The Star of Bethlehem

Notes of a Fringe-Watcher

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Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. . . . and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, the rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

Matthew 2: 1-2, 9-10

As Christmas approaches, Protestant and Catholic churches will be celebrating the birth of Jesus, with many references in sermons and Sunday schools to the Star of Bethlehem. The nation's some hundred planetariums will be devoting Christmas programs to possible natural causes of the Star. According to the book of Matthew, the only gospel to give an account of the Star, the wise men from the east (their number is not given, but tradition makes it three) were guided westward by the Star to the stable where the newborn Jesus lay in a manger.

Saint Augustine and other early Catholic theologians took for granted that the Star was one of God's miracles, placed in the heavens to lead the wise men to Bethlehem. When Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo ushered in the rise of empirical science, it became fashionable for Christian scholars to seek natural causes for events which the Bible clearly describes as supernatural.

One of the most popular and longest lasting of natural explanations of the Star was put forth by Kepler. He suggested in a 1606 tract that the Star was actually a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that occurred in 7 B.C. in the constellation of Pisces the Fish. He was not the first to suggest this; the conjecture can be found in English church annals as far back as 1285, but Kepler was the first to argue the possibility at length. The constellation's name was a happy coincidence because a fish had long been, as still is today, a symbol of the Christian church and its believers.

Scholars now agree that Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 8 B.C. Matthew dates the birth as in the “days of Herod.” Herod is known to have died early in 4 B.C. so Jesus must have been born before then. The exact year is, of course, unknown, though it could well have been at the time of the 7 B.C. Jupiter-Saturn conjunction.

Kepler later had doubts about his conjecture. As astronomer Roy K. Marshall points out in his booklet The Star of Bethlehem (published in 1949 by the Morehead Planetarium, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Jupiter and Saturn, throughout the period of their proximity, were never closer together than two diameters of the Moon as it appears in the sky. In 1846 British astronomer Charles Pritchard did some careful research on the event. Because of the erratic looping paths of the two planets, as seen from Earth, there were three separate close encounters. Astronomers call it a "triple conjunction."

The two giant planets were closest on May 29, October 1, and December 5. “Even with . . . the strange postulate of someone with weak eyes,” Pritchard wrote, “the planets could not have appeared as one star.” Marshall adds: “Only an abysmally weak pair of eyes could have ever merged them.”

There are other objections to Kepler’s guess. A much closer meeting of the same two planets occurred in 66 B.C. As Arthur C. Clarke says in his entertaining essay “The Star of Bethlehem” (Chapter 4 in his collection of essays Report on Planet Three, 1972), this event “should have brought a delegation of wise men to Bethlehem sixty years too soon!”
Each of the three conjunctions of 7 B.C. lasted only a few days, whereas Matthew has the Star guiding the wise men throughout a journey that must have taken at least several weeks. Finally, the two planets would rise and set like ordinary stars, planets, and the Sun and Moon, but Matthew describes the Star as lingering in the sky as it glided slowly toward Bethlehem. Kepler eventually decided the Star was created by God between Jupiter and Saturn when they were close together.

Kepler's original conjecture became popular among nineteenth-century Christians, especially in Germany where the so-called “higher criticism” of the Bible favored natural causes for Biblical miracles. The 7 B.C. theory was also defended in endless popular biographies of Jesus published in Christian countries. In England the Anglican cleric Frederic W. Farrar, in his Life of Christ (1874), devotes several pages to a scholarly discussion of the 7 B.C. conjunction. Samuel J. Andrews, in The Life of Our Lord Upon the Earth (1891), an American work, also takes Kepler's theory seriously.

In recent years the 7 B.C. conjecture has been revived in the lengthy life of Jesus section that makes up the final third of the massive Urantia Book (1955). This bible of the Urantia movement purports to have been written entirely by supermortals who channeled the text through members of the movement to give to Urantia, the cult's name for Earth, a new revelation destined to supersede Christianity. On page 1352 of the Urantia Book we learn that the Jupiter-Saturn encounter of May 29, 7 B.C., gave the appearance of a single star, which we know it didn't, and this accounts for what the supermortals call the “beautiful legend” that grew up about the “Star.” The supermortals, or “unseen friends” as Urantians like to call them, reveal that Jesus was born at noon, August 21, 7 B.C. It is a date celebrated annually by Urantians. (For more on the bizarre Urantia movement see my book Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery, recently reprinted in paperback by Prometheus Books.)

Other planetary conjunctions in later years have been considered as possible explanations of the Star. For example, a spectacular merging of Jupiter and Venus took place on June 17, 2 B.C. The disks of the two planets actually overlapped! This candidate for the Star is defended by James De Young and James Hilton in "Star of Bethlehem" (Sky and Telescope, April 1973), and again by Roger Sinnott in "Computing the Star of Bethlehem" (Sky and Telescope, December 1986). Jupiter and Venus were last that close in 1818, and won't be again until 2065.

Still another contender for the Star is a supernova explosion that occurred in the spring of 5 B.C. in the constellation of Capricorn. You'll find this argued by British astronomer David H. Clark and two associates in The Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society (December 1977). Other speculations, too absurd to consider, have hung the Star on Venus, comets, exploding meteors, and even ball lightning.

Immanuel Velikovsky, an orthodox Jew, struggled to invent natural causes for Old Testament miracles. He was not, of course, interested in doing the same thing for the New Testament miracles. He even proposed a natural explanation of how Joshua made the Sun and Moon stop moving: It was really Earth that ceased rotating. This was caused by a mammoth comet that erupted from Jupiter, and passed close to Earth before it settled down to become Venus! Some of today's far-out New Agers who believe in the reality of PK (psychokinesis) regard Jesus as a great psychic who used natural psi powers to walk on water, multiply loaves and fish, turn water into wine, and perform other stupendous feats of magic.

Ellen Gould White, prophetess and one of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism, had a much simpler, and more sensible, approach to the Bible’s great miracles. She took them to be miracles. In The Desire of Ages, her book on the life of Jesus, she explains the Star as follows:

The wise men had seen a mysterious light in the heavens upon that night when the glory of God flooded the hills of Bethlehem. As the light faded, a luminous star appeared, and lingered in the sky. It was not a fixed star nor a planet. . . .
That star was a distant company of shining angels. . . .

The association of the Star with angels goes back to the early Church fathers. Longfellow, in the third section of his miracle-play "The Nativity" (it is part of his book Christus: A Mystery), toys with the notion that the Star was held in the sky by angels. There were seven: angels of the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Here is Longfellow's opening stanza:

The Angels of the Planets Seven,
Across the shining fields of heaven
The natal star we bring!
Dropping our sevenfold virtues down
As priceless jewels in the crown
Of Christ, our new-born King.
What is my opinion about all this? I find it hard to comprehend why conservative and fundamentalist Christians, who believe the Bible’s miracles to be actual events, would even try to find natural explanations for what the Bible clearly describes as divine supernatural phenomena. The Jehovah of the Scriptures has awesome powers to suspend natural laws and do whatever He wants. Why trouble to look for natural causes of the great downpour by which God drowned every man, woman, and child on Earth, as well as their pets, except for one undistinguished family and the few animals they took on their Ark? I once asked a Seventh-day Adventist why God would be so cruel as to murder all the innocent little babies. He replied that God foresaw how wicked they would become if allowed to grow up!

In my not-so-humble opinion, the story of the Star is pure myth, similar to many ancient legends about the miraculous appearance of a star to herald a great event, such as the birth of Caesar, Pythagoras, Krishna (the Hindu savior), and other famous persons and deities. Aeneas is said to have been guided by a star as he traveled westward from Troy to the spot where he founded Rome. (I was unable to find a reference to this in Virgil’s Aenead, and would be grateful to any reader who can locate the reference for me.) The legend about the Star of Bethlehem is believed by many scholars to have arisen to fulfill a prophecy in Numbers 24:17, “I shall see him [God], but not now. I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.”

Although I do not think the Star of Bethlehem ever existed, or was an illusion caused by a natural astronomical event, I find Mrs. White’s statement more to be admired than the futile efforts of liberal Christians to banish from the Bible all references to God’s miraculous powers. I find this almost as degrading as the efforts of ultra-feminist Christian leaders to expunge from Scripture every sentence in which God is called “Father” (or given any other masculine term), and Jesus is called “Son.” The practice strikes me as even more ridiculous than trying to change “nigger” in such classic novels as Huckleberry Finn, and Joseph Conrad’s Nigger of the Narcissus, to “African American.”

Let the Bible be the Bible! It’s not about science. It’s not accurate history. It is a grab bag of religious fantasies written by many authors. Some of its myths, like the Star of Bethlehem, are very beautiful. Others are dull and ugly. Some express lofty ideals, such as the parables of Jesus. Others are morally disgusting. I think of the tragic legend about the rash vow of Jephtha that prompted him to sacrifice his daughter. (Why does St. Paul speak of Jephtha as a man of great faith?) Or the account of how an angry Jehovah slew Moses’ two nephews with lightning bolts merely because they failed to mix the incense properly for a sacrifice. God didn’t like the way the smoke smelled! The Old Testament’s God is as skillful as Zeus at using lightning as a weapon of punishment.

The King James Bible is itself a near-miracle, its poetic style far more beautiful and moving than any modern translation in English or any other language. It is also an improvement over the frequently crude writing by the old Hebrew and Greek authors. The King James Bible is a literary masterpiece best left unaltered. It is a classic to put on a shelf alongside the great fantasies of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and yes, even the Koran.

Note

1. Matthew’s account of the visiting magi is retold in greater detail in the apocryphal Book of James, a Greek manuscript of the second century. Legend has it that it was written by a half brother of Jesus. According to Origen, he was one of Joseph’s sons by a former marriage. Chapter 15, verse 7, describes the Star as so huge and bright that it rendered all the other stars invisible.

Addendum

From Reader Robert Reno:

It is important to debunk pseudoscience, but so is being factually accurate, fair, and honest to context when quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing to assure the original meaning is not distorted in any way by adding or subtracting from it. Gardner’s statement (see paragraph 10) above implies that the Urantia Book claims “the Jupiter-Saturn encounter of May 29, 7 B.C., gave the appearance of a single star.” This is false and a distortion of the actual paragraph’s meaning.

The actual complete paragraph in the Urantia Book states:

“These wise men saw no star to guide them to Bethlehem. The beautiful legend of the star of Bethlehem originated in this way: Jesus was born August 21 at noon, 7 B.C. On May 29, 7 B.C., there occurred an extraordinary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. And it is a remarkable
astronomic fact that similar conjunctions occurred on September 29 and December 5 of the same year. Upon the basis of these extraordinary but wholly natural events the well-meaning zealots of the succeeding generation constructed the appealing legend of the star of Bethlehem and the adoring Magi led thereby to the manger, where they beheld and worshiped the newborn babe. Oriental and near-Oriental minds delight in fairy stories, and they are continually spinning such beautiful myths about the lives of their religious leaders and political heroes. In the absence of printing, when most human knowledge was passed by word of mouth from one generation to another, it was very easy for myths to become traditions and for traditions eventually to become accepted as facts.” (Urantia Book 1352)

The first sentence in the paragraph states clearly “These wise men saw no star to guide them to Bethlehem.” Nowhere in the paragraph in question is it stated that the Jupiter-Saturn encounter gave the appearance of a single star. I searched the online version of the Urantia Book and could find no statement that the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction “gave the appearance of a single star.” This appears to indicate that Gardner has misquoted the Urantia Book by adding information that was not in the original source and omitting information, the first sentence of the paragraph in question, which contradicts his own fallacious statement. Gardner then goes on to use his own false statement as a basis upon which to criticize the Urantia Book, by stating “which we know it didn’t.” I fail to see how this erroneous quotation, which falls short of even minimal accuracy and fairness, furthers the cause of good science.

Martin Gardner Responds:

The writer is correct. The Urantia Book does not state that the conjunction gave the appearance of a single star. However, it was widely believed by Christian scholars, especially in Germany, that the conjunction appeared as the Star of bethlehem. See pages 206-208 of my Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery (Prometheus Books) for a full discussion of this misconception.

Martin Gardner

Martin Gardner is author of more than seventy books, most recently The Jinn from Hyperspace and When You Were a Tadpole and I was a Fish, and Other Speculations About This and That.