

[Reviews, Bible & Theology](#) / [Guillermo Gonzalez](#)

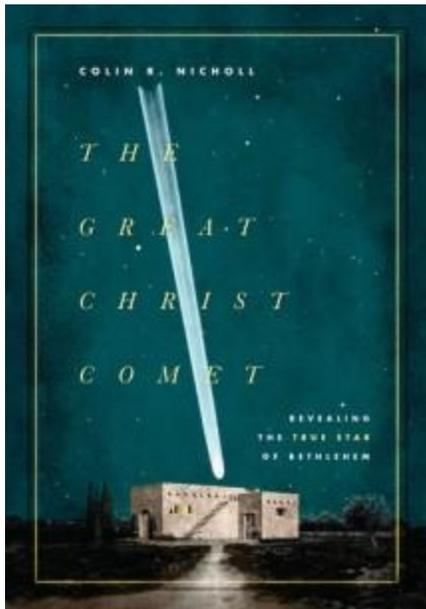
# The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem

October 9, 2015

As a Christian and an astronomer, it's only natural I should have a keen interest in the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem. While I've never done any original research on the topic, I've followed new developments from a distance over the years. And each time it appears all plausible explanations have been exhausted, someone comes up with a fresh idea.

Now we have a lengthy treatise written by an academic. Will we be surprised again?

Skeptic Turned Believer



I have to admit I started Colin Nicholl's [The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem](#) with considerable skepticism. Quickly perusing the book before I began reading in detail, I noticed Nicholl adopts 4 B.C. as the date of Herod's death. While this has been the consensus view among

historians, recent scholarship throws this dating into doubt (more on this below). Nicholl is obviously aware of this debate, but seems overly dismissive of challenges to the consensus. I feared if he lacked careful attention to this important point, his scholarship on other points would be similarly weak.

I'm happy to report, however, that I was wrong in my initial assessment of *The Great Christ Comet*. Unquestionably, Nicholl is a deeply knowledgeable and meticulous biblical scholar. Nearly every page contains multiple footnotes, often to obscure books and scholarly journals. But he is also humble. He acknowledges early on that the study of the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem requires expertise in multiple disciplines including biblical studies, Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) history, and astronomy. I'm impressed he dialogued with multiple astronomers while working on this book. Gary W. Kronk, a leading expert on comets, wrote the foreword.

The input from astronomers is evident in the high quality and great depth of discussions relating to the technical aspects of astronomy. Nicholl carefully explains the basic motions of celestial bodies in the night sky, always with attention to details relevant to ANE observers. He also does a very good job explaining the anatomy, orbital mechanics, brightness changes, and visual appearances of comets. Nicholl often draws on detailed historical accounts of bright comets, including many beautiful illustrations; the visual impact of a celestial phenomenon is an important part of the story of the Star. I couldn't find any obvious errors in the book's astronomy content.

Biblically Focused, Persuasive Storyteller

The biblical text is Nicholl's main source material. Early on, he makes a solid case that the nativity narrative should be taken as describing real historical events. Not only does he make use of the detailed description of the Star in [Matthew 1:18–2:18](#), but he also brings in [Numbers 24:17](#), [Isaiah 9:2](#), and [Revelation 12:1–5](#). Though Kronk says in the foreword that Nicholl is the first to tie the Revelation passage to the star, this isn't the case. In chapter 4, Nicholl actually states Ernest L. Martin did so in [The Star of Bethlehem: The Star that Astonished the World](#), as well as Frederick A. Larson, likely influenced by Martin, in his [The Star of Bethlehem](#) documentary.

I'm not spoiling the conclusion by telling you Nicholl strongly advocates the comet explanation for the Star; that much is evident on the book's cover. Before presenting his own theory, he critiques other well-known proposals. These include various conjunctions between Jupiter and other planets or stars, a nova or supernova, meteors, and an ordinary star. He also notes that the 12 B.C. apparition of [Halley's comet](#), which some have identified as the Star, is much too early to be consistent with the biblical chronology. I find his critiques to be persuasive.

Nicholl is a good storyteller. As I read through each chapter I had the impression he was retelling the story of how he'd worked as a detective to solve the mystery of the Star, carefully sifting through subtle clues bit by bit to arrive at a final, inescapable conclusion. Although at times the material can be technical and the pace slow (with some very long footnotes!), I think he manages to maintain the average reader's interest most of the time.

#### Theories and Chronologies

Without giving away the whole story, I'll briefly summarize Nicholl's theory. Only a comet, he argues, can do all the things the Star is reported to have done in the nativity texts—leading the Magi to Jerusalem, then to Bethlehem, then to the specific house in which the Christ child lay. I must admit I was astonished when I read Nicholl's description of the celestial sign he says prompted the Magi to make their long journey to Jerusalem. I won't spoil the surprise by revealing it here!

Nicholl even gives the orbital elements of the "Christ Comet." This is quite an achievement. With these, anyone with modern planetarium software can follow its path across the ancient skies and confirm that it did everything Nicholl claims for it.

I need to say a few words about the timing of the Christ Comet. As noted above, Nicholl accepts the consensus dating of Herod's death (4 B.C.). In 2009 Andrew Steinmann, professor of theology and Hebrew at Concordia University, published a paper in *Novum Testamentum* titled "[When Did Herod the Great Reign?](#)" in which he presents a case for Herod's death occurring in 1 B.C. There are many subtleties in this debate, such as whether one should count partial years in calculating the length of a king's reign and which lunar

eclipse is relevant to Herod's death. In my opinion, Steinmann presents a compelling case for the 1 B.C. date.

On this accounting, Jesus was born in 2 or 3 B.C. Nicholl's birthdate of 6 B.C., then, is excluded in the new chronology. His estimate is based on the celestial event described in Revelation 12. So there are actually two possible dates: September 11, 3 B.C. or September 15, 6 B.C. Thus, there is a simple fix to Nicholl's chronology—just advance his dates by three years!

Mystery Solved?

So, has Nicholl finally solved the mystery of the Star? I'm tempted to say he has. But until an independent reference to the Christ Comet is discovered in the historical record, I would have to call his theory a speculative historical reconstruction—albeit a sophisticated one that may be the most plausible offered to date.

Historians, take note: even a single brief note of a comet appearing at a certain date and in a particular constellation consistent with Nicholl's theory would be enough to confirm it.

**Colin Nicholl.** *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. 368 pp. \$40.00.

**Guillermo Gonzalez** is an assistant professor of astronomy at Ball State University. He is the co-author of *The Privileged Planet: How our Place in the Cosmos is Designed for Discovery.*

Comments

- [S-800 Hunter/Killer](#) • a year ago  
A little-noted work, *Jesus Christ Our Promised Seed* by Victor Paul Wierwille (1982), gives September 11, 3 BC as Christ's birth date arguing the biblical, historical and astronomical data. He discusses biblical lines of evidence for Herod's death occurring in 1 BC that may be overlooked in the current discussion. The weakness of Wierwille's work appears to be the strength of Nicholl's, which is the appearance of something sufficiently extraordinary, such as a comet within the sign of Revelation 12. I suspect that Prof. Gonzalez may be correct, "just advance [Nicholl's] dates by three years!" I look forward to acquiring *The Great Christ Comet*. Wierwille's book in PDF is available here: <http://www.preteristarchive...>

[Colin R. Nicholl](#) • 2 years ago

I am extremely grateful to Prof. Gonzalez for his generally very positive review. However, I should briefly respond to his criticisms:

(1) I deal with the dating issue on page 42 and pages 164-166, where I offer a heavily compressed and incisive evaluation of the relevant part of Steinmann's article. My treatment of the timing of Herod's death may be briefer than Guillermo would like, but it is hardly "weak," "dismissive," or careless. I also comprehensively refute the theory advocated by Rick Larson's documentary on pages 82-84. This theory has been a key factor prompting some to resist the consensus dating of Herod's death to 4 BC.

(2) The foreword is not incorrect in what it actually states—not that no part of Revelation 12 had ever been linked to the debate about the Star, but that Revelation 12:1-5 (as a whole) had previously been "unharvested" in treatments of the Star.

(3) Guillermo's use of the word "speculative" could scarcely be more inappropriate. That the Star could only have been a great comet is powerfully demonstrated in the first six chapters. In addition, the astonishingly deep and comprehensive astronomical harmony between Revelation 12 and Matthew 2 highlighted in the latter chapters of the book strongly refutes any attempt to relegate the Christ Comet to the rank of speculation.

So, at the risk of sounding antinomian, I'd encourage Guillermo to go ahead and succumb to temptation.

§ [Dwight R. Hutchison](#) Colin R. Nicholl • a year ago

Hello Mr. Nicholl, I would like to be in touch with you personally when you have an opportunity. You can reach me at [hutchison.dwight@gmail.com](mailto:hutchison.dwight@gmail.com)

It seems to me that your contribution to "star research" is substantial. I am not in agreement with your theory, but I do appreciate your efforts. Your book is very helpful concerning questions surrounding the reliability of Matthew's Gospel and the Magi's perception of the divinity of Jesus.

I would point out here that your effort to have the comet point to a particular house in Bethlehem is probably not the best manner of approaching the incidents in Bethlehem. If an observer moved ten meters to the right or left the building indicated by a comet would have been different. I do not see how such an idea would have ever worked.

I myself think that the star was a sign that informed the wise men about the Messiah's coming. Over Bethlehem it again became a sign concerning the Messiah's presence. However, I do not think that the star indicated any certain building where the child could be found. I suspect that the men went to Bethlehem during the day (John Chrysostom also thought the men travelled in the daytime). I suspect the men made a careful search and found the family (possibly with the help of local people). The mention of the house should

be taken as indicating the private nature of the encounter (in a home - not in public - see other incidents in Matthew in homes). The mention of the house should not be taken as an indicator of the position of the star.

The text does not say when the men went to Bethlehem. It also simply says that the star got to the skies above Bethlehem before the men got there - it had "preceded" (proago) them there. See other passages with "proago" in Matthew's gospel. The text actually does not say that the star led the men to a house. This is assumed. One does not need to think that the star was visually in front of the men. One only needs to affirm that it arrived in the skies over Bethlehem before the men arrived there (it was waiting for them there). I think the wise men became aware that God was giving them another sign only after they had already arrived in Bethlehem - not on the way there. Their joy of again appreciating the star as a sign was in Bethlehem itself, not on the going road there.

I could write plenty more, but this should be enough for now. Please be in touch.  
see more

§ [Guillermo Gonzalez](#) [Colin R. Nicholl](#) • [2 years ago](#)

The word "supernatural" in my reply should, of course, be "speculative." Don't know how that typo happened!

§ [Guillermo Gonzalez](#) [Colin R. Nicholl](#) • [2 years ago](#)

Having thought about my use of the word "supernatural," I admit this choice was too strong. I would be fine with describing Prof. Nicholl's work as "historical reconstruction." I am even willing to go on the record and say his is by far the most plausible theory for the Star of Bethlehem on the table. The date of the death of Herod is a debate for another day.

§ [Skillet Chitlins](#) [Colin R. Nicholl](#) • [2 years ago](#)

What? In the first six chapters of what? How?

Revelation 12 is after the fact (anachronistic), even for preterists. What the blazes are you writing about?

§ [Skillet Chitlins](#) [Skillet Chitlins](#) • [2 years ago](#)

My apologies to Colin Nicholl (the author),

The first six chapters of course refers to his book, my other challenges of course requires the actual reading of his book. My challenge to involving Rev 12 in this narrative remain however as it can have no place in discussing the discovery (finding by the Magi) of the nativity.

Colin is well within his rights as an author to speculate on historical (even Biblical) events and should be respected for his actions of publishing.

• [Robert Johnson](#) • [2 years ago](#)

It does increasingly seem that a 'natural' explanation MUST be given to just about everything nowadays and that from those who purport to believe in the virgin birth, Christ's and the Apostles miracles. Why? Why can this not be a supernatural event to announce the supernatural birth of the God Man? This naturalistic thread even ran through much of my theological training. It frankly leaves me bemused.

§ [Colin R. Nicholl](#) [Robert Johnson](#) • [2 years ago](#)

But the Star of Bethlehem is described by Matthew as "a star" that had "a rising." This is astronomical language and I, as a Biblical scholar, am duty-bound to follow the text's cues. There is no anti-supernatural agenda at work here....

§ [Skillet Chitlins](#) [Colin R. Nicholl](#) • [2 years ago](#)

Please explain the source of "a star" that had "a rising."

§ [Andy](#) [Skillet Chitlins](#) • [3 months ago](#)

What do you mean by the question? Mr. Nicholl's point is that Matthew's account uses astronomical terminology, and therefore - if we take the text of Scripture seriously - it would seem (barring other possible factors) that an astronomical explanation is necessary.

What is it you're not understanding about that point?

• [Andrew](#) • [2 years ago](#)

Is Nicholl's view really compatible with Steinmann's dates?

• [Sharon Ellis](#) • [2 years ago](#)

You say that the author concludes "only a comet" could have accomplished all the things this "star" did. Is there no possibility that the Shekinah Glory could have done everything described? It seems such an obvious possibility that when I read articles like this I'm always surprised that it's never mentioned. Just wondering...

§ [Haze](#) [Sharon Ellis](#) • [2 years ago](#)

It would be strange if it were possible to make the Old Testament link for Matthew not to make it more explicit, wouldn't it?

§ [Andy](#) [Haze](#) • [3 months ago](#)

I'm leaning toward the Shekinah theory, but you make a fair point.

§ [Colin R. Nicholl](#) [Sharon Ellis](#) • [2 years ago](#)

Sharon, remember that it is described by Matthew as "a star" that had a "rising" and was observed by astronomers/magi. If we take the Biblical author seriously, we must first and foremost consider whether the most natural sense of the text, namely that Matthew had in view an astronomical body, is the correct one. Why don't you read the book? You'll

discover that God's employment of a natural body to announce the birth of his Son is capable of bringing him great glory....

§ [Skillet Chitlins](#) [Colin R. Nicholl](#) • [2 years ago](#)

Where do you find 'rising'? What translation are you reading?

That the magi may have been astronomers is conjecture; proper exegesis does not authorize such a view.

'Rising' and 'astronomers' can only be justified by eisegesis, the reading of ones opinion into scripture.

§ [David Brandt](#) [Skillet Chitlins](#) • [a year ago](#)

The translation of Matthew 2:2 as "at it's rising" or "as it rose" is supported by both the ESV and NIV. Nicholl explains this point thoroughly in the book. So, no, 'rising' is not eisegesis. It's a valid interpretation. So is astronomers. Check any major commentary on Matthew (<http://bestcommentaries.com...> or Bible dictionary.

§ [Skillet Chitlins](#) [Sharon Ellis](#) • [2 years ago](#)

I am in total agreement with your analysis.

Matthew 2:9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

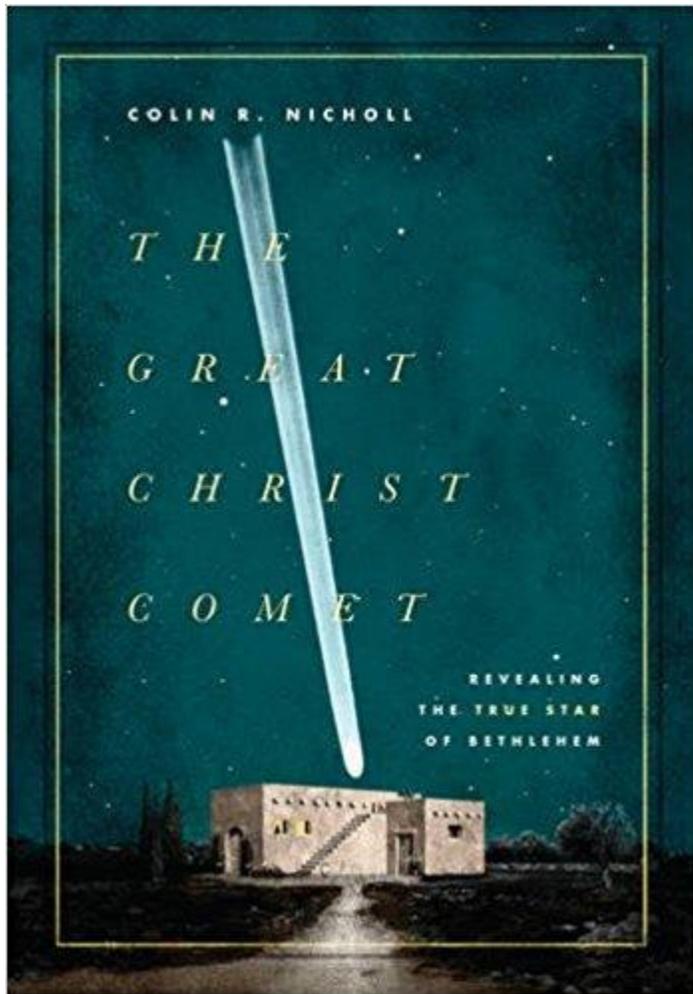
The parallax of anything seen that is in outer space cannot accomplish the function of 'leading' the wise men from a place in the east to the precise location of Jesus' birth. The Shekinah Glory is quite capable and has the historical connection of leading Moses and the Jewish tribes in the wilderness (God's GPS system ;-)

§ [David Brandt](#) [Skillet Chitlins](#) • [a year ago](#)

I echo what 'Haze' said above: If this really was the Shekinah glory that led the wise men, then Matthew did a terrible job saying so. If Matthew wanted to convey that it was the Shekinah glory led them, he would have explicitly said so. That's what Luke does when he describes the angels & shepherds: "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them."

However, here it is clearly a celestial entity that is leading the wise men. And just because we've always called it a 'star' in English doesn't mean it could only be that. BDAG (Bauer, Danker, etc.) Greek Lexicon (the standard Biblical Greek dictionary, used by evangelicals everywhere), allows for the word for star ('aster') to mean a wide range of celestial entities. It could mean 'star', it could mean 'planet', and yes, it can even mean 'comet'.

So Nicholl is not arguing for anything outrageous. He is arguing a valid theological position, both in terms of proper Greek usage, and the context of Matthew's story.



## BOOKS

# The Star of Bethlehem finds a new dedicated follower

*But the astronomer Marek Kukula wonders whether Colin Nicholl's exhaustive treatment of 'the Great Christ Comet' may miss the whole point of the gospel story*

[Marek Kukula](#) 12 Dec. 2015 (The Spectator)

It's hard to imagine Christmas without stars. They perch at the top of fir trees, glitter from greeting cards and dangle festively over shopping precincts. This year, even the John Lewis advert and Selfridges' Oxford Street window display — two of the holiest icons of our modern, commercialised Christmas — both have astronomical themes.

The origin of this celestial obsession is of course the Star of Bethlehem, whose apparition, according to the Gospel of Matthew, first alerted the Three Wise Men to the birth of Jesus, then guided them across the desert to pay homage to the new-born Messiah. For centuries scholars have speculated as to whether this founding tale of Christianity might have some basis in historical fact but, in an age in which religion and science are often caricatured as standing in stark opposition to one another, what are we to make of a book that uses science to investigate one of the Bible's best-loved stories?

The title of *The Great Christ Comet* may give the impression that this is some sort of fire-and-brimstone religious tract. On the contrary, it is for the most part a sober, detailed and accessible account of both scripture and science — and perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the Star of Bethlehem story to date.

Over the centuries many different types of astronomical phenomena have been invoked to explain the Star, and Colin Nicholl describes and assesses them all. The science of comets, supernovae and planetary conjunctions is explained, and their relative merits as objects that might have driven Babylonian astrologers to cross the deserts of the Middle East are clearly laid out. Since he is a Biblical scholar by training, Nicholl's grasp of the essential astronomy and astrophysics is all the more impressive. But his cool and even-handed treatment of the science sits somewhat uneasily with the book's fundamental assumption that the story of the Biblical star must have some basis in historical events, rather than being a shrewd (perhaps even expected) embellishment to the founding myth of a new religion.

Of course, the reliability of source material is an issue faced by historians and scientists alike. Drawing on modern Bible scholarship, Nicholl suggests that the stylistic and structural similarity of the Gospels to contemporary Greco-Roman biographies indicates that their authors, writing decades after Jesus's birth, are simply reporting what they've heard with no attempt to add or embellish. But surely this is exactly the template the Gospel authors would choose if they wanted to convince prospective converts of their veracity?

Still, if we follow Nicholl's lead and give the author of Matthew the benefit of the doubt, the book soon regains firmer ground. Here Nicholl's background adds a new and extremely valuable dimension to the debate. Matthew's statements about the Star, which often seem vague and confusing from a modern perspective, are re-examined in the context of astronomy and astrology as it was understood two millennia ago

As the book's title makes clear, Nicholl is convinced that a comet is the only class of object that can plausibly explain the details of Matthew's description, as well as the astrological and religious significance accorded to the Star. Here 21st-century technology is deployed to impressive effect: Nicholl uses freely available astronomical software to calculate how such a comet must have orbited the Sun, allowing it to fulfil all of the key points of Matthew's account, changing its appearance and position in the sky as the Magi travelled westwards across the desert in time to provide a spectacular show in the southern sky when they arrived at Jerusalem. Illustrations of historical comets from the last few centuries are used to show how Nicholl's 'Christ Comet' might have appeared: if he is right, the scene in the sky above Bethlehem could have been considerably more spectacular than the twinkling point of light commonly depicted on our Christmas cards.

However, this remains a big 'if'. The book's arguments are detailed and often highly plausible but at certain points they rely on suppositions about the motivations and psychology of Biblical characters, and in the end we are asked to accept that one of the most spectacular cometary apparitions for millennia was recorded for posterity only by the Christians of first-century Judea. Nicholl is commendably upfront about the leaps of faith that he asks us to make, but there are places where his interpretation seems to draw on religious convictions that may not be shared by every reader.

Does it really matter whether the Star of Bethlehem was a real astronomical object or not? Read as a parable of hope and salvation, the Biblical account of the Nativity is a universal story: peace on earth and goodwill to all men is a message that even the most hardline atheist can get behind.

The prominent inclusion of a stellar element to the tale reminds us that human beings have always looked to the heavens in order to gain a better understanding of life down here on Earth. Today, comets are scrutinised for signs, not of the birth of kings, but of the origins of life itself: right now the European Space Agency's Rosetta probe is in orbit about the comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko, beaming back a stream of images and data that are revising our understanding of the formation of our own planet 4.5 billion years ago. The Magi would surely have shared our wonder at this technological miracle.

Nicholl's thesis is one of the most detailed and compelling proposals to date, but it will surely not be the last. After two millennia the Star of Bethlehem continues to exert its fascination on the wise, and perhaps this tells us more about ourselves than it does about either the Bible or astronomy. If so, we will doubtless be following this particular star for millennia to come.

Book review — astronomy, St Matthew's Gospel, the Three Wise Men, the Messiah, Judea, astrology, the Mag

Book review — astronomy, St Matthew's Gospel, the Three Wise Men, the Messiah, Judea, astrology, the Mag

Marek Kukula is Public Astronomer at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich.

Available from the [Spectator Bookshop](#), £22. Tel: 08430 600033

## *About The Great Christ Comet*

"I am simply in awe of this book. An absolutely astonishing triumph."

Eric Metaxas, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Bonhoeffer*

The Star of Bethlehem is one of the greatest mysteries in astronomy and in the Bible. What was it? How did it prompt the Magi to set out on a long journey to Judea? How did it lead them to Jesus?

In this groundbreaking book, Colin R. Nicholl makes the compelling case that the Star of Bethlehem could only have been a great comet. Taking a fresh look at the biblical text and drawing on the latest astronomical research, this beautifully illustrated volume will introduce readers to the Bethlehem Star in all of its glory.

## *Author*



Colin R. Nicholl (PhD, University of Cambridge) taught at the University of Cambridge and was a professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary before devoting himself to biblical research. His book *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica* was published by Cambridge University Press, and his articles have appeared in publications such as *The Journal of Theological Studies* and *The Times* (London).

## *Endorsements*

"*The Great Christ Comet* is a stunning book. Colin R. Nicholl develops a convincing case for what exactly the Star of Bethlehem was. The book reads like a detective novel, and while it is full of evidence, information, and argumentation, it is accessible and enjoyable to read. This work is now the definitive treatment of the subject. I highly recommend it."

J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Biola University; author, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters*

"I am simply in awe of this book. It is a blockbuster. It is an historic discovery and nothing less. *The Great Christ Comet* is an absolutely astonishing triumph of interdisciplinary scholarship so rarely seen and so tremendously illuminating as to merit bright comparison with the very celestial phenomenon it describes. Both lead us to the manger and to the Great Poet within, whose syllables are the moon and

sun and stars.”

Eric Metaxas, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Miracles* and *Bonhoeffer*  
“In every respect this volume is a remarkable achievement. I regard it as the most important book ever published on the Star of Bethlehem and enthusiastically commend it.”

Gary W. Kronk, author, *Cometography*; Consultant, American Meteor Society

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### *Specifications*

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## *What Kind of Astronomical Marvel was the Star of Bethlehem?*

And was it even a star? A biblical scholar investigates the mysterious object that guided the Magi to Jesus.

**Interview by Greg Cootsona/ NOVEMBER 23, 2015**



**G**enerations of Christians have helped ring in the Christmas season by singing John Henry Hopkins Jr.'s 1857 carol, “We Three Kings,” with its evocative chorus:

Star of wonder, star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still proceeding  
Guide us to thy perfect light.

*We know, from the Gospel of Matthew, that these kings—or “Magi,” as Matthew calls them—saw something brilliant in the night sky, a celestial body that beckoned them to Jesus’ birthplace in Bethlehem. But what exactly was this mysterious “star of wonder”?*

*Biblical scholar Colin R. Nicholl is the latest to venture an explanation for this astronomical marvel. Blending Bible research with findings from expert astronomers, Nicholl makes the case that the Star of Bethlehem was actually an extraordinary comet. Greg Cootsona, a writer, teacher, and leader with the Scientists in Congregations program (funded by the Templeton Foundation to integrate science and theology in churches), spoke with Nicholl about his claims in *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem* (Crossway).*

**As a biblical scholar, what drew you to astronomy?**

If figuring out the biblical text requires me to understand history, geography, religion, sociology, or something else, then it's my responsibility to do the necessary study. It's obvious from Matthew 2 that the Star of Bethlehem is a real astronomical entity that was faithfully observed by astronomers in the Ancient Near East. The biblical scholar, then, is challenged to search for astronomical information, and that's what I've done.

The challenge is to be as rigorous about studying the relevant science as you are about studying the Bible. It's difficult, but it's also rewarding.

### **Why have biblical scholars shied away from studying the science behind the star?**

Because it requires knowledge outside their specialized areas. Some back away simply out of skepticism that the biblical text relays accurate history.

In my experience among scholars, few things draw out more cynicism than the Star of Bethlehem. But we need to remember that nowadays, Matthew's gospel is widely acknowledged to be an ancient biography. When an ancient biography is written in the same century as its subject, it is generally characterized by a concern with historical accuracy. Books like Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* bear this out.

As for Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, Luke and other historical accounts corroborate key elements. For example, what Matthew records about Herod matches up with what first-century historian Josephus tells us. It is perfectly legitimate, then, to look at Matthew as a source of historical information, and to ask whether astronomy supports his claims. As a biblical scholar, I'm not so quick to disregard Matthew's historical claims. I want to take him seriously. I'm willing to hang in with him even when I don't initially understand what he's saying.

### **Who were the Magi?**

We often call them "wise men," but that's not a helpful designation. Nor is it helpful to think of them as philosophers. The Magi, straightforwardly, were scholars engaged in astronomy and astrology. They made regular observations of stars, planets, comets, and other phenomena.

The Magi were probably from Babylon. We know that was the main center of astronomy in the Ancient Near East, and that the Babylonian astronomers had studied the stars dating back at least to the eighth century B.C. They kept an eye on celestial developments and kept detailed records.

### **What evidence is there that the star was a comet?**

The star appeared suddenly and was visible for over a year, something that makes sense only if it were a supernova or a great comet. That the star surprised the Magi with its impressive “rising” points strongly to it being a comet: Of all the celestial bodies, only comets behave in this manner. (*Rising* refers to the period when a celestial body re-emerges on the horizon after being hidden by the Sun.)

Then you take into account the star’s movement, in the space of a couple of months, from the eastern morning sky to the southern evening sky, where they see it when they’re traveling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. That kind of movement is only possible for an object in the inner solar system, meaning that the star had to be a comet.

At the end of the Magi’s journey, the star stands over the place of Jesus’ birth, pinpointing a particular location. As New Testament scholar Craig Keener has pointed out, that’s something only a comet can do. Josephus mentions a comet that “stood over” Jerusalem in the run-up to the Judean War. Another Roman historian, Cassius Dio, mentions that another comet did something similar over Rome in 12 B.C. This is all very powerful evidence, and there is much more in the book.

I should emphasize that I didn’t set out with an agenda. I didn’t have a clue what the Star of Bethlehem would be. I was just following the evidence wherever it went. When I did my analysis and looked at the star’s profile and orbit, and then compared the data with the great comets of history, I was astonished to discover that this Christ-comet really did turn out to be the greatest.

### **If the Star of Bethlehem is actually a comet, should we start calling it the “Comet of Bethlehem”?**

No. In the ancient world, many astronomical entities—meteors, for instance—could be regarded as “stars.” In fact, we still describe meteors as “shooting stars.” Comets were commonly called “stars.” This was true in the Greco-Roman world, in the writings of philosophers like Pliny and Seneca. It was also true in Babylon.

In Numbers 24:17, there’s a prophecy by Balaam about a “scepter” and a “star” (“ . . . a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”). Ancient rabbis could refer to comets as “scepter stars.” The “star” in Numbers is almost certainly a comet.

### **How did the Magi determine that the one whose birth was announced in the heavens was the Messiah?**

There are various indications in Matthew that the Magi were impacted most by what they saw in the star’s rising. Whatever it did at that time revealed that the Messiah had been born, motivating them to make their journey to find and worship him.

The Magi seem to have concluded that Balaam’s oracle in Numbers, about the rising scepter-star, was the key to interpreting the comet’s behavior. I also believe that the opening verses of Revelation 12 paint a picture of the heavenly sign the Magi witnessed. (Rev. 12:1–2 reads, “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.”) The Magi saw a nativity drama unfolding in the heavens, in which the constellation figure “The Virgin” played the role of a pregnant mother giving birth to a baby, whose part was played by a great comet. This celestial drama was strongly suggestive of Isaiah’s oracles about a virgin becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son (7:14), and about a great light shining in the darkness to signal the Messiah’s coming (9:2–7).

What’s really exciting is that, based on detailed information from Revelation 12, we can produce an approximate orbit for the comet. This means we can re-create what the comet did and where it was at various points. What’s more, when you plug the orbit into planetarium software, you discover a pattern that lines up perfectly with what Matthew 2 records. Now that really is amazing!

What the Magi did wasn't irrational. This is not some kind of weird, mystical story. This was a rugged, down-to-earth event. If we had been alongside the Magi and witnessed what they witnessed, we too would have gone to Judea. What the comet did would have drawn you in. It revealed Jesus for who he is. It compelled the Magi to become part of the story. It is interesting that later sources suggest the Magi abandoned astrology in favor of following Christ. After entering into their experience, you can understand why they would have done so.

### **How can your book help us appreciate the significance of Christ's birth?**

First, the book authenticates Matthew's account of the Nativity as historically reliable. Second, it authenticates Jesus as the prophesied Jewish Messiah. It is important to realize that no ancient source could have invented a comet so unique; they simply didn't know enough to pull that off.

So the book has implications for us as Christians and for the whole world, because every human being has to confront the claim of Christ and his divine confirmation as Messiah. The claim of Christ during his ministry is a lofty one—to be the Messiah, to be the light prophesied by Isaiah. Remarkably, this comet made precisely the same pronouncement. There's a glorious coming together of the claim of Jesus himself and heaven's pronouncement about him.

In addition, the comet's intense brightness anticipated the glorious light of Jesus' person and ministry. It speaks to our generation, assuring us that the one whose birth it announced will fully establish his kingdom on earth.

The Star of Bethlehem underscores God's mastery over the cosmos. For this great heavenly display to happen at the birth of Jesus, it had to have been tailor-made for the occasion. That included its size, shape, orbit, and chemical composition. And to think that this plan had been in motion from the birth of the solar system—it really is amazing. From our 21st-century perspective, we can appreciate that God is claiming lordship over astronomy and over the entire universe.

### **How can the real story behind the Star of Bethlehem change the way we worship during Christmas?**

When you walk in the sandals of the Magi, you feel the power of the story. At the end of the journey, it's you on your face before the Messiah. The story draws you into recognizing who Christ is and how great he is. And yet all this magnificence is displayed in the beautiful simplicity of a baby—this is the awesomeness of the Incarnation.

The glorious celestial wonder simultaneously reveals and hides. Not everyone looking into the sky understands. For example, Herod, the rabbis, and the people of Judea—there it is, right before their eyes, but they don't get it. It's the mystery and beauty of the plan of salvation and the marvel of what God has done in Christ.

To think of the Star of Bethlehem as a great comet is transforming. It takes away the sentimentality of Christmas and brings back the meaning, the power, the authenticity, and the ruggedness of the story. Suddenly, we realize that this is history. This is something that actually occurred. And the Magi on this journey were real people, overwhelmed by what they witnessed.

We too should be overwhelmed, even more than the Magi, because we are now able to recognize what God had to do to perform the great heavenly sign marking Jesus' birth. We can't be the same again.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december/what-kind-of-astronomical-marvel-was-star-of-bethlehem.html>