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## Angelic appearances in Matthew's infancy narratives

### ABSTRACT

Angelic appearances function prominently in the birth narratives of Matthew. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph (Mt. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19 and 22). Besides these explicit references to the angel, the first Gospel also refers to the guidance by an "unusual" star (Mt. 2:1-2 and 9-10). The appearance of the angel of the Lord to Joseph is investigated within the context of such appearances in New Testament times. Furthermore, the appearance of the star is investigated in the light of the views of stars in that period of time. The goal is to establish the nature of these appearances and the relation between them.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"Just as angels are the border guards for Jacob as he crosses the Jordan, so angels appear at the moments that the Word moves from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven" (Noll 1998:72). Angels appear prominently in the birth (the movement of the Word from heaven to earth) and passion, resurrection and ascension (the movement of the Word from earth to heaven) narratives of the Gospels. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke include birth narratives. Though the accounts by Matthew and Luke of Jesus' birth differ remarkably, both include angelic activities that demonstrate some resemblance. Luke has parallel annunciations by Gabriel to Zechariah (Luk. 1:11-13, 18-20) and to Mary (Luk. 1:26-30, 34-35). Furthermore, the third Gospel describes the appearance of the angels to the shepherds (Luk. 2:14). In Matthew's infancy narrative an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph (Mt. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19 and 22) in dream oracles to guide and warn him of danger. Besides these explicit references to the guidance of the angel, the first Gospel also refers to the guidance of the magi by an "unusual" star (Mt. 2:1-2 and 9-10). It seems as if there might be some similarity between the functions of the angel and of this star.

Focussing on the angelic appearances in Matthew's Gospel, several questions arise. Is there any resemblance between the guiding angel and the guiding star? Could this strange star be linked to angelic activity? Read in the context of ancient writings, how should these appearances and activities be interpreted?

In this article the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Joseph will first be investigated within the context of such appearances in New Testament times. Secondly, the appearance of the star will be investigated in light of the views of stars in that period of time. The goal is to establish the nature of these appearances and the relation between these two forms of guidance and whether the star could implicitly refer to angelic activity.

### 2. ANGELIC APPEARANCE IN DREAMS

Other than the direct angelic appearances described in Luke's Gospel, in Matthew the angel of the Lord appears in dream oracles. Of all the New Testament writers, Matthew especially deals with revelation through dreams<sup>1</sup>.

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1 The rest of the New Testament has few dreams or visions: Paul has a vision of a man of Macedon (Acts

## 2.1 Theophanies in dream oracles

Matthew contains five references to dream oracles in the infancy narrative<sup>2</sup>. Four of these encounters refer to Joseph's experience, and one to that of the magi's. Scholars delineate dream oracles according to form-critical elements: The situation provided by the narrative, an introduction to the dream report, a theophany, a dream reference, a recipient, mentioning of the place, the auditory address formula, the message, termination of the dream and the fulfilment of the command (Gnuse 1990:107). In three of the Matthean dream reports the theophany is explicitly described as the appearance of an angel of the Lord (*ἄγγελος κυρίου*). Though theophany is not explicitly mentioned in the other two dream reports, similar activities are implied:

- "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared (*ἄγγελος κυρίου φαίνεται*) to him in a dream (*κατ' ὄναρ*)<sup>3</sup> and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit ... When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord (*ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου*) had commanded him ..." (Mt. 1:20-24).
- "And having been warned<sup>4</sup> in a dream (*κατ' ὄναρ*) not to go back to Herod, they (the magi) returned to their country by another route" (Mt. 2:12).
- "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord (*ἄγγελος κυρίου*) appeared to Joseph in a dream (*κατ' ὄναρ*). 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him'" (Mt. 2:13).
- "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord (*ἄγγελος κυρίου*) appeared in a dream (*κατ' ὄναρ*) to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead ...'" (Mt. 2:19-21).<sup>5</sup>
- "But when he (Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream (*κατ' ὄναρ*),<sup>6</sup> he withdrew to the district of Galilee" (Mt. 2:22).

The language of these five dream reports is quite stereotypical (cf. Conrad 1985:656; Dodson 2002:50; Knox 1957:122; Malina 1967:122; Soares Prabhu 1967:185): An angel of the Lord (in three of the five cases explicitly mentioned) appears in a dream to deliver an oral message; each message carries both a warning and a command to travel somewhere; the end of the dream is mentioned and the fulfilment of the command by the dream recipient is described in the following narrative.

Even deeper structural similarities in the component parts of the dream reports can be recognized (Gnuse 1990:107):

(1) Situation (1:18-19; 2:9-11; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).

(2) Introduction to the dream report:

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16:9), Cornelius sees the angel of the Lord (Acts 10:1-8), Peter hears a voice with a vision (Acts 10:9-20) and Paul receives encouragement from the angel of the Lord (Acts 18:9, 23:11 and 27:23). However, these visions can hardly be considered as real dream reports. This list of visions is nevertheless short when compared with the distinct references to dreams in Matthew.

2 His sixth reference to a dream oracle describes the dream of Pilate's wife: "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him'" (Mt. 27:19).

3 *ὄναρ* and *ὄνειρος* are the most common dream-vision terminologies (Dodson 2002, 40).

4 The angel as source of the dream is assumed, but not specifically mentioned (France, 2007:76; Nolland, 2005:117).

5 The words of God to Moses in Midian are echoed in this message: "Go back to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your life have died" (Ex. 4:19) (France, 2007:90).

6 This time Matthew only briefly alludes to a dream without providing details about the messenger or the message.

(2.1) Participle and post-positive participle *de* (genitive absolute with full dream reports or aorist participle with dream references) (1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).

(2.2) "Behold" (*ἴδου*) with full dream reports (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).

(3) Theophany (*ἄγγελος κυρίου*) (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).

(4) Dream reference (*κατ' ὄναρ*) (1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).

(5) Recipient (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).

(6) Place (optional as the narrative often provides this) (2:19).

(7) Auditory address formula (*λέγων*) (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).

(8) Message (1:20b-21; 2:12; 2:13b; 2:20; 2:22).

(9) Termination of the dream (1:24; 2:14; 2:21).

(10) Fulfilment of the command (1:24b; 2:12; 2:14-15; 2:21; 2:22).

## 2.2 Directives and guidance by the angel

According to the five oracle dream reports in the infancy narrative, Joseph and the magi are directed to do something in order to protect the infant Jesus. An angel of the Lord is explicitly mentioned in three of the four dream oracles of Joseph, and implied in the fourth. The magi also experienced some sort of theophany in a dream oracle, though no explicit mentioning is made of the nature of this appearance. Otherwise these dream oracles of Joseph and the magi demonstrate a strong resemblance.

This kind of divine intervention in the course of human affairs reminds one of parallels with the patriarchs in Genesis, e.g. Abraham's and Jacob's night visions (Gen. 15 and 28) (Gnuse 1981:170; Hagner 1993:25). Scholars often analyze Matthew's dream narratives in terms of biblical and *midrashic* traditions, which Matthew appropriated for his purposes (e.g. Brown 1993:45; Soares Prabhu 1976:223-225). Contemporary Jewish *midrash* used dreams as a mode of divine revelation out of respect for God in his majesty. Matthew might have followed this trend for the sake of the sentiment it would bring forth from his audience. Based on form-critical comparison, it seems that Matthew mainly used the Elohists's<sup>7</sup> dream reports of Genesis as model. In Genesis the dream theophanies are connected to the angel of the Lord in Elohistic texts – exemplifying the transcendence of God (Gnuse 1990:116). The Elohistic source tends to underscore the superiority and remoteness of God to creation and is inclined to employ intermediaries like angels and dreams (Green 2000:402). The appropriate human response to Elohistic reports is a fear of God and reverence. The Elohistic multiplies episodes where sons were endangered (as with the infant Jesus). The Elohistic is also critical of power excesses (as that of Herod). Noteworthy is also the use of the introductory participle "behold" in the Matthean dream reports. This corresponds with *hinneh* that introduces the dream messages of the Elohistic. The very clear statements in terms of the fulfilment of the commands also correlate with the Genesis reports.

Remarkable resemblances can be recognized between the theophanies in Matthew's birth narratives and narratives in the Old Testament (France, 2007:52; Nolland, 2005:97). The annunciation to Joseph (Mt. 1:20-24) follows the pattern of the typical annunciations of birth in the Old Testament, e.g. the birth of Isaac (Gen. 17:15-21) and of Samson (Jgs. 13). Matthew's portrayal of Joseph who receives revelation in dreams (Mt. 1:20; 2:13, 19) and who goes to Egypt (Mt. 2:14) also reminds the reader of Joseph in the Old Testament, the dreamer (Gen. 37:19), who goes to Egypt, escaping an attempt on his life (Gen. 37:28)<sup>8</sup>. Jesus' escape from Herod is

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7 The Elohistic as one of the four sources or strata underlying the Pentateuch is far from assured, nor do those who acknowledge these sources agree on their features. Nevertheless, some coherent portrait of the Elohistic emerges from scholarship.

8 It should be recognized that Matthew does not explicitly connect the two Josephs (France. 2007:52).

reminiscent of Moses' escape from the Pharaoh<sup>9</sup>. Later in his life Moses flees to Sinai and returns only when he hears from the Lord: "All those who were seeking your life are dead" (compare Ex. 4:19 with Mt. 2:20).

According to Jewish traditions God revealed Himself in dreams to biblical heroes, e.g. Jacob's dream at Bethel with reference to angels ascending and descending a stairway (Gen. 28:12), Josephus's dreams (Gen. 37:5-9) and Daniel's dream (Dan. 2:19). According to Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* (2.216-19), God promised Moses' father in a dream that He would keep the infant Moses safe (similar to the dream Joseph had of Jesus).

Matthew's dream narratives formally correspond with those in the Greco-Roman world: They usually contain (1) a scene-setting, (2) dream-vision terminology, (3) a proper dream-vision, and (4) reaction and response (Dodson 2002:46; Gnuse 1990:114). The difference between the modern conception of dreams and that of the ancient world is significant. The modern notion is that dreams originate from within oneself as a product of one's subconscious. The ancients believed that dreams were objective means through which the spirit world could communicate with human beings. Ancients therefore paid considerable attention to the interpretation and categorization of revelatory dreams<sup>10</sup> (Dodson 2002:40). Apparitions from the spirit world were regarded as the characteristic of dreams. While dreams of the pagans (e.g. *Iliad* of Homer 23.65, 83-85) and Jews (e.g. 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan 40A) also included apparitions<sup>11</sup> of deceased persons, Matthew only describes apparitions from angels<sup>12</sup>.

Revelations in dreams were often regarded as grounds for faith. In Greece and Macedonia (e.g. *Iliad* of Homer 1.63; 5.150), Rome (Tacitus' *Annales* 2.14), the East (e.g. Herodotus' *History* 1.34, 107, 127), Carthage (e.g. Dio Cassius' *Roman History* bk. 13), Palestine (e.g. Josephus' *Jewish War* 1.328; 2.116), among later rabbis (e.g. 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan 40 A) and in magical papyri (Papyri Graecae Magica 4.2076-80) people believed that divine messages were conveyed through dreams (Keener 1999:95).

The simplicity of the appearances in Matthew's dream reports contrasts with the bizarre Hellenistic reports that required further interpretation. The appearances in Matthew's report prompted direct action in the plot as God directed human affairs through agents:

- Joseph planned to divorce Mary quietly, but because of an angel of the Lord's appearance in a dream he took Mary as his wife (1:19-24).
- Because of some kind of theophany in a dream, the wise men did not return to Herod who intended to harm the child (2:12).
- Joseph took Mary and the child and escaped to Egypt because he was informed by an angel of the Lord in a dream that Herod was about to kill the child (2:13-14).
- When Herod died, Joseph once again was informed by an angel of the Lord in a dream that it was safe to return, and so he took Mary and the child and returned (2:19-21).

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9 The biblical narrative of Moses' birth had undergone substantial expansion by the first century A.D. as can be seen in the writings of Josephus (*Ant.* 2.205, 206). In the expanded narrative Pharaoh was warned by his scribes that a child was about to be born who would threaten his crown. He and his advisers therefore decided to kill all the Hebrew male children. At the same time Moses' father had a divine revelation in a dream that his pregnant wife would bear a child who would save Israel – the child who escaped Pharaoh's massacre (cf. Brown 1975, 577).

10 Artemidorus divided dreams into five categories; enigmatic dreams, prophetic vision, oracular dreams, nightmares, and apparitions (Dodson 2002, 40).

11 Miller (1990, 401-4) thinks that early Judaism blurred the older distinction between dreams and night visions.

12 In Matthew's narrative angels only appear in dreams until the appearance of the angel at the empty grave after Jesus' resurrection (Mt. 28:2).

- Joseph is somehow warned in a dream that Archelaus was ruling, and therefore he went and lived in Galilee (2:22-23).

The immediate command-execution sequence indicates that human obedience to the divine will is blessed. Matthew teaches that “obedience brings deliverance” (Gnuse 1990:119). Through these revelations God protects the child Jesus. Three of the five revelations prompted action that will ultimately fulfil prophecy (1:23; 2:15, 23). God leads his people to their ultimate destiny.

Having observed that the Matthean dream reports, including angelic appearances, are probably form-critically dependent on the Elohistic dreams in Genesis, the function of these narratives becomes even more remarkable. Dreams occur almost exclusively in the Elohistic source in Genesis. They serve as a form of revelation which assumes a distant deity. Dreams are indirect forms of divine theophany signifying the distance between God and the human reality. Matthew utilizes this connotation of dreams to deliberately contrast the distant revelation of God in dreams with the immediate incarnation. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God because of his immanent presence as Immanuel.

### Conclusion

Matthew describes five cases where the angel of the Lord appears in dreams. During each of these appearances the angel delivers a message. Each of these messages carries a warning and directive. At the end of the dream the fulfilment of these commands is mentioned. In line with the ancient understanding of dreams, these dreams are depicted as the means through which the angel of the Lord communicates with Joseph and the magi, and thus constructively intervenes in the course of human affairs. God protected the child Jesus and led his people to deliverance. Yet the incarnated Jesus, Immanuel, is portrayed as the ultimate revelation of God.

### 3. THE GUIDING STAR OF THE MAGI

The second type of divine theophany in Matthew’s infancy narrative comes in the form of a significant star. Magi from the East arrive in Jerusalem and ask “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” (Mt. 2:1-2). What exactly they meant by “his star” remains unsaid. Matthew simply tells that “the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them (προῆγεν) until it stopped over the place where the child was (ἔως ἔλθων ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον)” (Mt. 2:9). The identification of this star needs to satisfy the following conditions (Nolland, 2005:110):

- It must be something the magi would consider a star;
- It must somehow be something the magi would regard as the star of the messiah of the Jews;
- It must be able to guide the magi to a specific location; and
- It must be able to come to rest over a particular dwelling.

#### 3.1 An “unusual” star

The star of Bethlehem was strange, even surreal. The great astronomer Johannes Kepler speculated in the early seventeenth century that the star was in fact a thrice repeated conjunction (nova or supernova) of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of Pisces (representing the last days) that occurred in 7 BC (France, 2007:68; Rosenberg 1972:105). Some scholars suggested a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars followed by a temporary bright star in 7-6 BC (cf. France 1985:82). Three explanations of the star are commonly proposed (cf. Davies & Allison 2004:235): (1) A supernova (stellar explosion), which, however, is not documented for that time. (2) A comet, but the often mentioned Halley’s Comet of the year 12/11 BC came too early. (3) The conjunction of

Jupiter and Saturn, which appeared three times in 7/6 BC fits the situation quite well, as Jupiter was considered the royal star and Saturn the star of the Sabbath and the star of the Jews.

There are, however, quite a few difficulties with these proposals with regard to the star. Philologically *ἀστήρ* means an individual star, not a group of stars (*ἄστρον*), though with the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in 7/6 BC the planets did come so close to each other that it probably could be considered one star (Luz 1990:132). But Matthew speaks of the star appearing, disappearing, and reappearing. Furthermore, the idea that a star high up in the sky could guide people below on earth to a specific place (where it stopped over the place where the child was) does not make sense to the modern reader. Machen (1930:56), while arguing for the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, proposed that Matthew's story of the star should be regarded as a "poetical, oriental way of describing events that we should describe in very different terms". Many scholars nowadays do not regard the story of the star as historical, as such events conflict with scientific knowledge (e.g. Brown 1975 574; Paffenroth 1994:79). The question therefore arises whether the star in the narrative should be interpreted merely in astronomical terms.

### 3.2 Problems with traditional exegesis

John Chrysostom from Antioch in the fourth century proposed a solution to the problem of how a star high above the earth could guide people to a specific location. He suggested that the star came down (*κάτω κατέβη*) and stood over the head of the child (*ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς ἔστη τῆς κεφαλῆς τοῦ παιδίου*) (Hom. Mt. 6.2(3)) (PG 57.64-65). Several centuries later Theophylact (eighth century) had a similar explanation; the star descended (*κατέβη*) from the heights and came closer to the earth (*προσγειώτερος*) to show the spot where Christ was. The star descended and stood over the head of the child (*ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς τοῦ παιδίου ἔστη*) (Comm. Mt. Ad 2:9) (PG 123.165B-C). The *Protoevangelium* of James (second century) also mentions that the star came down and stood over the head of the child (*ἔστη ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ παιδίου*) (21:3). The interpretation according to which the star came down from heaven to the earth was common among the church fathers, as can be seen in their writings (Irenaeus, Dem. 58 (SC 406); Origen, Hom. Num. 18.2[4]; Ephraem, Comm. Diat. 20-21).

Calvin (1979[1563]:132) elaborated on this explanation. He commented that the star of Bethlehem was not a natural star. It was a real phenomenon, but unique and miraculous. Thus the star was a grand and impressive herald of Christ's birth.

Current astronomical knowledge teaches us that if a natural star would indeed approach our planet, we all would perish in a blaze. Stars can neither go before people to guide them on their way, nor can they rest over a city or a house. It seems obvious that we should distinguish between ancient and modern conceptions of stars to get a better understanding of the star that led the magi.

### 3.3 Stars regarded as living spirits

To get a better understanding of the meaning of the star of Bethlehem, it is important to recognize the significance of stars and astrology in antiquity. According to widespread Mediterranean, Egyptian and Middle Eastern folklore, stars were regarded as living spirits (Allison 2005:22). Even in Jewish tradition it was taken for granted that stars were living beings. The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo from Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) wrote: "Those who have philosophy their study tell us that stars too are living creatures" (Plant. 12), "The stars are souls divine" (Gig. 8), "The heavenly bodies are said to be not only living creatures, but living creatures endowed with mind, or rather each of them a mind in itself" (Opif. 73). The fourteenth chapter of Joseph and Aseneth (an ancient apocryphal expansion of the Book of Genesis' account of Joseph's marriage to Aseneth, the daughter of Potiphera) refers to a star in heaven that came to earth and changed

into an angel. When Aseneth saw the morning star rose out of heaven in the east she rejoiced and said: "So the Lord God listened to my prayer, because this star rose as a messenger (*ἀγγελοῦ*) and herald of the light of the great day". Aseneth kept looking and close to the morning star the heaven tore apart and a bright shining light appeared. From this light a voice called Aseneth and said: "I am the chief of the house of the Lord and commander of the whole host of the Most High" (Jos. Asen. 14:1-7).

Even in the canonical text stars are identified as celestial forces. The book of Judges describes the involvement of stars – being forces in heaven – in the victory of Israel: "From the heaven fought the stars, from their courses they fought against Sisera" (Judg. 5:20). In Job 38:7 we read of a time "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted together". These two lines form a synonymous parallelism identifying the sons of God with the morning stars. Furthermore, the Satan and his angels are represented as falling stars from heaven: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star (= Latin *Lucifer*), son of Dawn!" (Isa. 14:12) and "The devil swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth" (Rev. 12:4). In the opening vision in Revelations, Jesus tells John: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20).

From the literary environment of Matthew it is clear that stars were frequently conceptualized as angels.

On the other hand, angels often were depicted as brilliant lights. The angel at Jesus' tomb had the appearance of lightning (Mt. 28:3). The Satan disguised himself as an angel of the light (2 Cor. 11:14). According to the pseudo-epigraphical writing the "Life of Adam and Eve" 29:15 Satan, in order to deceive Eve, appeared as a bright angel. The Dead Sea Scrolls refer to the archangel Michael as "the Prince of Lights" (1QS 3:20; 1QM 13:9-10). Stephen's face shone like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15).

In Judeo-Christian tradition angels frequently descend from heaven to earth (like falling stars). According to 3 Macc. 6:16-29 God opened heaven's gates to send forth two angels of glorious appearance to bewilder the prosecutors of the righteous Jews. Gen. 28 reports the story of Jacob's ladder with angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. A similar event is envisioned in John 1:51: "You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man". The author of Revelations twice declares that he saw an angel coming down from heaven (Rev. 18:1 and 20:1).

### 3.4 Guiding angels

Angels who act as guides is a common theme in ancient literature. "The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved in front of them and took its place behind them" (Ex. 14:19) and Ex. 23:20 explains: "I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared". Reference to the guiding angels reappears in Ex. 23:23; 32:34 and 33:2. The third century Christian writing, the Apocalypse of Elijah, depicted the latter days: "Then Gabriel and Uriel will become a pillar of light leading them (upon whose forehead the name of Christ is written and upon whose hand is the seal) into the holy land" (5:5).

### 3.5 The magi's angel

Within this context it seems highly probable that the magi's star should be considered an angel. A star allegedly also guided Aeneas to the place where Rome was to be found (Virgil's Aeneid 2.694) (Keener 1999:99). The apocryphal Gospel of the Saviour (probably fifth century Syrian) in chapter 7 explicitly depicts the guiding star of the magi as an angel: "When the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem of Judea ... magi came from the east ... And they adored Jesus and presented



to Him their gifts ... In the same hour there appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before guided them on their journey; and they went away, following the guidance of its light, until they arrived in their own country". The fifth century Theodotus of Ancyra writes about the Bethlehem star: "An angelic power ... appearing in the form of a star" (Ps. Hom 1). The eighth century Byzantine monk, Theodore the Studite writes: "An angel as a light of heaven, having transformed itself into the form of a star, led the magi on the way" (Orat. 6). Theophylact also considered the star to be angelic: "When you hear 'star', do not think it was a star such as we see, but a divine angelic power that appeared in the form of a star. The magi were astrologers, and so the Lord used what was familiar to them to draw them to himself. ... That the star was an angelic power is apparent from the fact that it shone even by day, and that it moved as they moved, and stood still as they rested; also that it moved from Persia in the north to Jerusalem in the south" (Comm. Mt. Ad loc.). Remigius remarks: "Others say it was an angel, the same who appeared to the shepherds" (Catena Aurea). Isho'dad of Merv argues: "It is evident from many things that it was not a real star, nor an imagination, nor a fantasy, nor an automaton, but an angel who shone like a star from Persia to Bethlehem" (Comm. Mt. Ad loc.).

These writings explicitly state what Matthew implies in his narrative. It is plausible to identify the magi's star with an angel.

### 3.6 Personal stars

Angels and stars were intimately associated with each other. Matthew probably considered the guiding star of the magi as angelic. Most scholars identify the magi with a priestly class of eastern astrologers coming from Persia or Babylon (Davies & Allison 2004:227). Astrologers studied the relative movement of celestial bodies and regarded them as having influence on human affairs and the natural world. Such magi were highly regarded in the Graeco-Roman world as foretelling events of world importance, including the rise and fall of kings. Theophylact remarked that the magi were astrologers, and so the Lord used what was familiar to them to draw them to himself (Comm. Mt. Ad loc.). The Chaldeans or Persians were known for astrology, prediction of the future, dream interpretation and special wisdom (cf. Philo's *Dreams* 1.53; Herodotus' *History* 1.107, 127; 7.12-19; Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 10.195-203). Astrology was also known in Greco-Roman paganism (cf. Horace *Ode* 2.17.17-25). Reference to comets or other phenomena of light related to the birth of great men were widespread in antiquity (France, 2007:68). Romans respected astrological confirmation of its rulers and emperors feared astrological predictions of their downfall (Oster 1982:220). Magi reportedly predicted the fall of rulers and the rise of new rulers (Pliny *Natural History* 1.47; 30.6). Contemporary ancient writers often linked heavenly signs to the foreshadowing of major events (e.g. Tacitus' *Annales* 14.22). Because of these widespread beliefs, Rabbis commonly described Gentiles as "worshippers of the stars" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanh* 59a; 'Abod Zar 3a; Sipra on Lev. 20:7). "For one special event in history, the God who rules the heavens chose to reveal himself where pagans were looking" (Keener 1999:100).

The formulation *αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα* (Mt. 2:2) probably refers to the widespread idea that each person has a star; important and rich people have bright stars, the stars of the others are insignificant. According to then popular astrology a personal star appeared at the birth and was extinguished at the death of such a person (France, 2007:68; Luz 1990:135; Nolland, 2005:110). "Seeing his star" the astrologers in Matthew's gospel recognized something auspicious that revealed the newborn king of Judea (Molnar 1999:42). Regal horoscopes were developed that would reveal a royal birth in Judea. According to Matthew the magi were led by this guide of astrology to meet the Messiah.



### 3.7 Stars in Jewish literature

Although the Hebrew Bible forbade astrology (Deut. 4:19; Is. 47:13), astrology had nevertheless infiltrated some of Jewish thought and practice of that time. Observant Jews affirmed God's sovereign rule over the stars (cf. Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.156; Philo's *De Opificio Mundi* 46). Yet in folk belief some Jews accepted stars' relative authority over nations (cf. Philo's *Creation* 58-59). Astrological speculation persisted from the earliest days of Israel's history. Jewish sources attributed significance to periodic conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. Such conjunctions heralded earthly events such as impending wars, and the births of kings, great prophets, miracle workers, revealers of secrets and even of the Messiah (Rosenberg 1972:105).

The star in Matthew is reminiscent of the star referred to in Num. 24:17: "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab ...". The Matthean narrative echoes the LXX version of Numbers 22-24 more closely than the Hebrew one. According to Num. 22-24 Moses was leading Israel through the Trans-Jordanian region on his way to the Promised Land when he came across another wicked king, Balak. Like the Pharaoh of Egypt, Balak the king of Moab also tried to destroy him. He summoned the seer named Balaam from the East (Num 23:7) to use his skills against Moses and Israel. Balaam was an occult visionary that would have been called in Matthew's time a *magus*<sup>13</sup>. But instead of cursing Moses and Israel, he had a positive vision: "There shall come a man out of Israel's seed, and he shall rule many nations ... I see him, but not now; I behold him but not close: a star shall rise from Jacob, and a man shall come forth from Israel" (Num. 23:17 (LXX)). The passage refers to the emergence of the Davidic monarchy. David was the star that Balaam had foreseen. In later Judaism this passage was interpreted as referring to the Messiah, the king of Davidic descent (Brown 1975:578). As Balaam saw the Star of David rise, the New Testament magi saw the star of the King of the Jews rising (Davies & Allison 1988:235).

Herod thus had much reason to be upset by the magi's report (Mt. 2:3). An astrological signal of another ruler obviously indicated his own downfall. In those days celestial signs were commonly interpreted as signalling the death of one ruler and the consequent rise of another (Malina & Rohrbach 1992:32). News of a star signalling a new ruler would undoubtedly have upset a ruler as paranoid as Herod<sup>14</sup>. Other rulers were reportedly also paranoid about astrologers, and some were even prepared to kill their own descendants to keep the throne (Herodotus' *History* 1.107-110) (Keener 1999:102). A star also occurs in the story of Abraham's child who is chased by Nimrod (Luz 1990:131). Similarly the opposition between the king of the Jews, Herod, and the royal child, Jesus, is emphasized by the star.

The magi left for Bethlehem and Matthew reports that "the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were overjoyed" (Mt. 2:9-10). The specific movement of the star and its ability to locate the specific place where the king was born sounds implausible to the modern reader. Some modern artistic portrayals of the event suggest that the star had a tail pointing to the specific location. Such a suggestion obviously is highly speculative. This described movement of the star should rather be seen as alluding to the pillar of cloud (and angel) guiding Israel in the wilderness (Soares Prabhu 1976:280). While the magi followed the star, God used it in a manner

13 In New Testament times the word *magoi* covered a wide range of people who practiced occult cults: astrologers, fortunetellers, magicians of varying degrees of plausibility (Brown 1975, 577). Matthew refers to astrologers.

14 The Moses *haggadah* is very close to the Matthean story. Magi (TgJ pn Ex. 1:15; ExR 1:18 on Ex. 1:22) or scribes (Josephus, *Ant.* 2.205) predict for Pharaoh the birth of Moses that would become its conqueror. Pharaoh is very upset (Josephus, *Ant.* 2.206) and orders the infanticide (cf. Luz 1990, 131). The same cast of characters is present in Matthew: the wicked ruler, the chief priests and scribes that aligned against the newborn King.

reminiscent of the salvation of Israel from Egypt. Such an interpretation correlates with that of the early Christian document, the Syrian Chronicle of Zuqnin, which identified the star with “a pillar of light” (Keener 1999:104).

Readers through the ages should realize God’s guidance by means of the star during the entire event of Jesus’ birth.

### 3.8 Conclusion

With current astronomical knowledge the star of Bethlehem is strange. One needs an understanding of the ancient concept of stars to interpret Matthew’s description of the star. According to widespread Mediterranean, Egyptian, and even Jewish traditions stars were regarded as living beings and celestial forces. While stars frequently were conceptualized as angels, angels were often depicted as brilliant lights. Angels could descend from heaven to earth and provide divine guidance to people. As angels and stars were associated with one another, the magi’s star should probably be regarded as an angel. The magi thus identified this bright star as an astrological confirmation of the birth of a new ruler and as guide to honour Him. This obviously also indicated the downfall of the current ruler, which undoubtedly upset the paranoid Herod.

## 4. RESUME

From this investigation the resemblance between the guiding angel and the guiding star becomes evident. Angels and stars were associated with one another. Both kinds of appearances were the result of divine intervention in the course of human affairs.

The author of Hebrews wrote: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). The modes of revelation in the Old Testament varied in external phenomena, which included angelic appearances, voices, dreams and stars. Matthew links up with such Old Testament forms of revelation to then transcend to the ultimate incarnate revelation, Immanuel, in Jesus the new born King.

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#### KEY WORDS

- Angel  
Star  
Dream  
Theophany  
Matthew's Gospel  
Oracle

#### TREFWOORDE

- Engel  
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Droom  
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