

# Could the Star of Bethlehem be Venus?

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In the second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew verse 2 we read that the Magi (or Wise men) found the Messiah by following a star which led them to the region of Judea. Many people have theorized over the mystery of this star. Some speculate that the Star of Bethlehem could have been a comet, or a supernova. Some astronomers have even suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was actually Venus and Jupiter “*which were so close together they would have shone unusually brightly as a single "beacon of light" which appeared suddenly.*”<sup>1</sup>

The true answer is a mystery that we cannot truly know in this lifetime. However, in this paper I would like to propose one theory that possibly could give us an answer as to the identity of the Star of Bethlehem.

To begin our discussion we must first identify the key features of the Star of Bethlehem which will assist us in determining the star’s identity.

Firstly, the star is said to have moved. The Magi had followed the star from their home land to the land of Judea. Then in Matthew 2:9, after they had spoken to Herod the star went ahead of the Magi and rested over the place where the child Jesus was staying. The fact that the star moves is why many scholars have suggested that it was a comet that shot across the sky. The fact that the star moved eliminates the theory of a planetary conjunction or a supernova.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the star was bright. This fact comes from the traditional interpretation of the text, as there is no specific verse in the Gospel of Matthew that calls the star bright. However, the text clearly indicates that there was something special about the star and that it stood out from amongst the rest. According to the New Testament Apocryphal book, *The Proto-Gospel of James*<sup>3</sup>, written around 150AD, paragraph 21, the star was brighter than all the other stars and even obscured the light of other stars.

Thirdly, the star appeared. In Matthew 2:7 Herod met with the Magi and ascertained from them when the star had first appeared. The appearance of the Star of Bethlehem was something new that hadn’t appeared in the night sky before. Whatever the Magi saw it was not a pre-existing phenomenon. This leads us to the fourth point.



Fourthly, this was not a single nightly event. Many people mistakenly believe that the Magi came to Jesus on the night when He was born while He and His family were still in the stable. This, however, is not true. According to the Gospel of Luke 2:16 the shepherds came and found Jesus lying in a manger on the night when He was born. However, according to the Gospel of Matthew the Magi came much later. When the Magi arrived they

<sup>1</sup> “Jesus was Born in June” Astronomers claim, **The Telegraph**,

[www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/3687843/Jesus-was-born-in-June-astronomers-claim.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/3687843/Jesus-was-born-in-June-astronomers-claim.html)

<sup>2</sup> *The Star of Bethlehem*, Colin Humphreys, From *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol 5, (October 1995), pages 83-101, [www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Astronomy-Cosmology/S&CB%2010-93Humphreys.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Astronomy-Cosmology/S&CB%2010-93Humphreys.html)

<sup>3</sup> *The Protoevangelium of James*, **New Advent**, [www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm)

did not find a baby in a manger but a child in a house, where Joseph and Mary were living before they fled to Egypt. Not only was Jesus in a different place but the age of the child is different. In Luke's Gospel Jesus is called a *brepheos* (βρέφος), the Greek word for baby or infant, while in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is called a *paidion* (παιδίον), the Greek word for a little child or toddler. The fact that the Magi came later is evident in the Church's liturgical calendar; on December 25<sup>th</sup> the Church celebrates the Birth of Jesus, but twelve days later on January 6<sup>th</sup> the Church celebrates Epiphany or the coming of the Magi.

The appearance of the star was not a single nightly event. The Star of Bethlehem was the Messiah's star (Matt. 2:2) which first appeared when the Messiah was born. It was for this reason that Herod could determine the age of the child. We are not told the exact age of Jesus when the Magi appeared, except that He was a toddler and at least under the age of two. The fact that Herod decided to kill two years olds and under rather than one year olds under would imply that Jesus was nearing two years old. Therefore, the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem had to have lasted for about two years, from the birth of Jesus until the arrival of the Magi. This was not a short term event. For this reason, the Star of Bethlehem could not have been a supernova or a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, as these are short term events. I will discuss the issue with comets below.

Fifthly, the Star of Bethlehem is a single star. The theory of the planter conjunction being used to explain the Star of Bethlehem "*does not satisfy the description that the star was a single star which appeared at a specific time.*"<sup>4</sup>

Sixthly, the Star of Bethlehem was the Messiah's star. This sixth point will make sense further on, but for now it will suffice to simply state that the Star of Bethlehem was Jesus' star (Matt. 2:2).

Having discussed the key features of the Star of Bethlehem, I now wish to present my case for why I believe Venus could be the Star of Bethlehem. But before I do, I just want to repeat that this is simply a theory.

In this paragraph I will give reasons for why I think Venus could be a contender for the Star of Bethlehem and in the next paragraph I will discuss the issue of the emergence (first appearance) of the Star of Bethlehem.

Firstly, the Star of Bethlehem is said to have moved. This is one of the primary reasons for why comets have been suggested as the Star of Bethlehem. However, it could also be a planet, such as Venus. Planets move across the sky during the year as they rotate around the Sun. The English word "planet" comes from the Greek word "*planetai*" (πλανῆται) meaning "wanderers". This movement of Venus could explain the movement of the Star of Bethlehem.

Secondly, the Star of Bethlehem was a very bright star. When comets appear they can be very bright and could explain the bright Star of Bethlehem. However, Venus is also very bright. Venus is the brightest star in the night sky and could possibly be the Star of Bethlehem.

Thirdly, Venus is the Morning Star. Venus appears in the night sky around sunset and sunrise and has been called both the Morning Star and the Evening



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<sup>4</sup> *The Star of Bethlehem*, Colin Humphreys, From *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol 5, (October 1995), pages 83-101, [www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Astronomy-Cosmology/S&CB%2010-93Humphreys.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Astronomy-Cosmology/S&CB%2010-93Humphreys.html)

Star. The authors of the Bible also knew Venus as the Morning Star and they have used the term metaphorically in the Bible.

The term is used in Isaiah 14:12 to refer to Satan and in 2 Peter 1:19 and Revelation 2:28 and 22:16 to refer to Jesus. Some might find it strange that the metaphor of Morning Star is used for both Jesus and Satan, but Scripture also uses the metaphor of lion for both Jesus and Satan (Rev. 5:5, 1 Pet. 5:8).<sup>5</sup> In Isaiah the term Morning Star (KJV: Lucifer) is referring to Satan's previous status as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14) before his fall from Heaven (Luke 10:18). In Job 38:7 God refers to the angels as Morning Stars, and thus Isaiah may be referring to a Morning Star (angel) who has fallen. Although it is important to note that the Hebrew for "Morning Star" in Isaiah is different to "Morning Stars" in Job.

The term Morning Star is properly reserved for Jesus, who three times in the New Testament is called the Morning Star (2 Pet. 1:19, Rev. 2:28, 22:16). This term is used metaphorically for Jesus because the Morning Star was the brightest star in the sky (besides the Sun), and Jesus is the light of the world (John 9:5), that shines brighter than of the other stars of God. This metaphor is fitting because angels are often referred to as stars in Scripture (e.g. Job 38:7, Rev. 12:4) and Jesus is also called the Angel of the LORD (e.g. Exod. 3:2, Jud. 2:1, Zech. 3:1). Jesus is the brightest of angels (messengers) just as the Morning Star is the brightest of stars.

Therefore, since Jesus is called the Morning Star, which is Venus, it would be fitting if Venus was the Star of Bethlehem.

Now the biggest objection that people have to Venus being the Star of Bethlehem is the concept that the Star of Bethlehem appeared. As stated above, whatever the Magi saw, they didn't see it before the birth of Jesus. Am I therefore saying that Venus didn't exist before the birth of Jesus? No, I am not saying that, but before I propose my answer for how Venus "appeared" let me first discuss the theory of comets.

One of the most popular theories the Star of Bethlehem is a comet, they're bright, they move across the sky and a single comet flying across the sky would match the description of the Star of Bethlehem being a single star. Also since comets can appear and disappear they fit well with the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem. Also according to Matthew 2:9, the Magi followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, suggesting that the star moved south. But hold on a moment, didn't we establish above that the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem was not a single nightly event but lasted at least two years? How long do comets appear in the night sky?

Yes, the Star of Bethlehem lasted at least two. As for comets, they can be seen in the night sky with the naked eye for long periods up to months. The current longest recorded appearance of a comet was the Hale-Bopp comet, last seen in 1997AD, which was able to be seen in the night sky by the naked eye for 569 days (over 18 months). The second longest record goes to the Great Comet of 1811 which was seen for up to 9 months. Therefore, a comet similar to the Hale-Boop of 1997 could have appeared for the needed 1-2years between the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi, especially since the Star of Bethlehem was a supernatural phenomenon and could have last as long as



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<sup>5</sup> *Why are both Jesus and Satan referred to as the morning star?*, **Got Questions**, [www.gotquestions.org/morning-star.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/morning-star.html)

God intended it too. I do not out-rightly reject the idea that the Star of Bethlehem could have been a comet, and that theory does provide a good answer. However, the point of this paper is to discuss why and how I think the Star of Bethlehem could possibly have been Venus. Personally, I prefer to hold to the Venus theory, mainly due to the connection of Jesus and Venus as the Morning Star.

Therefore, how do I explain the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem? People tend to reject the theory of Venus as the Star of Bethlehem due to two reasons, one, the star appeared and two, the star disappeared. This is why people prefer the comet theory as they appear and disappear over time.

There are two possible ways to explain the appearance of Venus, and both are based on the idea that Venus became brighter. It is not necessary for us to think that the Star of Bethlehem did not exist in the night sky before the birth of Jesus. The appearing of the Star of Bethlehem may simply be referring to the star becoming noticeably brighter than it previously was. This could occur in either of two scenarios. One, during the period between the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi, Venus was brighter than it previously was and is currently. After the arrival of the Magi it returned to its original brightness. Or two, before the birth of Jesus Venus was duller than it is now, becoming brighter at the birth of Jesus and continuing to remain that bright until today.

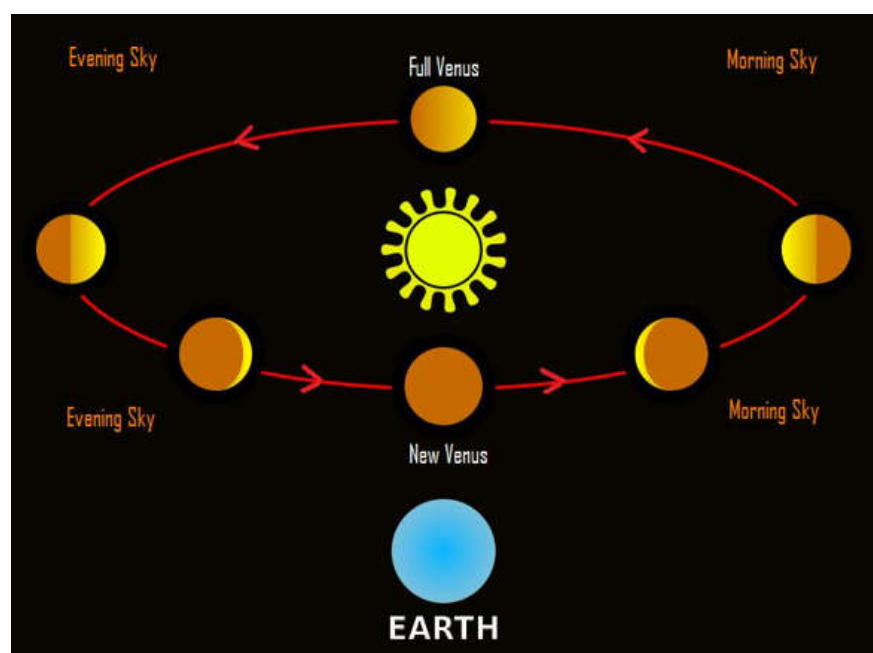
There is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that the Star of Bethlehem disappeared after the arrival of the Magi. In fact, however, God chose to make the Star of Bethlehem appear, it makes it more significant if God left it that way afterwards. For example, many Creationists believe that it did not rain before Noah's Flood (Gen. 2:5), and thus the first rainbow appeared only after the Flood (Gen. 9:13). The rainbow now exists as an everlasting sign of the Noahic Covenant, that God will never again destroy the whole world in a devastating flood. If Venus was duller before the birth of Jesus and continually brighter afterwards, then Venus could serve as an everlasting sign of the birth of Jesus, a sign reinforced by the association of Jesus as the Morning Star (Venus).

Now in regards to this theory that Venus became brighter at the birth of Jesus, either temporarily or continually, a few things need to be discussed.

Firstly, we know that Venus was the brightest star in the sky prior to the birth of Jesus; for the Morning Star was used as a metaphoric image of great brightest prior to the birth of Jesus. Firstly, Isaiah 14:12 uses the term Morning Star about 800years prior to the birth of Jesus. In addition to that, the Greek poet, Hesiod, who lived around 750-650BC, also used the term Morning Star (Phosphorus) in his poetry. Therefore, if Venus was duller before the birth of Jesus, it was still brighter than the other stars in the sky, which gives sway to the first idea that Venus was only temporarily brighter between the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi.

It is true that Venus does go to periods of great brilliancy when it is brighter than normal. During this time Venus is more than double its normal brightness.<sup>6</sup>

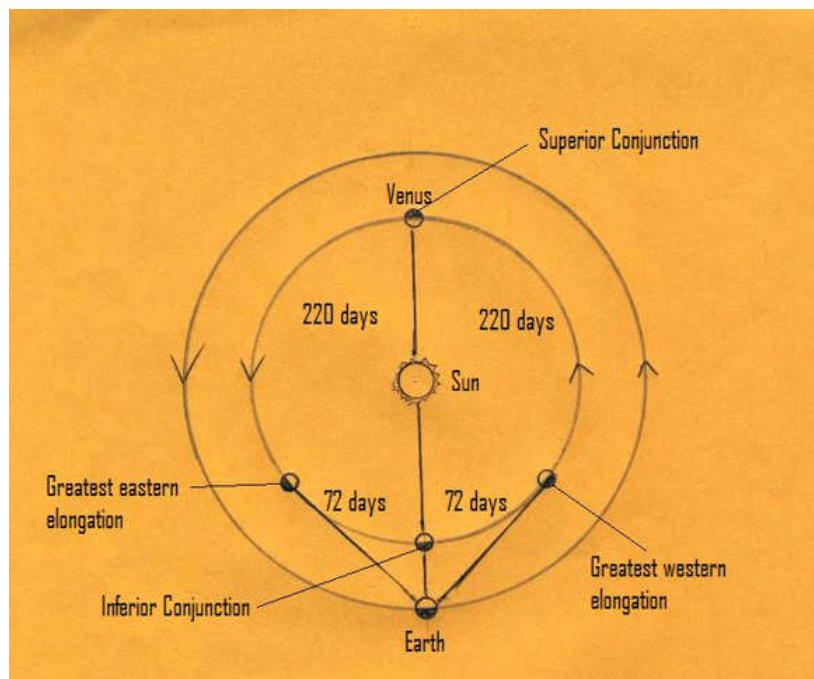
However, this is a short term effect that takes on a regular basis. Venus is a planet and is bright because it, like the Moon, reflects sunlight



<sup>6</sup> *Venus Brightest in mid-February for all of 2014*, Bruce McClure and Deborah Byrd, **EarthSky**, [www.earthsky.org/human-world/venus-brightest-greatest-brilliancy-greatest-illuminated-extent](http://www.earthsky.org/human-world/venus-brightest-greatest-brilliancy-greatest-illuminated-extent)



towards Earth. As Venus orbits around the Sun it will reflect different amounts of sunshine, just as the Moon does as it orbits Earth. A full moon is when the Moon is directly opposite the Sun and thus we on Earth see one whole side of the Moon reflecting sunlight, thus making it brighter. Venus, however, works differently, and in a very interesting way. When Venus is directly opposite the Earth (see above diagram), one entire side of the planet is reflecting sunlight towards Earth, thus making it brighter than ever. However, due to the fact that the Sun is sitting between the two planets, we are actually unable to see Venus from Earth. However, as Venus approaches Earth, it reaches its greatest elongation (see diagram adjacent), the point at which there is the greatest geocentric angular distance from the Sun. At this point, Earth can see half of Venus light side and half of its night side, similar to a half-moon. When Venus is close to Earth



and we can see only a quarter of its dayside, then it is the brighter than normal. *“That’s in spite of the fact that Venus shows only about 25% of its lit side and 75% of its dark side.”*<sup>7</sup>

As Venus orbits the Sun, Earth is treated to two periods of great brilliancy only about 72 days apart, the first as the Evening Star and the second as the Morning Star. The period from Evening Star to Evening Star takes about 584 Earth days.

It could be possible that at the birth of Jesus the Magi saw Venus at a period of great brilliancy, followed it for a year and a half and witnessed a second period of great brilliancy just before arriving at Bethlehem. However, that doesn’t fit with the view that the Star of Bethlehem was continually bright for a period of 1-2years. Also, the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem was an amazing phenomenon that the Magi had not seen before, while Venus’ period’s of great brilliancy happen on a regular basis.

The next point that needs to be discussed is why Venus is so bright in the first place. Venus is very bright mainly because it is the closest planet to Earth, hence why it is brighter than Mercury or Mars. However, Venus is abnormally bright for a planet that close to Earth. That is due Venus’s thick clouds. Venus has very thick clouds, causing an extreme Greenhouse Gas Effect. The planet’s air is about 96% carbon dioxide and covered in volcanic cloud. This creates high temperatures and an intense atmospheric pressure. It also causes Venus to be brighter than usual. Because of Venus’s thick clouds it reflects about 70% of its sunlight back into space.<sup>8 and 9</sup> Compare this with planet Earth which only reflects about 30% of its sunlight.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> July 2007 Feature: Venus at Greatest Brilliancy, Bruce McClure, **Bruce McClure’s Astronomy Page**, [www.idialstars.com/vagb.htm](http://www.idialstars.com/vagb.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Why is Venus so Bright in the Night Sky?, Cool Cosmos, [www.coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/42-Why-is-Venus-so-bright-in-the-night-sky-](http://www.coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/42-Why-is-Venus-so-bright-in-the-night-sky-)

<sup>9</sup> What Makes Venus the Brightest Planet?, EarthSky, [www.earthsky.org/space/brightest-planet-brightest-mirrors-venus](http://www.earthsky.org/space/brightest-planet-brightest-mirrors-venus)

<sup>10</sup> What is Earthshine?, TimeandDate.com, [www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/earthshine.html](http://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/earthshine.html)

Since these clouds are the reason Venus is so bright, in order for Venus to have been duller before the birth of Jesus, these clouds would have to have been thinner.

Therefore, in order for Venus to be the Star of Bethlehem, I am proposing that one of two things had to have occurred. Venus had thinner clouds than it does today and was thus duller than today. Or temporarily, between the period of the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi the clouds on Venus were thicker and thus Venus was brighter. Since the account of the Star of Bethlehem was a supernatural phenomenon it is more than possible that God made Venus brighter than it was prior to the birth of Jesus.

Based on the fact that the Morning Star (Venus) was considered a bright star before the birth of Jesus, it is more likely that Venus was temporarily brighter. This would also fit better with the account given in the *Proto-Gospel of James*, stating that the Star of Bethlehem obscured the light of surrounding stars, something that Venus is not doing today. Although, the *Proto-Gospel of James* is a later Gnostic writing and can be expected to contain exaggerations based upon the Biblical texts.

The identity of the Star of Bethlehem will remain a mystery until we enter into the life to come. Numerous theories have been proposed; many which I believe do not fit with the Biblical description of the Star of Bethlehem. The purpose of this paper was simply to discuss reasons why and how Venus could possibly be the Star of Bethlehem. The theory is not without question and requires further research and discussion. However, I personally like the idea that Venus the Morning Star, was the Star of Bethlehem which directed the Magi to Jesus Christ the Morning Star.