

ANCIENT COSMOLOGIES AND MODERN PROPHETS

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The Star of Bethlehem and Luke's Shepherds: an Exploration of the Astrological Features of the Two Nativity Stories

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Abstract

A considerable amount of the research into the 'Star of Bethlehem' has assumed that it was a unique celestial event. Such an approach, however, has overlooked the possible celestial information contained in the other features of both nativities of the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke. This paper considers these other attributes. It adopts an archaeo-astronomical and astrological approach to both narratives using the sky for the period of 07-06 B.C.E. as a primary document, as well as the Mesopotamian and Hellenistic astrological literature of the time. In the case of the Matthean pericope - the stories in Matthew's gospel - this approach suggests that the Star of Bethlehem is the title of a story rather than a single bright apparition. In the case of Luke's pericope it reveals that the attributes of the shepherds, angel, and the notion of a manger or a place for animals can be viewed as a Mesopotamian-influenced sky-watching discourse.

KEYWORDS: Star of Bethlehem, Astrology, Nativity

POVZETEK

Vec raziskav Betlehemske zvezde izhaja iz predpostavke, da je bil to enkraten nebesni dogodek. Vendar pa tak pristop ne upošteva nekaterih nebesnih podatkov, lei jib vsebujejo opisi Kristusovega rojstva v evangelijih po Mateju in Luku. V clanku obravnavamo te podatke z arheoastronomskim in astroloskim pristopom, pri cemer kot primami vir uporabljamo podatke o nebu za leti 7 in 6 pro n. st., upostevamo pa tudi mezopotamsko in helenisticno astrolosko literaturo tistega casa. V primeru odlomka iz evangelija po Mateju pokazemo, da je Betlehemska zvezda prej naslov zgodbe kot pa enkraten pojav. V primeru odlomka iz evangelija po Luku pa se je izkazalo, da so atributi pastirjev, angela ter pojemjaslic oz. hlevcka lahko oblike opisa neb a, kot so ga tolmacili Mezopotamci.

KUUCNE BESEDE: Betlehemska zvezda, astrologija, Kristusovo rojstvo

The discussion around Christ's birth mythology connected to the Star of Bethlehem is a well-ploughed field. Mark Kidger (1999: 20) lists three themes contained in these discussions: the 'star' was a miracle, or a political construct, or a real celestial event. However according to Nicola Denzey (2003: 211), the theme of a political construct also contains the other two themes of miracle and celestial event. She argues that the collapsing of these themes was motivated by the desire of the largely anti-astrological early Christian writings to distance Christ's birth from any astrological association. Denzey (2003: 216-7) points out that the earlier Christian writers used Matthew's text to link Christ's birth to the messianic prophecy of Balaam (Numbers 24.17): 'A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel, ..' (RSV). Denzey maintains that rather than the 'star' being a traceable celestial event, the 'star' was as a miraculous event, real or otherwise, used as a political construct to promote the cause of Christianity. In contrast, Tim Hegedus (2003: 91) considers that the 'star' was real and was viewed as astrologically significant which propelled Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-117) to reframe it. Ignatius wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians* 19.2 that the Star of Bethlehem was as such that 'all the other stars together with the sun and the moon become a chorus for the star, and it outshone them all with its light.' Hegedus (2003: 91) points out that for Ignatius the 'star' was a miracle that 'set people free from the bonds which held them fast, including magic and astrological fate.'

There is an important corollary to the argument of the 'star' being a celestial! astrological event rather than solely a miracle. If the star was real, then it offers the possibility of being able to trace an approximate date of birth for Christ. However, researchers engaged in this line of investigation tend to look for a suitable event that was visually spectacular to warrant the Ignatian description of the Star of Bethlehem. This paper also takes this latter path; however, 'spectacular' is not pursued in a visual sense but rather in an astrological sense. For as Denzey (2003: 220) points out, 'modern scientific interpreters of the Star of Bethlehem consistently miss this point,' that the significance of any celestial event, if it did occur, needs to be judged through the lens of the astrological discourse of the Magi rather than the modern notions of spectacular. Hegedus (2003: 83,87), agrees and also considers that the astrological tradition which viewed the star as significant belonged to the astrology of the Magi and also, as noted above, the prophet Balaam. As Hegedus puts it, Ambrose of Milan (330-397) cited these Magi as the ancestors of Balaam while Origen of Adamantius (184/5-253/4) made the association explicitly:

... those who were then living in Mesopotamia, among whom Balaam had a great reputation and who are known to have been disciples in his art. It is said that the race of Magi descends from him, and that their institution flourishes in eastern lands, and that they [the Magi] had copied among them all of Balaam's prophecies.

Thus, following Hegedus' argument, the astrological potency of any 'star' would be defined by the astrological traditions of the eastern lands of Mesopotamia.

However, before exploring this Mesopotamian style of astrology and its relationship to the two nativity stories of Christ's birth it is useful to visit some other opinions

around the nature of the 'star'. Historically it is accepted that Christ was born before the death of King Herod. Herod's death is generally acknowledged as being around 04 B.C.E. (Hoehner 1989: 107) and thus any celestial event needs to occur some years before that date. Following Ignatius' lead Origen suggested in *Contra Celsum*, 1.58, that the 'star' was a comet. Some thirteen hundred years later Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) re-opened the debate when he speculated that the Star of Bethlehem was linked to a rare conjunction of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. He calculated that such a conjunction of the three superior planets (Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), which he witnessed in 1603, also occurred in 07/06 B.C.E. and was rare enough - 796.4 years between occurrences - to warrant the story of the 'star' (Sachs and Walker 1984: 43-44). Kepler's argument was supported by David Hughes (Hughes 1979) and later by Paul Maier (1989: 119). However, Martin Wells (2009: 3) argues that Kepler's argument has been misrepresented for, 'Kepler never suggested that the triple conjunction (three planet conjunction) was the Star of Bethlehem and only believed that the Star had been a nova that the conjunction of 7-6 BCE had created.' Another strong candidate for the 'star' was the triple conjunction - occurring three times - of Jupiter/Saturn which happened in 07-06 B.C.E. (Brown 1993: 611-2; Sinnott 1986; Ferrari-D'Occhieppo 1989: 48-49). This triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred immediately *before* the three planet conjunction noted by Kepler. Other scholars promote the idea that the 'star' was a supernova (LTipler 2005).

In contrast Michael Molnar (1999) uses the evidence of an Antioch coin. He suggests the year 06 B.C.E. for the appearance of the 'star' due to the fact that the coin appeared to celebrate the passage of Jupiter through the stars of Aries while being twice eclipsed by the moon. Citing Claudius Ptolemy (c. 85-165) and the Roman lawyer/astrologer Firmicus Maternus (c.330), Molnar argues that this event would have been of sufficient importance for astrologers to announce a sovereign birth and Jupiter as the Star of Bethlehem.

Throughout these diverse arguments the idea of a single bright heavenly object has blinded researchers and prevented them looking for celestial information amongst the other attributes of the two gospel stories. There is an unquestioned assumption that the Magi are real individuals carrying real gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Any discussion about the nature of the shepherds in Luke's pericope is focused on the first century B.C.E. herding habits of shepherds around Jerusalem (Kidger 1999: 63). Similarly the announcing angel who appears as a bright apparition to the shepherds is largely ignored and the cattle, manger, and stable settings are assumed to be historical (Crossan 1991: 372) or used to imply Christ's humble origins (Brown 1993: 418ft). However, as Charles Harrison (2009: 12) argues, to understand great art, whether image or story, all of the components of the piece must be considered. In applying Harrison's common sense suggestion to the nativity stories all of the attributes of these stories can potentially form part of the heavenly witness to the birth of Christ. Thus Matthew's pericope can be viewed as one single canvas - star and story attributes - and combined to produce a different view of the Star of Bethlehem. Additionally Luke's pericope, approached using the same methodology, allows for questions to be asked around the possible heavenly nature of the shepherds and the cattle.

Revisiting the Gospel Nativities

There are two different stories of Christ's nativity. According to Wells (2009: 17-19), the gospel of St. Matthew is commonly accepted to have been written between 75 C.E. and 90 C.E. with the caveat that such dating is speculative as it is based on associations with external events. Wells (2009: 39) points out that there are debates on whether Luke's gospel drew on Matthew's or on a common first century source. However, he stresses that both gospels record 'the witness of the heavens to Jesus' birth'. In Matthew's text (2.1-11) the narrative is focused on the protagonists, the gift-carrying Magi, and their interaction with King Herod. The 'witnessing by the heavens' is by the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem. Matthew's gospel (RSV) states,

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Hegedus (2003: 83) suggests that seeing the star in the east would more correctly be translated from the Hebrew as seeing his star 'at its rising'. After their encounter with Herod they secretly depart to travel to Bethlehem. As they leave Jerusalem,

... Lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

The gospel by Saint Luke (Luke 2: 1-20) gives a different narrative (RSV). Luke's gospel is, as Wells (2009: 45-46) puts it, 'peaceful and low-key' in contrast to Matthew's 'threat driven' narrative filled with the tension of Herod's reaction to the new born child.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, Lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

... And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

There are differing arguments by scholars concerning these two pericopes. Hegedus, as cited earlier, sees Matthew's pericope as an attempt to link Christ's birth to the messianic prophecy of Balaam. However, Michael Goulder (1989: Vol I., 249) argues that Luke's gospel was written as a reaction against the political undertones of Matthew's pericope. In considering Luke's nativity story, scholars view the shepherds in three ways: as symbolising Christ's humble origins (McNicol et al. 1996: 64); as the notion of the Lamb of God; or as Christ's birth being announced by the symbolic role of 'everyman'/the shepherds (Brown 1993: 418ft). In contrasting the two pericopes Ed Sanders and Margaret Davies (1989: 290) argue that Luke's pericope was 'closer to Hellenistic history writing than that of Matthew and Mark.' This is an argument carried forward by Michael Crossan (1991: 372) who considers that Luke's pericope is a form of prophetic historical narrative. That the two gospels are a form of history is also the argument voiced by Kenneth Bailey (1995: 363-7) who considers that both Matthew's and Luke's gospels were transmitted through time as oral history, repeated tales, before finally being committed to writing by the latter part of the first century.

In brief, in Matthew's text it is the Magi who announce the birth of the new king. This announcement is based on the Magi's astrological interpretation of a bright star which they have been following. Upon arriving in Jerusalem they ask about the whereabouts of the new king. They then leave by secrecy to follow the star and arrive in the 'house' of the new born king to whom they give gifts. The Luke pericope contains very different elements. These elements include shepherds, an angel, cattle, and a manger and, to reiterate an earlier point argued by Crossan, Luke's pericope is suggestive of a more prophetic historical narrative. For Luke it is the shepherds who announce the birth to the world, not the Star of Bethlehem.

Astrology at the time of the Nativity

James H. Charlesworth (1983: Vol I., 479) suggests that, 'Astrological speculation could well have been linked with Jesus' birth by Jewish Christians well before Matthew wrote his account of the 'star'. The first point to consider in exploring these 'astrological speculations' is that Christ was born at night. This point seems to be largely overlooked by scholars, yet a night setting allowed Ignatius to link Christ's birth with the star of Balaam's prophecy as one needs the darkness of night to reveal the glory of any 'star'. However, ascribing a night birth retrospectively for such a potentially divine figure is questionable as, generally; a day birth carried more prestige. At that time the sun was viewed as divine (Hegedus 2007: 12) and as Nicholas Campion (2008: 258-9) notes, the sun was associated with 'sustained imperial power'. The Roman emperor Augustus (63 B.C.E.-14 C.E.) who was the emperor at the time of Christ's birth, was said to have been born at sun rise (Barton 1995: 35). The Emperor Nero (c.37-63 C.E.) who wished to be seen as a solar deity, was also accorded a dawn birth (Snyder 1964: 506). Thus ascribing a nocturnal setting for the birth of Christ removes the potentiality of the divine options available for a diurnal birth. However, a night birth would be the choice if the story-tellers were recalling the view of the sky at night.

Yet Raymond Brown (1993: 173) asserts that Matthew's pericope contains no astrology. Citing Claudius Ptolemy, he states that the 'principle of astrology is to establish a horoscope based on the sign of the zodiac that is rising in the eastern horizon when a person is born.' He assumes that the astrology of the day was purely horoscopic, yet this is not the case. To appreciate the problem and with an awareness that it is the Magi who ascribed astrological significance to the 'star', it is worth looking at some Mesopotamian Babylonian based astrology.

The sky as narrative was a part of the Mesopotamian sky lore of the seventh century B.C.E. The planetary movements in relationship to each other as well as the constellations were reported in a poetic, anthropomorphic manner. For example, a letter written in the seventh century B.C.E. titled the 'Rising of Venus' states 'What is this love by which Ishtar loves the king my lord and has [sent] the very best to the king my lord!' (Hunger 1992: Paragraph 27). Here Hunger equates Venus with the goddess Ishtar. Such a personification of the planets was not unusual. In her discussion on this form of celestial divination, Francesca Rochberg (2004: 39) argues that the moon, sun, and the planets could all be referred to using 'anthropomorphic personification'. Rochberg (1998: 44) also comments that the synodic phenomena were of key importance in this style of astrology. For Venus and Mercury, this was their visibility as a morning rising or evening setting phenomena, while for Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, the key times were when they were in the positions of morning rising or setting, or acronychal (evening) rising or setting.

It is this style of Mesopotamian visual astrology that, Campion argues, persisted into the development of Hellenistic astrology of the first century C.E. Campion (2008: 173) comments that 'different forms of astrology emerged, some naturalistic, others magic. Some assumed a Pythagorean cosmos ruled by number, others maintained direct observation of the sky'. This argument is also made by Michael Astour (Astour 1966) who argues that early Hebrew cosmology drew on Mesopotamian origins; furthermore Rochberg (1998: 2) points to elements of 'transmission and borrowing from Mesopotamia found in specific elements of Greek astrology'. Jim Collins (2010: 8) comments that based on evidence from Jewish and early Syriac traditions, this mixed style of astrology with its visual sky narratives was known to the early Jewish and Christian authors. Moreover in considering the influence of Mesopotamian thinking on Hellenistic astrology David Pingree (1998: 131) states that the 'tradition of celestial omens continued into medieval Sogdian' [astrological literature], a script which remained in use until around the tenth century. Also supporting this argument A.J. Sachs (1976: 379 ff) points to the last cuneiform astrological texts being dated between 31 C.E.-75 C.E. Actual evidence of Mesopotamian influence on Greek horoscopic astrology is seen in the work of the first century astrologer Titus Pitenius. Roger Beck (2010: 6) notes Pitenius who in his delineation of a horoscope referred to the constellation of the Swallows, a Mesopotamian constellation. Hence at the time of Christ's birth and the century that followed in which the gospels were written, astrology was still a loose mixture of the Hellenistic horoscopic and anthropomorphic Mesopotamian sky narratives.

In returning to Matthew's text, Simo Parpola (2001: 102) states that this Mesopotamian style of astrology would have been the astrology used by the Magi in Matthew's

pericope. He points to the existence of four clay Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets dated from 08 B.C.E. which list the forthcoming Jupiter/Saturn conjunction. Hegedus also agrees with Parpola that this was the style of astrology used by the Magi of Matthew's text. Hegedus (2007: 202) states that the astrological tradition of the Magi was focused into astrological omens such as the rising of a star or planet for, 'It was this more ancient form of astrology, rather than horoscopic astrology, in which the Magi were engaged'. With these arguments in mind, if the Star of Bethlehem was a spectacular astrological event, then it would not conform to Brown's expectations of a Greek horoscopic tradition but more logically be represented in the literature as a story drawn from an oral tradition based on a Mesopotamian narrative style of astrology with its anthropomorphising tendencies.

The Celestial Events of 07 to early 06 B.C.E.

When one stands on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem one can technically gain a clear 360° view of the horizon and thus the heavens. The height above sea level is around 745 meters and one is surrounded by mountains of a similar height which are set at a distance of 1 to 2 kilometres. The exception to this is when one looks east to south east where the view is unbroken for 50 to 70 kilometres. From this location Bethlehem, at 775 meters above sea level, lies to the south east at a bearing of 203°44' and a direct distance of around 9 kilometres (see Figure 2).

We know that Herod had access to priests and scribes for, as Matthew (2.4) wrote, Herod drew on the 'chief priests and scribes of the people' to ponder the announcement made by the arrival of the Magi (RSV). In 07 and early 06 B.C.E these priests and scribes would have been able to witness an unusual series of celestial events. The beginning of 07 B.C.E commenced with Jupiter and Saturn lying within 7° of each other, being seen as the heliacal rising event- returning to visibility by being observed to rise just before the sun - of the spring equinox. As the year progressed towards the summer solstice, Jupiter and Saturn could be seen culminating (in the south) at dawn. As the winter solstice arrived Mars began to move towards Jupiter and Saturn so that all three superior planets were in a line in the western sky and seen to be following the setting sun. Mars, setting first, was only 45° from Jupiter and Saturn. This in itself was not visually spectacular. However, it heralded a forthcoming spectacular astrological event. Within a few months Mars had moved to within 6° of Jupiter and Saturn. This clustering of all three superior planets last occurred in 802 B.C.E. It is reasonable to believe that the scribes and/or priests in Jerusalem would have been aware of this unprecedented celestial event.

In addition, another sky event was unfolding. Venus was a bright morning star from early December 07 through to April 06 B.C.E and as the three superior planets drew together in the west at sunset, Venus, as a morning star, shone brightly in the east at sunrise. These two celestial events were actually straddling the sun (see Figure 1) and thus, due to the movement of the sun, the three planets would be seen to follow the bright Venus. The three planets would, firstly, be observed setting in the west at sunset and then they would disappear, only reappear later in the east, somewhat separated, but rising before the sun.

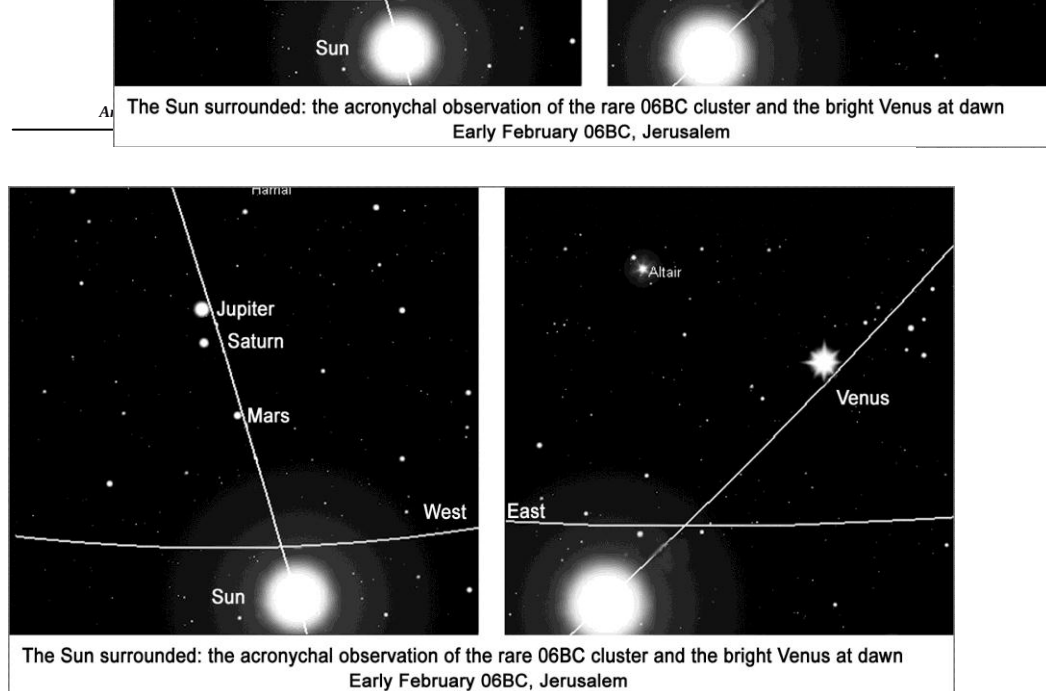


Figure 1: The Straddling of the Sun in early 06 B.C.E, The three planet cluster 'followed' the sun, as they could only be seen when low in the west and setting. At dawn, rising before the sun, a bright 'hovering' Venus was the morning star (also see Figure 2 for more details concerning Venus).

Adding to this dynamic, Venus as the bright morning star was in the midst of one of its irregular retrograde loops and may have been viewed by the priests and scribes of Jerusalem as moving in unexpected ways. Venus has an eccentric retrograde pattern which is only repeated every 243 years. The particular retrograde loop with which Venus was engaged gave it a unique set of visual features. When it rose, like any pre-dawn planet at that time of the year, its rising point moved southward along the horizon. Additionally, every night it was also seen to move southward over the top of the distant mountains via its diurnal movement. From early December 07 B.C.E and over the next few weeks Venus rose and grew in radiance to achieve a magnitude of -4.6. By late December Venus was gaining an altitude of around 35° before being lost in the light of the rising sun. By February 06 B.C.E, as the three superior planets drew within 6° of each other, Venus began to emphasise one particular azimuth (see Figure 2). At every consecutive predawn, Venus rose and 'paused'-when it reached the same bearing before being lost in the sun's light. This 'hovering' behaviour was caused by Venus moving retrograde towards the sun's position at a speed which maintained the necessary angle of separation to allow for a constant azimuth to be achieved by Venus each night. Adding to this event, and due to the particular retrograde loop in which Venus was engaged, the radiating morning star also appeared to lose altitude while holding this bearing. Thus the observation of Venus over its retrograde period was that it appeared as a bright morning star of magnitude -4.6, and moved southward over respective mornings. Then by January at successive dawns it appeared to hover on the azimuth bearing of 139°-143° and by mid-January it began to drop down from an altitude of 35° to that of 25° on

that very bearing. Venus did not 'hover' directly over Bethlehem which was 60° of azimuth to the south of the Venus hover-point when viewed from Jerusalem. However, Bethlehem may have been the most logical settlement lying to the south of Jerusalem, as it was already cited by the prophecy of Micah (5 1.2) which stated that from Bethlehem a ruler of Israel would come forth. Indeed Brown (1993: 516) argues that the evidence for Christ's birth to have occurred in Bethlehem is weak and that the event was located there retrospectively to link the birth with the Micah prophecy.

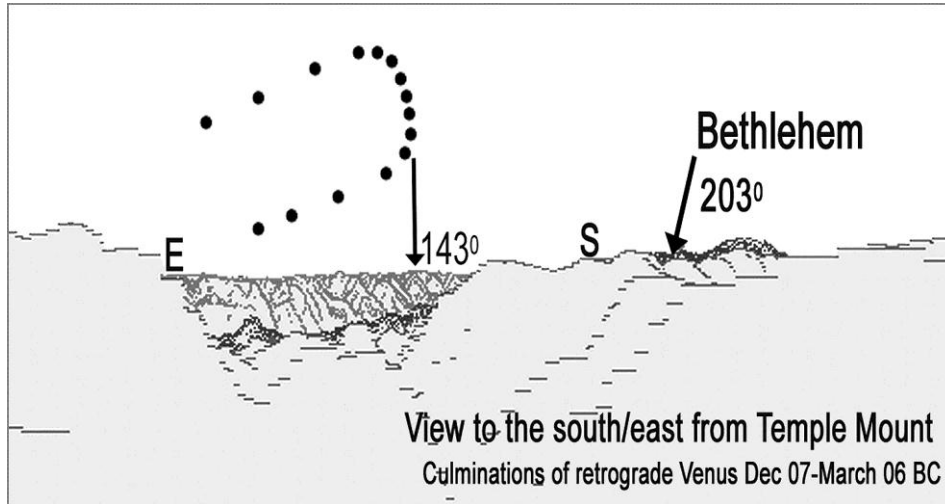


Figure 2: View from the Temple Mount, Jerusalem to the south/east. The position reached by Venus at sunrise (sun 5° depression below the horizon) from 1 Dec 07 to 24 March 06 B.C.E. Each marker is separated by seven days from the previous. Venus, at a magnitude of around -4.6, rose, moved south and then hovered and lowered over an azimuth bearing of around 143° . The altitude scale is compressed.

Matthew's Version of the Nativity - Star and Magi

If these gospel stories are, as Bailey suggests, oral history or repeated tales within the different Jewish/Christian communities, then the identity of the Magi in Matthew's text can be reconsidered. Matthew tells the reader that the Magi, who have been following a bright star, arrive in Jerusalem and announce to Herod that a new king has been born. This, as a historical fact, is dubious. As Wells notes (2009: 267), Herod was in the last few years of his reign and had become so paranoid that he had already murdered his wife and son for fear that they were going to overthrow him. Additionally, at this time the practice of astrology was being challenged under Roman law (Cramer 1996: 238). Thus any astrologer traveling through a Roman province would, logically, have been discreet. With Herod's paranoia, his murderous reactions, and the current Roman law all in mind it suggests that Matthew's claim that the 'wise men' go to Herod's court and pronounce that the King of the Jews has been born is, at the very least, questionable.

A further point to note concerning the identity of the Magi is the fact that they are carrying gifts for the new-born king. Within the early Hellenistic astrological traditions

we find a theme of planets near the sun giving power to the sun. In his *Tetrabiblos* Ptolemy defined the term *doryphory* - spear bearers - used when planets were grouped around a luminary and deemed to bestow power to that luminary (Ptolemy 1969: Bk. III Ch.V). Although Ptolemy wrote some fifty to seventy years after the time of the gospels, he drew his astrological thinking from earlier authors. As Mark Riley states, 'the general procedures found in the *Tetrabiblos* are quite similar to those found in all ancient astrological writings'. Furthermore as Owen Gingerich (2002: 70-71), argues Ptolemy's goal within astrology was to bring its already established techniques under the control of mathematics. Hence Ptolemy's astrological techniques potentially derived from astrologers such as Berosus (c.375 BCE), the Babylonian priest considered to be the first to introduce natal astrology into Greece, (Schmidt and Hand 1994: 50) or Geminus (151 BCE) who wrote on astrological aspects and star phases, similar to Ptolemy's later work on star phases (Schmidt and Hand 1994: 50). In returning then to Ptolemy's writing on the *doryphory* it can be assumed that he was discussing an already established astrological technique. The origins of such a tradition, could well have been the planetary phases (synodic phenomena), noted by Rochberg earlier, within seventh century Mesopotamian astrological practice. Ptolemy wrote of the *doryphory* that if it was made up of the three superior planets of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, then the level of empowerment that could be bestowed on the luminary was sufficient to mark the birth of a great king (Ptolemy 1969: Bk IV Ch III).

With this in mind, combined, as already discussed, with the nature of the astrology of the period and the actual sky events of that time, an alternative reading of Matthew's text can be explored. One can speculate that the priests and scribes of Jerusalem witnessed the 'arrival' of the Magi or wise men by witnessing the unprecedented arrival of the three superior planets setting after the sun. They did not come from the east as they were acronychal settings; nevertheless the eastern origins of the Magi may have been a reference to astrology being knowledge that came from the east, as noted earlier by Origen, or alternatively, that the three planets were heading towards the east. Matthew then informs the reader that the Magi follow the 'star' to find the new king. Indeed by March 06 B.C.E the three superior planets had disappeared from view - possibly explaining the reference to the Magi leaving Herod's palace in secret - and then later around the following May/June they reappeared in the 'house' of the new king, in the east, rising before the sun. The idea of the 'house' of the king, if viewed astrologically, would be the statement that the Magi had moved into the place or sign in which the sun was located (Valens 1994: i). Having arrived in the sun's house, the Magi now act as 'spear-bearers' and give their 'gifts' to the sun.

Looking at the story historically one can propose that the scribes and/or priests of Jerusalem noted the astrologically spectacular clustering of the three superior planets, the bright Venus and the movement of the three planets to 'follow' the Venus. At some point the scribes inform Herod of a threat to his rule, basing their argument in the astrology of the Magi. The three planets, with their worrying implications, then disappear for a period only to reappear in the east rising before the sun. The paranoid Herod reacts to the scribes' reading of the sky and orders the massacre of the male children under two years old. This act effectively embeds the story into the Jewish community's oral history and thereby plants the seed for Matthew's pericope.

Thus the 'Star of Bethlehem' becomes the title of a story, a sky narrative of planets rising and setting, coming and going, which become embedded into the oral history of the community by the actions of a ruthless king.

Luke's version of the Nativity - Shepherds and Cattle

Luke's narrative is quite different but it is also a story of the 'witnessing by the heavens' of Christ's birth. Luke's version of the nativity may also be based in a Mesopotamian informed sky. There were eighteen constellations that made up the Mesopotamian sky, and three of these seem to be the focus of Luke's pericope. The constellation Orion was known as the True Shepherd of Anu (Rochberg 2004: 108) where Anu either referred to the stars which occupied the ecliptical belt or all the stars of the heavens, thus Orion was the shepherd of the 'flock' of the stars. Orion is situated south of the ecliptic with Aurgia, the Charioteer, above it to the north. The hook of Aurgia was considered to be the Crook of the True Shepherd of Anu (Black and Green 1992: 54) (Figure 3). From a Mesopotamian perspective this part of the sky was a large image of a shepherd and his crook which stretched across the line of the ecliptic. In the seventh century B.C.E. the priest Bullutu wrote of a bright Venus in the Crook as follows: 'the foundation of the throne will become stable' (Hunger 1992: 73). Another letter of the same era warns the king of a potential rival when it was noted that a bright Venus 'radiated' the stars of the True Shepherd, translated here by Hunger as Orion: 'If the stars of Orion keep gaining radiance: an important person will become too mighty and commit evil- Venus stands in front of Orion' (Hunger 1992: 143). The shepherd with his crook was a powerful sky entity and activity within it, such as crescent moons or a bright Venus and/or planetary movement among these stars, spoke of disruptions and/or an outsider gaining power. Next to the True Shepherd of Anu stood the Great Bull of Heaven or the Cosmic Bull, the constellation Taurus (Rochberg 1998: 28). Celestial events which occurred amongst the stars of the Bull foretold of great success or great disaster, for it was considered to be a storm god (Black and Green 1992: 47-50) who created new pathways through disruption. In this way the heavenly Bull was seen as a cosmogonic constellation.

As already discussed story-telling was a part of the astrology of the first century C.E. In returning to Beck's (2010: 3) discussion of the Greek horoscope from 81 C.E. by the astrologer Titus Pitenius, Beck shows that Pitenius was acting as 'story-teller, and spoke of the planets as agents *doing things*' [Beck's italics]. Beck (2010: 6) specifies that

Titus Pitenius enriches the celestial story by personalizing the adventures of the seven [planets], each along his or her own path. He does this, not as an astronomer would do, by specifying latitude as well as longitude, but by introducing stars and parts of constellations near which or through which the planets pass.

The astrologer Titus Pitenius was thus echoing his Mesopotamian astrological roots from the seventh century B.C.E. In such dynamic story-telling astrology Erica Reiner (1999: 28) claims that 'predictions were made based on one planet approaching another, or nearing,

reaching, or passing another' such that the planet's journey produced a sky narrative. Beck shows that Pitenius, some seven hundred years later, has taken the same approach, using the imagery of the constellations like stage sets into which the characters (the planets) produce the natal story by traveling backwards and forwards, and meet or pass above or below one another while weaving in and out of the different settings of the stage. This is what Beck (2006: 153-164) defined as 'star-talk' in his discussion on Roman Mithraism.

Returning to Luke's gospel with this star lore in mind, other options for interpretation of the story are apparent. Luke reports that shepherds see a bright angel, and are informed by this heavenly event that a new king is born in a manger. In searching for celestial events occurring amongst the stars of the Shepherd, the evening of 30 April 07 B.C.E. reveals a promising sky story. It was the beginning of a new month as the crescent moon was visible just after sunset (Figure 3). [This particular month was going to contain a visible lunar eclipse which notably was not referred to by Luke]. However, as the sun set, the evening star which had been growing in radiance for some time, hung amongst the stars of the True Shepherd of Anu and was emphasised by the crescent moon. Additionally the sun, symbolic of the king in Mesopotamian astrology, was located in the Bull of Heaven. Such a combination could speak of a new king emerging who was empowered and a threat to any established order. To report this sky narrative one would talk of a radiating bright light

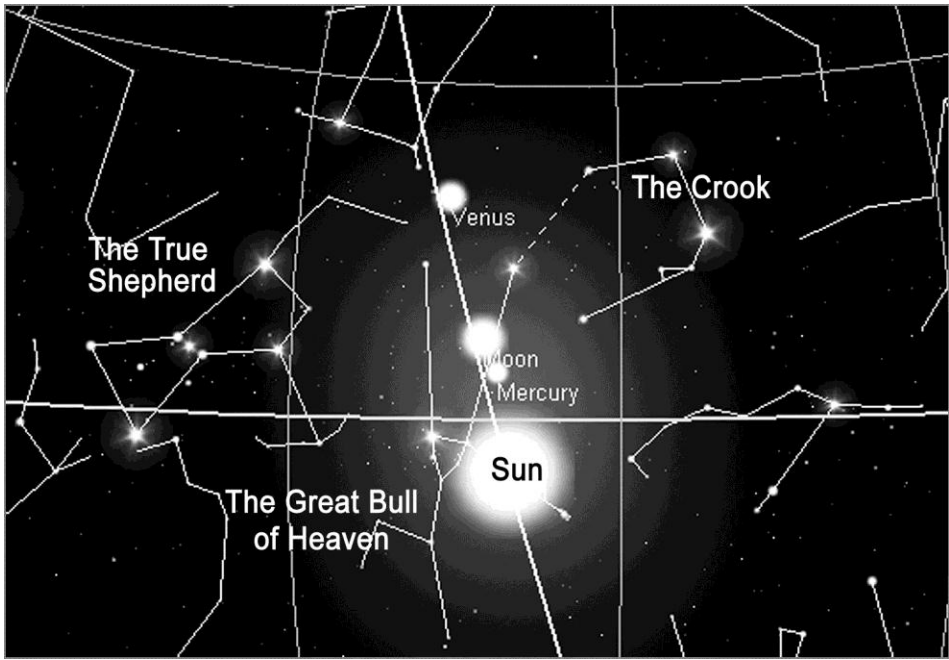


Figure 3: The crescent new moon of 30 April, 07 occurred with an evening star Venus at magnitude -3.92 in the stars of the True Shepherd of Anu, while the sun, the king, sat in the stars of the Great Bull of Heaven. The solid white line just above the sun is the horizon.

amongst the stars of the Shepherd and a new king located with cattle or in a place of animals. To be sure, this sky story is not the great sky narrative reflected in Matthew's account. However, awareness of the contemporary cultural view of the sky suggests that Luke's narrative may be a more localised sky description of the events at that time.

In sum, this paper speculates that the two nativity pericopes of Matthew and Luke are two distinct astrological narratives. This speculation is based on a consideration of the two gospel stories through the cultural milieu of the astrology of that period. Luke's narrative is suggestive of a birth 'horoscope' using what Beck would define as 'star-talk' and carried forward in an oral tradition until finally placed into text in the late first century. Matthew's pericope relates to the observation by advisers in Herod's court of an astrologically spectacular sky narrative which became embedded into oral history through the paranoid actions of Herod. This drama was, within a few generations, politicised by Ignatius, resulting in the story being symbolised, or collapsed, under the title of the *Star of Bethlehem*.

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