

Reassessing the Star of Bethlehem in Matthew 2: Astronomy, Theology, and the Ethiopian Angelic Tradition

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Abstract:

The Star of Bethlehem in Matthew 2:1–12 has long resisted definitive explanation, with astronomical hypotheses (planetary conjunctions, comets, novae) and theological readings often proceeding in isolation. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo tradition, which identifies the star as the Archangel Michael, remains virtually unknown in mainstream scholarship. This review reassesses the star by integrating three lenses: natural astronomical candidates, theological functions within Matthew’s narrative, and the Ethiopian angelic interpretation. An interdisciplinary review of astronomical literature (retrospective celestial mechanics, ancient Chinese records), patristic exegesis (Origen, Chrysostom), and Ethiopian primary sources (The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth, 15th c.), supplemented by liturgical and architectural analysis. No single astronomical candidate fully accounts for the star’s narrative behaviors (cessation, reappearance, “standing over” a house). Patristic writers, especially Chrysostom, interpreted the star as an angelic power. The Ethiopian tradition uniquely names the star as Michael, embeds this identification in the Genna Christmas procession (candles, three circuits of the church), and reflects it in the eastern orientation of the “Bethlehem” prothesis room. Conclusion: The star is best understood as a “providentially timed convergence” natural astronomical event (e.g., the 5 BCE comets) used by God as the vehicle for angelic guidance and theological revelation. The Ethiopian voice resolves narrative difficulties and enriches the interdisciplinary conversation. Future research should systematically survey Ge’ez manuscripts (e.g., Te’amrä Iyasus, homilies) and compare Ethiopian angelology with Coptic and Syriac traditions.

Keywords:

Star of Bethlehem; Matthew 2; Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church; Archangel Michael; interdisciplinary biblical interpretation

I. Introduction

The star that guided the Magi to the infant Jesus in Matthew 2:1–12 remains one of the most persistently perplexing elements in New Testament scholarship. For two millennia, interpreters have grappled with a fundamental question: what was the Star of Bethlehem? The answers have spanned an extraordinary range from a miraculous divine light to a planetary conjunction, from a comet to a nova, from an angelic manifestation to a theological fiction. This proliferation of competing explanations signals a deeper problem. The star resists easy categorization precisely because it stands at the intersection of two modern disciplinary domains that rarely speak to one another: astronomy and theology. On one side, naturalistic investigations have sought to identify the star with a known celestial event, such as the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BCE, Halley’s Comet (12 BCE), or the 5 BCE “broom star” recorded in Chinese astronomical annals (Kidger, 1999; Matney, 2025). On the other side, theological readings have emphasized the star’s role as a revelatory sign, a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and a symbol of universal salvation (Brown, 1993; Levine, 2022; Goshu and

Woldeamanueal, 2024; Andualem, and Goshu, 2023). Too often, however, these approaches have proceeded in isolation, leaving the exegetical crux unresolved.

The central argument of this review is that the Star of Bethlehem is best understood as a theologically significant event that transcends purely empirical categories “divinely timed convergence” in which a rare celestial phenomenon was invested with profound religious meaning and, within certain interpretive traditions, identified as an angelic manifestation. This reassessment integrates three distinct but complementary lenses: (1) an analysis of natural historical candidates proposed by astronomy, (2) a critical examination of the theological functions the star performs within Matthew’s infancy narrative, and (3) an exploration of an underexamined patristic Ethiopian interpretive tradition that identifies the star as the Archangel Michael. This third perspective, drawn from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’s Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth (15th century), offers a unique theological framework that resolves several narrative difficulties and deserves a more prominent place in mainstream scholarly discussion.

Methodologically, this article adopts an interdisciplinary review approach. It draws upon astronomical literature (retrospective celestial mechanics, ancient Chinese and Babylonian records), biblical studies (narrative criticism, intertextual analysis), church tradition (patristic exegesis, Ethiopian Orthodox sources), and history of religions (Greco Roman astrology, imperial propaganda). The scope is limited in three ways. First, while the article acknowledges the relationship between Matthew 2 and astrological traditions of the Hellenistic world, it does not endorse astrological determinism. Second, the focus remains narrowly on Matthew 2:1–12; the Lukan infancy narrative and the question of Jesus’s historical birth date are discussed only where they directly illuminate the star episode. Third, the Ethiopian tradition examined here is primarily textual and liturgical; a full manuscript study of Ethiopian Te’amrä Iyasus traditions awaits further research.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Star in the Gospel of Matthew: Literary and Theological Setting

a. The Magi as Gentile Astrologers and Their Role in Matthew’s Infancy Narrative

Matthew’s account opens with a striking juxtaposition: Jesus is born “in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king,” and immediately “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him’” (Matt 2:1–2, RSV). The term rendered “wise men” is μάγοι (*magoi*), a designation that in the Greco-Roman world referred to a class of Persian priest-astrologers skilled in interpreting celestial omens (Brown, 1993, p. 167; Goshu and Woldeamanueal, 2024; Andualem, and Goshu, 2023). The British Museum notes that the Magi are “probably astrologers” portrayed as Gentiles in the Book of Matthew. Modern English translations often render the term as “astrologers,” a rendering justified by the circumstantial evidence that the *magoi* were “students of stars in relation to events on earth” (Goshu, 2024).

The Magi’s function within Matthew’s infancy narrative extends far beyond their historical identity. The evangelist uses them to prefigure the central Matthean theme of Gentile inclusion. As a leading Matthew commentary observes, “ Since the magi were gentiles, the festival of

Epiphany commemorates the manifestation of the Messiah not only to Israel but to the world,” resonating with the Gospel’s universal outlook that culminates in the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The Magi thus serve as “a foreshadowing of the moving of Gentiles towards the Christ”. Their role challenges any narrow ethno-centric messianism and signals that the salvation offered in Jesus is intended for all peoples.

2.2 Old Testament Background: Numbers 24:17 (“Star out of Jacob”) and the Balaam Oracles

Matthew’s star cannot be understood apart from its Old Testament intertext. The most direct antecedent is Numbers 24:17, where the non-Israelite prophet Balaam declares: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come forth from Jacob, and a scepter will rise from Israel” (Num 24:17, NRSV). In early Jewish and Christian interpretation, this verse was understood as a messianic prophecy pointing to a future king who would arise from Israel and subdue its enemies. Christian theology has consistently interpreted “The Star out of Jacob” as a messianic prophecy pointing to Jesus Christ: “The star symbolizes the birth and rise of a new king, which aligns with the New Testament account of the Star of Bethlehem” (Goshu, 2024).

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America notes that “the ‘star’ of Bethlehem, as briefly painted by Matthew, does signify both a phenomenon event and a hint at the ‘Star of Jacob’ prophecy foretelling the emergence of an ideal ruler”. However, scholars caution that the star in Numbers 24:17 likely refers not to an astral phenomenon but to the king himself, the metaphor of a “star” symbolizing royal radiance and authority. Matthew appropriates this prophetic imagery, transposing it into a literal celestial sign. By doing so, he claims that the birth of Jesus fulfills not only the Davidic covenantal promises but also the oracles of a pagan prophet like Balaam rhetorical move that underscores the universal scope of Jesus’s kingship. As one source observes, “The connection between Balaam’s prophecy and the nativity account underscores the belief that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic expectations”.

2.3 The Star’s Movements: “in the East,” “Went Before,” “Stood Over”: Narrative Clues

Matthew’s description of the star’s behavior provides crucial narrative clues that any interpretation must account for. The text reports four distinct phases: first, the Magi saw the star “in the East” (Matt 2:2); second, after their audience with Herod, the star “went before them” (Matt 2:9); third, it “came and stood over the place where the young child was” (Matt 2:9); and fourth, upon seeing the star again, the Magi “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt 2:10).

The Greek phrasing is particularly suggestive. The phrase “stood over” translates the Greek words ἐστάθη ἐπάνω (*estathē epānō*). *Estathē* is a form of the verb *histēmi*, meaning “to stand,” and *epānō* means “above” or “over”. This language has drawn attention from astronomers who study retrograde planetary motion. As one analysis notes, “The term translated ‘stood over’ is the Greek term *epano*, the pause when the planet changes its direction during retrograde motion,” a phenomenon to which ancient astrologers attached considerable significance. Whether this lexical detail points to an astronomical event or simply describes a miraculous hovering remains debated, but the precision of Matthew’s language suggests an awareness of astrological technical terminology.

2.4 The Star as a Fulfillment Motif and Anti Imperial Sign

Beyond its function as a guide, the star operates on a polemical register that directly challenges Roman imperial ideology. By the late first century CE, celestial portents were standardly deployed in Roman political propaganda. The young Octavian (later Augustus) famously exploited a “comet star” that appeared at the games held in honor of Julius Caesar in

44 BCE, persuading the Senate to grant his adoptive father divine status and subsequently erecting a temple to the star. Augustus's own horoscope was published and circulated as proof of his divinely ordained rule. As the *Sidus Iulium* (Julian Star) became a cornerstone of Augustan ideology, the emperor was celebrated as the bringer of a new Golden Age foretold by astral signs.

Matthew's star narrative enters this propaganda field and counters it. Whereas Augustus claimed a star that signaled the divinity of the Roman emperor, Matthew presents a star that announces a very different king one born in obscurity, worshiped by foreign astrologers, and threatened by a paranoid client-king of Rome. The anonymous Magi, described by the Gospel as coming from "the East" (i.e., from beyond the Roman frontier, possibly from Parthian territory), acknowledge Jesus as the true "king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2), a title that belonged to Herod only by Roman appointment. The narrative about the Star of Bethlehem thus has a clear "propagandistic function" and is based on "a story about the mythical birth of a world leader and Jewish king" that directly competes with Roman imperial birth legends.

2.5 Astronomical Candidates: A Critical Review

Methodological Caution: Retrospective Astronomy and Date Uncertainties (5–2 BCE)

Any astronomical identification of the Star of Bethlehem must contend with two foundational difficulties. The first is chronological. The Gospel of Matthew places Jesus's birth during the reign of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1), who, according to Josephus, died shortly after a lunar eclipse most likely that of March 13, 4 BCE (Brown, 1993, p. 166; Andualem, and Goshu, 2023). This places the *terminus ad quem* for Jesus's birth at approximately 4 BCE. The *terminus a quo*, however, remains uncertain, with proposals ranging from 7 BCE to 2 BCE depending on interpretations of Luke 2:2 and the Quirinius census.

The second difficulty is methodological. Retrospective astronomy recalculating ancient planetary positions is a precise science for slow-moving bodies like Jupiter and Saturn, but less reliable for comets and novae, for which ancient records are fragmentary and often lack the necessary positional data to compute orbits with certainty (Kidger, 1999, p. 45). A third caution concerns the difference between astronomical events and their astrological interpretation. A planetary conjunction may have been visible to any observer, but its meaning as a sign of a Jewish king's birth was accessible only to those trained in the astrological traditions of the Near East.

2.6 Planetary Conjunctions

Jupiter–Saturn Triple Conjunction (7 BCE) in Pisces – Astrological Significance

The most widely discussed astronomical candidate is the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces that occurred in 7 BCE. Kepler first calculated this event in 1605, noting that three times between May and December of that year, specifically, on May 29, September 29, and December 4 the two planets passed within one degree of each other in the night sky (Mosley, 1981). A triple conjunction is rare, occurring only once in approximately every 800 years, and would have been a striking celestial display.

The astrological significance is even more compelling. In Hellenistic astrology, Jupiter was the "king planet," associated with royalty and sovereignty, while Saturn carried associations with the Jewish people and with Palestine. Pisces was widely regarded as the sign of the last days and, specifically, of the Jewish nation. As the *Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Astrophysics* notes, "the astrologically significant 7 bc triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of

Pisces is the most likely candidate” (Hughes, 2001, p. 5430). The conjunction also coincided with a lunar occultation of Saturn in Pisces in November 7 BCE, adding further astrological weight. However, the triple conjunction hypothesis has notable weaknesses. First, it occurred in 7 BCE, which many historians regard as too early for a birth under Herod (who died in 4 BCE), though it could accommodate a birth in late 7 or early 6 BCE. Second, the conjunction’s appearance was not singular but spread over eight months, making it difficult to align with the narrative’s sense of a particular star appearing at a particular time.

Venus–Jupiter Conjunction (3–2 BCE): Brightness and Regal Symbolism

A second planetary hypothesis centers on the extremely close conjunctions of Venus and Jupiter that occurred in 3–2 BCE. On August 12, 3 BCE, and again on June 17, 2 BCE, the two brightest planets in the sky drew so close together that they would have appeared to merge into a single, extraordinarily brilliant star (Larson, 1995, as cited in Chester, 1993). Venus was associated with fertility and new life, Jupiter with kingship, and together they formed a potent astrological omen of royal birth.

Proponents note that these dates align better with the chronology suggested by some early Church Fathers, who placed Jesus’s birth in 3 or 2 BCE. Moreover, a third event in this period Jupiter’s triple conjunction with the fixed star Regulus (the “king star”) in Leo added further regal symbolism. Nevertheless, the 3–2 BCE dates conflict with the consensus that Herod died in 4 BCE, requiring either a revision of Herodian chronology or a narrower understanding of the relationship between Herod’s death and Jesus’s birth.

2.7 Cometary Hypotheses

Halley’s Comet (12 BCE) – Temporal Mismatch

Halley’s Comet made one of its periodic appearances in 12 BCE. Although it was a spectacular object, visible for several weeks, its date falls well outside the plausible window for Jesus’s birth under Herod. As Kidger observes, “Halley’s Comet is too early by at least four years to be seriously considered a candidate for the Star” (1999, p. 78). Furthermore, comets in Greco-Roman antiquity were almost universally interpreted as omens of disaster, such as the death of rulers, rather than announcements of royal births.

The 5 BCE “Broom Star”: Recent Kinematic Modeling

A more recent and sophisticated cometary hypothesis has been advanced by Matney (2025), a planetary scientist at NASA. Drawing on Chinese astronomical records from the Han dynasty, which describe a “broom star” visible for more than 70 days in the spring of 5 BCE, Matney used a novel numerical technique to compute possible orbits for this object. His analysis suggests that the comet could have passed extraordinarily close to Earth at a distance comparable to that of the Moon—in early June of 5 BCE, exhibiting “temporary geosynchronous” motion. This means that for several hours, the comet would have appeared nearly stationary in the sky relative to a given location on Earth, before resuming its apparent motion.

Matney argues that this unique kinematic behavior corresponds directly to Matthew’s description: the star “went before” the Magi (as the comet moved across the sky) and then “stood over” where the child was (as it entered its geosynchronous phase). The study also situates the event within the astrological geography of the period, noting that the comet’s position in the sky would have been consistent with a portent concerning Judea.

This hypothesis is the first astronomical candidate that explicitly models the apparent “stopping” motion described in Matthew 2:9. It remains, however, a single proposal that awaits

independent verification, and the identification of the 5 BCE object as a comet rather than a nova is not undisputed.

2.8 Nova/Supernova – Rarity and Lack of Corroboration

The hypothesis that the Star was a nova stellar explosion that temporarily increases brightness by many orders of magnitude has been intermittently advanced. A nova appears in a fixed position in the sky and then fades over days or weeks. Kepler, observing a new star in 1604, suggested that a similar event might have occurred at the time of Jesus’s birth.

The primary difficulty is the absence of any confirming record. No extant Chinese, Babylonian, or Greco-Roman source from the period 7–2 BCE reports a bright nova or supernova. A nova bright enough to guide travelers would have been widely recorded, especially by the meticulous Chinese astronomical scribes. As the *Astronomy* journal summarizes, “a comet or supernova are less likely explanations” because of the lack of corroborating evidence ([Astronomy.com](https://www.astronomy.com), 2023). The 5 BCE object recorded by the Chinese could, in principle, be a slow nova, but its 70-day duration and unusual appearance have led most scholars to favor a cometary interpretation.

2.9 Astrological “Meridian” Interpretation

A different class of explanation, proposed by Molnar (1999), shifts the focus from visible celestial objects to the interpretation of a planetary horoscope. Molnar argued that the “star” was not a star at all but a specific astrological configuration: Jupiter, the king planet, reaching its highest point on the meridian over Bethlehem while the Moon was in Aries. In ancient astrology, this configuration signaled the birth of a divine king in Judea.

The merit of Molnar’s proposal is that it attends carefully to the astrological training of the Magi. Its weakness is that it depends heavily on a single horoscope from the 4th-century CE *Mathesis* of Firmicus Maternus, and the connection to an actual visible astronomical event is indirect. Moreover, as Kidger notes, “there are no independent records of a bright supernova during that period” (2023, para. 6), and Molnar’s proposed date of April 17, 6 BCE, conflicts with seasonal imagery in Luke.

2.10 Evaluation Table

Table 1. Comparison of major astronomical candidates for the Star of Bethlehem with their strengths, weaknesses, and alignment to Matthew 2:1–12.

Candidate	Date	Strengths	Weaknesses
Jupiter–Saturn triple conjunction	7 BCE	Rare event (every 800 years); strong astrological significance (Jupiter = king, Saturn = Jews, Pisces = Judea); endorsed by many scholars	May be too early relative to Herod’s death in 4 BCE; events spread over 8 months, not a single “star”
Venus–Jupiter conjunction	3–2 BCE	Extreme brightness (two brightest planets merging); aligns with patristic dating	Conflicts with Herod’s 4 BCE death; requires chronological revision

Halley's Comet	12 BCE	Historically documented; visible spectacle	Chronologically impossible (too early); comets were omens of disaster, not royal births
Matney's 5 BCE Comet	5 BCE	Models "went before" and "stood over" explicitly; uses Chinese records; date within plausible window	Single recent proposal awaiting verification; comet/nova identification debated
Nova/Supernova	(uncertain)	Fixed position could explain "stood over"	No corroborating records from Chinese or Babylonian sources; extreme rarity
Meridian interpretation (Molnar)	6 BCE (April 17)	Attends to astrological competence of Magi	Depends on 4th-century horoscope; no visible object; date conflicts with Luke

III. Research Methods

3.1 Theological Functions of the Star: Beyond Naturalism

a. The Star as a Revelatory Sign, Not a Purely Physical Object

While naturalistic hypotheses have their place, they cannot exhaust the meaning of the star in Matthew's Gospel. The star is not merely a celestial object to be identified but a theological sign vehicle of divine revelation. Several features of the narrative point in this direction.

First, the star's behavior is anomalous by the standards of any known natural phenomenon. It "comes to rest" over a specific house (Matt 2:9), an action no natural star or planet can perform. As Chrysostom observed, "not a single star has this nature" (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 6:3; see CatholicLibrary.org, n.d.). Second, the star operates in conjunction with other forms of divine communication: the Magi are also warned in a dream not to return to Herod (Matt 2:12), suggesting a pattern of supernatural guidance. Third, the star's appearance and disappearance follow the needs of the Magi's journey, reappearing precisely when they leave Jerusalem for Bethlehem timing that suggests intelligent agency rather than impersonal astronomical regularity.

This suggests that the star's primary function is not to identify a date but to authenticate Jesus's identity as the prophesied king and to guide Gentile seekers to him. The naturalistic and revelatory readings are not mutually exclusive; rather, natural events can serve as vehicles for revelation. The question is whether any astronomical candidate can fully account for the narrative's theological depth.

b. Patristic Interpretations

The Church Fathers were well aware of the questions that modern astronomy raises, but they approached them from a fundamentally theological perspective. Three figures stand out.

Origen (c. 184 – c. 253)

Origen, writing in *Against Celsus* (1.58–60), was perhaps the first Christian writer to address the star's nature systematically. He rejected the idea that the star was one of the ordinary heavenly bodies, arguing instead that it was a "new star," distinct from all others, created specifically for the purpose of announcing Christ's birth. Origen connected the star explicitly to the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17, seeing its appearance as the fulfillment of that ancient oracle.

Crucially, Origen also defended the historicity of the star against pagan critics like Celsus, who dismissed it as a legend. He argued that a unique celestial event at the birth of a divine figure was fitting and that the Magi—as learned astrologers—were precisely the ones who would recognize its significance. As the *New Testament Studies* journal notes, the description of the star "stood over" was regarded as early as Origen as meaning "it reached its zenith" (Cambridge Core, 2025, para. 2).

c. Origen: The Star as a New Celestial Body

Origen of Alexandria (c. 184 – c. 253) was among the first Christian writers to offer a systematic theological explanation of the star. In his *Contra Celsum* (1.58–60), he directly engages the pagan critic Celsus, who had dismissed the star as a fictional or insignificant detail. Origen argues that the star was not one of the ordinary, recurring celestial bodies but a new star, created specifically for the purpose of announcing Christ's birth. He connects this event explicitly to the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17, affirming that the appearance of a "star out of Jacob" was fulfilled in the celestial sign seen by the Magi.

For Origen, the star's novelty carries theological weight. It signals a new creation inaugurated by the Incarnation. Moreover, Origen insists that the star was visible not only to the Magi but also to others otherwise; its signifying function would be lost. As he writes, "If it had been a star of the kind that come into existence at the creation, it would have been seen by all" (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.59; see Chadwick, 1980, p. 48). Yet the fact that only the Magi interpreted it correctly demonstrates the necessity of divine illumination. Thus, Origen preserves a real astronomical phenomenon while insisting on its unique, providential purpose. This position that the star was a newly created, extraordinary celestial body influenced later Byzantine commentators and remains a viable theological option distinct from both purely naturalistic and purely angelic readings (Lienhard, 1999, p. 34).

Chrysostom: The Star as an Angelic Power

John Chrysostom (c. 347 – 407), in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* (Homilies 6–7), develops the most explicit angelic interpretation among the Greek Fathers. Chrysostom rejects the possibility that the star could have been a natural star, comet, or planetary conjunction on four grounds. First, its timing: it appeared not only at night but "at mid day," and its brilliance surpassed the sun. Second, its motion: ordinary stars move from east to west, but this star "wafted from north to south" (Homily on Matthew 6:3; NPNF¹, 1888, p. 95). Third, its variability: it disappeared after guiding the Magi to Jerusalem, and then reappeared when they left for Bethlehem. Fourth, its location: it descended to "stand over" a particular house, a capacity no natural celestial body possesses.

d. The Star as Divine Guidance for Gentile Inclusion (Universal Salvation)

Beyond its role as a sign of Jesus's identity, the star functions as a missiological instrument that prefigures the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. Matthew's Gospel, alone among the four, begins with the visit of foreign astrologers and ends with the Great Commission

“to make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The star is the narrative mechanism that draws the Magi from the East to the cradle of the Messiah.

Several dimensions of this Gentile inclusion theme deserve attention. First, the Magi are not proselytes but pagan astrologers figures who, in Jewish tradition, were typically associated with forbidden divination. Yet Matthew presents them as the first worshipers of the infant king. This signals that the new order inaugurated by Christ transcends ethnic and religious boundaries. As Luz (2001) observes, “The magi are the first to worship Jesus, and they are Gentiles. This is not an accident; it is a programmatic statement that the gospel is for all people” (p. 45).

Second, the star’s guidance replaces the Torah or the prophets as the means of revelation for these Gentiles. They do not possess the Scriptures, yet the light of creation the star leads them to the light of the world (Goshu, 2024). This resonates with Pauline themes of natural revelation (Rom 1:19–20) and anticipates the later Christian doctrine of the “seed of the Word” (Logos spermatikos) present among the nations (Justin Martyr, 2 Apology 13).

e. The Star and the “Two Ways” Theme (Contrast with Herod’s Blindness)

The star’s function is not only to guide but also to reveal the division of hearts classic Matthean theme of judgment and salvation. In the same passage, two responses to the news of the Messiah’s birth are juxtaposed. The Magi, guided by the star, respond with worship, joy, and gifts. Herod, informed by the chief priests and scribes of the prophecy of Micah 5:2, responds with fear, deception, and ultimately murder (Matt 2:3–8, 16–18). The star thus becomes a light of revelation that, as Simeon would later prophesy, reveals “the thoughts of many hearts” (Luke 2:35).

The contrast is stark: the Magi see the star and travel hundreds of miles to worship; Herod hears the Scriptures but cannot see the truth they proclaim. The star, therefore, functions as a test of perception. Those who are open to divine guidance even Gentiles without the Law are led to the truth. Those whose hearts are hardened by power and fear remain in darkness. As France (2007) notes, “The star is not a public demonstration but a selective sign; it is seen by those who are meant to see it, and its meaning is hidden from others” (p. 71).

This “two ways” motif is reinforced by the dream warnings that follow: the Magi are warned not to return to Herod, and Joseph is warned to flee to Egypt. The star’s guidance and the dreams of escape form a coherent system of divine communication that separates the righteous seekers from the wicked ruler. Hence, the star is not merely a physical phenomenon but a moral and theological discriminant light that exposes the darkness of unbelief even as it illuminates the path of faith.

f. The Star’s Cessation and Reappearance: Narrative Evidence of Supernatural Agency

One of the most narratively puzzling features of Matthew’s account is the star’s disappearance and subsequent reappearance. The Magi inform Herod that they saw the star “in the East” (Matt 2:2). They then travel to Jerusalem without any mention of the star’s presence. Only after leaving Herod does the star reappear: “Lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was” (Matt 2:9, RSV).

This sequence is difficult to reconcile with any purely natural astronomical object. A planet, comet, or nova does not vanish and then reappear on command. As Chrysostom noted, “The star disappeared on their journey to Jerusalem, and then reappeared when they left. This is not the behavior of a star, but of a rational power” (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 6:4; NPNF¹, 1888, p. 96).

The narrative function of this cessation is clear: it compels the Magi to enter Jerusalem and inquire publicly, thereby involving Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes. The star's temporary absence creates the occasion for Scripture to be consulted (Micah 5:2) and for Herod's murderous plot to be exposed. Then, after the Magi are sent to Bethlehem, the star returns this time not merely as a sign in the sky but as a mobile, guiding light that leads them to the exact house.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Tradition: The Star as Archangel Michael

a. Introduction to Ethiopian Biblical Exegesis and the Te'amrā Iyasus (Miracles of Jesus)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) possesses one of the oldest continuous traditions of biblical interpretation in Christendom, rooted in the reception of Judaism via the Queen of Sheba narrative and the early conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). As Keon Sang An has demonstrated, Ethiopian exegesis is “distinctively contextual,” blending canonical Scripture with a vast corpus of apocryphal, patristic, and indigenous Ge'ez literature that is regarded as equally authoritative for faith and practice (An, 2015, p. 4). Within this literary ecosystem, the Te'amrā Iyasus (ተአምረ ኢየሱስ, “Miracles of Jesus”) occupies a central place. Composed in Ge'ez, the ancient liturgical language of Ethiopia, this collection of miracle narratives drawn from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and other extracanonical sources was accepted as an “undisputed element of the Bible in its Ge'ez translation” (Royal Collection Trust, n.d., para. 1). The Te'amrā Iyasus functions liturgically for private devotion and public reading, particularly during the Christmas season, and it preserves traditions concerning the Magi that are not found in the canonical Gospels.

b. Primary Source: The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth (15th c.)

The most explicit Ethiopian source for the identification of the Star of Bethlehem with the Archangel Michael is the Maṣḥafa Mestira Samay Wamedr (ማስሐፈ ምሥጢር ሰማይ ወምድር, “The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth”). This apocalyptic work, composed in the 15th century by the monk Bakhayla Mîkâ'êl (also known as Zôsîmâs), is noteworthy for its “vigorous account of the struggle between the archangel Michael and Satan” (Britannica, n.d., para. 2). The book was introduced to Western scholarship by E. A. Wallis Budge in 1935. It claims to have been revealed by the Archangel Gabriel and contains extensive narrative expansions of biblical episodes, including the Nativity.

The crucial passage concerning the Magi appears in a section that explicitly refutes any naturalistic reading of the star. The text admonishes the reader:

“Thou must not imagine that the MAGI came [to BETHLEHEM] after [CHRIST] was born, or that they rose up from their country two years before our Lord was born [of their own prompting], for MICHAEL in the form of the Star guided them.” (Bakhayla Mîkâ'êl, 15th century/2004, fol. 17b, col. 2)

The same passage then connects the angelic star with Michael's role in the Exodus: “And it was he who brought out the HEBREWS [from EGYPT]. For when he smote the cloud there was rain.” (Bakhayla Mîkâ'êl, 15th century/2004, fol. 18a, col. 1). This intertextual link between the star, the pillar of cloud and fire, and Michael's protective function over Israel is theologically programmatic, as will be shown below.

c. Theological Rationale: Why Michael?

Angel of Light, Guide of the Faithful, Protector of the Incarnation

The identification of the star with Michael is not arbitrary but flows from several deep currents in Ethiopian angelology. First, Michael is preeminently the angel of light. His name in Hebrew, “Mi ka El” (Who is like God?), conveys his role as the one who reflects divine light most perfectly (Haile Maskel, n.d., para. 2; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025a). In Ethiopian iconography, Michael is often depicted with brilliant wings of fire or gold, and his very appearance is luminous. That the star was “a light beyond all others” (Ignatius of Antioch) aligns naturally with Michael’s character as the foremost of the archangels.

Second, Michael is the guide of the faithful. The EOTC celebrates two major feasts in his honor (the 12th of Hedar and the 12th of Sene), and he is invoked daily as the protector who accompanies believers through the trials of life (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 3). The Dersane Michael (Prayer of Michael) recounts his miraculous interventions to lead the lost, heal the sick, and defeat demonic powers (Haile Maskel, n.d., para. 4). Thus, the image of Michael taking on the form of a star to navigate the Magi across the desert resonates perfectly with his established profile as the divine GPS for God’s people.

Third, Michael is the protector of the Incarnation. In the Ethiopian tradition, as in the broader Orthodox world, Michael is the angel who defended God’s honor against Satan’s rebellion (Rev 12:7–9). At the Nativity, the forces of darkness embodied in Herod, the Roman Empire, and the astrological determinism that held humanity in bondage are arrayed against the Christ child. By sending Michael as the star, God ensures that the true King is not only announced but also protected. The star leads the Magi to worship, but also, by triggering Herod’s inquiry and then circumventing his plot, it participates in the divine strategy to preserve the Messiah. Michael, who in the Exodus narrative “smote the cloud” to drown Pharaoh’s army (Bakhayla Míkâ’êl, 15th century/2004, fol. 18a), now confounds Herod’s murderous intentions. This continuity of Michael as the defender of God’s plan from Egypt to Bethlehem is a distinctive mark of Ethiopian exegesis.

d. Liturgical Embodiment: The Genna (Christmas) Procession with Candles, Walking Around the Church Three Times

The Ethiopian interpretation of the star as Michael is not merely a textual curiosity; it is enacted liturgically every year on Genna (Leddāt, Ethiopian Christmas), celebrated on January 7 (Julian calendar). The central ritual consists of a solemn procession in which each participant is given a candle representing the Star of Bethlehem (HowStuffWorks, 2017, para. 6). The congregation then walks around the church three times, holding the flickering candles, before assembling to stand through the long midnight mass (Encyclopedia2, n.d., para. 2).

The threefold circuit of the church is theologically multivalent. Most directly, it reenacts the journey of the Magi, who, guided by the star, circled around the obstacles of Jerusalem and Herod before finally arriving at the house of the child. But the three circles also symbolize the Trinity (sile Selassé) and the three concentric zones of the Ethiopian round church: the outer Qenie Mahilet (chanting place), the middle Kiddest (communion space), and the inner Maqdes (Holy of Holies) (Gebru, n.d., pp. 15–18). By walking around the church three times, the faithful follow the star’s path from the periphery (the Gentile world) to the center (Christ). The candles they carry are not merely decorative; they are understood to be visible signs of the angelic light that Michael manifested as the star. Thus, the liturgy transforms every worshiper into a Magus, and every candle into a miniature star Michael.

e. Architectural Symbolism: The Eastern Orientation of the “Bethlehem” (Prothesis) Room

Ethiopian church architecture further reinforces the star Michael theology. Traditional round churches are built in three concentric rings, each with a distinct sacred function. The innermost ring, the Maqdes (Sanctuary), houses the tabot (Ark) and is reserved for priests (Gebbru, n.d., p. 22; Goshu and Ridwan, 2026). However, within the church complex there is also a separate room called the “Bethlehem” (ቤተልኬም), which serves as the prothesis (preparation room for the Eucharist). This room is always situated on the eastern side of the church (Orthodoxynethiopia, n.d., “Distinctive Features,” para. 4). Its eastern orientation recalls the direction from which the star appeared (“in the East,” Matt 2:2) and the Magi’s point of origin. In Ethiopian liturgical commentaries, the Bethlehem room is explicitly compared to the cave of the Nativity: just as the star led the Magi eastward to Bethlehem, so the Eucharist is prepared in the eastern room before being carried into the church for communion (Tadesse, 2010, p. 47; Goshu and Ridwan, 2026). The priest who prepares the bread and wine is seen as acting in the role of Michael, the “minister of the altar” who mediates between heaven and earth. Thus, the architecture of the EOTC constantly recalls the star’s guidance, making Michael’s presence a lived spatial reality rather than a mere doctrine.

f. Comparison with Western Patristic Angelic Interpretations (e.g., Chrysostom, Pseudo Ignatius)

The Ethiopian tradition does not stand entirely alone; it can be understood as the fullest flowering of a seed planted by earlier patristic writers.

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), as noted in Section 4.2, explicitly argued that the star was not a natural star but “an invisible power, which took the form of a star” (Chrysostom, c. 390/1888, Homily 6.3). He compared it to the pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus, thereby establishing a typology between the wilderness guidance of Israel and the guidance of the Magi. However, Chrysostom stopped short of naming the angel. For him, the star was an angelic power, but its personal identity remained unspecified.

Pseudo Ignatius (late 4th or early 5th century), in a Latin expansion of Ignatius’s Letter to the Ephesians, went further. In the so called “Long Recension,” Pseudo Ignatius writes that the star “was an angel, who became a star and guided the Magi” (Lightfoot, 1885, p. 89). This is the closest Western parallel to the Ethiopian teaching, but even here the angel remains anonymous.

Origen and others proposed the star was a “new star” specially created for the Nativity, but this view identifies the star as a physical object (albeit miraculous), not a personal angelic being.

The Ethiopian tradition distinguishes itself on three counts: (1) it explicitly names the angel as Michael, the highest of the archangels; (2) it provides a detailed narrative expansion of the star’s activity, connecting it to Michael’s earlier roles in the Exodus and the heavenly war; and (3) it embodies the identification liturgically and architecturally, making it a lived tradition rather than an abstract doctrinal statement. No Western patristic source identifies the star of Bethlehem as Michael. Thus, the Ethiopian teaching represents a unique and theologically coherent development within Oriental Orthodox Christianity, one that deserves far more scholarly attention than it has received.

4.2 Synthesis: Towards an Integrated Model

a. The False Dilemma: Natural OR Supernatural – Instead “Natural Vehicle, Theological Meaning”

The history of scholarship on the star of Bethlehem has often been framed as a binary choice: either the star was a natural astronomical event (a conjunction, comet, or nova) that can be explained by retrograde calculations, or it was a supernatural miracle that bypasses the laws of nature entirely. This framing, however, is a false dilemma. As several recent commentators have observed, “A solely naturalistic or materialistic interpretation of the star ignores its revelatory nature” (Premier Christianity, 2018, para. 3). Conversely, a purely supernatural reading that dismisses the possibility of any astronomical correlate risks disconnecting the Gospel narrative from the historical astronomical context in which it was set.

A more productive approach is to recognize that the two categories; natural and supernatural are not mutually exclusive when God is understood as the author of both the laws of nature and the events of salvation history. God can, and in this case evidently did, use a rare or anomalous celestial event as the vehicle for theological revelation. The star was not either a conjunction or a miracle; it was a conjunction (or comet) and a miracle, insofar as its timing, interpretation, and guidance of the Magi were providentially orchestrated. This is what the theologian might call a “natural vehicle, theological meaning” model. The natural event supplied the raw material; the divine intention supplied the meaning.

b. How the Ethiopian Angelic View Resolves Narrative Difficulties

The Ethiopian identification of the star with Michael (the Archangel in the form of a star) resolves several narrative difficulties that have bedeviled purely naturalistic theories.

- a. The “Standing Over” Problem: Any natural star, planet, or comet moves across the sky over time. It does not, cannot, “stand over” a single house (Matt 2:9). The Ethiopian view, following Chrysostom, understands “stood over” as the action of a rational being that can pause, hover, and descend. Michael, as an angel, can position himself directly above a specific location. No astronomical candidate can explain this detail; only a personal agent can.
- b. The Cessation and Reappearance: Why does the star disappear after the Magi reach Jerusalem and only reappear when they leave for Bethlehem? Natural stars do not vanish on command and then reappear days or weeks later. But a rational angel can withdraw from view to compel the Magi to enter Jerusalem, consult the Scriptures, and trigger Herod’s involvement, then reappear to lead them the short distance to Bethlehem.
- c. The Guidance Function: Natural celestial bodies follow fixed paths; they do not “go before” travelers who are moving on the ground, changing direction with them. A conjunction or comet cannot navigate a winding road. An angel, however, can.
- d. The Astrological Interpretation: Why do only the Magi see the star, and why do they interpret it as a sign of a Jewish king? If the star were a purely natural object, it would have been visible to all. If it were a purely miraculous light, why would the Magi need astrological training to interpret it? The Ethiopian view elegantly bridges this: Michael takes the form of a star, which is a natural light (visible to all), but its meaning as a royal sign is discernible only to those with astrological and prophetic training the Magi. Meanwhile, Herod and his court, though they see the star (the same light), cannot interpret it because their hearts are hardened.

Thus, the angelic view satisfies the criteria of both narrative coherence (it accounts for every action of the star) and theological depth (it preserves the star’s revelatory and guiding function).

V. Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This review has argued that the star of Bethlehem, as narrated in Matthew 2:1–12, is best understood not as a purely natural astronomical event nor as a purely supernatural miracle, but as a providentially timed convergence of the two. The main findings are:

- a. Astronomical candidates (Jupiter Saturn triple conjunction, Venus Jupiter conjunction, the 5 BCE comet, etc.) each have strengths and weaknesses, but none fully accounts for all the narrative details, especially the star's cessation, reappearance, and stopping over a house.
- b. Theological readings from the patristic period (Origen, Chrysostom, and Pseudo Ignatius) moved beyond naturalism to interpret the star as a revelatory sign, with Chrysostom explicitly identifying it as an angelic power.
- c. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo tradition offers the most developed version of the angelic interpretation: the star was the Archangel Michael, who took the form of a star to guide the Magi. This tradition is grounded in a 15th century text (*The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth*), embodied in the Genna liturgical procession, and reflected in church architecture.
- d. An integrated model; natural vehicle, theological meaning, angelic agency resolves the narrative difficulties and provides a template for interpreting miracle accounts in the Gospels.

Contribution: Bringing the Ethiopian Orthodox Voice into Mainstream Star of Bethlehem Scholarship

One of the principal contributions of this article is to introduce the Ethiopian tradition to a wider audience in New Testament and early Christian studies. While Western scholarship has debated the star for centuries, the Ethiopian interpretation has remained virtually unknown outside of Ethiopian studies and Oriental Orthodox circles. This is a significant lacuna, because the Ethiopian tradition preserves a coherent, ancient, and liturgically embodied reading that predates the modern divide between astronomy and theology. By bringing this voice into the conversation, this article aims to enrich the interdisciplinary reassessment of the star and to encourage further research on Ethiopian exegetical traditions.

Limitations and Open Questions

Several limitations of this review should be noted, and several questions remain open for future research:

- a. Date of Jesus's Birth: The chronological debate (Herod's death in 4 BCE vs. an alternative date in 1 BCE) remains unresolved. Any astronomical identification depends on this chronology.
- b. Origin of the Magi: The Ethiopian tradition, in some of its strands, asserts that the Magi themselves were Ethiopian or came from Ethiopia (Witakowski, 1999, p. 34). This claim requires further investigation of Ge'ez sources.
- c. Further Ethiopic Manuscript Studies: This article has relied primarily on the Wallis Budge edition of the *Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth* (1935). There are many other Ethiopic manuscripts containing Nativity traditions, including the *Te'amrā Iyasus*, the *Maṣḥāfa Milad* (Book of the Nativity), and various homiliaries. A systematic survey of these texts would likely yield additional material on the star and the Magi.
- d. Comparative Study: The relationship between the Ethiopian angelic interpretation and similar developments in Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian Christianity deserves further exploration.

Final Statement: The Star Remains Both an Astronomical Puzzle and a Lasting Theological Symbol

In the end, the star of Bethlehem refuses to be confined to any single category. It is an astronomical puzzle that continues to invite scientific investigation; it is a theological symbol that has inspired two millennia of art, liturgy, and devotion; and according to the Ethiopian tradition; it is a personal angelic guide who still leads the faithful to Christ. Rather than seeing these dimensions as competing, the reassessment offered here suggests that they are complementary. The star shines in the heavens and in the heart; it is a natural light and a supernatural sign; it is a conjunction of planets and the Archangel Michael. To quote the ancient Ethiopian text: “Michael in the form of the Star guided them.” That guidance, the Ethiopian faithful believe, continues to this day for every worshiper who lights a candle at Genna and walks three times around the church follows, in spirit, the same star that led the Magi to Bethlehem.

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