

The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi

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

Edited by

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Stars and Powers: Astrological Thinking in Imperial Politics from the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba

Kocku von Stuckrad

Maybe the Star of Bethlehem
wasn't a star at all.

NEIL YOUNG

It was a widespread belief in the ancient world—and beyond—that the movements of the stars are directly linked to events on Earth, and that comets and planets indicate the will of the gods. For the small and quite diverse communities that were the first to follow Jesus as their teacher and Messiah, the spectacular narrative of a star marking Jesus' divine birth strengthened the identity of the new movement and positioned it in a broader context of Jewish and Roman political discourse.

The theoretical and hermeneutical conceptualization of the relation between the planetary and the earthly realms is the task of astrology. Until recently, research into these connections was not separated in any way from that of the mathematical study of the stars—what today we call astronomy—even though in antiquity people already generally agreed that astronomy and astrology described two different ways of looking at heavenly phenomena.¹ These ways of looking were not conceptually differentiated, however, and authors often simply referred to “mathematics” (Lat. *ars mathematica*) or “astronomy” (*astronomia*) when they actually meant astrology. The mathematical study of the stars provided the tools for gathering data for interpretive astrology.

Since astrology asks about the *meaning* of heavenly phenomena for the earthly sphere, it is particularly interested in the *quality* of time (that is, how a specific point in time ‘feels’ or which ‘energy’ is attached to it), as opposed to the pure *quantity* of time (that is, the measurement of duration and the calculation of planetary points of reference). In order to investigate the meaning

1 See Wolfgang Hübner, *Die Begriffe “Astrologie” und “Astronomie” in der Antike: Wortgeschichte und Wissenschaftssystematik, mit einer Hypothese zum Terminus “Quadrivium”* (Mainz: Academy of Sciences and Literature, 1989).

of astral events, astrology postulates correspondences between planetary levels and earthly levels, correspondences that are basically established through symbolic analogies.

Heavenly signs have always played a considerable role in the legitimization of political power. During imperial Roman times, when astrology was intrinsically linked to philosophy, religion, and politics, the utilization of heavenly signs peaked in many ways. Astrologers were the “power behind the throne,” as Frederick H. Cramer demonstrated in his now-classic study.² The emperor made his horoscope publicly known in order to emphasize that his rule corresponded with divine election and predetermination. Against a common misunderstanding, it is important to note that interpretations of a horoscope are by no means completely arbitrary. Despite some hermeneutical freedom, classical astrology operated within a Stoic framework of *heimarmenê* (Greek for “fate/destiny”) and *sympatheia* (“sympathy/mutual interdependence”) in which there were firmly established rules of interpretation. Learned astrologers as well as those in the political milieu knew that a birth could be marked by ‘bad’ or unfavorable constellations and aspects, or by ‘good’ or favorable ones. This is why some emperors propagated their natal chart or tried to forge it, while others forbid talking about it publicly. Nero, for instance, had a bad horoscope (as we read in Dio Cassius, Tacitus, and many others), and Hadrian had a good one.³ The emperor’s horoscope was part of political communication and propaganda.

Astrology in Jewish and Christian Politics

Such political thinking was not limited to the Roman sovereigns. It was adopted by the Hasmoneans, Herod, and the Christian emperors alike. In these cases, however, the Jewish religious tradition was brought into the mix. The strong expectation in Roman political discourse of a fundamental turn of the era and the dawning of a Golden Age (see below) was combined with the Jews’ own

2 See Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954).

3 The chart was transmitted by Hephaestion of Thebes and interpreted by Antigonus of Nicaea and others; see Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 137–38; see also Stephan Heilen, “The Emperor Hadrian in the Horoscopes of Antigonus of Nicaea,” in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology* (ed. Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin, and Kocku von Stuckrad; Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 2005), 49–67.

religious identity. Many documents linked this to another rhetorical strategy—claiming the superiority of Judaism over other religions. Those texts tried to show that scientific, ethical, and political knowledge had been developed and guarded by the Jews since early times, whereas later developments were only possible due to Jewish transmission. The numerous legends about Abraham, describing how he taught astrology to ‘Chaldeans’ and Egyptians, are to be understood against this background.⁴ The hero could equally be Moses or Enoch—what is important is the intention to give evidence of Jewish superiority in religious matters.

With regard to Jewish and subsequent Christian discourses, an important theme formed around the famous prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:17, which is referred to many times in the present volume: “A star will go out of Jacob, a scepter will rise from Israel.” There can be no doubt that many Jews later interpreted this pagan prophecy in a messianic way: the *targumim* translate it as “King of Jacob” and “Messiah of Israel” (Targum Onkelos and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan); the Codex Neofiti (FrgmT) has “Once a King will rise from the House of Jacob, and a redeemer and emperor from the House of Israel;” and the Septuagint renders the sentence as “A star will emerge from Jacob, a man (*antrópos*) will rise from Israel.” The messianic connotation of this pagan prophecy captured the imagination of many Jews and Christians, especially those striving for political power. In the context of the narrative of the Star of Bethlehem, it is noteworthy that—exactly as in the story about the magi and the star—part of the strategy of legitimization is to have Gentiles proclaiming the birth or rise of a Jewish king.

How did this theme work out in Jewish and Christian politics?⁵

The Hasmoneans

The Hasmonean kings made extensive use of astrological symbolism, usually drawing on Balaam’s prophecy. During the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), many coins were minted that bore a star as prominent symbol, which,

4 This claim is very old. It can be traced back to Artapanus (second century BCE) and his Jewish history (*peri Ioudaión*), which is fragmentarily transmitted through Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* 9.8;23;27.

5 For the full argument of this chapter, see Kocku von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie: Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis* (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 2000), 105–58; see also von Stuckrad, “Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity—A New Approach,” *Numen* 47 (2000): 1–40. Annti Laato (*A Star is Rising: The Historical Development of the Old Testament Royal Ideology and the Rise of the Jewish Messianic Expectations* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]) has shown that the messianic concept used in Jewish and Christian discourse has its roots in Near Eastern royal ideology.

according to Ya'akov Meshorer, was “perhaps the most common Jewish coin.”⁶ The Hasmonean star could be depicted with eight rays or, alternatively, with six points, with or without a circle. As historians, we have to find an explanation for the prominent use of the star. One way of approaching this phenomenon is taking seriously the astrological practice of the time.

In ancient cosmological thinking, the cycles of the outer planets Jupiter and Saturn were of special importance. Babylonians were the first to speculate about the meaning of the combined paths of Jupiter and Saturn, but it was Berossus in the third century BCE who further developed this theory and introduced it to Greek and Roman astrology.⁷ Berossus was a priest of Bel (Marduk). Vitruvius (*On Architecture* 9.6.2) tells us that Berossus founded a school of astrologers on the island of Cos, probably around 281 BCE. Berossus' reputation—and the influence of his school in general—was considerable. Pliny the Elder (NH 7.123) reports that Berossus was so highly honored in the imperial period “because of his divine predictions” that a statue with a gold-plated tongue was erected in his memory. With Berossus, we see for the first time an explicit astronomical calculation of the end of days based on planetary cycles (and not on astral myths, as was the case with Plato). The figure of 432,000 years is derived from the revolutions of Jupiter and Saturn—432,000 years corresponds to both 14,400 cycles of Saturn and 36,000 cycles of Jupiter.

This theory of the Great Year was subsequently spread and transformed, and it ultimately influenced the politics of Roman emperors. The history of Berossus' school of astrologers on Cos illuminates the further development of astrology, not only through the application of transmitted knowledge, but particularly through the observation and research conducted by these scholars. Many famous astrologers were affiliated with the Cos school, from Calippus in the school's first generation to the celebrated Hipparchus of Nicaea (ca. 190–120 BCE), who engaged intensively with both Babylonian astronomy

6 Ya'akov Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* (Tel Aviv: Hassefer & Massada, 1967), 119. See also Baruch Kanael, “Ancient Jewish Coins and Their Historical Importance,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 36 (1963): 38–62; and Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage* (2 vols.; Dix Hills: Amphora Books, 1982). It is a serious omission in Molnar's account that, although the author mentions the importance of coins in political rhetoric (Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem*, 3–4), he does not include the Hasmonean and subsequent Jewish coins in his analysis.

7 On the history of astrology prior to the Roman Empire, see von Stuckrad, “Astrology,” in *Companion to Greek Science, Medicine, and Technology* (ed. Georgia L. Irby; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2015).

and Greek geometry and arithmetic.⁸ In addition to many other astronomical calculations—for instance, the creation of a star catalogue that later formed the basis of Ptolemy’s studies—Hipparchus suggested a figure for the precession of the equinoxes of at least one degree in a century, which comes quite close to the actual figure of a little over 50 inches per year. This assumption was supported by Ptolemy.

Considering the great interest of ancient cultures in calculating and interpreting periods, “Great Years,” and planetary cycles, one would expect that a discovery such as Hipparchus’ would lead to excited responses. After all, it occurred during a period in which the Vernal Point was moving from Aries to Pisces, a change that could have triggered many expectations. Unfortunately, we can only speculate here, because the ancient sources do not refer explicitly to the ingress of the Vernal Point into Pisces. But there are scholars who assume that Hipparchus’ discovery had a massive impact on the religions of his time; some even suggest that the cult of Mithras was in fact born out of the astronomical determination of a new epoch.⁹

The conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn are at the heart of the debate about the Star of Bethlehem (as is clear from the prominence of this issue in other chapters in this volume).¹⁰ The rare triple conjunctions corresponded in an interesting way to political events and speculations.¹¹ Of course, there was no “theory of Great Conjunctions” at that time; this was developed later and

8 John North, *The Fontana History of Astronomy and Cosmology* (London: Fontana, 1994), 92–104.

9 This is particularly the case with August Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neuen Forschung* 11.20.2 (ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 988–1190; and Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); cf. the discussion in von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 163–68.

10 See Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern.” Many of the theories that Molnar (*Star of Bethlehem*) presented as ‘new discoveries’ had in fact been discussed by three generations of scholars before him; it is a serious shortcoming that Molnar does not refer to those older contributions, such as Strobel’s (which was even translated into English).

11 See von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 860–75, which gives an overview of all of the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn between 200 BCE and 710 CE; a list of comet descriptions in ancient sources; tables and charts of the major conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn between 126 BCE and 134 CE; and the birth charts of the emperors Nero and Hadrian.

subsequently popularized by Abu Ma'shar and other Muslim scholars in the early Islamic period. However, these conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn could easily be observed for more than a year, every night, and we know that their movements were also calculated. Hence, even without a theory, the importance of those planets' movements is firmly established in classical astrology.

If we want to understand the astrological message underlying Alexander Jannaeus' coins, we should take into account that his year of birth, 126 BCE, was marked by a great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces. To be precise, in 126 BCE the great conjunction was not completed, since the retrograde phase of Jupiter ended with an orb of $1^{\circ}05'$ to Saturn. The next exact great conjunction happened in 7 BCE. This conjunction was calculated beforehand by Babylonian astrologers, as Kugler showed many years ago.¹²

Jupiter was typically connected to kingship and royalty, whereas Saturn, being the seventh star and thus heralding the Sabbath, was often attributed to the Jewish people.¹³ When Alexander and his family minted coins bearing the Hasmonean star, he laid claim to his divine election as sovereign, in correspondence with the great conjunction. His reign was the fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy.

Herod the Great

Herod the Great, for his part, read the heavenly signs differently, yet he applied the same pattern of arguments. There can be no doubt that Herod was deeply engaged in skilled astrological discourse: He was a good friend of the Pollio

12 Franz Xaver Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel: Assyriologische, astronomische und astralmythologische Untersuchungen* (vol. 2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1907–1935), 498–99.

13 The link between Saturn and the Jewish community is a well-attested theme in ancient literature, at times linked to the assumption that the Jews would venerate Saturn with sacrifices; on this point, see Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, *L'astrologie Grecque* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899), 318, 478, 483–84; on the Sabbath as the *dies Saturni* in Roman theology, see Jörg Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: Die Geschichte der Repräsentation und religiösen Qualifikation von Zeit in Rom* (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 1995), 457–58; Bouché-Leclercq, *L'astrologie Grecque*, 476–84. Judaism was also repeatedly linked to Pisces as the sign of the Messianic Age; for the rabbinic discussion, see Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (vol. 4; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922–1961), 1046 and 1049; for the theme in Mandaean and Gnostic literature, see Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Gießen: A. Töpelmann, 1915), 408ff; E. S. Drower, trans., *The Book of the Zodiac* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1949), 60–61 and 119 (the “Great King” who will rise when Venus and Saturn govern the sign of Pisces); see also Testamentum Levi 18:3.

family, including C. Asinius Gallus (the bearer of the promise in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue); he honored the island Rhode, which was an astrological center of the time, and financed the reconstruction of the Temple of Apollo as a bearer of the Golden Age; he also built a Temple for Apollo near Caesarea.¹⁴ As Abraham Schalit clearly demonstrated,¹⁵ Herod saw himself as the Jewish Messiah who was to establish a divine reign for his people. According to Josephus, Herod said in a speech: "I think that through the will of God I helped the Jewish people to gain a level of wealth that had never been known before" (*AJ* 15.383). And he goes on: "But now, through God's will, I am the emperor, and there will be a long period of piece and abundant wealth and income" (*AJ* 15.387).¹⁶ He saw himself as the new star rising from Israel. Given the astrological orientation of his political program, Herod was extremely sensitive when it came to extraordinary heavenly events.¹⁷ Taking this into account, it is not surprising to find the king aggressively reacting to the challenge to his power during the years 7 and 6 BCE.¹⁸ What at first glance seems to be an outburst of persecution mania turns out to be a 'reasonable' response to the planetary threat. A great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the last decade of Pisces, i.e., exactly on the Vernal Point of that time.¹⁹

For educated astrologers, the interpretation of this event would have been apparent: The last important conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 126 BCE brought forth a Jewish kingdom that was to last for 27 years, during which time its area and influence extended enormously. What more could be expected as a result of a genuine great conjunction on the Vernal Point, stressed further by the planet Mars?²⁰ No doubt, the events called for decided and resolute action, and so Herod went for it. Furthermore, the king was driven by an enigmatic prophecy, once uttered by a Pharisee, that Herod would lose his power

14 For a detailed discussion of astrology in Herodian politics, see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 112–33.

15 Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969).

16 On Herod's Messianism, see Schalit, *König Herodes*, 476.

17 This caused much nervous tension in Rome during his reign, when Virgil's Fourth Eclogue as a prophecy of fundamental change played a significant role; see von Stuckrad, *Frömmigkeit und Wissenschaft: Astrologie in Tanach, Qumran und früh-rabbinischer Literatur* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1996), 68–71; von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 119.

18 Josephus reports these events extensively in *AJ* 16.73–76.328–334.361–394. See also Schalit, *König Herodes*, 620–28.

19 Strobel, "Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern," 1051.

20 See the charts for the various moments of that great conjunction in von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 869–72.

“by God’s decree” (*AJ* 17.43–44). Again, political discourse was deeply saturated with prophecies and astrological notions. Josephus himself raised the question of whether these events were to be regarded as the influence of necessity (*anankê*) or heavenly fate (*heimarmenê*) (*AJ* 16.397).²¹ This interpretation leads us right into the center of ancient discussions and expectations.

The “Star of Bethlehem” in the Christian Imagination

The Christian version of the triple conjunction’s ‘true meaning’ was near at hand. From this perspective, the birth of the Messiah was accompanied by a heavenly sign, and the great conjunction was molded into the ‘Star of Bethlehem’, thus ensuring the belief in Jesus’ divine origin.²² Generally, the stars as signs is a common motif in both canonized and non-canonized writings, and the star of the Messiah intrigued the early followers of Jesus. From the second century on, patristic literature discussed its theological implications. In general, Jewish and Christian attitudes toward the science of the stars were marked by a critical response to the fatalistic and deterministic dimensions of (Stoic) astrology, while the idea that the paths of the stars indicate divine will and cosmic processes was much less controversial. Put differently, the disputes did not touch upon the notion of correspondences, but rather raised the question of how those correspondences were to be explained. Do heavenly signs simply accompany mundane events—the stars as *sêmeia*? Or are they responsible for them—the stars as *poiêtikoi*? And if there is a sympathetic correspondence between the celestial sphere and earthly events, does this necessarily imply a deterministic or fatalistic influence?

Origen (ca. 185–255 CE) had an interesting take on these questions. In his almost-canonical commentary on Gen 1:14, he explained that the movements of the stars were to be regarded as a kind of writing by God’s hand in the sky. They reveal the divine mysteries to the heavenly powers, such as angels. Some people may gain (perhaps inaccurate) insight into those secrets, as well.²³ Thus,

21 See Schalit, *König Herodes*, 627; and Strobel, “Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” 1073.

22 For a detailed analysis of Matthew’s account and its historical context, see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 555–86, and the references provided there.

23 Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.11; *Philocalia* 23.1–21; see also *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* 9.2,112,11ff. The enormous influence of Origen’s commentary is described in Utto Riedinger, *Die Heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie von Origenes bis Johannes von Damaskos: Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und zur Geschichte der Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1956), 177–82; cf. also David Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l’antiquité grecque: Recherches sur la survivance de l’argumentation*

even anti-astrological arguments make use of astrological semantics.²⁴ This is not due to a naïve misunderstanding of astrology's implications, but is rather an attempt to establish an interpretation of astrology that would be acceptable to monotheistic theology. Consequently, Origen also applied his reading of the planetary movements as the writing of God's own hand to the birth of Jesus.

The Bar Kokhba Revolt

If it is right to say that the great conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn had an impact on politics and religious identities, then one can assume that the next great conjunction of the two planets would raise old questions anew. This was the case in the year 134 CE, during the Bar Kokhba revolt; again, astrological interpretation sheds light on the difficult psychological and historical circumstances of the Jewish rebellion. For this purpose, it is helpful to know that Hadrian, who besieged Jerusalem and changed its name into *Aelia Capitolina*—a sanctuary for Jupiter—was an astrologer himself.²⁵ He was by all means a learned expert, and there can be no doubt that he arranged his politics in accordance with astrological calculations.²⁶ Turning to the Jewish rebels, we find a similar involvement. First, the very name of the leader—Bar Kokhba/Aramaic Bar Koseba, i.e., “son of the star”—reveals not only a messianic expectation, but also its astral (or astrological?) connotation. This notion was obviously common, even within Christian circles, as Eusebius of Caesarea noted: “The Jews' leader was [a man] named Bar Kokhba [*Barchôchebas*] which means *star*. Although he was a bloodthirsty and rapacious man, he was, due to his name, slavishly honored as a *lantern* [*phôstêr*] that had come down from heaven to help and illuminate the oppressed” (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.6,2).

During the revolt, several coins were minted with a star as a symbol above the temple front. In some cases, the motif resembled a rosette or a small wave,

morale antifataliste de Carnéade chez les philosophes grecs et les théologiens chrétiens des quatre premiers siècles (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1973), 307–18.

- 24 Tamsyn Barton correctly noted: “Origen thus concedes a good deal to astrology. He says that the stars offer information about a fixed future from beginning to end, and that in some cases they are part of the medium by which fate is played out” (*Ancient Astrology* [London & New York: Routledge, 1994], 75). It is exactly the doctrine of correspondences that goes undisputed in Origen's argument. Or, in the words of John North: “Origen [...] tried desperately to purge astrology of fatalism” (*The Fontana History of Astronomy and Cosmology*, 123).
- 25 The renaming of the city can either be an act of thanks to Jupiter after the victory over the Jews/Saturn or a preparatory act before the siege. Thus, this interpretation does not solve the much-discussed difficulties in the dating of Hadrian's decision.
- 26 Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, 162ff.

so that no final decision is possible about its meaning.²⁷ But the fact that the Jews fashioned their most valuable coins, the silver *tetradrachms*, with a star-rossette in a marked position calls for explanation. The temple—and even more so the *new* temple—was not a mere decoration,²⁸ but represented a program and propaganda. Its interpretation as a star fits the discourses of the day very well, and these discourses were shared by Romans and Jews. What is more, the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn was observable all the time, which enabled those Jews who were not familiar with astronomical calculations to make up their own minds about the quality of time.

Conclusion: Narratives and Claims of Power

When it comes to Jewish and Christian knowledge and practice of astrology, as well as to the interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem in (inter)religious communication, I suggest an indirect line of argument. There is no evidence of serious astrological theory in Jewish and Christian milieus before the third century; astrology was an elite discourse, and only Jews who were immersed in Roman intellectual culture had sufficient education to explicitly use astrology. We can demonstrate that Herod—and to a certain extent also Josephus Flavius and Philo of Alexandria²⁹—had knowledge of astrology and access to the highest educated levels of the astrological craft. Herod most likely used this knowledge and applied it in his political strategy; therefore, we can interpret his actions in the light of the astrology of his time.

When it comes to the Hasmoneans and other Jewish groups, including the early Jesus communities, the case is different. We can better speak of astral symbolism in this case, which at times was merged with some rudimentary knowledge of astrological theory; it was only from the third century on that this knowledge became more common among Jews and Christians.³⁰

27 See Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period*, and *Ancient Jewish Coinage*. Strobel (“Weltenjahr, Große Konjunktion und Messiasstern,” 1106) is enthusiastically positive about the star; Leo Mildenberg (*The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War* [Aarau: Sauerländer, 1984], 45) is critical; and Peter Schäfer (*Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand: Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1981], 65) is sure about the star, but not about its messianic connotation.

28 This is what Mildenberg (*The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War*, 45) assumes.

29 See von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 224–310.

30 This was mainly in Manichaean, Mandaean, and Gnostic milieus; see von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 624–766.

This means that the narrative in Matthew chapter two must be regarded as fiction, which may be based on a story about the mythical birth of a world leader and Jewish king, probably linked to a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. The story is part of a larger discourse on the star of the Messiah, from the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba. The story has a clear propagandistic function in interreligious discourse. Searching for evidence of a celestial event that corresponds to Matthew's Star of Bethlehem is futile.

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