PART THREE

BALAAM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY
In Ulrich Luz’s important commentary on the Gospel of Matthew the following sentence can be found: ‘Über den Stern ist sehr viel Tinte vergossen worden’. Luz is absolutely right: The interpretations of the mysterious ‘star’, which according to Matt 2:1–12 leads the ‘magi’ to the newborn ‘king of the Jews’, are manifold and—as far as I see—no consensus about its meaning and background has been found yet.

Perhaps the different interpretations of the star can be best arranged in correspondence to the questions which those interpretations actually seek to answer.3

(1) How can the astronomical phenomenon told by Matthew be explained on a historical or a scientific level?

It was the famous astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who first calculated that a conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars had taken place around the years 7 or 6 BCE. For centuries this constellation—and several other phenomena—has been seen as proof that the Gospel tells the truth.4 Many of explanations like this are in

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1 U. Luz, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (EKK I/1), Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1985, 118.
3 I am sceptical of the attempts to reconstruct earlier sources of the scene, as for example performed by J. Nolland, ‘The Sources for Matthew 2:1–12’, Catholic Biblical Quarterly 60 (1998) 283–300 (discussion of older literature!). Therefore I do not refer to questions regarding such attempts.