

A Bible Detective Looks for the Star of Bethlehem

ABSTRACT: A study of the Star of Bethlehem starting with the premise the star the magi called “his star” was the star of which Jesus said I am the Bright Morning Star. Before Jesus’ birth, that star marked a picture in the sky of the Lion of the tribe of Judah receiving the scepter of world rule. After Jesus’ birth, when the magi were in Bethlehem, that star again marked a picture of a sacrificed lamb in the sky, the star proceeded to point out the child Jesus during the day as that lamb.

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Why is this theory of the star of Bethlehem better than any other theory? Most who seek to identify this star are astronomers who search the sky at the time they believe Jesus was born looking for something that fits the story in Matthew of the magi or wise men seeking a newborn king. The story of star of Bethlehem comes from the Bible not some astronomical or astrological text. Since the Bible provides a great deal of self-interpretive help, using the Bible to understand this enigmatic star can help discover and understand it, because God provided the star to guide the magi.

Does the Bible explain the purpose of the stars? It does, God in the first chapter of the Bible, identifies the purposes of the stars. God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs, seasons, days and years (Genesis 1:14). The Bible groups the sun, moon, stars, planets, comets, etc. together, generally their purpose is to be lights and to order time, but one of their purposes is to be for signs.¹ The word sign in the Bible in its simplest form is used synonymously with our word picture.² The stars form pictures that we call constellations, in a connect-the-dots fashion. The Bible mentions constellations, some by name: the Bear, Orion, Pleiades.³ The sign for the tribe of Judah was a banner with a picture of a lion for the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.⁴ The constellation associated with Judah is Leo, which is Latin for lion.⁵

The Magi came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw “his star” in the east and have come to worship him."⁶ Does the Bible ever identify “his” star? In the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus identifies His star as the Bright Morning Star.⁷ So the Magi saw His star—the Bright Morning Star in the east.

When did the magi see his star in the east? Here the Bible gives another important clue. The word in Greek for “in the east” is not a geographical term for the direction east, but an astronomical term⁸ that means, “to rise in the east with the sun.”⁹ Most stars rise in the east with

¹ Genesis 1:14 ... for signs, seasons, days and years. Luke 21:25 There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars.

² This is a simplification because sign can mean many things, but picture is one of the primary meanings.

³ Job 9:9, 38:3, 31-32. Isaiah 13:10; Amos 5:8; Wisdom 7:29

⁴ Num 2:3, 10:14 Standard-- <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Lion-of-Judah>.

⁵ E.W. Bullinger, *The Witness of the Stars*, 1893, p. 163.

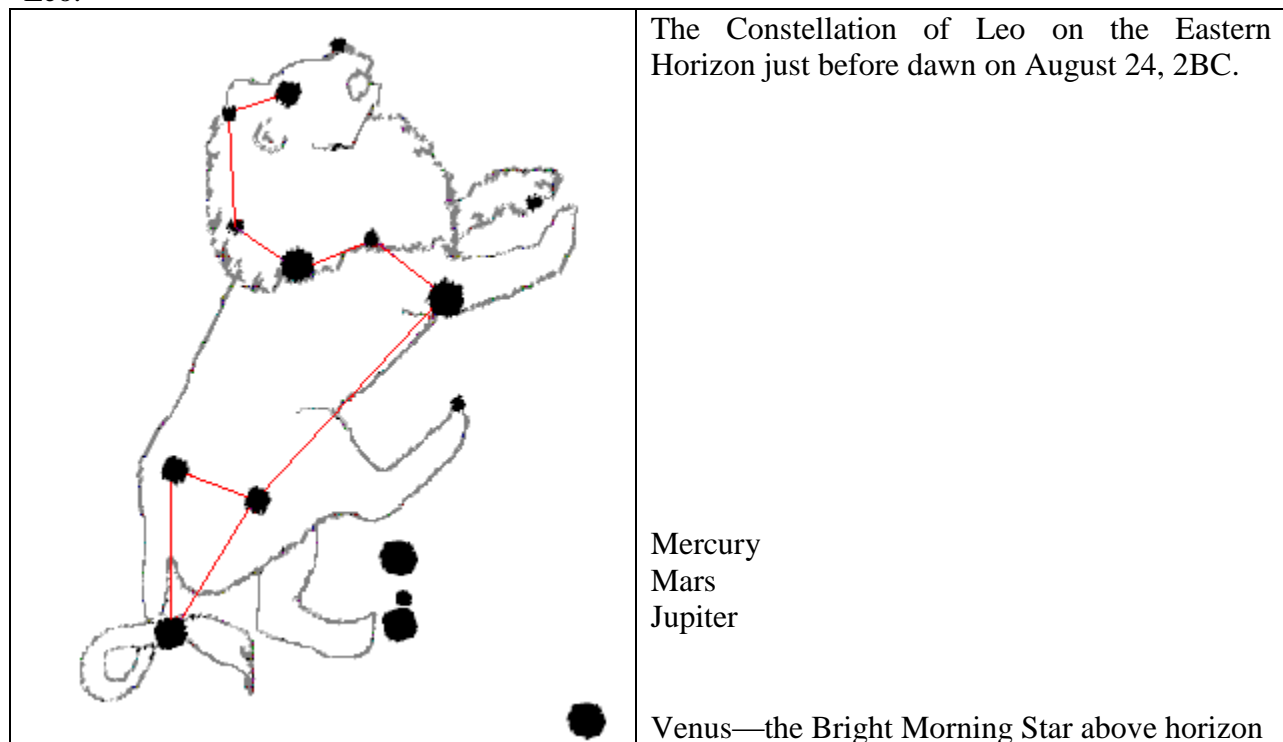
⁶ Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

⁷ Revelations 22:16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

⁸ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1979, p. 62.

the sun once per year. So they saw his star rise at dawn just before the sun that is a heliacal rising. A heliacal rising occurs when a star first appears before dawn after it has been hidden for a time, so the star appears to be “born”.

If Jesus’ star is the bright morning star, which star is the bright morning star? It is Venus the brightest star in the sky, ten times brighter than any fixed star, and only Mercury and Venus qualify as morning stars. The planets are called wandering stars in the Bible.¹⁰ When did the bright morning star rise with the sun? The bright morning star rises with the sun every 1.6 years. With an astronomy program, one can look at the sky from any location, in any direction at any time.¹¹ It is possible to see exactly when the bright morning star rose just before the sun. Naturally, one would choose dates around the time of the birth of Jesus. There is a very interesting date, 24 August 2BC. This date is close to the anticipated birth of Jesus Christ and catches the eye because the eastern sky before dawn is busy with planets in the constellation of Leo.



What help does the Bible give to interpret or understand this sign? Because we seek to understand a sign involving a star in the constellation of Leo, searching the Bible for the words star and lion may help to interpret the sign. These occur together in one passage Balaam’s prophecy, “Like a lion..., A star will come out of Jacob a scepter will rise out of Israel.”¹² This is

⁹ Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, 2nd Rev. Ed., 1980, p 364.

¹⁰ Jude 1:13 They are ... wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever. Greek planet stars.

¹¹ Cartes du Ceil (Sky Charts), www.astrosurf.com/astropc. This software is free.

¹² Numbers 24:9 Like a lion they crouch and lie down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse them? "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!" Numbers 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. The verses between 9 and 17 are parenthetical conversation between the king of Moab and Balaam in the middle of his prophecy. This verse was clearly told to Herod because it explains why he though he was dying he tried to kill the Christ, the one to rise out of Israel, because he would crush the heads of the Edomites and Herod and his sons were Edomites.

the first passage where the word star appears. The Bible often links passages by using similar words or phrases. In this passage star is further linked to scepter by Hebrew poetry, so star and scepter may have a similar meaning. Searching the Bible for lion and scepter there is one additional passage Genesis 49:9-10. When Venus rose on August 24, 2BC it was in the constellation of Leo and it marked a picture of a scepter formed by Mercury, Mars and Jupiter. This scepter, a vertical line of stars, fulfilled a prophecy given by Jacob, “Judah you are a lion ... , The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. (Genesis 49:9-10). If one looks at the dawning sky on the four days before Venus appears, one will note that Mercury, Mars and Jupiter form a longer line of stars that is shortening and pivoting to form the scepter. So the same stars form a ruler's staff and scepter on different days. This is a key verse to understanding the Star of Bethlehem. This unique picture matched the prophecy of Jacob and revealed to the magi that the promised Jewish world ruler was about to be born.

Where would one go to find a newborn Jewish king? King Herod the Great's palace in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews (which comes from the word Judah) was their logical destination to find the newborn Jewish king. When the magi asked about the king's sons, they learned all Herod's sons were adults, so none qualified. The chief priests and the scribes interpreted the Bible and said that the Christ (a king) would be born in Bethlehem. Since the magi already trusted the Bible, when the magi learned this they did not need a star to point out where Bethlehem was, it was only five miles south on the main road from Jerusalem, the magi believed and went there. The Magi had no doubt the sign was orchestrated by God—and had a purpose and meaning.

How long after the sign, did the magi leave to see the newborn king? They left about a year and a half after the sign; they waited until they could be sure the new king was born. This can be discerned because shortly after they arrived in Bethlehem they saw the second sign. It is now the end of March A.D. 1. A purpose of the sign was to announce that Jesus would soon be born. One should not infer this to mean Jesus was conceived or born on this date because when King Herod was told of the interpretation of the sign by the magi he killed all the boys of Bethlehem less than two years of age a broad period of time. Since the magi saw the star shortly after their arrival, the magi had timed their visit to the subsequent rising of Venus 1.6 years later. They probably did this so that they could be sure that the king was born when they arrived rather than continue to wait for the pregnancy to complete.

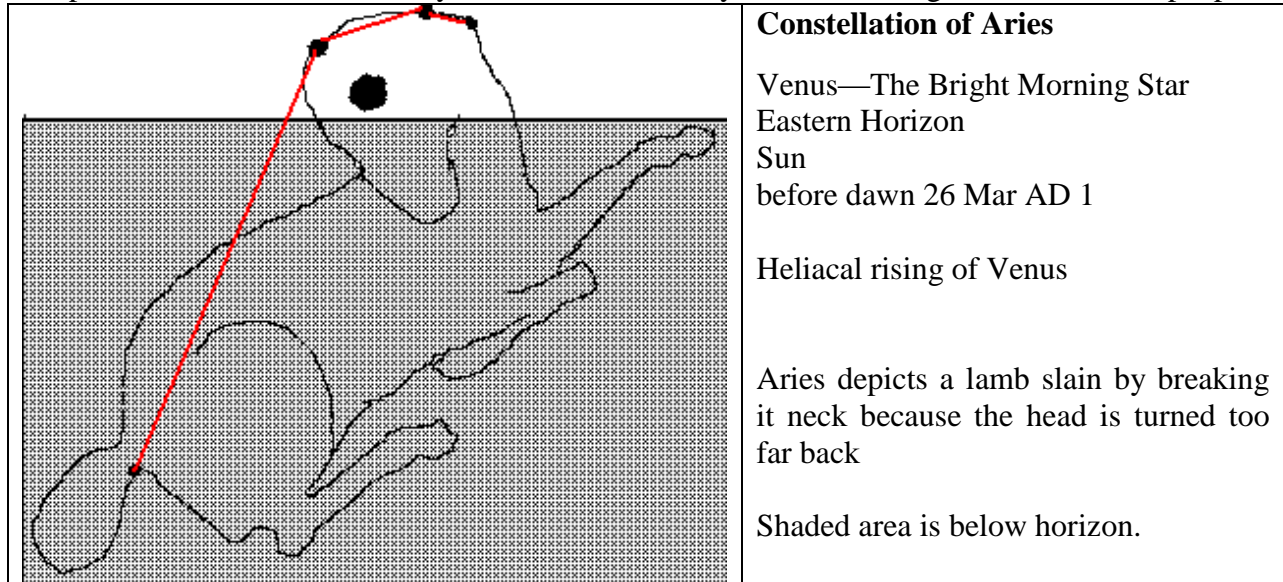
If the sign was obvious, why didn't many come to Jerusalem? The sign only lasted four minutes and it was in the glare of the soon to rise sun so most would not see it, but the magi paid close attention to the heliacal rise of Venus.¹³ If it could be seen, they would see it. One had to be familiar with the Bible to make this interpretation, but centuries earlier the prophet Daniel had been chief of the magi.¹⁴ Only a few magi connected the sign to Jacob's prophecy and so understood it.

Where would the magi go to look for this star? The magi needed an open area away from trees, houses and hills to view the sky especially the eastern horizon, so the shepherd's field which were east of Bethlehem would be the logical place from which to view the stars. They went to Bethlehem looking for this king but when they got there, they could not tell which young boy was the king. Surely, the Levitical shepherds who had visited Jesus on the night of his birth and certified him as without defect could tell the magi where to find Jesus. No, because Passover

¹³ *Dresden Codex* and *Venus tablet of Ammisaduqa*.

¹⁴ Daniel 4:9, 5:11.

was near, all the men of Bethlehem would be in Jerusalem. No one in Bethlehem looked like a king. The shepherds were not available to tell their story; they had taken their flocks to Jerusalem. This is also Judah where most people spoke Aramaic, so it is unlikely that the magi and most of the people spoke the same language (in Galilee speaking Greek was common) so in the poor town of Bethlehem, they would have difficulty communicating with most of the people.



Why did the magi exceedingly rejoice when they saw the bright morning star when and where they were expected to see it? In Bethlehem, probably the next morning, on the eve of Passover March 27 AD 1, they saw Venus rise with the sun, in the constellation of Aries. Aries pictures a slain lamb.¹⁵ They rejoiced for two reasons, they realized that they were seeing a second sign in the heavens (orchestrated by God before the foundation of the world). They were in a town of shepherds and the male sheep raised there were destined to be sacrificed (mostly Passover lambs) and Jesus' star pointed to a slain sacrificial lamb in the heavens and then pointed out Jesus on the earth as the one the sign in the heavens referred to. Jesus was the slain Passover Lamb. It was the day the Passover lambs were slain. Second, it guided them straight to the house, where Jesus and Mary lived. Because they are observing a star that is close to the sun the magi probably found a tree that they could stand under that they could use the screen out the sun while they watched Venus throughout the day. There was only one street in Bethlehem and Joseph needing a place to live so he had probably recently constructed a house. Because Venus is north of the east west path of the sun it is likely, he built his house at the north end of Bethlehem.

How could a star go before them and stop over the house where Jesus lived, wouldn't it have to be an angel or some such to move and then stop over a house? Note it would be hard to follow any star at night because it is dark and hazardous to travel cross-country (John 11:9). But Venus is unique among the stars it can be seen during the day near the time it makes its heliacal rise.¹⁶ Venus rose in the east before dawn, then continued to rise in the sky and was visible throughout the day. This is the reason that Venus is known as the daystar (2 Peter 1:19 KJV). So Venus is the only star that one could easily follow, because it was visible during the day. The magi said twice they saw the star as it rose heliacally,¹⁷ on the second occasion it went before

¹⁵ E.W. Bullinger, *The Witness of the Stars*, 1893, p. 106.

¹⁶ H. B. Curtis "[Venus Visible at Inferior Conjunction](#)," 1935, pp 15-19.

¹⁷ Matthew 2:2 and 2:9.

them after sunrise moving across the entire sky. It continued to be visible throughout the day and disappeared in the late afternoon above the western horizon over the house where Jesus and Mary were. That evening as Passover started the magi visited Jesus and Mary. Joseph was not at home, because men were required to be in Jerusalem for Passover. Later after midnight, the holy family fled to Egypt, the reverse of Israel fleeing from Egypt on Passover over fourteen hundred years earlier.

Does the Bible ever link the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Passover Lamb? In Revelation 22:16 where Jesus identified the Bright Morning Star with Himself, He also identifies Himself as the Root of David a phrase that only occurs in one other passage, Revelation 5:5-6 ... See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. ... Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne. This is the only passage Jesus is identified as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He is also identified as the Lamb looking as if slain. So this passage brings these signs together with the Bright Morning Star. The two signs in the heavens the magi saw are two key titles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They knew the boy was God because they came to "worship Him" and did so. These two signs together succinctly tell the gospel, the long ago promised Divine Son was born to rule the nations and to be the sacrificed Passover lamb for it. The primary purpose of sacrifice was for the forgiveness of sin. So a redeemer would soon arrive.

Can we tell anything additional about what the magi knew? We can tell that they were probably familiar with the book of Isaiah because of the gifts that they brought. Isaiah 60:1-6 tells about groups from the east bring many things including gold and incense (frankincense in the LXX),¹⁸ and that passage starts with the coming of a light that rises in the east and shines in the darkness (so not the sun) but associated with the dawn, e.g. the morning star.

Isaiah 60:1-6 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but Yahweh rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of Yahweh.

Much of the tradition of the magi comes from this passage (e.g. camels, kings). In the New Testament Venus is called either the Bright Morning Star or phosphoros meaning Venus but translated as Morning Star or Day Star. In the LXX, this star also shows up as heosphoros (bringer of the dawn) a translation that the Septuagint uses for the Hebrew word shachar a difficult to translate word meaning from the root of dark usually translated dawn, but with the connotation of raising early and waiting for the light. It also has connection to disaster and looking early and diligently actively watching and waiting for the dawn.

Are there any other passages in the Old Testament that give understanding to this subject? Yes, Jesus in the gospels posed a question to the Pharisees during His last public appearance when He asked

"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your

¹⁸ The LXX or Septuagint is the Greek Translation of the Old Testament made around 200BC.

enemies under your feet." If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (Matt 22:42-45; see also Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44)

Jesus answers His own question when He states "I, Jesus, I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16). Here Jesus confirms the Septuagint reading of Psalm 110:1-3 (Ps 109:1-3 in the LXX). This is a short (seven verse) messianic psalm quoted more than twenty-five times in the New Testament. In 110:2 refers to Yahweh's mighty scepter in connection with the heosphoros the morning star.

Psalms 110:1-7 {Of David. A psalm.} The LORD says to you, my lord: "Take your throne at my right-hand, while I make your enemies your footstool." 2 The scepter of your sovereign might the LORD will extend from Zion. The LORD says: "Rule over your enemies! 3 Yours is princely power from the day of your birth. In holy splendor before the daystar, like the dew I begot you 4 The LORD has sworn and will not waver: "Like Melchizedek you are a priest forever." 5 At your right hand is the Lord, who crushes kings on the day of wrath. 6 Who, robed in splendor, judges nations, crushes heads across the wide earth. 7 Who drinks from the brook by the wayside and thus holds high the head. NAS

Jesus in answering the question He posed to the Pharisees on the last day of His public ministry, and referring to the Bright Morning Star confirms that the daystar is a messianic symbol and it refers to Himself. So Psalm 110 is a further link between the morning star, the scepter, and the messiah and strengthening the link to Rev 5:5-6 with the Messiah as the root of David.

Are there any problems with this interpretation? Yes, there are two: the stars forming the signs are so faint that it cannot be seen today without binoculars. Near the horizon, the atmosphere dims the lights in the sky; this is why one can stare directly at the sun as it is rising or setting. A modern astronomer would say that these signs were not visible they were too faint. But both Mayan and Babylonian astronomers record the visibility of Venus at these times that today we would say you need binoculars to see it.¹⁹ From a skeptic's viewpoint there were no signs in the heavens. If the Babylonian's could see the heliacal rising of Venus, so could the magi. The other problem is King Herod has to live until at least Passover March 27 AD 1. King Herod's death is dated by a lunar eclipse recorded by Josephus that occurred a few months before Herod died. This eclipse was dated by many to 4BC, but a recent investigation has it more likely the eclipse of 29 December 1BC.²⁰ This eclipse was the most visible of the likely eclipses, when the moon rose shortly after sunset, also because the eclipsed moon was at the horizon it would appear red in color. This eclipse is much more likely and more visible than the other possibilities. Josephus is not Scripture; he placed the death of John the Baptist in AD 36.²¹

Conclusion: The star of Bethlehem, Venus, the bright morning star, the daystar marked a great sign in the sky. A purpose for the stars is to be for signs or pictures. The brightest star represents Jesus. At dawn on August 24, 2 BC, there was a picture of a newborn king the Lion of the tribe of Judah receiving scepter fulfilling several prophecies of the coming Christ. This sign was faint because it was on the horizon and dawn approached, but the magi saw the sign and came to understand that it fulfilled the prophecy of Jacob of coming Jewish world ruler. The magi journeyed to Jerusalem where they learned the king would be born in Bethlehem. The magi in Bethlehem saw another sign and understood the king was also the lamb prepared for sacrifice.

¹⁹ *Dresden Codex* and *Venus tablet of Ammisaduqa*.

²⁰ John Pratt, "[Yet Another Eclipse for Herod](#)," 1990.

²¹ PTET, "[Did John the Baptist die after Jesus?](#)"

The star guided them to Jesus' house and they arrived in the evening of Passover. The heavens declared the glory of God—by declaring His plan. The sign in the sky announcing the coming birth of Jesus links Jesus to signs in the heavens from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of revelation. It links the earliest announcement of Jesus in the gospels to the coming of Jesus with the last public discourse of Jesus shortly before He went on to celebrate the Last Supper a Passover Seder. The sign God gave the magi, we can still observe today using technology.