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“Following the Star”: Eärendil, Númenor, and the Star of Bethlehem

Kristine Larsen
Central Connecticut State University, larsen@ccsu.edu

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“Following the Star”: Eärendil, Númenor, and the Star of Bethlehem

Stars, Silmarils, and The Silmarillion

A rather detailed 1872 article in the Philadelphia Ledger (76) noted that

A curious discussion has been going on in the London papers respecting the nature of the light, or rather the luminous appearance called ‘a star,’ which guided the wise men to Bethlehem, as narrated in the second chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. The controversy is by no means a new one; indeed it has furnished a subject for speculation and philosophical investigation for eighteen hundred years; but it seems to have sprung up into vitality again just now, for some reason or other. To those who accept the Scriptural narrative literally, and believe in its plenary inspiration, such a discussion may seem irreverent, if not profane; yet it has been entered upon in all seriousness, and with the conviction that whatever throws light upon the true meaning of the phenomena recorded in the Bible, promotes reverence of that volume.

Fifteen years later, astronomer William Payne, Editor of The Sidereal Messenger, shared with his readers that “Intelligent people have been frequently asking during the past summer where the Star of Bethlehem could be found. The impression seems to have been general that there was now to be seen somewhere in the heavens, a very bright star which should be properly called the Star of Bethlehem, meaning that notable star spoken of in the Bible” (1887, 265–6). In a 1937 leaflet for the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, Mount Wilson Observatory staff astronomer Robert Richardson (54) bemoaned the fact that “At Christmas time an astronomer is almost sure to be asked the question: ‘Will you please tell me if that big blue star in the southeast is the Star of Bethlehem?’ The astronomer regrettfully shakes his head and replies that it is only the dog-star, Sirius, and so far as he is aware it has always been known by that name.” Four decades later, Ruth Freitag, a bibliographer at the United States Library of Congress, published a bibliography of 240 articles and books focusing on the Star of Bethlehem, an addendum a decade later adding more than a hundred additional titles (Gingerich 2015, 3). The bulk of these works seek a rational astronomical explanation for what some consider a Biblical miracle. Note that public interest in the Star long predated the birth of J.R.R. Tolkien and has shown no signs of abating nearly five decades after his death. Therefore, his life was fully immersed in a culture in which such discussions
were considered both commonplace and intellectual. We should therefore not be surprised to see echoes of this iconic image within the legendarium.

Alister McGrath (2018, 235) names Sam’s famous sighting of a beautiful white twinkling star seen through the clouds of Mordor (RK 199) a “subtle reworking of the imagery of the ‘star of Bethlehem’” that “affirms the resilience of hope.” Appendix A of The Lord of the Rings explains how Eärendil, bearing a silmaril, sailed the heavens in his ship as “a sign of hope to the dwellers in Middle-earth oppressed by the Great Enemy or his servants” (RK 314). A footnote directs the reader to several references in the text, including Sam’s star, suggesting that the star is none other than Eärendil himself. Readers of the posthumously published The Silmarillion were introduced to Eärendil’s role as “Gil-estel, the Star of High Hope” that filled Morgoth with doubt upon its first rising (S 250) and the star’s identity as the planet Venus, our Morning and Evening Star. Eärendil plays another important role as a specific heavenly portent in the Akallabêth, the history of the ill-fated isle of Númenor first published in The Silmarillion. After the island is prepared by the Valar,

the Star of Eärendil shone bright in the West as a token that all was made ready, and as a guide over the sea; and Men marvelled to see that silver flame in the paths of the Sun. Then the Edain set sail upon the deep waters, following the Star; and the Valar laid a peace upon the sea for many days, and sent sunlight and a sailing wind, so that the waters glittered before the eyes of the Edain like rippling glass, and the foam flew like snow before the stems of their ships. But so bright was Rothinzil that even at morning Men could see it glimmering in the West, and in the cloudless night it shone alone, for no other star could stand beside it. (S 260)

As I have discussed elsewhere (Larsen 2021a, 8), the passage of Venus along a similar path in the sky as the sun is to be expected, as Venus and the sun (and moon) travel along the same general path relative to the stars, the ecliptic. What is truly marvelous is seeing Venus in the Western sky opposite the rising sun, let alone it being stationary in this position for days on end, as this is a physical impossibility for a planet that orbits closer to the sun than our earth. Indeed, Venus is called the

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1 As an aside, this description suggests (astronomically speaking) that it cannot be Venus, but instead some random star. The brighter planets, especially Venus, don’t generally twinkle, especially when seen high in the sky. This star is indeed seen high in the sky, “above a dark tor high up in the mountains” (RK 199); as will be described presently Venus can never appear more than 45 degrees away from the sun in the sky, thus making this scene impossible (if the star is, indeed, Venus).
Morning or Evening Star specifically because its orbit confines it to appearing in the sky no more than about 45 degrees east or west of the sun (and hence can only be seen in the night sky within a few hours of sunrise or sunset).

As seen from Earth (T), Venus can never appear more than about 45 degrees to the east (left) or west (right) of the sun. This geometry also explains the observed phases of Venus as discovered by Galileo. Illustration from J.A. Gillet and W. J. Rolfe, *Astronomy for the Use of Schools and Academies* (1882). Public domain, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth has relatively few strange events in the heavens – no comets, few meteors, no novae/supernovae, and infrequent mentions of aurora. Instead, the regular, predictable patterns of the heavens are given central importance (most notably, the phases of the moon). Eclipses, being the most important exception to this rule, are clearly set in opposition to these orderly motions, solar eclipses explained as the result of the infatuation of Tilion, the driver of the moon, for Arien, the driver of the sun, while lunar eclipses are attempts at injury perpetrated upon the moon by Melkor (S 100-101). On the surface this makes the supernatural role of Eärendil in the *Akallabêth* that much more striking. However, the source of the name of the character can shed some light on an inherently supernatural status. In the drafts for a letter to Mr. Rang (August 1967),
Tolkien explains that he was taken by the Anglo-Saxon *earendil* “most notably [in] Crist 104, éala éarendel engla beorhtast ofer middangeard monnum sended” (*Letters* 385). Tolkien noted that the line from Crist was “Often supposed to refer to Christ (or Mary), but comparison with Bl. Homs. suggests that it refers to the Baptist. The lines refer to a herald, and divine messenger, clearly not…. Christ” himself (*Letters* 385). In Tolkien’s mind, these references “seem plainly to indicate that it was a star presaging dawn (at any rate in English tradition): that is what we now call Venus: the morning-star as it may be seen shining brilliantly in the dawn, before the actual rising of the Sun. That is at any rate how I took it” (*Letters* 385).

Coupling the origin of Tolkien’s character name with the public fascination with a heavenly beacon associated with the birth of Christ and we see an interesting parallel between the unnatural apparition of Eärendil in *Akallabêth* and the Gospel of Matthew, in which the Wise Men “went their way; and behold the star which they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the child was” (Matt. 2:9).²

It is important to note that I make no judgement on Tolkien’s personal beliefs concerning the astronomy and theology of the Star of Bethlehem, as they fall outside the purview of this study. Instead, I posit the following thesis:

1. There has been a widespread and persistent interest in an astronomical explanation of the Star of Bethlehem as a single, brilliant physical object (e.g., Venus) among the general public (in both England and America) for more than a century and a half. This fascination is reflected in artwork as well as questions posed to astronomers.
2. The astronomical community has frequently referenced this interest in print articles that are available to the general public.
3. Tolkien paralleled this widespread iconography in his artwork and literary texts.
4. Tolkien’s decades-long revisions for the character of Eärendil as the Evening/Morning Star (Venus) increasingly align the character with a brilliant celestial sign of hope and intentional, directional travel towards a promised end, therefore whether intentionally or (perhaps more likely) unconsciously aligning it with the popular iconography of the Star of Bethlehem.

² Biblical verses are taken from the English Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible, which would have been known to Tolkien.
You say Astronomy, I say Astrology

The sole Biblical reference to the Star of Bethlehem comes from Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew. Herod is visited in Jerusalem by “wise men from the east” who seek the king of the Jews, having “seen his star in the east” (Matt. 2: 1-2). Herod and his advisors are caught unawares, suggesting that the star is only visible to someone with specific knowledge of the heavens. Following previous prophecies, Herod suggests that the visitors look in Bethlehem. As the wise men journey on the star which “they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the child was” (Matt. 2:9). The appearance of the Star is often interpreted to fulfill the so-called “star prophecy” in Numbers 24: “A Star shall rise out of Jacob and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel: and shall strike the chiefs of Moab, and shall waste all the children of Seth” (Num. 24: 17). Matthew’s description of the Star is vague and problematic. For example, if the wise men came from the east, why would they follow a Star seen in the east toward the west (where Jerusalem lay, relatively speaking)? Fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople (and later saint) John Chrysostom noted that it would be impossible for a celestial object to pinpoint the location of something as small as a manger (let along an infant), asking “How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down and stood over the very head of the child?” (qtd. in Gingerich 2015, 3). The ability of a star to remain stationary in the sky is problematic on an entirely different level, of course, given the nightly motion of the stars (unless we use the North Star, which is neither in the east, nor particularly bright, and certainly not a special celestial omen). It is therefore common for scholars to warn against a literal interpretation of this (or any) Biblical passage in terms of scientific veracity. For example, the intention may have simply been that “what the Magi had seen in the heavens led, in consequence thereof, to their finding the Messiah” (Farquharson 1978, 18).

Regardless of the very real possibility that the Star is a literary device, a legend or a Biblical miracle (and therefore beyond the purview of science), as previously noted numerous authors have suggested real-world astronomical explanations for the Star. For example, in 1908 ancient historian J.K. Fotheringham wrote a curious paper with his own explanation for the Star, relating Babylonian

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3 This section provides background information on the scholarly views of the astronomical community towards the Star, setting it in opposition to the popular public viewpoint. The impatient reader may choose to skip to the following section, although as Treebeard would argue, one should not be so hasty.

4 In The Book of Lost Tales Part I (181-2) some stars are said to be stationary, in particular Morwinyon (Arcturus) and Nielluin (Sirius). Christopher Tolkien notes that there is no mythological explanation for this lack of motion, which is clearly stated to have been something relegated to the past of Middle-earth (LT I 200, 182).
astrological omens connecting the planet Mars with the deaths (and presumably births) of kings. Elsewhere (Larsen 2014) I argued that Tolkien would have been familiar with Fotheringham, who held a Readership in Ancient Astronomy and Chronology at Oxford, and whose highly political efforts to become the Savalian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford in 1930 was unsuccessful, and his work. In 1918 American ethnologist and expert in Peruvian astronomy Stansbury Hagar published a meandering 4-part reflection on aspects of cultural astronomy in Popular Astronomy under the title “What was the Star of Bethlehem” (although the Star was only a topic of the last two installments). In the end he arrives at the rather underwhelming conclusion that it was “nothing more than an asterism which annually marked for the astronomers the approach of the solstice” for example the Praesepe star cluster in Cancer or the twin stars Castor and Pollux in Gemini (Hagar 1918, 394).

The decidedly astrological flavor of these proposals is no accident. The wise men, whose number (and popular depiction as “kings”) is never specified in the Gospel of Matthew, are Magi, derived from the Greek magoi. The term “originated in Persia where it denoted influential religious leaders, but in Greek translation this term also meant sorcerers or magicians,” leading to their common identification as astrologers (Farquharson 1978, 9). A search for an astrological explanation for the Star goes back to the early 17th century, to the work of famed astronomer (and part-time astrologer) Johannes Kepler. Kepler and other astrologically and astronomically minded people watched the heavens in autumn 1604 looking forward to seeing conjunctions – apparent close approaches in the sky – between Jupiter and Mars and Mars with Saturn (the three planets forming a triangle at times). According to Kepler, some “watched, to correct their ephemerides, some, for the sake of pleasure, some, because of the rarity of the occasion, some, to verify their predictions, and others, indeed, to see if there would be a comet, as had been expressly predicted by the astrology of the Arabs” (Burke-Gaffney 1937, 418). While no comet was to be seen, a ‘new star,’ or stella nova, did unexpectedly appear in the same general area of the sky. While Kepler was not the first to note its arrival, his careful observations and detailed writings led his name to be attached to it as Kepler’s Star. At its brightest it bested Jupiter and rivalled Venus, before ultimately fading from view. We now know that the object was a supernova, the explosion of a dying star, rather than a new star being born.

While writing up his observations of the supernova and the conjunctions Kepler became interested in the date of the nativity, based on the work of Johann Barwitz. Issues had developed with the dating of the nativity, because the assignment of December 25, 1 CE by the 6th century Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus became known to be based on an erroneous date for the founding of Rome. As a result, the historical date for Jesus’ birth had to be in several years BCE. In addition, the December 25th designation came from the fourth century and was
often compared to the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, itself related to the Winter Solstice (Richardson 1937, 56-7). In 1614 Kepler published his work on a new chronology, placing the birth of Christ in 5 BCE, two years after a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces, a constellation connected astrologically with Judea (an event that Kepler argued would have alerted the Magi to the upcoming birth but was not the Star itself) (Burke-Gaffney 1937, 420-1). In 1821 Danish Lutheran bishop Münter suggested that a single conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn itself could be the Star; in 1825-6 Ludwig Ideler calculated and published the dates of three such conjunctions in Pisces in 7 BCE (redoing Kepler’s calculation using different astronomical tables), calculations that were revised by Charles Pritchard in 1856 (Burke-Gaffney 1937, 422-3). The erroneous view often seen in 20th century popular works that Kepler himself called the triple conjunction the Christmas Star comes from a footnote in Ideler’s work (Burke-Gaffney 1937, 422).

An example of this can be found in The Astronomy of the Bible, a widely read popular level exposé published by solar astronomer at the Royal Greenwich Observatory and expert on the sunspot cycle Edward Walter Maunder in 1908. I have argued elsewhere (Larsen 2021c) that it is likely that Tolkien was familiar with this volume, despite its not being listed in Oronzo Cilli’s Tolkien’s Library. The final topic covered in Maunder’s book, in its own chapter, is the Star of Bethlehem. Maunder incorrectly explains that “the ingenious and devout Kepler supposed that he could identify the Star with a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn” (Maunder 1908, 396). Despite the confusion that is now attached to the suggestion that the Star is a set of three close approaches in the night sky between Saturn and Jupiter, this model has found a popular niche in planetariums. Because such a celestial dance is easily and effectively recreated by an electromechanical planetarium projector, “Christmas Star” shows became the standard December offering at countless planetariums, including the Copernican Planetarium at Central Connecticut State University where I served as a planetarium performer as an undergraduate and I have been a faculty member since 1989. Indeed, the Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina only abandoned its annual “Star of Bethlehem” show in 2011 after 61 years when they decommissioned their original planetarium projector (Hall 2011).

Perhaps the current favored scientific explanation (if such a thing is sought for) is that of Michael Molnar (1999), who argues that it is not a dualistically astrologically symbolic and astronomically visible event like a conjunction, but a strictly astrological one. In particular, Molnar found that horoscopes for 6 BCE contain important astrological symbolism for the birth of a king associated with Judea, including the April 17 heliacal rising of Jupiter, the king of the planets, in Aries, a sign associated with Judea. This explains the phrasing that the Star was seen “in the east,” while the subsequent motion of Jupiter into Taurus and back into Aries on December 19 (when it “stood over” the sign of Judea) generates an
“astounding horoscope that could indeed have drawn the attention of some astrologers to Judea” (Molnar 2015, 59-60). Astronomer Bradley Schaefer (2015, 93) notes that Molnar’s hypothesis explains why Herod and his court were unaware of the Star, as “the special patterns of the planets can only be recognized through the eyes of an astrologer looking at their positions on a horoscope…. So of course no one in Jerusalem would have seen the arcane astrological pattern up in the sky.” The stars aligned in 2014 again, in a different way; to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the University of Groningen and the 400th anniversary of the publication of Kepler’s Biblical chronology De vero anno quo aeternus dei filius humanam naturam in utero benedictae Virginis Mariae assumpsit [The true year in which the eternal son of God assumed human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary], the University held an international colloquium to “engage with recent theories on the Star of Bethlehem, such as the astrological Jupiter theory of Michael Molnar, drawing on the expertise of all the relevant, related fields of ancient astronomy/astrology, ancient history, and religion” (Barthel and van Kooten 2015, xi).

Venus or a Venus-like Supernova: The Persistence of the Single Star Model Among the General Public

The takeaway message of the previous discussion should be that astronomers have seriously considered what real world astronomical events best fit with the Gospel of Matthew, and have come to a conclusion that is in stark opposition to what one classically finds depicted on a Hallmark Christmas card: a single brilliant star (Venus or a supernova like Kepler’s Star) that outshines all other objects in the sky (with the exception of the moon). However, as Schaefer points out the popular explanation completely misses the point, because the only people to attach original meaning to the Star are the Magi, and they are astrologers, not astronomers…. Astrologers have no interpretation for any nova…. As such, any hypothesis of nova-as-Star is nonsensical, because the Magi could not have been motivated to travel to Judea by a nova…. Molnar (1999) has argued that the astrological orientation of the Magi has ruled out prior naturalistic explanations, because they are all astronomical events that excite modern astronomers, but not ancient astrologers (Schaefer 2013, 230).

Let us return to the decade before Tolkien’s birth, when, as previously noted, there was high interest in the general public concerning possibly viewing the
Star in the sky. In the May 1885 issue of *The Sidereal Messenger*, William Payne reported that

From recent notices in the newspapers public attention has been called to the supposed re-appearance of a certain star, well known to the Bible student, the ‘Star of the East,’ or the ‘Star of Bethlehem’ as some writers have termed it. In some of these accounts, the claim that this notable star has re-appeared this year, is apparently so certain, that its place in the heavens has been pointed out, and the time of day given when it could be seen. In one instance it was urged that persons should seek early opportunity to observe this morning star because it was fast receding from sight. Is it any wonder that many people would take advantage of such advice whether certain of its truth or not, if they might possibly look on the face of a star once divinely chosen to mark the time and place of the birth of Jesus Christ in sacred history? (Payne 1885, 110)

Payne has to be the bearer of bad news that “the star referred to was undoubtedly the planet *Venus* as she was recently nearing the Sun from the west” (*Ibid.*; emphasis original). This was not an isolated incident. As Payne (1887, 266) recalls in an 1887 article, in the summer of 1884 “very much was said about this star in newspapers and various periodicals in popular and religious lines of thought, awakening an interest in the minds of the uninstructed in the astronomy and the history of it, which was sometimes very ludicrous and fanciful.” Once again, the supposed Star of Bethlehem was merely Venus, this time appearing in the evening sky.

Venus is also famous for spawning UFO reports, due to its extreme brightness, location within 45 degrees of the horizon, and because for those unlikely to get up before dawn it spends many months at a time out of sight and thus out of mind (Powell 2013). Most recently, the intense media attention paid to the close conjunction of Venus and Jupiter somehow missed nearly 100 individuals who called a local television station newsroom in Milwaukee, alarmed at the two bright lights they saw in the Western sky (Carson 2023). An editorial article in the December 1887 issue of the august British science journal *Nature* (probably penned by Norman Lockyer) bemoaned the fact that Venus’ attainment of its usual maximum brightness in the predawn sky

has given rise to a flood of superstitious fears in this country…. In spite of School Boards and all the present stock-in-trade of elementary education, perhaps partly because that elementary education deals so little with natural science… the planet Venus, one
of the most stable and the most brilliant member of the solar system, is being regarded as a second appearance of the star of Bethlehem! This being the idea which ignorance has conjured up, superstition next comes to bear her part, and hence very naturally all sorts of woe and desolations, the end of this world being naturally included among them, have been predicted, and in some places a considerable amount of alarm has really arisen. Nor is this all: thousands of people who ought to be able to look up pocket-books and almanacs for themselves have been for the last month pestering everybody who is known to possess a telescope for information on the subject. We think it, therefore, worthwhile to refer to this subject, for we have in this ignorant fright an additional reason, which it may be worthwhile to dwell upon, why the young population of a country like England should not be allowed to group up without some knowledge, however slight, of the natural phenomena which are always being unfolded around them – phenomena which will always delight, instruct, and interest them if understood, but which will be apt to cause alarm so long as they are shrouded in mystery. (Lockyer 1887, 169)

While Lockyer’s gripes concerning the apparently abysmal level of scientific literacy of the general public invokes a sense of déjà vu in the mind of this 21st century astronomer, it is more important to note that the article elicited three published letters to the editor in a subsequent issue, including one exasperated writer who shared a May 21, 1887 letter from a woman inquiring “Will you kindly tell me what people mean about ‘a wonderful star’? All our servants are talking about it…. Some call it ‘the star of Bethlehem’…. I hear it is ‘wonderfully bright!” (Pengelly 1888, 221; emphasis original).

An additional widespread identification of Venus with the Star occurred in 1888, when the December 22 edition of the New York Evangelist erroneously informed its readers that

The ‘Star of Bethlehem,’ so called from its being coincident with the beginning of the Christian era, is at present visible any clear morning from about half past four. Its brilliancy far exceeds that of any other star. Its last appearance was several hundred years ago, and it will rapidly recede from the earth, not to be visible again for 340 years. Its light is so powerful that even after the sun has passed the horizon it can be seen. Look to the east. (qtd. in Payne 1888, 91)
Public confusion of Venus with the Star of Bethlehem persisted during the decades during which Tolkien was being educated himself and during his writing of the legendarium. Edward Maunder noted in his 1908 description of the Star that due to the “extraordinary brilliance” of Venus at some points in its orbit, “when she was seen as a morning star in the east, some hazy recollection of the legend just noticed caused a number of people to hail her as none other than the star of Bethlehem at its predicted return” (Maunder 1908, 397-8). Writing in 1937, Robert Richardson offers that “Perhaps Venus deserves special consideration” in searching for astronomical explanations for the Star due to its brilliance. Indeed,

On appearances alone, Venus would make a fine Star of Bethlehem, if it were not for the unfortunate fact that she is never in the right part of the sky at the right time. Presumably the Wise Men saw the star rising in the east in the evening and followed it all night. Venus can be in the east before sunrise, but in that case they would have had to start early in the morning and could only have traveled a few hours at most. Hence the planet Venus, although closely resembling our Christmas card conception of the Star of Bethlehem, must be ruled out at the very start. (Richardson 1937, 55-6)

Again, note the discussion of Venus being in the wrong part of the sky relative to the sun and the short duration it can be seen in the sky each night, in contrast with the requirements of the Biblical story (if one takes a literal interpretation). This aligns well with our previously mentioned difficulties with the apparent behavior of Eärendil at the sailing west to Númenor described in the Akallabêth.

But let us rewind a moment, to the Evangelist article from 1888. Note that there is a reference to the Star only being visible every few hundred years or so, which clearly does not describe the apparent celestial motions of Venus. Instead, this mixed metaphor refers to another popular astronomical error that became attached to public discourse concerning the Star in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Kepler’s supernova was not the first to be seen by a famous pre-telescopic astronomer in Europe. In 1572 Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe observed a different supernova, this one in the constellation Cassiopeia. It also rivalled Venus at its brightest and, since it was circumpolar from northern latitudes such as Denmark and England (meaning it lay near the North Star in the sky and never set) it would have been visible all night long, adding to its wonderful appearance. The confusion occurred several centuries later, when astronomical records from the Far East as well as medieval Europe were scoured for observations of other potential supernova, and it was incorrectly proposed that Tycho’s Star had erupted around 1265 and 952, meaning it was a periodic outburst with a period of around 315-6 years. Working backwards it was suggested that the star was first
seen at the birth of Jesus. As Maunder (1908, 397) reported, there was a common belief that Tycho’s Star was “the star that announced the birth of our Lord, and that it would reappear towards the end of the nineteenth century to announce His second coming.” Since Maunder was writing several years after the anticipated year, one might expect the belief to die out. But as American astronomer and popularizer of astronomy Garrett Serviss wrote in his Curiosities of the Sky (1909), the “romantic reputation” of Tycho’s star as the Biblical star “persistently survives, and no astronomer is free from eager questions about it addressed by people whose imagination has been excited by the legend. It is only necessary to say that the supposition of a connection between the phenomenon of the Magi and Tycho’s star is without any scientific foundation” (Serviss 1909, 70; 73). Maunder (1908, 398) agrees that “There is no reason to suppose that the star of 1572 had ever appeared before that date, or will ever appear again,” but furthermore notes that it could not be the Star because as a circumpolar object “the wise men, when they set out from Jerusalem to Bethlehem must have had Cassiopeia and all her stars behind them.”

As astronomically incorrect as Venus and a supernova rivalling Venus are as explanations for the Star, they are consistently the most common in the minds of the general public – and artists. The Star has often been depicted as a single brilliant object in the sky in many artistic representations. Examples include the Adoration of the Magi (Gentile de Fabriano, 1423) which shows the star above Joseph’s head, and numerous medieval manuscripts that depict the Magi following a brilliant star in the sky.

Close-up of Adoration of the Magi (Gentile de Fabriano, 1423). Public domain, adapted from Wikimedia Commons image.
Close-up of an image from the Saint-Sever Beatus (11th century). Public domain, adapted from a Wikimedia Commons image.

Close-up of a 12th century Spanish Beatus manuscript. Public domain, adapted from a Wikimedia Commons image.
The British movie poster for the 1912 American silent film *The Star of Bethlehem* (directed by Lawrence Marston) also highlights this popular public image.

![British movie poster for *The Star of Bethlehem* (1912). Public domain, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.](image)

In 1886, John Prideaux Lightfoot, Rector of Exeter College in Oxford, commissioned the creation of a tapestry by the famed William Morris and Company on the subject of the wise men’s adoration of Jesus. The design was done by Edward Burne-Jones, Morris and Burne-Jones both being Honorary Fellows of Oxford. The tapestry, *The Adoration of the Magi*, was so well received that an additional nine versions were created, including for Eton College Chapel and St. Andrew’s Church at Roker (MacCarthy 2012, 389). Meanwhile, Burne-Jones was commissioned by the Corporation of Birmingham to paint a large work for the new municipal Museum and Art Gallery; the water colour version of the tapestry artwork, named *The Star of Bethlehem*, was first shown in 1891 (MacCarthy 2012, 390). In both versions an angel holds the star in their hands and is seen hovering a few feet above the ground next to the mother and child as the Magi offer their gifts. The personal handling of the star as if it was a precious gem parallels Tolkien’s later vision of the silmaril borne by Eärendil as a heavenly light. Tolkien would have been exposed to the painting as a resident of Birmingham, and the tapestry as a student at Exeter.
Adoration of the Magi, tapestry by William Morris & Co., 1900-02 (Merton Abbey, Surrey). Note the jewel-like star in the angel’s hand. Nearly identical to the Exeter version. Public domain, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Star of Bethlehem, watercolor by Edward Burne-Jones, 1890 (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery). Public domain, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The painting became extremely famous and influential. Cultural historian Fiona MacCarthy (2012, 390) noted that Burne-Jones’ image of the nativity “found
its place in the spiritual experience of the nation, an object of pilgrimage and soon to be the subject of a thousand Christmas cards. While Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World* was unarguably the most famous of nineteenth-century religious images, Burne-Jones’s *Adoration of the Magi* had, and still has, its following as well.”

It is therefore no wonder that celestial images of a single brilliant star in the heavens appear among Tolkien’s artwork. Examples include “Lunar Landscape” (1925), an illustration for *Roverandom* (Hammond and Scull 2000, 78), and “Beyond” (1914) (Tolkien Estate). It is interesting that the latter was composed while Tolkien was on Christmas vacation visiting Edith, because Tolkien later utilized the image of a single star in his Christmas-related illustrations that accompanied the Father Christmas letters drawn for his children. For example, the postage stamp for 1920 shows a white “tower” (the literal North Pole) with a crescent moon and single five-pointed star on either side (*FC* 13). In a similar picture included in the 1925 letter the five-pointed star is seen very low in the sky, beneath the crescent moon (*FC* 29). The stamp for that year also depicts the pole with a sun low in the sky, star, and crescent moon (facing in the wrong direction) (*FC* 30). The inclusion of the sun (which happens in a number of other letters) is interesting, as he correctly notes in later letters that they don’t see the sun for several months at the pole around Christmas time (i.e., the winter solstice) (*FC* 42; 200). The envelope for the lengthy 1927 letter features a single five-pointed star in the upper left corner, while an illustration shows the comet and Big Dipper mentioned in the letter itself in addition to a more brilliant five-pointed star in the upper right corner (*FC* 45). The stamp for 1933 again shows the North Pole with a single brilliant five-pointed star in the upper right corner (*FC* 115). Interestingly, the star is not mentioned in the letters themselves. The message appears to be that the star needs no explanation but is rather an expectation for a night scene near Christmas.

**The Evolution of Eärendil the Evening Star in the Legendarium**

But the most famous Tolkienian image of a brilliant single star in the sky appears in poetry rather than paint, a series of early poems featuring the aforementioned mariner Eärendil, originally an independent character who first appeared in the 1914 poem *Élal Éarendel Engla Beorhtast* ‘The Voyage of Eärendel’ but was quickly grandfathered into the nascent legendarium (*Letters* 385). John Garth (2020, 191) connected the poem’s writing with an August 1914 trip to Cornwall’s Lizard Peninsula. Confirming that Venus had been visible as the Evening Star at that time and that the weather had been clear on at least several nights, Garth additionally used a desktop planetarium software

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5 The spelling of the character’s name changed over time. I will consistently use the later spelling, Eärendil, unless using direct quotations that use earlier versions.
to confirm that the planet was setting due west at that time, something that is not strictly universally true. In an email exchange I verified for him that at the latitude of Cornwall Venus can only set exactly due west at specific times of the year, in bands of several weeks at a time, including August (Larsen 2019). In the early Eärendil poems there is no particular direction to Eärendil’s journeys, which are called “errantry” (Garth 2003, 46; LT II 269), “circuitous, lingering, restlessly daring” (LT II 270), and vaguely “beyond the West” (LT II 276). In “The Nameless Land” (1924), inspired by his reading Pearl “for examination purposes” (LR 98), Eärendil is termed a “wayward star” (LR 100). In the earliest versions of the Silmarillion texts the only focus his journeys have is to search for his father, Tuor, after the older man succumbs to the call of the sea and leaves his family late in life.

This “wayward” nature of Eärendil is echoed by a general lack of a greater purpose surrounding him in the early mythology. For example, in “The Fall of Gondolin” (LT II 155) Ulmo explains to Tuor that “a child shall come of thee than whom no man shall know more of the uttermost deeps, be it of the sea or of the firmament of heaven.” Note that there is no reference to Eärendil as a sign of hope, but rather only as an accomplished mariner (sailing the seas and the heavens). Compare this to the corresponding scene in “Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin” (circa 1951) in which Ulmo explains that one of his reasons for sending Tuor to Gondolin is to “bring into the world a hope beyond thy sight, and a light that shall pierce the darkness” (UT 30). A major step in this transition is reuniting Eärendil with his wife, Elwing, and the silmaril she saves from the sacking of Sirion by the sons of Fëanor. This major plot point enters the legendarium in the QS II text (circa 1930). It is in this version that we read for the first time how Eärendil is greeted by Fionwë, son of Manwë and Varda, upon landing on the shores of the Blessed Lands as a “star most radiant, messenger most fair! Hail thou bearer of light before the Sun and Moon, the looked-for that comest unawares, the longed-for that comest beyond hope! Hail thou splendour of the children of the world, thou slayer of the dark! Star of sunset hail! Hail herald of the morn!” (Shaping 154). This speech is largely retained as is through to the published Silmarillion, except for the shift of the speaker from Fionwë, son of Manwë, to Eonwë, his herald, after the deletion of the concept of the children of the Valar (Burns 2004, 175-6).

Note Eärendil’s important assumption of the role of messenger and herald, echoing both Tolkien’s interpretation of the name as described in his 1967 letter draft and a central responsibility of the Star. Like the Star, Eärendil is a sign of hope for the world. Indeed, upon the first rising of Eärendil’s silmaril-bearing ship into the heavens “the folk of earth beheld it from afar and wondered, and looked up from despair, saying surely a Silmaril is in the sky, a new star is risen in the West….

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6 For a detailed discussion of how the fate of Eärendil and Elwing as a couple evolved over the legendarium, see Larsen (2022).
Thus hope arose and a promise of betterment” (Shaping 154-5). This image persists as well, with a slight modification of the language: “the folk of earth beheld it from afar and wondered, and they took it for a sign of hope…. Then the Elves looked up, and despaired no longer” (LR 328). While the importance of Eärendil’s general role in uplifting the hearts of Middle-earth is certainly not to be underestimated, Tolkien (and through his pen the Valar) tasked the mariner with one very specific miraculous-seeming mission: acting as the Star of Bethlehem to the wise Edain, guiding them not across the desert to a manger and the promise of a king but rather across the sea to a promised star-shaped island kingdom, Númenor.

The Númenor Connection

As in the case of Eärendil’s role as a beacon of hope, there is an intentional evolution in this responsibility as a heavenly roadsign. In the original three versions of the “Fall of Númenor” (published in The Lost Road) there is no mention of the star of Eärendil in relation to the island’s initial habitation. The next iteration of the legend, “The Drowning of Anadûnê,” is a curious Mannish retelling of the Silmarillion mythology that Christopher Tolkien called “closely associated with Part Two of The Notion Club Papers” circa 1946 (Sauron 340; 147). Here the Elves, Maiar, and Valar are generally aggregated in the “Eru-bēnī, servants of God” (Sauron 341). As in the main legendarium, humans largely fall under the sway of the evil Melkor (here called Mēlekō); some, the Eruhil, later repent, and drive Mēlekō into hiding. The Eru-bēnī withdraw west, “seeking the realm of Manawē,” (Sauron 342) leaving the humans to fight amongst themselves. Earendil the Seafriend builds a mighty ship and sails seeking Manawē’s aid. While Manawē is prohibited from directly interfering, he gives the Eruhil an island and sets Earendil’s ship into the sky “filled with silver flame” (Sauron 343). Back home, the Eruhil behold the celestial beacon and “knew that it was the sign of Earendil. And hope and courage as born in their hearts; and they gathered their ships, small and great, and all their goods, and set sail upon the deep waters, following the star” to the island of Númenorē (Sauron 343). In a second version the tale adds in the description of the celestial ship that “So bright was Rōthinzil that even at morning men could see it glimmering in the West, and in the cloudless night it shone alone, for no other star might come beside it” (Sauron 360). Note the alignment with the standard popular view of the Star of Bethlehem as a brilliant celestial signpost that outshines any normal star (i.e., Venus or a Venus-rivalling supernova).

The third and final version of the Númenor legend, the Akallabêth, dates to the post LOTR era (Peoples 140), and was largely published as finally composed in The Silmarillion. Much of it closely follows “The Drowning of Anadûnê” (although giving up much of the Mannish revision of the mythology in favor of a “Mixed Dúnedain” or “mixture of Elvish and Númenórean tradition” [Sauron 406-7]). The
persistence of the phrasing “following the Star” (Peoples 144; capitalization original) is interesting, as is the subtle suggestion that the “Star” was standing over the island, similar to the description of the Star in the Gospel of Matthew. If this is the case, then we see here Venus more than meeting the public’s expectations of their personal interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem, the ultimate sign of hope and heavenly intervention.

**Seeking Astronomical Conclusions and Authoritative Answers**

Maunder concludes his analysis of the Star by admitting that the Biblical “narrative appears to me astronomically too incomplete for any astronomical conclusions to be drawn from it. The reticence of the narrative on all points, except those directly relating to our Lord Himself, is an illustration of the truth that the Scriptures were not written to instruct us in astronomy, or in any of the physical sciences” (Maunder 1908, 400). Similarly, Michael Martinez muses on his Middle-earth Blog whether “Eärendil have been the Star of Bethlehem,” offering

Yes. No. Whatever you wish, I suppose… I cannot provide you with an authoritative answer. While there are many theories about what the star may have been, modern scholars can’t even agree on how the story about the wise men and the star was told…. I’ve read so many theories I can’t keep them all straight. But I don’t think Tolkien meant for Eärendil to be the Star of Bethlehem. That was an event that came long after the First Age. (Martinez n.d.)

Martinez ends on a particularly important point. In his 1967 letter draft Tolkien offers that the “use of éarendel in A-S Christian symbolism as the herald of the rise of the true Sun in Christ is completely alien to my use. The Fall of Man is in the past and off stage; the redemption of Man in the far future” (Letters 387). Of course, he also famously said “I do not like allegory” (Letters 297), although he did not shy away from using it when it suited his purpose. To be fair, perhaps here we more correctly have a case of “applicability” (to use another of Tolkien’s terms) because, as he noted in the same letter, “long narratives cannot be made out of nothing” (Letters 298). Indeed, perhaps what we observe in the parallels between post-1930 Eärendil and the image of the Star of Bethlehem in the public imagination are examples of what Tolkien called rearranging the “primary matter in secondary patterns,” patterns that are simultaneously familiar and fresh. Like Sam’s star in Mordor, these patterns resonate deeply with the reader, whether or not we were consciously intended by the author to associate them in a one-to-one correspondence, or whether or not they align with scientific reality.
References


