

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



*Buy me a coffee*

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_scripture-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php)

in him that he at once acknowledged Jesus as the Messias—such is the meaning here of the words “Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel.” Our Lord then replied that this faith would be further confirmed both for him and those with him by future experience, “Amen, Amen I say to you (plural), you shall see the heavens opened, and the Angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

This answer is couched in language recalling Jacob’s vision at Bethel, Gen. xxviii, 10–17. Every Israelite was familiar with the account of this vision with its “angels ascending and descending,” a pledge to the Patriarch of God’s protection and an assurance that He would be with him on his journey and in the future: “Neither will I leave thee till I have accomplished all that I have said.” Gen. xxviii, 15. Probably our Lord in referring to this vision applies it to Himself, namely the Apostles would see that divine protection, which Jacob’s vision signified, extended in such an extraordinary manner to Himself during His earthly life that the divine character of His mission would be made manifest. They would see such continuous signs during His ministry that they would be made to feel that the heavens were, metaphorically, opened and that the angels were ascending and descending in the service of the Son of God.

Another interpretation, which is adopted by a number of commentators, was put forward by Maldonatus. He refers the passage to the Last Judgment when the appearance of our Lord in the clouds of heaven surrounded by Angels will make it manifest that He is indeed the Son of God, cf. Matt. xxvi, 63ff. This interpretation has the advantage of taking the words literally but the context would seem to indicate some signs in the nearer future. The verse is fully discussed in *The Gospel of St. John* by His Eminence Cardinal MacRory. 7th ed. Dublin. 1923.

R. J. FOSTER.

*“What is known of the Star of Bethlehem?”*

All that is *known* of the Star is to be found in St. Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. ii.): (i) It appeared “in the East” (sc. either “to us in the East” or “in the Eastern sky”: (ii) It appeared some time (perhaps more than a year) before the visit of the Magi: (iii) There is no suggestion that it accompanied the Magi on their journey to Jerusalem, the implication of Matt. ii, 9, 10 being that they had not seen it between their departure from home and their arrival in Jerusalem: (iv) It seems to have moved its position in the sky during the short journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and then to have stood still over the place where the child was.

There are three possible interpretations of the Gospel evidence.

A. The star was a comet. In *The Oracles of Jacob and Balaam*, pp. 97 sqq., the late Fr. Eric Burrows accepts this view and argues that the star is to be identified with Halley’s comet which, as we know from

Chinese records, made an appearance in August 12 B.C. He finds it "significant that when the brilliant comet of 12 B.C. appeared . . . its head must have pointed approximately towards Leo," the sign which, in an earlier passage (pp. 14-15), he has shown to be associated with Judah. There would seem to be ground here for the association in the mind of the Magi of the Star with the Messiah promised in Gen. xlix, 10. On the other hand, the chronological argument, in my view, is against the identification of the star with Halley's comet.

B. Kepler's theory. The famous astronomer observed a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces, which was so remarkable as to suggest the possibility that this might have been *the* star. He calculated that a similar conjunction must have occurred in 7 B.C. It is objected to this theory that the Greek word used by St. Matthew (ἄστὴρ) normally refers to a single star; but this does not seem to be a very forcible argument. And the chronological indications are close enough. Two problems suggest themselves: (i) Why did the Magi associate this conjunction with the birth of a King of the Jews? (ii) What about the alleged motion of the star? In answer to the first question, we can only say that—if you are unwilling to admit some form of revelation—the whole story of the Magi's visit is one which puzzles our modern minds, in their ignorance of ancient astrology. The more difficult question is: Why should the Magi have come *at all*, not why on account of any one star? As to the motion of the star, it is perhaps legitimate to argue that the apparent motion of any bright celestial object, relative to a traveller, may account for the language of Matt.; and the standing still over the Child's house would again be sufficiently accounted for if that house were isolated and the two planets sufficiently far down in the sky. (If you are moving directly towards, say, the moon or a bright star, it does not seem to move as it does when you are going "parallel" to it. What I am suggesting is that, if, on leaving Herod's palace the Magi went "parallel" to their Star and then changed direction so as to approach it, it might well seem to stand still.)

C. A unique, preternatural, that is, miraculous, phenomenon. The chief argument against this, apart from the general principle *miracula non sunt multiplicanda* . . . is the absence of any contemporary allusion to such a phenomenon. But this is a singularly unconvincing form of the argument from silence.

Tradition on the whole favours the view that the Star was miraculous. If however we choose one of the other solutions, then the comet theory is astronomically preferable, Kepler's theory chronologically more probable. For the Magi themselves, it seems almost inevitable to admit a revelation.

T. CORBISHLEY, S.J.