

Star of Bethlehem

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has an inevitable hitch: "as far as we know from the Bible, the only people who took special note of the Star of Bethlehem were the Wise Men," in reality Zoroastrian priests who may have been astrologers.

The planetarium story solves this problem handily. "The Zoroastrian priests likely were aware that a prophecy had been proclaimed of the coming of a King to the Hebrews, a Messiah, a Saviour, and they might have patiently watched the constellation Pisces, the fish, for a celestial sign of His coming," it continues. "To the Wise Men, Pisces represented the House of the Hebrews, and anything that took place in this region of the sky they interpreted to be of special significance to the Israelites, who knew nothing of these beliefs."



In the summer of 7 B.C., Saturn and Jupiter passed side by side in what astronomers now refer to as a conjunction. These planets, whose generic name comes from the Greek word for "wanderer," may actually have appeared to the people of Christ's time to be wandering stars. To the Magi, watching eagerly for just such a miraculous event, this conjunction and a second one that occurred a few months later quite possibly inspired visions of "two of the mightiest Gods coming together for a conference in the house of the Hebrews."

A third such phenomenon was observed in the winter of 7 B.C., a triple conjunction that the Magi must have regarded as a magical event, although we know today that triple conjunctions occur every 175 years. Just at sunset, in early 6 B.C., the planet Mars joined Jupiter and Saturn, according to the 1978 script. "Faithful watchers of the sky that they were, the Zoroastrian priests would have certainly been aware of the great significance and rarity of this planetary grouping, which we now know happens only once every 800 years. This 'star' might indeed have led them on their long journey westward to Bethlehem, following a route

from Persia to the point where Jesus was born."

Although scriptures cite the Magi as having "seen His star in the east," which seems to contradict the appearance of a triple conjunction in the western part of the sky, contemporary biblical scholars theorize that "east" refers not to the direction of the star in the sky, but rather to the point of origin of the Wise Men's journey.

The 1978 script concludes with a lyrical passage that very definitely ties scientific speculation into religious faith:

And so we've built a case for the star actually being a rare conjunction of planets. We cannot discount completely a meteor or a comet — or even the appearance of a nova. But we merely offer these, including the conjunction, as scientific possibilities to explain what might have been seen. Another possibility must, of course, be added to the list, and that is that the star might indeed have been a Miracle; that which cannot ever be explained in purely scientific terms. But this is for you to decide, for the real beauty of the Star of Bethlehem is that it has as many profound meanings as there are people who will take a moment to wonder.

Whatever the star was, it is symbolic of an event that changed the lives of people the world over, for centuries without end.

Since 1981, "Planetarian," the Journal of the International Planetarium Society, has published two articles on the topic of common errors in "Star of Bethlehem" planetarium shows. Discrepancies in the dating of biblical events, ambiguous definitions of terms, and astronomical inaccuracies top the list of disheartening fallacies, leading planetarium astronomers to conclude that a new show must be produced that takes such findings into consideration.



"Biblical scholars still disagree about what the star might have been, and scientists haven't found any definitive answer," says Fran Biddy. "But it is an interesting process."

As to the question of whether people of faith might find the entire debate superfluous, Biddy reports that he hasn't experienced any overt anti-scientific reaction among

religious people who have come to the planetarium over the years to see the show. "I don't find any great dichotomy between science and religion," he concludes. "You'll find religious scientists and 'scientific religionists.'"



Professor H.S. Williams once opined, in an essay entitled "The Scientific Study of Religion" (reprinted from "Century" in the 1892 Christmas edition of the old Catholic Journal) that "science exercises and develops functions which are not essentially antagonistic to religion, but they are not the functions of religion, and if they be given

um's Christmas offering to the community. The two approaches, in this case, don't appear to be mutually exclusive.

Hope — like newborn lambs or children — springs eternal in this season of peace on earth. Perhaps in the constellation of Pisces, in the House of the Hebrews, there is sufficient room for both points of view. The rekindled debate, in any event, may ensure that the Star of Bethlehem burns brighter still in our own time, and for many millennia to come.



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

J.H. Hopkins, 1857
'We Three Kings of Orient Are'

first place in our interest, religious growth must deteriorate in proportion to its neglect ... Scientific study, though extremely fascinating, though it fills us with exalted notions of the complexity of the universe and of the wonderful harmony of its correlations, leads us to no hope. We find it only stern, relentless law; it has no feeling and its end is certain death."

The good professor's assessment seems a trifle judgmental, in light of the truly heartening spirit of open scientific/religious exchange that characterizes the planetari-

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