

The Views of the Theologians: Jesus Christ or an Angel: Spencer Concludes the Shekinah Glory while Collins Decides on the Archangel Gabriel; Both Ideas Rejected by the Principle of Hermeneutics Regarding Normal Use of Words & the Doctrine of Theophanies

II. The Views of the Theologians: Jesus Christ or an Angel:

Among the references I consulted one concluded that the Magi's guiding star was Jesus Christ in a theophany while the other concluded that it was an angel, e.g., Gabriel. We will first note the one who decided it was the Lord Himself.

Duane Edward Spencer of Word of Grace Ministries in San Antonio, Texas, wrote a collection of commentaries on words or phrases in the Bible entitled, *Word Keys which Unlock Scripture*, one of which is "Star of Bethlehem."

In this book, Spencer provides thorough background information for the assumption that the star was literal:

1. Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel \äb-rä-bä-nel' (1437–1508) was a Jewish writer known for his defense of the Jewish doctrine of the Messiah. In his commentary on Daniel, *Ma'yanei ha-Yeshu'ah (The Wellsprings of Salvation)*, he concluded that the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 1480 forecasted the birth of Messiah.
2. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), a German astronomer, discovered the laws of planetary motion. In a December observation of the solar system he saw the conjunction of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn, in the constellation Pisces and was reminded of Abrabanel's writings.
3. The Jews had historically contended that the planet Jupiter was the sign of royalty, the planet Saturn was the sign of its promised king, and the constellation Pisces was the sign for Israel.
4. Abrabanel had concluded that such a conjunction of these two planets in the constellation of Pisces could have been understood by the Magi as the sign of the virgin birth.
5. Kepler, using his formulae of planetary motion, calculated that such a conjunction did indeed occur in Pisces in the year B.C. 7.
6. Modern astronomers confirm that such was the case on three occasions that year—May 29, October 3, and December 4.
7. Spencer then poses the question: How could a star go before the Magi as they went south to Bethlehem? It turns out that the third conjunction on December 4 of B. C. 7 occurred in the southern skies.
8. But what causes Spencer to reject all these indicators is found in Matthew 2:9, "... the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was."
9. Assuming this to be an impossibility, Spencer rejected the apparent proof of a conjunction of planets in Pisces and developed the following conclusion:



In the church's anxiety to provide an acceptable statement as to the identity of the Star, the very, very obvious answer has been overlooked. Just pause for a moment and think of what the Bible says about the phenomena which is the "sign of the Son of Man" and His coming to earth. It is the same amazing blaze of glory which marked the Presence of Jehovah in the midst of Israel during their journey through the wilderness, "leading them the way." It was a phenomena (*sic*) which not only went "before them," as in the case of the Star of Bethlehem, but it also marked the residence of the Son of God in a goat hair tent as He communed with Moses from between the Cherubim over the Mercy Seat. Whether it was over the tabernacle, or a bush which was not consumed, or upon Mount Sinai, it always declared one thing: "God is present in this place."

By now you surely have guessed what the Star of Bethlehem was. Yes! It was the Shekinah Glory or Pillar of Fire which was Jehovah's "sign" to the Jew that He was present. The Hebrew Magoi would have recognized it immediately as the "sign" of Messiah's coming or presence, and it fulfills the demands of the narrative in Matthew for a heavenly body which both goes before the Magoi and rests upon the place where the young Child lay.¹

The problem with Spencer's conclusion is that the Lord's biblical appearances to Moses on Sinai and to the Jews of the Exodus are never referred to as a star.

Steven M. Collins is not a theologian. He has, however, invested a great deal of research into biblical subjects, including the influence of the Parthians on the political climate prior to and during the Incarnation. His commentary on the star observed by the Magi follows pretty much the same reasoning as Spencer's:

Some observations must be made about the "star" which led the Magi to Jesus. Some have proposed that this star was a comet or a celestial phenomenon although the biblical accounts indicate that this was not the case. Simple logic confirms that no comet or celestial phenomenon in the sky could possibly pinpoint a single city, much less "stand over" an individual child on the earth's surface! Nevertheless, that is what the biblical "star" did.

The Bible periodically uses the word "star" to represent angels (Job 38:7, Revelation 1:20), and there is good reason to believe that the "star" which led the Parthian nobles to a specific child in a specific house in Judah was an angel of God. Nothing else makes sense. Only an angel, a spirit being, could literally "stand over" the baby Jesus to designate one specific child to the Parthian nobles. (p. 136)

Also, nothing in the biblical account indicates that this "star" was visible to anyone other than the Magi-Wise Men! Matthew 2:2 states that the Magi saw "the star," but the context argues no one else ever saw it. Verse 7 relates that Herod asked the Magi when "the star" appeared to them, indicating no one in Judea was aware of any such "star." If a striking celestial object had appeared in the sky, Herod and his astrologers would already have known the exact date and hour on which it had appeared. (pp. 136, 138)

¹ Duane Edward Spencer, "Star of Bethlehem," in *Word Keys which Unlock Scripture* (San Antonio: Word of Grace Ministries, nd), 11–12.



After leading the Parthians to Judea, the “star” disappeared, forcing the Parthians to ask Herod for directions. After the Magi left Herod, the “star” again appeared to them, led them directly to Bethlehem, and finally “stood over” one specific child, Jesus. Verse 10 states the Magi rejoiced that the “star” had again appeared to show them where to go! Obviously, a “star” which appeared, disappeared and reappeared for the Magi (but which was apparently not seen by any other humans) had to be an angel. Supporting this fact is that Luke 2:8–15 records that the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds by angels speaking to them out of a heavenly light which accompanied their appearance.

God also used an angel to warn Joseph to flee to Egypt. Since God used angels to direct the movements of persons in the events surrounding Christ’s birth, it would have been completely consistent for God to also send an angel to guide the Magi’s movements.² (pp. 137–38)

Both Spencer and Collins are not able to reconcile several facts presented in the biblical record. Both noted that the Magi saw a star in Parthia but it apparently disappeared only to reappear once they learned the Messiah was located in Bethlehem.

This is understandable if, without any other knowledge, one assumes the messenger is a literal star. The text of Matthew 2:2 reads, “We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

The verb “saw” is the aorist active indicative of ὁράω (*horaō*). The aorist is constative meaning that the action is considered in its entirety. If the verb was in the imperfect tense then we could conclude that the star was visible all the way to Jerusalem. But this is not the case. Therefore, what the Magi saw, in the view of Spencer and Collins, could not have been a literal star since stars do not go out and come on again as is seemingly indicated by its reappearance in verse 9.

Both men also take issue with a literal star by the information provided in the passage which reveals that the star led the Magi to Bethlehem: “it came and stood over the place where the Child was” (v. 9) The “place” is later revealed to be a house, “coming into the house they saw the Child” (v. 11a). A literal star cannot do this.

Because of these facts expressed clearly in the text, Spencer concluded that a literal star could not be the object that communicated to the Magi and proffered that it was the Shekinah Glory. Collins came to the same conclusion and contended that the star must have been the angel Gabriel.

These are legitimate arguments in favor of either a theophany by the deity of Christ in the form of a phenomenon of nature as was illustrated by the pillar of fire of the Exodus. There is also a legitimate argument to support the idea of an angel being the method of communicating information to the Magi such as Gabriel had done in his several annunciations surrounding the pregnancy of Mary and the virgin birth.

It is important to remember this principle from Bernard Ramm’s *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*: If the population uses the word “bear” three times more frequently for the stock speculator than for the animal then the literal meaning of “bear” is the stock speculator (p. 120).

² Steven M. Collins, *Parthia: The Forgotten Ancient Superpower and Its Role in Biblical History* (Royal Oak, MI: Bible Blessings, 2003), 136, 138–39.



A few additional comments by Ramm on this principle are also instructive:

Scripture interprets Scripture (or, “obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages”). There is no question that there are passages in Holy Scripture that are very obscure for modern man which may have been very clear to the authors of the passages. (p. 104)

The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture. (p. 105)

In recent literature, philology means the technical and comparative study of words.³ But in the larger historical context philology meant a total program in understanding a piece of literature. This includes history, cultural surroundings, and literary criticism. (pp. 113–14)

Philological interpretation of Scripture means that the Biblical interpreter does very much the same sort of thing that any competent scholar would do working in the same general area.

The true philological spirit in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—to lead the meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text. (p. 115)

The meaning of a word is determined how the word was used in ordinary conversation. (p. 120)⁴

These principles may be applied to the word “star” in Scripture. On no occasion are the biblical words for star, *kochav* in the Hebrew Old Testament, or *astēr* in the Greek New Testament, used in the singular to identify an angel. The terms “angel of the Lord” or “angel of God,” are represented by the words מַלְאָכִים (*mal’ach*) 66 times and ἄγγελος (*angelos*) 15 times. These words mean “messenger” and when specific angels are referenced these are the words that are used.

To therefore conclude that the Greek noun *astēr* refers to an angel in Matthew 2 makes its use in verses 2, 7, 9, and 10 hapax legomena⁵ for such a use is not found anywhere else in Scripture.

Principles on Theophanies of Jesus Christ:

1. Definition. A theophany is a manifestation of the person and work of Jesus Christ in His preincarnate state. This is a theological category for the appearances of Jesus Christ before the First Advent.
2. Theophanies demonstrate the fact that Jesus Christ is the God of Israel:
 - A. As the Angel of the Lord.

³ “Philology: an older term for linguistics, and especially for the branch of linguistic study devoted to comparative and historical research into the development of languages. In a wider sense, the term sometimes also covers the study of literary texts” (Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], 167).

⁴ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 104–105, 113–15, 120.

⁵ “A word or form occurring only once in a document or corpus. Greek: something said only once” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v.: “hapax legomenon.”)



- 1) Jesus Christ as a theophany appeared to Moses in the burning bush, Exodus 3:2. He was called *Malach Adonai*, the angel or messenger of Jehovah. This reference is conclusive in itself.
- 2) Jesus Christ is called the angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ is in the pillar of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night to lead Israel through the desert, Exodus 13:21; Isaiah 63:9
- 3) The Isaiah reference especially emphasizes the fact that the angel of the Lord, the theophany of Jesus Christ, is the God of Israel.
- 4) As the God of Israel, Jesus Christ as the angel of the Lord warned the judges of Israel in Judges 2:1-4.
- 5) Not only did Jesus Christ as the God of Israel appoint Moses the first leader of the Jewish nation, but He also appointed the second leader, Gideon, in Judges 6:11-24.
- 6) As the God of Israel, Jesus Christ is always mentioned in the Old Testament under the title Angel of the Lord.

B. As a Man.

- 1) He appears to Abraham as a man in Genesis 18:1-33.
- 2) He was the wrestler with Jacob in Gen 32:24-32.
- 3) He appeared as a man to the elders of Israel in Ex 24:9-11.

C. As a cloud.

- 1) Jesus Christ is called "the cloud of the Lord, the glory of the Lord" in Exodus 40:38.

He is in the cloudy pillar by day in Exodus 33:9-23.

3. The Identification of the Angel of the Lord.

- 1) The Angel of the Lord identifies Himself as Jehovah or God:
 - a. When the angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar in Gen 16:7-13, He also identified Himself as God.
 - b. Likewise, when you compare Gen 22:11-18 with Genesis 48:15-16, the same principle emerges. The angel of the Lord identifies Himself as the Lord, or as God.
 - c. The angel of Jehovah identifies himself as God in Judges 6:11-24, 13:3-23.
 - d. In passages where the angel of the Lord is identified as the Lord, it is the declaration of the deity of Christ. It therefore refutes all the false doctrine that Jesus Christ was truly God but a super human being.

4. No theophanies occurred during the Incarnation; that is the ultimate appearance of the deity of Christ inseparably united with the true humanity of Christ.

During the Incarnation there is no theophany during that period of time; you have Christ on earth in hypostatic union.



5. The angel of Jehovah is a distinct person from Jehovah.
 - 1) This is important, for it helps us to understand how the Trinity was taught in the Old Testament. It taught that there was more than one person in the Godhead.
 - 2) When this distinction occurs, ADONAI alone refers to God the Father; whereas MALACH ADONAI refers to God the Son
 - 3) Jesus Christ is the only visible member of the Trinity. The second person of the Trinity is the only visible God of the New Testament and the only visible God of the Old Testament.
 - 4) In the Incarnation, Jesus Christ was the God of Israel. They did not recognize Him as that but this didn't change the fact that He was.
6. The Termination of Theophanies. When the Incarnation and Hypostatic Union occurred, there were no longer any Theophanies. Instead, from that point on, there are Christophanies, which were appearances of Christ in His resurrection body from the time of His resurrection until He ascended.⁶
7. The angel of the Lord in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the New Testament are both said to be sent by God the Father.
8. This gives us some background information on why we are going to reject both of these men's conclusions. They have good arguments; they try to stay with the text.
9. The first man, Spencer, says it is a theophany in the form of the Shekinah Glory and that simply cannot be true because it takes place within the Incarnation.
10. Our next man, Collins, says it's an angel, but there is no proof that there is ever a case, except the one assumed in Matthew 2, where a messenger angel is referred to as a star.
11. So our first two men who have made a stab at this have been proved to be unsuccessful—so Spencer and Collins are going to be pushed to the side. I've given you their testimony, I've given you their research, I've given you their rationales and conclusions, and we reject them out of hand.

⁶ In addition, there were six post-ascension Christophanies that occurred during the precanon period of the Church Age: (1) to Stephen, Acts 7:55–56, (2) to Paul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:3-6, 22:6-11, 26:13-18, (3) to Paul in Arabia, Acts 20:34, 26:17; Gal 1:12, 17 (4) to Paul in the temple, Acts 9:26-30, 22:17-21, Gal 1:18, (5) to Paul in prison, Acts 23:11, and (6) to John on the island of Patmos, Rev 1:12-20.

