthew speaks of people “from East and West.” At the level of Matthew’s Gospel, they seem to point at the magi who are from the East (2:1) and at the Roman centurion of Capernaum, who is from the West. John Riches and David Sim were certainly right in their innovative discussion of the Gospel of Matthew in its Roman imperial context,¹¹⁸ yet it now appears that this context is even broader, yet at the same time more specific: the Parthian-Roman relations of the first centuries BCE and CE, as especially experienced in Syria. Matthew shows himself neither anti-Parthian nor anti-Roman, but sees Jesus’ “kingdom of heaven” as different from earthly kingdoms because it transcends them by receiving people from East and West, Parthian magi and Romans. The kingdom of heaven assembles Christ-believing Jews, Parthians, and Romans into a new, non-political assembly (ἐκκλησία; Matt 16:18) in which the values of the kingdom of heaven are practiced.¹¹⁹

The characteristic of these members of the “kingdom of heaven” is that they perform *proskynēsis* to Jesus. This *proskynēsis*, first exemplified by the magi (Matt 2:11), and declined to the devil (Matt 4:9), is performed by the disciples toward Jesus aboard a ship in recognition of Jesus’ power over the elements. Only in Matthew’s adaptation of this narrative, taken over from the Gospel of Mark, is it said that the disciples perform *proskynēsis* towards Jesus, whereas according to Mark, they are only utterly astounded (Mark 6:51): “And those in the boat worshipped him (προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ), saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (Matt 14:33; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #147). Only at this point do the disciples offer Jesus the *proskynēsis* that the magi already offered him at the beginning. In that sense, the narrative of the magi is crucial to Matthew’s narrative.

118 See J. K. Riches and D. C. Sim, eds., *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

119 For more on the early Christian self-designation *ekklēsia*, see van Kooten, “Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ: The ‘Church of God’ and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησίαι) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Response to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley,” *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 522–48.

Another resonance of the magi in Matthew's Gospel may be found in the common interest of the magi and Matthew in the issue of Hades, the underworld. Matthew's Gospel is unique among the gospels in its specific reference to Hades. According to Matthew, Jesus, in response to Peter's confession that he is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16), tells Peter: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (πύλαι ᾗδου) will not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18; cf. Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #158). A similar interest in the realm of the dead also seems reflected in Matthew's claim, again unique among the gospels, that immediately after Jesus' death "[t]he earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matt 27:51b–53; cf. Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #347). Such an interest in Hades is, in Greco-Roman writings, also ascribed to the magi. According to Plutarch, the magi wear white robes, "arraying themselves against Hades and the powers of darkness, and making themselves like unto Light and Brightness" (Plutarch, *The Roman Questions* 270D). The magi's dealings with Hades are further emphasized by Suetonius, who, in his description of Nero's guilt over the murder of his mother, tells us that "He [i.e., Nero] even had rites performed by the magi, in the effort to summon her shade and entreat it for forgiveness" (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6. Nero 34.4). The magi are even explicitly associated with the power to open "the gates of Hades" in Lucian's *Menippus, or The Descent into Hades*, in which Menippus describes how he descended into Hades in order to explore what the best life consists of:

So one time, while I lay awake over these problems, I resolved to go to Babylon and address myself to one of the magi, the disciples and successors of Zoroaster, as I had heard that with certain charms and ceremonials they could open the gates of Hades (τοῦ Ἄιδου τὰς πύλας), taking down in safety anyone they would and guiding him back again. Consequently I thought best to arrange with one of these men for my going down, and then to call upon Teiresias of Boeotia and find out from him in his capacity of prophet and sage what the best life was, the life that a man of sense would choose. (Lucian, *Menippus, or The Descent into Hades* 6)

This importance of Hades to the magi is further confirmed by Diogenes Laertius, who refers his readers to Aristotle and others for this information:

Aristotle in the first book of his dialogue *On Philosophy* declares that the magi are more ancient than the Egyptians; and further, that they believe

in two principles, the good spirit and the evil spirit, the one called Zeus or Oromasdes, the other Hades or Arimanius. This is confirmed by Hermippus in his first book about the magi, Eudoxus in his *Voyage round the World*, and Theopompus in the eighth book of his *Philippica*. The last-named author says that according to the magi men will live in a future life and be immortal. (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book 1—Prologue 8–9)

These issues of the magi's mastery over "the gates of Hades" and their ability to bring people back from Hades seem to have been taken up in Matthew's Gospel and attributed to Jesus, who grants Peter the power to prevail against the gates of Hades and whose death causes the deceased saints in Jerusalem to arise from their tombs.

It is not altogether surprising that Matthew is so interested in the Parthian magi. Firstly, as we have seen, Matthew seems to be acquainted with the Jewish "Book of Similitudes" from *1 Enoch*, which also pays attention to the Parthians, although negatively, because of their conquest of Jerusalem in 40 BCE. Secondly, and crucially, the historical plausibility of the magi's meeting with Jesus suggests that Matthew took this event as highly relevant, just as Sulla regarded his own encounter with the magi as highly significant. It thus seems that Matthew, probably writing in Antioch, rewrites Jesus' biography from this perspective. This would accord well with modern insights that the gospels do not constitute a genre of their own, but are instances of Greco-Roman biography, which is intent on showing the essence of the person described by building on historical information.

The theme of proper *proskynēsis* toward Jesus, initiated by the magi, recurs twice more in Matthew's Gospel. According to Matthew, on the day of the resurrection, when Jesus meets his disciples, the latter "came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him (καὶ προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ)" (Matt 28:9). And finally, the theme returns in the subsequent, climactic passage at the very end of Matthew's gospel that describes Jesus' final meeting with his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, the mountain where Jesus had given his Sermon of the Mount:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had appointed them [i.e., to service in the kingdom of heaven]. When they saw him, they worshipped him (καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν προσεκύνησαν); but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς). Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching

them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:16–20; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #364)

This ending of Matthew’s Gospel is unique to Matthew, as Mark’s Gospel ends with the episode of the women at the tomb (Mark 16:1–8; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #352) and the ending of Luke’s Gospel, with its mention of Jesus’ ascension (Luke 24:44–53; Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* #365), forges a connection with the beginning of Luke’s second writing, The Acts of the Apostles, which repeats the episode of Jesus’ farewell to the disciples and his ascension in more detail (Acts 1:1–11).

Hence the ending of Matthew’s Gospel is unique and reflects the main pre-occupation of the gospel: the depiction of Jesus’ kingdom of heaven as a non-political alternative to the earthly kingdoms of Romans and Parthians. Although their relations were peaceful in the Augustan era, tensions between them in the Flavian era are again on the rise. It is against this background that Jesus statement, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Ἐδόθη μοι πάντα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς),” acquires special significance. It contrasts sharply with assertions such as that made by Nero, according to Dio Cassius, at Tiridates’ coronation in Rome: “King of Armenia I now declare thee, that both thou and they may understand that I have power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Epitome of Book 63[62].5.3–4). As we have seen, Matthew does not set Jesus’ kingdom of heaven in opposition to either Roman or Parthian kingdoms, but pictures Jesus’ kingdom as a non-earthly kingdom. This ending of the gospel portrays Jesus as the king of an alternative kingdom, something which seems to be recognized by the pagan philosopher Mara bar Serapion, who lived in Syria around the turn of the first century CE, and referred to Jesus as the “wise king” of the Jews who laid down his new laws.¹²⁰ It is this king for whom the disciples, at their final meeting with Jesus, perform their *proskynēsis*, although, interestingly, Matthew adds that some still doubted and refrained from prostrating themselves before Jesus: “When they saw him, they worshipped him (καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν προσεκύνησαν); but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). Those who do perform their *proskynēsis* before him, however, follow the example of the magi, the kingmakers of the Parthians, who were the first to perform such a *proskynēsis* before Jesus.

Far from being an isolated episode in Matthew’s Gospel, the magi’s visit to Jesus seems to be fundamental. The way this narrative resonates with the

120 R. E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 53–58.

historical conditions of the Augustan era seems to suggest that Matthew had access to traditions about the encounter between Parthian magi and Jesus and used this perspective to shape his gospel. Matthew's Gospel reflects the tensions of Parthian-Roman relations in the first centuries BCE and CE and uses them to characterize Jesus as the founder of an alternative, peaceful, non-political kingdom.¹²¹

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- B. The Magi
- C. Matthew
- D. Miscellaneous
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A Parthia

1 Parthia

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121 After the completion of this manuscript, it was brought to my attention by Matthias Helmer (Fulda) that the saying "do not throw your pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6) in Matthew's rendition of Jesus' Sermon of the Mount is probably Parthian, as it occurs in the Parthian writing "The Assyrian Tree" (*Draxt ī Asūrīg*) 51. See his paper "Perlen vor die Säue (Mt 7,6): Ein Sprichwort und seine Deutungen im Laufe der Zeit und in verschiedenen kulturellen Zusammenhängen", to be published in Marco Frenschkowski a.o. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), also with reference to G. Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 1960), 36–37. This would further reinforce my interpretation of Matthew's Gospel against a Parthian background.

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7 *The Magi*

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C Matthew

8 Matthew

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Epilogue

Peter Barthel and George van Kooten

After the colloquium, all of the participants agreed that it had been extremely important and fruitful to have the different disciplines together at one table, sharing their views on the topic in general, and on Molnar's theory in particular. All of the speakers came with well-prepared papers, which—with the exception of two—they edited in the months after the meeting to yield the chapters in this book. This epilogue aims to draw up the general conclusions of the colloquium, representing the fair but at the same time personal view of the editors, Barthel and van Kooten. All of the contributors saw a draft version of this epilogue, provided input, and suggested certain amendments. The combined view of these twenty contributors is what you will read below.

Let us first recall the lead question: Were there models available in the Greco-Roman period which explain the journey of astronomers/astrologers from A to B? This question was fine-tuned to focus on the Augustan era as the likely period of Jesus' birth and on A being "the East" and B being Jerusalem/Judea. We shall here summarize the various contributions in a structured fashion, describing the views of the experts on four simple questions:

- (1) What? (the astronomical phenomena);
 - (2) When? (the chronology of events);
 - (3) How? (the role of Near Eastern astronomy and astrology); and
 - (4) Why? (the evangelist's motivation).
-
- (1) What—Aaron Adair presented a skeptical view of Molnar's theory as well as other astronomical theories, believing that Matthew wrote pure fiction, while Peter Barthel described the pros and cons of various astronomical explanations and—noting certain specific details in the Matthew narrative—found plausible elements in the Molnar theory. Owen Gingerich gave a description of the theory of Johannes Kepler, and David Hughes went into substantial detail in his review of the various theories and declared his ongoing support for the Jupiter–Saturn triple conjunction theory. Michael Molnar gave a complete, to-the-point, and further developed description of his Jupiter-in-Aries theory, and Bradley Schaefer put that theory into further focus and perspective. In a specially added invited paper, Teije de Jong addresses an unknown 1920 publication

- by a Dutch scholar. He shows that many elements of Molnar's theory were already proposed and discussed in a number of early twentieth-century German and Dutch publications.
- (2) When—Most experts agreed on the time period of 7–5 BCE as the interval in which Jesus' birth must have taken place and went into more or less detail as to the rationale behind this argument.
 - (3) How—Pre-Hellenistic and Hellenistic astronomy and astrology, in Mesopotamia and the surrounding countries, was expertly dealt with by a number of specialists. John Steele reviewed astrological geography from Mesopotamian sources and gave a summary table of associations of astronomical constellations with Babylonian cities. Roger Beck, in his discussion of Mithraism, recalled magus Tiridates' expedition to meet Nero (66 CE) and suggested that Matthew cloned his magi story from that expedition. Mathieu Ossendrijver also noted the parallels with Tiridates, but also with the arrival of Alexander the Great in Babylon (where the latter was welcomed by Chaldeans and magi). Albert de Jong put strong emphasis on the king-making role of hellenized magi, and Stephan Heilen, in a very thorough analysis of the key elements of Molnar's theory, found major problems, particularly in the association of Aries with Judea on the basis of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. Antonio Panaino, in his detailed paper, also addressed the shortcomings of Molnar's theory and other naturalistic star theories; he stressed the importance of theology and "the myth of the framework." Alexander Jones dealt with prognostic Greco-Roman astrology and found no evidence that astrologers generated horoscopes *a priori* and then searched for individuals born on auspicious dates.
 - (4) Why—Annette Merz, an expert on the historical Jesus, considered the star story as historically unreliable because none of the basic historical details presupposed by the story—that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the time of Herod the Great as the child of a family that could claim Davidic descent—can be ascertained by a critical evaluation of the sources. Jan-Willem van Henten reviewed messianic expectations among the Jews in the Augustan era, in connection with similar Roman expectations. Kocku von Stuckrad drew attention to the fact that educated Jews like Herod did know about astrology; at the same time, he considers the Matthew story to be pure fiction, with a possible recollection of the triple conjunction event. George van Kooten examined in detail the relationships between Parthians, Romans, and Jews—particularly centered on Antioch, the likely location of Matthew's writing—and found a

surprisingly positive climate precisely in the Augustan era. Two specially added papers, by Helen Jacobus and Darrell Hannah, respectively, deal with Balaam's prophecy in early Jewish and Christian sources.

The meeting generated a variety of answers to the lead question. As for the historicity of the star story (whether it was based on events in the Hellenistic-Roman time period of interest), the views diverged. Nonetheless, all of the contributors agreed on the following three conclusions: (a) Mesopotamian and Babylonian astronomy/astrology expressed no interest in "the West" in pre-Hellenistic times; (b) on the other hand, astrology was very important in the Hellenistic-Roman period and in the region in question; (c) Matthew's motivation for writing or reporting the story is an important element.

Broadly speaking, three different categories of expert opinions about the historicity of Matthew's star narrative can be discerned: (1) the skeptical, pure fiction view: no historical star, no historical magi; (2) the minimalist view: historical magi without a star, or a historical star without magi; (3) the maximalist view: star as well as magi, both constituent parts of a coherent, interdependent whole. As for the third view, light versions suppose that the magi, during their visit(s) to the West (Syrian Antioch?), reported their view of a royal birth star, while strong versions in addition suppose that their journey to Herod in Jerusalem, and subsequently Bethlehem, did in fact take place. We shall deal with these categories in some detail:

- (1) The fully skeptical view (neither star nor magi) entails that Matthew wrote pure fiction, from a myth-making, prophecy-fulfilling, or metaphorical perspective (see Adair, Heilen, Merz, and Panaino).
- (2) The minimalist views of (a) visiting, king-making magi without a historic sky phenomenon or (b) a historic star without (traveling) magi do not consider the magi and the star as constituent parts of a coherent, interdependent event. The magi-without-star view supposes that the magi did visit (in Syria/Antioch or Judea/Jerusalem), but without any historical sky phenomenon, be it astronomical or astrological in nature. First-century politics include regular magi visits, and Matthew may have cloned the story of magus Tiridates, king of Armenia from the North (see Beck, Albert de Jong, and Ossendrijver), adding a fictitious star/comet and having it move across the sky. The star-without-magi view hypothesizes that Matthew used a pre-existing star story (for instance, the 7 BCE triple conjunction or the 66 CE occurrence of Halley's Comet) and added magi to the story, together with Old Testament elements to underline the divine

nature of Jesus (see von Stuckrad and Ossendrijver) or to stress Jesus' world-leadership (see van Henten). This view builds on the notion that astrology was not used to predict births, but only to interpret certain births that had already occurred.

Molnar's horoscope theory also belongs to this variant, the major difference obviously being that astrology is the key element. His paper in this book deals with the nature of the star and leaves the historicity issues of the biblical story for others to debate; his theory does not depend on any scenario or sequence of historical events linking Jesus with a horoscope. The only historicity he claims is the astrological portent of 17 April 6 BCE and the subsequent months. Heilen acknowledges that the planetary alignment of that morning can be interpreted as a portent of a royal birth within the rules of Hellenistic astrology but is at the same time critical for various reasons, one of them being that neither he nor Jones find examples of prognostic Hellenistic astrology, let alone prognostic magi expeditions. Doubts also remain concerning Molnar's geographical association of Aries with Judea and his take on Matthew's verb 'pro-ago' (see Heilen and Panaino). Molnar emphasizes that the biblical details about magi from the East, their audience with Herod, the slaughter of the innocents, and the timely birth of Jesus are unprovable and their (un)historicity has no bearing on his theory. The 17 April 6 BCE Jupiter is the portent for a new king of the Jews, regardless of whether magi reported this portent or not. Biblical details concerning the magi and Herod could have been fabricated years later around reports of the star. In Molnar's view, the star probably inspired the evangelist Matthew, who then constructed his personal account to attract astrology-practicing pagans for conversion to Christianity. The astrological portent serves this purpose perfectly; hence Molnar also belongs to the minimalist category of a star-without-magi. His view of the star as the natal horoscope from 6 BCE is shared by Schaefer and Gingerich. Schaefer consciously leaves two possibilities open: the origin of Matthew's star could either be a historical report passed along for around a century or a calculation/discovery of this horoscope by a latter-day Greek convert to Christianity seeking a celestial omen for the birth of a great king.

- (3) The maximalist view supposes a historic sky phenomenon as well as magi from the east visiting Syria and/or Judea and reporting it. Unlike the minimalist views, which argue that either a star or the magi constitute the historical basis for the Matthew narrative, the maximalist view argues that star and the magi have an intrinsic, rather than a wholly secondary, connection. The maximalist view also comes in two versions. On the one

hand, Hughes assumes that real magi travelled from the East to Jerusalem/Bethlehem on account of the 7 BCE triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. On the other hand, Barthel and van Kooten support the main thrust of Molnar's astrological theory, but modify it by contextualizing it within the historical conditions of the first century BCE. They consider Hellenistic astrology-in-context plausible, as it provides good explanations for specific details of the narrative, which are difficult to imagine as being pure fantasy (see Barthel). They furthermore suppose that—given the unique, relaxed Parthian-Roman relations in the Augustan era (see van Kooten)—magi came from Parthia to Syria/Judea with a political mission/agenda, but also with a certain star story; in that sense, magi and star are interdependent.

These models all have their pros and cons, as well as elements of personal taste. Only future multidisciplinary research can contribute to further understanding concerning the balance of history and fiction with regard to the Star of Bethlehem. Such potential research areas include: the historical Herod; the chronology of Jesus; Near Eastern astrology; the relations between Parthians, Jews, and Romans; and the nature and interdependence of the gospels. The interdisciplinary debate, which this Groningen Colloquium initiated, must continue.

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