



## The Magi and the Star in the Gospel of Matthew and Early Christian Tradition

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### Résumé de l'article

La péripécie matthéenne (2,1-12) sur les Mages et l'étoile de Bethléem a suscité des réactions variées chez les commentateurs chrétiens du II<sup>e</sup> au V<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ces réactions reflètent, chez les premiers chrétiens, une diversité d'attitudes envers l'astrologie, qui était un aspect fondamental et omniprésent de la religion et de la culture gréco-romaines. Certains auteurs chrétiens de l'époque répudiaient absolument l'astrologie alors que d'autres cherchaient à l'accommoder jusqu'à un certain point aux croyances et aux pratiques chrétiennes. Les interprétations de la péripécie matthéenne permettent de prendre la mesure de ces opinions divergentes. Cet article examine les thèmes des Mages et de l'étoile en Matthieu 2,1-12, ainsi qu'un certain nombre d'exégèses anciennes de la péripécie. Celles-ci fournissent autant d'indices de l'ambivalence de l'attitude chrétienne face à l'astrologie.

# THE MAGI AND THE STAR IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW AND EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION\*

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**RÉSUMÉ :** La péricope matthéenne (2,1-12) sur les Mages et l'étoile de Bethléem a suscité des réactions variées chez les commentateurs chrétiens du II<sup>e</sup> au V<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ces réactions reflètent, chez les premiers chrétiens, une diversité d'attitudes envers l'astrologie, qui était un aspect fondamental et omniprésent de la religion et de la culture gréco-romaines. Certains auteurs chrétiens de l'époque répudiaient absolument l'astrologie alors que d'autres cherchaient à l'accommoder jusqu'à un certain point aux croyances et aux pratiques chrétiennes. Les interprétations de la péricope matthéenne permettent de prendre la mesure de ces opinions divergentes. Cet article examine les thèmes des Mages et de l'étoile en Matthieu 2,1-12, ainsi qu'un certain nombre d'exégèses anciennes de la péricope. Celles-ci fournissent autant d'indices de l'ambivalence de l'attitude chrétienne face à l'astrologie.

**ABSTRACT :** The Matthean pericope (2.1-12) of the Magi and the star of Bethlehem prompted a variety of responses among early Christian commentators of the second to the fifth centuries. These responses reflect a range of attitudes among the early Christians towards astrology, which was a fundamental and pervasive aspect of ancient Greco-Roman religion and culture. Some early Christian writers repudiated astrology absolutely, while others sought to grant it some degree of accommodation to Christian beliefs and practices. Interpretations of the Matthean pericope offer an index to the range of such views. This paper examines the motifs of the Magi and of the star in Matthew 2.1-12 as well as a number of early Christian interpretations of the pericope as evidence of a pattern of ambivalence in early Christian attitudes toward Greco-Roman astrology.

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\* I would like to thank Roger Beck, Timothy Barnes, Joanne McWilliam and Harold Remus for helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. The following abbreviations are used in this article : CCL = *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* ; CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* ; DACL = F. Cabrol and H. LECLERCQ, *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, 1920-1953 ; GCS = *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* ; GNO = W. JAEGER *et al.*, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, Leiden, 1952-1996 ; LCL = *Loeb Classical Library* ; LSJ = Henry George LIDDELL and Robert SCOTT, *A Greek English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones, 9th ed., Oxford, 1940 ; OTP = James CHARLESWORTH, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vol., Garden City, NY, 1983-1987 ; PG = J.-P. MIGNE, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* ; RAC = *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Stuttgart, 1941ff. ; SC = *Sources Chrétiennes* ; TDNT = Gerhard KITTEL, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, 1964-1976.

The observation of the sun, moon and stars and the calculation of their position with respect to the zodiac was developed by the ancient Babylonians. In the early Hellenistic period these practices were imported into the Mediterranean world where they were combined with themes from Greco-Roman mythology, as well as with the notion of fate, to produce the classical system of astrology. Over the centuries astrology came to be a fundamental and pervasive aspect of Greco-Roman culture ; indeed, astrology has been characterized by Luther H. Martin as “the most important and widespread Hellenistic system of piety.”<sup>1</sup>

Greco-Roman astrology was commonly rejected by the early Christians because of its association with fatalistic determinism. Despite the fact that in practice many ancient astrological writers found ways to mitigate absolute fatalism and to accommodate free will, the charge of fatalism occasioned numerous passages of virulent anti-astrological polemic in early Christian literature.<sup>2</sup> However, the widespread popularity of astrology in Greco-Roman culture and society into late antiquity should lead us to expect other responses to astrology in early Christianity aside from sheer monolithic repudiation ; and, indeed, upon closer examination of the sources this turns out to be the case.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, elements within Christianity itself that touch on astrology necessitated a more complex type of response, and among these perhaps the most pressing was the pericope of the Magi and the star in Matthew 2.1-12. The presence of this account in the scriptural context of the nativity story posed a very real problem for early Christian commentators, raising a number of questions. Had some Magi actually managed to locate Jesus by means of astrological knowledge ? Did the Matthean pericope offer some sort of scriptural warrant for the validity of astrology ? And, most significantly, what did it mean that the Saviour had been born under a star ? Such questions prompted early Christian writers to find creative ways to deal with astrology in the course of interpreting this pericope. This article surveys the interpretation of the two features of the Matthean pericope which relate most directly to astrology : the Magi and the star.

## I. THE MAGI AND THE STAR IN MATTHEW 2.1-12

The order of Magi (Μάγοι) was well known in Greco-Roman antiquity. In Book 1 of the *Histories* Herodotus refers to Magi as originally members of the priestly caste of the Medes and Persians who possessed special power to interpret dreams. During the Hellenistic period, the Magi developed a reputation as learned

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1. “The Pagan Religious Background,” in Ian HAZLETT, ed., *Early Christianity : Origins and Evolution to A.D. 600*, Nashville, 1991, p. 59. Cf. Luther H. MARTIN, *Hellenistic Religions : An Introduction*, New York, 1987, p. 43 : “More than any other such form [of divination], it captured the Hellenistic imagination.”

2. On this see David AMAND, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'Antiquité grecque*, Louvain, 1945.

3. This is the argument of my dissertation *Attitudes to Astrology in Early Christianity : A Study Based on Selected Sources*, Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, 2000.

practitioners of magic and of various types of divination, especially astrology<sup>4</sup>; as such, they were esteemed or condemned according to the various views of such practices held by Greco-Roman writers.<sup>5</sup>

The portrayal of the Magi in Matt 2.1-12 is remarkably positive; there is no hint of explicit or implicit criticism of them in this pericope.<sup>6</sup> Since in this text the Magi direct their attention to the rising of a star it seems evident that we are to take them to be professional astrologers. The text (2.1) says that they came from the east (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν); while no exact place of origin is named, the phrase may refer to Persia or Babylon.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they ask for “the newborn king of the Jews” whose star they have seen “at its rising” (ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ) (v.2, cf. v.9). (This translation is preferable to “in the east” of older versions [so KJV and RSV], which would be properly ἐν [ταῖς] ἀνατολαῖς.<sup>8</sup>) The statement of the Magi is not a reference to a time of day, but rather is calendrical (cf. the phrase “the time of the star’s appearing” [τὸν χρόνον τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρος] in 2.7<sup>9</sup>): “rising” means the star’s heliacal rising, i.e. the first time in the year that it was visible rising ahead of the sun before dawn. The usual technical term for this was ἐπιτολή but ἀνατολή could be used for the heliacal rising as well<sup>10</sup>; the latter seems to be the case in Matt 2.2. According to the narrative, the heliacal “rising” of the star held significance for the Magi as an astrological omen. It was this more ancient form of astrology, rather than horoscopic astrology, in which the Magi were engaged.

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4. [G.] DELLING, s.v., “Magos,” TDNT vol. 4, p. 356-359; A.D. NÖCK, “Paul and the Magus,” in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, vol. 1, Oxford, 1972, p. 308-324.
  5. On the Greek view of the Magi see Roger BECK, “Thus Spake Not Zarathustra: Zoroastrian Pseudepigrapha of the Greco-Roman World,” in Mary BOYCE and Frantz GRENET, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, Leiden, 1991, p. 511-521.
  6. Raymond E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, new updated edition, New York, 1993, p. 167-168, arguing against scholars who see an implicit apologetic against false magi and astrology in the text; Engelbert KIRSCHBAUM, “Der Prophet Balaam und die Anbetung der Weisen,” *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte*, 49 (1954), p. 135: “[...] ohne sich in irgendeiner Weise über die Herkunft ihres Wissens zu äussern.”
  7. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 168-170. Persia reflects the historical origin of the Magi (as in Herodotus), while Babylon (Chaldea) reflects the background of astrology; Brown adds that gold, frankincense and myrrh would also have been associated with Arab traders.
  8. The plural is more commonly used when referring to the east (LSJ s.v. ἀνατολή, p. 123), though this is disputed by Franz BOLL, “Der Stern der Weisen,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 18 (1917), p. 44-45. The New RSV has “at its rising”. According to Krister Stendahl, since Num 24.17 is the only place in the LXX where the Hebrew verb נָחַם (“tread, march forth”) is rendered by ἀνατέλλειν this text presumably lies behind the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ in Matt 2 (*The School of St. Matthew*, 2nd ed, Lund, 1968, p. 136). The Lukan infancy narrative also mentions ἀνατολή (Lk 1.78), where it may carry an astrological sense (the rising of a heavenly body), a temporal sense (“dawn”), or may be a directly christological term (deriving from the translation of the Davidic “branch” of Zech 3.8, 6.12 as ἀνατολή in LXX) (see BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 373-374; Reginald FULLER, *He That Cometh*, Harrisburg, PA, 1990, p. 92-93). Cf. also the references to Jesus as the “morning star” in Rev 2.28 and 22.16 (ὁ ἀστήρ ὁ πρωῒνός) and in 2 Peter 1.19 (ἕως ... φωσφόρος ἀνατείλη). On ἀνατολή as a Christian messianic title see [Heinrich] SCHLIER, s.v. “ἀνατολή,” TDNT vol. 1, p. 352-353, and EUSEBIUS, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 4.17 and *Eclogae Propheticae* 3.23.
  9. BOLL, “Stern,” p. 45-46.
  10. GEMINUS, *Introduction to the Phaenomena* 13.3 (and see p. 68, n. 1, of Aujac’s edition).

A recent study by Michael Molnar argues that the most likely horoscope in which professional astrologers such as the Magi would have been interested was the appearance of the Sun, Moon, Jupiter and Saturn (all regal signs) in Aries on April 17, 6 B.C.E.<sup>11</sup> However, Molnar's conclusions are overly sophisticated : there is no need to interpret the Matthean text in terms of technical or sophisticated astrology such as that of Ptolemy and Firmicus Maternus. Rather, the star of Matthew 2.1-12 derives from the common, widespread belief (found already in Plato) that all people have a "natal star" that appears at their birth and passes away with them.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, celestial phenomena are of course frequently associated with important terrestrial events in ancient literature : it seems most plausible to read the Matthean pericope as yet another example of this literary topos. Despite this common-sense view, however, over the centuries many attempts have been made to identify the star of Matthew with spectacular celestial phenomenon such as a supernova<sup>13</sup>, a comet<sup>14</sup> or a planetary conjunction.<sup>15</sup>

Despite various efforts to offer scientific explanations the relevance of such explanations to the text cannot be assumed. Furthermore the text itself contains a number of uncertainties. For example, it is unclear how the contemporary ascent of two planets could be termed a "rising" (vv. 2, 9)<sup>16</sup>, or even strictly speaking a "star".<sup>17</sup> A related puzzle is the notion of the star "going before" the Magi "until it came to where the child was" (προῆγεν αὐτοῦς, ἕως ἑλθὼν οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον, v. 9)<sup>18</sup> : even

11. *The Star of Bethlehem : The Legacy of the Magi*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1999, p. 64-101.

12. BOLL, "Stern," p. 44-45. For PLATO, see *Timaeus* 41D-E.

13. See David H. CLARK *et al.*, "An Astronomical Re-Appraisal of the Star of Bethlehem — A Nova in 5 BC," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 18 (1977), p. 443-449, citing Chinese astronomical records.

14. The identification of the star as a comet was already made by ORIGEN (*Contra Celsum* 1.58). See more recently William E. PHIPPS, "The Magi and Halley's Comet," *Theology Today*, 43 (1986-1987), p. 88-92.

15. See the discussion of these three possible identifications in BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 171-173, 610-612. (On p. 610, n. 110, Brown mentions a recent fourth proposal — a U.F.O. !) Brown (*ibid.*, p. 166-167, 172-173, 607-608, 611-612) suggests that the most reasonable of these proposals is a planetary conjunction : the best candidate is a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn which occurred in 7-6 B.C.E., about the same time as Jesus' birth which took place some two years (cf. Matt 2.16) before the death of Herod the Great in 5-4 B.C.E. (on the latter date see T.D. BARNES, "The Date of Herod's Death," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 19 [1968], p. 204-209). The triple conjunction hypothesis has been maintained, with some variations, by Roger W. SINNOT ("Computing the Star of Bethlehem," *Sky and Telescope*, 72 [1986], p. 632-635) and Colin J. HUMPHREYS ("The Star of Bethlehem — A Comet in B.C. — and the Date of the Birth of Christ," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 32 [1991], p. 389-407). However, the triple conjunction took place in Pisces, a sign which only came to be associated with Judea in the Middle Ages ; MOLNAR (*Star*, p. 27-28, 42-48) rightly points out that Greco-Roman astrologers such as Ptolemy and Vettius Valens held Aries to be the sign of Syria and Judea. Thus Molnar's point undermines the triple conjunction hypothesis. Molnar also argues persuasively that Matthew does not refer to a celestial phenomenon that was astronomically impressive (such as later astronomers have looked for), but rather to a sign whose significance was primarily astrological.

16. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 173.

17. BOLL, "Stern," p. 40-43, emphasizes that ἀστὴρ almost always refers to a single star.

18. This is further complicated if we accept the reading of the "western" manuscript tradition which inserts ἐστᾶθη ἐπάνω after ἑλθὼν. According to EUSEBIUS, to believe that the star came down and stood over the roof of Mary and Joseph's house is madness (*cave existimes eam de caelo in terram descendisse, et supra domus tectum stetisse : nam qui ita credit, insanit*) ; his solution is that the star still moved on high though not very far from the earth (*ea alte quidem sed tamen a terra haud valde distans decurrebat*) (*Supplementa*

granted that this refers not to the entire journey of the Magi but only to their trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem,<sup>19</sup> it is still unclear how any planetary movement (which was believed to correspond with the movement of the sun) could be understood as a guide for travelling in a southward direction from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Raymond E. Brown's emphasis is apposite: "Really no one, including the astronomers, takes everything in the Matthean account as literal history"<sup>21</sup>; the historical and astronomical data in the Matthean pericope are clearly subordinate to its overriding theological character and purpose.

Matt 2.1-12 has many parallels in ancient literature: the story of Astyages (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.107ff.), a king (of the Medes) who consults Magi and then tries unsuccessfully to kill his prophesied successor, a male child (Cyrus)<sup>22</sup>; the story of the visit of the Armenian king Tiridates and his entourage to Rome in 66 C.E., told by Dio Cassius (*Roman History* 63.1-7) and Suetonius (*Life of Nero* 13)<sup>23</sup>; and also the Biblical story of Moses.<sup>24</sup> In particular, scholars have long noted the connection between Matt 2.1-12 and Num 24.17b, "a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel", found in one of the oracles of blessing upon Israel uttered by Balaam in Numbers 22-24.<sup>25</sup> Num 24.17 was clearly regarded as a messianic prophecy among some Jewish groups in the Second Temple period, including the early Christians. Already the Septuagint of Num 24.17 translates the term "sceptre" as ἄνθρωπος, and in the Targumim the "star" is rendered as "king" and the "sceptre" variously as "redeemer, ruler, or Messiah."<sup>26</sup> The best known instance of Jewish mes-

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*Quaestionum ad Stephanum*; trans. of the Syriac in PG 22.982B). However, Eusebius has not always been heeded. Thus HUMPHREYS ("Star," p. 392-393) claims that Matt 2.9 can only be explained as a comet: he bases this not on astronomy but on ancient portrayals of comets as standing still or lying low over the earth.

19. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 174.

20. BOLL, "Stern," p. 46. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 176, merely notes that "the precision of leading them to a house is unusual".

21. *Messiah*, p. 612; the discussion that follows (p. 612-613) of how Biblical scholars and astronomers talk past each other on this issue is insightful. Similarly, Boll questions the significance of identifying the star astronomically for understanding the Matthean account ("Stern", p. 47-48).

22. Note the term "anointed" one (i.e. "messiah") applied to Cyrus in Is 45.1, and in the same context the reference to the wealth of nations being brought to Israel (Is 45.14; cf. Is 60.6); on this as background to Matt 2.1-12 see R.D. AUS, "The Magi at the Birth of Cyrus, and the Magi at Jesus' Birth in Matt 2.1-12," in Jacob NEUSNER, ed. et al., *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, vol. 2, Lanham, MD, 1987, p. 99-114.

23. Note particularly the description of Tiridates' homage to Nero (according to Dio, Tiridates said "I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Mithras") and that the king returned home by a different route than that by which he had come. PLINY, *Natural History* 30.6.16-17, writes that Tiridates was accompanied on this journey by Magi.

24. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 110-119.

25. Jean DANIELOU, "L'Étoile de Jacob et la mission chrétienne à Damas," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 11 (1957), p. 121-138; ID., "The Star of Jacob," in *Primitive Christian Symbols*, trans. Donald Attwater, London, 1964, p. 102-123; BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 190-196.

26. *Targum Neofiti 1: Numbers*, ed. and trans. Martin McNAMARA, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Numbers*, ed. and trans. Ernest G. CLARKE, Collegeville, MN, 1995, p. 140, 261. The "sceptre" was also understood messianically in the Syriac versions (*ibid.*, p. 140, n. 23). On the use of Num 24.17 at Qumran see BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 195, n. 47 (preferable to DANIELOU, "Star of Jacob"). The same exegetical tradition is also evident in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Testament of Levi* 18.3 and *Testament of Judah* 24.1; these passages may reflect the contexts in which early Christianity read these texts (see H. DIXON SLINGERLAND, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Missoula, MT, 1977, p. 106-115).

sianic interpretation of Num 24.17 occurred in the early second century C.E. when fulfilment of the text was ascribed by some Jews to Bar Kosiba, the leader of the last great Jewish revolt against Rome, who came to be known as Bar Kochba (meaning “son of a star”), an allusion to Num 24.17. It is also possible that Num 24.17 was invoked in the context of the first Jewish revolt against Rome of 66-70 C.E. : Martin Hengel claims that Josephus likely had this text in mind when he referred to Jewish belief in an oracular pronouncement found in Holy Scripture that prophesied a world ruler (*Jewish War* 6.312).<sup>27</sup> In the context of early Christianity, Matt 2.1-12 also clearly invokes the messianic prophecy of Num 24.17 by means of the motif of the star. With regard to this motif (which is also of course astrological), the theological point that is developed in the Matthean text is that the star’s appearance signalled the birth of the “King of the Jews”.

As with the star, the theological treatment of the Magi in the Matthean text also relates to the Balaam account in Numbers. Like Balaam, the Magi too are foreigners who appear in the text from outside the tradition of Israel. Indeed, the identical phrase is used of the origin of the Magi in Matt 2.1 and of Balaam in Num 23.7 : both are said to come “from the east”<sup>28</sup>, with all the exotic connotations that conveyed. Moreover, Balaam as well as the Magi were associated with divination : as astrologers, the Magi in Matthew would have been associated with divination, while Num 22.7 speaks of certain “fees for divination” that were paid to Balaam (cf. Num 23.23).<sup>29</sup> There are further parallels between the story of Balaam and Matthew’s account of the Magi. In Numbers 22-24, Balaam honours Israel and prophesies the rise of its ruler despite the fact that he had originally been summoned by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. Similarly, in Matt 2.1-12 King Herod tries to use the Magi for his own purposes against the newborn “King of the Jews”, but his evil plot is thwarted and the Magi pay honour to Herod’s enemy nevertheless.<sup>30</sup>

These various parallels suggest strongly that the Matthean account was shaped by the story of Balaam in Num 22-24. The latter text also provided the background to Matthew’s theological point concerning the Magi, i.e. that the Magi (who are Gentile “outsiders”) are included among those who recognized and worshipped the “King of the Jews” at his birth.<sup>31</sup> The parallels between Balaam and Matthew’s Magi also prepared the way for interpretation of Matt 2.1-12 among the early Christians, enabling the astrological motifs of the Matthean text to be brought into line with earlier Bibli-

27. *The Zealots*, Edinburgh, 1989, p. 237-240.

28. See BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 193, n. 43, for various suggestions regarding the origin of Balaam and correspondences with possible identifications of the homeland of the Magi.

29. PHILO explicitly refers to Balaam as a μάγος in *Life of Moses* 1.50. (On Philo’s portrayal of Balaam in *Life of Moses*, see Harold REMUS, “Moses and the Thaumaturges : Philo’s *De Vita Mosis* as a Rescue Operation,” *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 52, 3 [1996], p. 671-674.) The view of Balaam as μάγος presumably lies behind the description of Balaam in EUSEBIUS, *Quaestiones* (PG 22.979C-982A).

30. BROWN, *Messiah*, p. 193-194, who also notes the parallel between Balaam’s being accompanied by two servants (Num 22.22) and the later Christian enumeration of the Magi as three.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 178-179, 182-183, 196. Moreover, this positive behaviour of the Magi is implicitly contrasted with that of the Jews and of Herod.

cal traditions regarding Balaam and thus rendered acceptable for exegetical and homiletical usage in the early church.

## II. THE MAGI IN EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF MATT 2.1-12

Let us begin with various early Christian traditions which connected Balaam and the Matthean Magi. Not only did Num 24.17 provide a prophetic text for the coming of Christ, but establishing a line of association between Balaam and the Magi helped early Christian writers to justify the astrological knowledge by which, according to the Matthean pericope, the Magi recognized the significance of the star which led them to Bethlehem. Thus in his commentary on Luke 2.48, Ambrose of Milan writes :

But who are these Magi unless those who, as a certain history teaches, derive from the stock of Balaam, by whom it was prophesied “a star shall arise out of Jacob” [Num 24.17] ? Therefore these are heirs not less of faith than of succession. He saw the star in spirit, they saw it with their eyes and believed (CSEL 32/4, p. 67-68.2).

The reference to a “certain history” (*historia quaedam*), also mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>32</sup>, suggests that there was a literary tradition in which Balaam was portrayed as an ancestor of the Magi of Matthew’s Gospel. Origen states the association explicitly :

If Balaam’s prophecies were included in the sacred books by Moses, how much more would they have been copied by those who were then living in Mesopotamia, among whom Balaam had a great reputation and who are known to have been disciples in his art. It is said that the race of Magi descends from him, and that their institution flourishes in eastern lands, and that they [the Magi] had copied among them all of Balaam’s prophecies, including “A star shall arise out of Jacob” [Num 24.17]. The Magi had these things written among themselves, and so when Jesus was born they recognized the star and understood that the prophecy was fulfilled (*Homilies on Numbers* 13.7).<sup>33</sup>

The connection between Balaam and the Matthean Magi also appears in early Christian iconography in scenes of the adoring Magi, or Mary with the Christ child in her lap, which include the figure of Balaam pointing to a star shining overhead.<sup>34</sup> In early Christian literature Balaam himself came to be seen as an astrologer (so Diodore of Tarsus, Κατὰ Εἰμαρμένῃς<sup>35</sup>), and he was even identified with Zoroaster, the legen-

32. *Supplementa Quaestionum ad Stephanum* (extant in Syriac) (PG 22.979C-D).

33. *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung*, ed. Baehrens (GCS), vol. 2, p. 118.14-22.

34. KIRSCHBAUM, “Der Prophet Balaam,” p. 144-164 ; Friedrich Wilhelm DEICHMANN, “Zur Erscheinung des Sternes von Bethlehem,” in *Vivarium : Festschrift Theodor Klauser zum 90. Geburtstag*, Münster, 1984, p. 101-102.

35. Quoted in PHOTIUS, *Bibliotheca* cod. 223 (p. 47.26-32 Henry) : the Magi were ὁμοτέχνοι of Balaam. In Eusebius’ *Quaestiones*, Balaam is termed a magus (PG 22.979C-982A). Gregory of Nyssa calls Balaam an οἰωνοστής (augur) in a Christmas sermon (p. 245.12 Mann [GNO]). The early fifth century *Consultationes Zacchaei Christiani et Apollonii Philosophi* 2.4.12-13 refers to Balaam as “auctor suae artis” [i.e. of the Magi] (vol. 2, p. 30.70 Feiertag [SC 402]). In *De Fide Catholica* 1.12, Isidore of Seville refers to Balaam as the first astrologer (PL 83, 471B).



dary figure who was widely regarded in antiquity as the founder and inventor of astrology.<sup>36</sup> In *Contra Celsum* 1.60, Origen again presents the Matthean Magi as inheritors of the tradition of Balaam, adding that the reason that the prophecies of Balaam had been recorded in the books of Moses was that Moses himself had been “skilful in the same arts”.<sup>37</sup>

By the fourth century the tradition connecting Balaam and the Magi of Matthew seems to have been well established, since it is referred to by Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrosiaster and Jerome. In a sermon on Christ’s nativity Gregory claims that the Magi were looking forward to the rising of the star because of the prediction of Balaam their forefather.<sup>38</sup> The writings of Ambrosiaster frequently condemn astrology as a demonically inspired denial of human free will. Because of this, Ambrosiaster frankly admits in *Quaestio* 63 that to him the Magi’s confirmation of Balaam’s messianic prophecy was unexpected: “[Balaam] received confirmation from a source that is usually condemned; for astrologers are enemies of the truth” (CSEL 50, p. 112). Jerome, for his part, portrays the Matthean Magi as righteous Gentiles who responded to Balaam’s prophecy in faith: the Magi’s astrological learning thus receives at least tacit approval, in effect becoming a type of natural revelation. Jerome also praises the Magi by contrast with the Jews who did not believe in the coming of Christ (*Commentary on Matthew* 1; CCL 77, p. 12.128-13.134). However, he does not want to encourage his audience to develop a favourable view of astrology. In his *Commentary on Isaiah* 13.47.12-15 Jerome admits that the Magi did follow the star either from their knowledge of astrology (“ex artis scientia”) or from the prophecy of Balaam in Num 24.17; however, he adds a warning to his readers against astrology and its practitioners (CCL 73A, p. 525). Earlier in the Isaiah commentary (7.19.1) Jerome writes that no matter whether the Magi knew of Christ’s birth from the teaching of demons or the prophecy of Balaam, the coming of God’s Son meant the destruction of the whole power of astrology (CCL 73, p. 278.19-279.22). Jerome’s view of the Magi indicates that the Magi were used within the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition of the early church. Similar anti-Jewish readings of the Matthean pericope — in which the Magi serve as a foil to show up Jewish “faithlessness” — are found in Basil of Caesarea (*Homilies on the Birth of Christ* 5; PG 31.1469), Ephrem of Edessa (*Hymns on the*

36. Joseph BIDEZ and Franz CUMONT, *Les mages hellénisés : Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d’après la tradition grecque*, vol. 1, Paris, 1938, p. 48-49; David WINSTON, “The Iranian Component in the Bible, Apocrypha, and Qumran,” *History of Religions*, 5 (1966), p. 213-214; BOYCE and GRENET, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, p. 438; BECK, “Thus Spake Not Zarathustra,” 521ff. A parallel tradition also developed in which Zoroaster was credited with prophesying the star of Bethlehem and the coming of Christ: see Richard J.H. GOTTHEIL, “References to Zoroaster in Syriac and Arabic Literature,” *Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler*, New York, 1894, p. 24-32; BIDEZ and CUMONT, *Les mages hellénisés*, vol. 2, p. 117ff.

37. Vol. 1, p. 238-240 Borret (SC 132). Cf. the identification of Moses as a “Chaldean” in PHILO, *Life of Moses* 1.5. See also the lines of Orphica quoted by Clement of Alexandria (OTP, vol. 2, p. 796) where the reference is to Abraham or Moses, as well as the fragment of Artapanus’ *On the Jews* preserved by Eusebius, where Moses is identified with Mousaeus the teacher of Orpheus as well as with Hermes who gave the “interpretation of sacred letters” to the priests of Egypt (OTP, vol. 2, p. 898). Cf. Garth FOWDEN, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Princeton, 1993, p. 36-37; W. and H.G. GUNDEL, *Astrologumena*, Wiesbaden, 1966, p. 23, n. 32.

38. P. 245.14-16 Mann (GNO). Gregory uses the technical term for the star’s heliacal rising, ἐπιτολή

*Nativity* 24.20<sup>39</sup>), Ambrose (*Exposition of Luke* 2.47 ; CSEL 32/4, p. 67.22-23), John Chrysostom (*Homilies* 6.3 ; PG 57.65) and the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, an anonymous Arian commentary on Matthew written in the fourth century (PG 56.641). In the latter work the writer exclaims : “O blessed Magi, who before the gaze of the cruellest king were made confessors of Christ before they had even seen Christ !”<sup>40</sup>

### III. EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE STAR

The other motif in Matt 2.1-12 which directly pertains to astrology is the star. The rehabilitation of this star — its being rendered positively useful for Christian exegetical and homiletical purposes — occurred by means of an anonymous tradition depicting one star that scores a decisive victory over the other stars and planets. This tradition seems to have been the source of an extended passage from Ignatius’ *Letter to the Ephesians* 19.2-3 in which astral imagery features prominently :

[2] How then was he [Christ] revealed to the aeons ?  
 A star shone in heaven,  
 brighter than all the stars,  
 and its light was ineffable,  
 and its novelty caused astonishment ;  
 all the other stars  
 together with the sun and moon  
 became a chorus for the star,  
 and it outshone them all with its light ;  
 and there was perplexity [as to] whence [came] this novelty so unlike them.  
 [3] Thence was destroyed all magic,  
 and every bond vanished ;  
 evil’s ignorance was abolished,  
 the old kingdom perished,  
 God being revealed as human  
 to bring newness of eternal life,  
 and what had been prepared by God had its beginning ;  
 hence all things were disturbed  
 because the destruction of death was being worked out.<sup>41</sup>

It is unclear that Ignatius was drawing on Matthew 2.1-12 per se in this passage : in his commentary on Ignatius’ letters, William Schoedel has argued that this passage derives from a version of the story of the star of the Magi which predated the

39. “As it is written in the scripture, distant peoples saw the star that the near People might be put to shame. O the learned and proud People who by the peoples have been retaught how and where they saw that rising of which Balaam spoke ! A stranger declared it ; strangers were those who saw it. Blessed is He Who made His kinspeople jealous !” (P. 197, trans. McVey.)

40. “O beati magi, qui ante conspectum crudelissimi regis, antequam Christum cognoscerent, Christi facti sunt confessores !” (PG 56.637.) Cf. LEO THE GREAT, *Sermo* 34.2, where the discovery of the Saviour by the Magi is deemed “a gift of divine honour” (CCL 138, p. 179).

41. P. 74-76 Camelot (SC 10). The above translation is from William R. SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius of Antioch*, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 87.

Matthean account.<sup>42</sup> Another possible source was Gen 37.9, in which Joseph reports his dream that the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down before him.<sup>43</sup> What is most significant for our present purposes is the distinctive element of the tradition elaborated by Ignatius in the passage above, i.e., the star that was victorious over the other heavenly bodies.

Schoedel notes the tendency of earlier scholars to see in this Ignatian text evidence for a “Gnostic redeemer myth” concerning a redemptive figure who descends to earth and then ascends in victory to the heavens.<sup>44</sup> However, instead of a victorious ascent Ignatius actually portrays the confounding of the cosmic powers (αἰῶνες) at Christ’s incarnation, which has mighty cosmological effects : to Ignatius, the birth of Christ was itself a victory over cosmic evil forces, corresponding to the later victory of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>45</sup> According to Schoedel, Ignatius’ text, with its motif of the single star that is victorious over the other stars, is an example of “popular magic [...] being resisted in the name of a higher magic.”<sup>46</sup> More specifically, it should be remembered that the ancient world widely held to a belief that pre-eminent among the cosmic αἰῶνες was fate (εἰμαρμένη), that is, the fatal domination exercised over the sublunar realm (including earth) by means of the planets and the fixed stars. The pernicious influence of fate’s power is implied in Ignatius’ use of the term “bond” (πᾶς δεσμός) : in his classic study *The Origins of European Thought*, Richard Broxton Onians cites numerous examples in ancient Indo-European thought in which the concept of fate or destiny was conceived in terms of “binding” and related images (e.g. spinning or weaving ropes, cords, webs, nets, etc.).<sup>47</sup> It was from

42. SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius*, p. 93. In “Ignatius and the Reception of the Gospel of Matthew in Antioch,” in David L. BALCH, ed., *Social History of the Matthean Community : Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 156, SCHOEDEL examines the relationship of Ephesians 19.2-3 to Matthew, concluding that both Ignatius and Matthew were independently responding to an earlier tradition regarding the appearance of a star at Jesus’ birth. John P. Meier’s response to Schoedel’s essay is critical on this point (*ibid.*, p. 184-185), but there is no evidence for Meier’s view that Ephesians 19.2-3 is an Ignatian “homiletic midrash” on the Matthean passage. Moreover, Meier’s claim that “By making the Gentiles in chapter 2 astrologers who bear the title μάγοι, Matthew may indeed be hinting at the overcoming of pagan magical belief by the light of Christian faith” ignores the absence of anti-astrological polemic in the Matthean text. A nuanced discussion of the evidence for Ignatian usage of Matthew is found in Wolf-Dietrich KÖHLER, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit vor Irenäus*, Tübingen, 1987, p. 73-96 ; Köhler sees in Ephesians 19.2-3 a quite possible, though not probable, reference to the Matthew text.

43. This is denied by SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius*, p. 92.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 88, 91-92.

45. Jean DANIÉLOU, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker, London, 1964, p. 223. Cf. the version found in a “certain book of Scripture written in the name of Seth” (quaedam scriptura, inscripta nomine Seth) referred to in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum* according to which for generations the Magi had ascended a mountain (which is called in their language Mons Victorialis) to await the star : when at last the star appeared it contained the form of a tiny boy and was accompanied by the likeness of a cross above it (habens in se formam quasi pueri parvuli, et super se similitudinem crucis) (PG 56.637-638 ; BOYCE and GRENET, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, p. 448).

46. SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius*, p. 93. Cf. DANIÉLOU, *Theology*, p. 221, who notes that Ignatius’ use of the term μαγεία may also imply a polemic against Magi ; however, it does not necessarily follow that this passage provides evidence for polemic against Magi among Jewish Christians in Syria (contra *ibid.*, p. 222, cf. DANIÉLOU, “Star of Jacob,” p. 121-123).

47. Richard Broxton ONIANS, *The Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge, 1951, p. 321-338, 349-351, 378-382, 425, 431-433. The image of “bonds” is used to refer to the power of astrological fate in particular in a

this power that the early Christians believed the coming of Christ had set humanity free : Ignatius parallels the phrase “every bond of evil vanished” (πᾶς δεσμός ῥφανίζετο κακίας) with “all magic has been destroyed” (ἐλύετο πᾶσα μαγεία) to express the view that Christ had set people free from the bonds which held them fast, including magic and astrological fate.<sup>48</sup> This early Christian idea of liberation from astrological fate was expressed succinctly by John Chrysostom in *Homilia* 6.1 : ἀστρολογίαν ἔλυσε, “he [Christ] set [us] free from the power of astrology” (PG 57.61).

According to Schoedel, the particular issue that Ignatius addresses in Ephesians 19 relates to the larger polemic against docetism which pervades the Ignatian correspondence. How can the humble and ignominious event of Christ’s birth be construed as a victory over the αἰῶνες, the cosmic powers of the universe ? How did the birth of Christ confound these powers, considering that it was also hidden from them ? How did the incarnation as it were “slip by” the αἰῶνες so as to bring about their defeat ?<sup>49</sup> In Ephesians 19.2, Ignatius portrays the αἰῶνες as a chorus (χορός) of lesser stars which are outdone by the appearance of Christ’s single bright star. A comparable text is *Protevangelium of James* 21.2 (dating from the second half of the second century), where the Magi say to Herod : “We saw an immense star shining among these stars and making them dim, so that the stars no longer shone. And so we knew that a king was born for Israel.”<sup>50</sup> Prudentius also vividly portrays the signs of the zodiac quailing before the “new star” : Serpens withdraws ; Leo flees ; Cancer contracts its claws at its side as if maimed ; the bullock (Taurus) having been tamed groans with its horns broken ; Capricorn withers, its coat torn to pieces ; here the banished water boy (Aquarius) glides down, there too Sagittarius ; Gemini wander, separated as they flee ; shameless Virgo gives up her silent lovers in the vault of

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papyrus (Berolinensis 8502) of the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John* (72.2-12) ; see Walter C. TILL, ed., *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, Berlin, 1955, p. 184.

48. According to SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius*, p. 93, n. 39, ῥφανίζετο here is a “stylistic variant” of ἐλύετο. The verb λύειν is regularly used for breaking the bonds of evil powers : see Mk 7.35 ; Lk 13.16 ; IGNATIUS, Eph 13.1 ; HIPPOLYTUS, *Commentary on Daniel* 4.33 ; and IAMBlichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.27, where an example of the power of magic is δεσμεῖν τε ἱερούς τινας δεσμούς καὶ λύειν τούτους (p. 138.17-18 des Places).
49. SCHOEDEL, *Ignatius*, p. 89. A clear parallel is Paul’s reference in 1 Cor 2.6-8 to the demonic powers that unwittingly accomplished their own defeat by crucifying the Lord of glory. With regard to the hiddenness of Christ’s birth, the Ascension of Isaiah 11 describes Christ’s incarnation as “hidden from all the heavens and all the princes and every god of this world [...] in Nazareth he sucked the breast like an infant, as was customary, that he might not be recognized” (11.16-17), with the result that at Christ’s ascension the angels and Satan recognize him and worship him but are forced to ask “How did our Lord descend upon us, and we did not notice the glory which was upon him ?” (11.24) (trans. Knibb, OTP, vol. 2, p. 175 ; cf. Jonathan KNIGHT, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, Sheffield, 1995, p. 75-76). Ignatius’ view that Christ’s birth from Mary was hidden from the cosmic powers was taken up by later writers such as Origen, Eusebius and Jerome (see G. BARDY, “La littérature patristique des ‘Quaestiones et Responsiones’ sur l’Écriture Sainte,” *Revue Biblique*, 41 [1932], p. 233-234).
50. Émile de STRYCKER, *La Forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques*, Bruxelles, 1961, p. 168-170. This passage is not found in Papyrus Bodmer V. On the date of the *Protevangelium of James* see *ibid.*, p. 412-418, and Michael TESTUZ, *Papyrus Bodmer V : Nativité de Marie*, Cologny, Genève, 1958, p. 23-26. Cf. the description of the Bethlehem star as a “great light” (φῶς μέγα) in *Protevangelium of James* 19.2 (p. 154-156 Strycker).

heaven ; the other fiery orbs that hang in the terrible clouds are afraid before the new star (*Apotheosis* 617-626).<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, in an Epiphany hymn Prudentius writes :

This star which surpasses the wheel of the sun in splendour and light [...]  
It alone possesses the sky [and] governs the course of the days [...]  
As soon as it began to shine the other stars withdrew,  
Nor did beautiful Lucifer dare show his form in comparison.  
(*Liber Cathemerinon* 12.5-6, 11-12, 29-32.)<sup>52</sup>

For Ignatius, the *Protevangelium of James*, as well as Prudentius, the other stars serve as a foil for the brighter star which represents the appearance of Christ : the lesser stars represent the αἰῶνες which the early Christians believed Christ had defeated. As Lietzmann notes :

The stars and their cosmic power, magic, and the pagan belief in daemons, were real to Ignatius, and not merely metaphors : and their conquest by the power of God in Christ was for him another real thing [...] he consciously describes it in a metaphorical analogy which [...] expressed graphically the victory of the Lord over the evil spirits.<sup>53</sup>

The same could be said of the author of the *Protevangelium of James* and of Prudentius.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, whether or not these authors took it metaphorically, the imagery that they used in these passages is striking. Collectively, these texts provide evidence of a tradition which used the image of a star (appropriately) to express the early Christian conviction of the defeat of the power of fate mediated by the stars.

In his version of this “star tradition” reflected in *Ephesians* 19.2, Ignatius had referred to the “newness” of the star (ἡ καινότης αὐτοῦ). It is this wording in particular which is paralleled in several other early Christian writers. For example, Theodotus affirmed that

[...] a strange and new star arose destroying the old order of constellations, shining with a new light that was not of this world, which turned toward a new and saving way — the Lord himself, guide of humanity, come to earth in order to transpose from Fate to his providence those who believe in Christ (*Excerpta ex Theodoto* 74.2).<sup>55</sup>

Here again, the image of a “new star” is used to convey the notion of Christ’s victory over astrally-mediated fate : in this passage “the Lord himself, guide of humanity” is

51. “[...] cecississe anguem, fugisse leonem,/ contraxisse pedes lateris manco ordine cancrum,/ cornibus infractis domitum mugire iuvenum,/ sidus et hirquinum laceris marcescere uillis/ Labitur hinc pulsus puer hydryus, inde sagittae ; palantes geminos fuga separat, improba virgo/ prodit amatores tacitos in fornice mundi/ quique alii horrificis pendent in nubibus ignes/ luciferum timuere novum” (CCL 126, p. 98-99).

52. “Haec stella, quae solis rotam/ vincit decore ac lumine [...] / sed sola caelum possidens/ cursum dierum temperat. [...] / Quod ut refulsit, ceteri/ cessere signorum globi/ nec pulcher est ausus suam/ conferre formam Lucifer” (CCL 126, p. 65-66).

53. Hans LIETZMANN, *A History of the Early Church*, vol. 1, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church*, trans. Bertram Lee Wolf, London, 1961, p. 245.

54. Cf. the parallel between the “star over the stars” and the “human over the humans” in PSEUDO-CLEMENTINE, *Recognitions* 1.45.2 (F. Stanley JONES, *An Ancient Jewish Christian Source on the History of Christianity* : *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 1.27-71, Atlanta, 1995, p. 76).

55. ἀνέτειλεν ξένος ἀστήρ καὶ καινὸς καταλύων τὴν παλαιὰν ἀστροθεσίαν, καινῷ φωτὶ, οὐ κοσμικῷ λαμπόμενος, ὁ καινὰς ὁδοῦς καὶ σωτηρίου τρεπόμενος, αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἀνθρώπων ὁδηγὸς ὁ καταλθὼν εἰς γῆν, ἵνα μεταθῇ τοὺς εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν πιστεύσαντας ἀπὸ τῆς Εἰμαρμένης εἰς τὴν ἐκεῖνον πρόνοιαν (p. 86.650-654 Casey).

in apposition to the image of the “strange and new star” which is victorious over fate (τὴν παλαιὰν ἀστροθεσίαν, “the old order of constellations”). Another text featuring similar terminology is *Sibylline Oracles* 8.475-476 : “The heavenly throne laughed and the world rejoiced./ A wondrous, new-shining star was venerated by Magi.”<sup>56</sup> In turn, Origen understands the “new star” as a comet, a sensible interpretation of an astral phenomenon which makes a sudden appearance (*Contra Celsum* 1.58).<sup>57</sup> The motif of the “new star” was still evident in a sermon of Gregory the Great (*Homilia In Evangelia* 10.4 ; PL 76, 1111-1112).

The domination of the other stars/αἰῶνες by the one star representing Christ was also portrayed in early Christian iconography. For example, the arcosolium vault of the tomb of Callistus I, bishop of Rome in the early third century, is decorated with numerous eight-rayed stars, and at the top the largest star is set apart and enclosed in a circle ; the christological identification of this pre-eminent star is evident from the chi-rho monogram placed immediately beneath it.<sup>58</sup> By the fourth century, the star of Bethlehem was used as an attribute in representations of Christus Basileus, the ruler of the world.<sup>59</sup>

Thus by the fourth century this theme of the “newness” of the star which appeared at Christ’s birth had become well established. Gregory of Nazianzus writes, “For this is not the kind of star dealt with by expounders of astrology, but rather a star without precedent which had never previously appeared” (*Poemata Arcana* 5.56-57).<sup>60</sup> In a Christmas sermon Gregory of Nyssa refers to the “rising of the new star” which was anticipated by the Magi.<sup>61</sup> Commenting on Luke 2.48, Ambrose writes : “the Magi saw a new star which had not been seen by any creature in the world, they saw a new creation and not only on earth but also in heaven” (CSEL 32/4, p. 68.3-4). The tradition is also evident in the writings of Augustine : the star of Bethlehem was not an astrological sign nor an ordinary star,

[...] one of those which from the beginning of creation keep the order of their way under the law of the Creator, [but] with the new birth from the Virgin appeared a new star, which demonstrated its service as a guide to those Magi who were seeking for Christ when it went before their face [cf. Matt 2.9] (*Contra Faustum* 2.5 ; CSEL 25, p. 259.19-24).

John Chrysostom similarly claims that the star of Bethlehem was not to be classified with the other stars of the heavens. Its size and beauty were what drew the Magi to

56. οὐράνιος δ' ἐγέλασσε θρόνος καὶ ἀγάλλετο κόσμος./ καινοφαῖς δὲ μάγοισι σεβάσθη θέσφατος ἀστήρ (p. 172 Geffcken [GCS]). The above trans. is that of Collins in OTP, vol. 1, p. 428. Note that the second half of book eight of the *Sibylline Oracles* [vv. 217-500] is of Christian provenance (see *ibid.*, p. 416).

57. P. 236 Borret.

58. H. LECLERQ, “Astres,” DACL 1.2, 3017 and figure 1047. Leclerq argues that the pre-eminent star was replaced by other christological symbols in early Christian art : among examples he cites are pieces of art on which the chi-rho by itself, a lamb, and a cross are each portrayed dominating fields of stars.

59. DEICHMANN, “Zur Erscheinung,” p. 104.

60. οὐ γὰρ τῶν τις ἦν ὅσον φραστήρες ἔασιν/ ἀστρολόγοι, ξείνος δὲ καὶ οὐ πάρος ἐξεφαάνθη (p. 24-25 trans. Moreschini-Sykes). In v.61 Gregory refers to it as “a star newly shining” (ἀρτιφαῖς) (*ibid.*, p. 26-27).

61. τὴν τοῦ καινοῦ ἀστέρος ἐπιτολήν (p. 245.16 Mann [GNO]).

the Christ child : since they would not have paid attention to visions or prophetic writings alone, God showed them “a large and unusual star, so that by means of its greatness and the beauty of its appearance, and manner of its course, they would be amazed” (*Homilia* 6.3<sup>62</sup>). In his Epiphany sermons Leo the Great also makes mention of the “unusual star”, the “star of new splendour, brighter and fairer than the other stars.”<sup>63</sup>

John Chrysostom further concludes that what appeared to the Magi only seemed to be a star, and was really “an unseen power altering its appearance” (*Homilia* 6.1).<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in *Homilia* 8.1 John says that the star as well as “the illumination produced by God in their minds” led the Magi to leave their home and travel to the Christ child.<sup>65</sup> It is not far from this to John’s identification of the star as an angel : in *Homilia* 7.3 he writes that after the Magi visited Herod in Jerusalem “an angel took them up again and taught them all things”.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Prudentius refers to the star as a “winged messenger, most like the rapid south wind” (*Apotheosis* 611-612).<sup>67</sup> The view of the star as an angel is also found in the so-called *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 7, a section that was part of the original stratum of the work which was composed in Syriac before the fifth century.<sup>68</sup> The association is also evident in iconography of the period : a Milan sarcophagus dating from the end of the fourth century depicts a male figure pointing towards the sky, i.e. in the stance of Balaam (see above), which has been identified as an angel.<sup>69</sup> Of course, the association of angels with the stars and

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62. ἄστρον μέγα καὶ ἐξηλλαγμένον, ὥστε καὶ τῷ μεγέθει καὶ τῷ κάλλει τῆς ὁμοιωσῆς αὐτοῦς ἐκπλήξαι, καὶ τῷ τρόπῳ τῆς πορείας (PG 57.65). The “manner of its course” refers to the curious movement of the star in Matt 2.9. John’s text of Matt 2.9 seems to have belonged to the “western” manuscript tradition, according to which the star guided the Magi to Bethlehem and then stood over the house of Mary and Joseph : in *Homilia* 7.4 he says that this “is itself also an indication of a greater power than was in keeping with an [ordinary] star, now to hide itself, now to appear, and when it appears to stand still” (ὅπερ καὶ αὐτὸ μείζονος δυνάμεως ἢ κατὰ ἀστέρα ἦν, τὸ νῦν μὲν κρύπτεσθαι, νῦν δὲ φαίνεσθαι, καὶ φανέντα ἵστασθαι [PG 57.77]). Cf. the more didactic interpretation of Origen, *Homilia in Numeros* 18.4, that the star was like the dove which rested on Christ at his baptism [Matt 3.16-17 et parr.], i.e. a sign of his deity (vol. 2, p. 173-174 Baehrens [GCS]); and of the anonymous author of the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, that the star’s movement shows that the physical elements wait upon those who seek God, and the star’s stopping was its way of saying to the Magi “here he is” since it could not speak (PG 56.641).
63. *Sermo* 31.1 “stella novae claritatis apparuit, quae inlustrior ceteris pulchriorque sideribus” (CCL 138, p. 161.13-14) ; *Sermo* 33.1 “novi sideris” (p. 171.33-34), “stellis ceteris stella fulgentior” (p. 172.36) ; *Sermo* 34.1 “Nova etenim claritas apud magos stellae inlustrioris apparuit” (p. 179.23-24) and 34.2 “fulgore insoliti sideris” (p. 180.37-38) ; *Sermo* 36.1 “novi sideris” (p. 195.5).
64. δύναμις τις ἀόρατος εἰς ταύτην μετασχηματισθεῖσα τὴν ὄψιν (PG 57.64). This interpretation was offered earlier by Diodore of Tarsus, who wrote that the star was not one of the many other stars of heaven but rather a divine power represented by a star (τὸν φανέντα ἀστέρα μὴ ἓνα τῶν πολλῶν καὶ κατ’ οὐρανὸν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ δυνάμιν τινα θειοτέραν, εἰς ἄστρον μὲν σχηματιζομένην [p. 47.23-25 Henry]) — a curious type of exegesis from a representative of the Antiochene school.
65. Τί οὖν τὸ πείσαν αὐτούς; Τὸ παρασκευάσαν οἰκοθεν ἀναστῆναι καὶ τοσαύτην ἐλθεῖν ὁδόν· τοῦτο δὲ ἦν ὁ τε ἀστὴρ καὶ ἡ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ γενομένη τῇ διανοίᾳ αὐτῶν ἔλλαμνις... (PG 57.83).
66. πάλιν ἄγγελος αὐτοὺς παραλαβὼν πάντα ἐδίδαξε (PG 57.77).
67. “[...] tam pinnatus rapidoque simillimus austro/ nuntius” (CCL 126, p. 98).
68. P. 9 Peeters ; on the date of this passage see *ibid.*, p. VII-XI, L-LIV.
69. J. KLAUSER, “Engel X (in der Kunst),” RAC 5, p. 299 (cf. col. 263, no. 25) ; see also DEICHMANN, “Zur Erscheinung,” p. 98-99.

planets was widespread in the ancient world<sup>70</sup> ; it is also possible that connecting the star of Matt 2 with an angel was prompted by the appearance of an angel in the other canonical nativity account (Luke 2.9-12).

In sum, the presence of the astrological motifs of the Magi and the star in Matt 2.1-12 presented the early church with an opportunity to develop creative responses to astrology. Such responses are evident in two larger traditions of interpretation of the Matthean pericope which can be discerned within early Christianity. In the first, by establishing a link between Balaam and the Magi of the Matthean nativity story, early Christian writers were able to develop an acceptable, even favourable, view of the practitioners of astrology depicted in Matt 2.1-12. In the second tradition, a myth in which a “new star” is victorious over the other heavenly bodies illustrated the Christian belief in Christ’s victory over the cosmic power of fate that held humanity in bondage, and that the star of the Matthean account signalled this victory already at Christ’s birth. In these ways the astrological content of the Matthean pericope was re-interpreted in a remarkably benign manner that stood in more or less explicit tension with the prevalent anti-astrological stance of early Christianity.

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70. J. MICHL, “Engel IV [christlich],” RAC 5, p. 136-137.