

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

71 Was the Christmas Star for Real?

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-10; Isaiah 60:3

Within the last two weeks (December 15, 1977) a colloquium took place at New York University having to do with the presentation of a new view on the subject of the ancient star of Bethlehem. Dr. David H. Clark of the Royal Greenwich Observatory in Herstmonceaux, England, explained that he felt the star was a result of a stellar flare-up recorded in Chinese annals and which took place about the time Jesus was born. It is interesting that man has not outgrown his interest in this signal from heaven which witnessed the birth of Christ. Several observations can be made concerning the matter.

I. STARS HAVE LONG INTRIGUED MANKIND:

The wise men who came investigating the appearance of a king were a class of royal scholars, doubtless from Persia. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences. Whether they were three in number or more in their entourage is not important. We can assume they were familiar with the Old Testament by virtue of the fact that Daniel served as prime minister of Persia under Darius and Cyrus. (Daniel 6:1-3, 28) This same 'Daniel prophesied that the Messiah would emerge in Jerusalem as Prince 483 years after the Persian emperor Artaxerxes would command the Jews returning from captivity to rebuild the city and its walls. (Daniel 9:25-26; Nehemiah 2:7-8) This decree was given about 446 B.C. and to these years would have been added the age of Messiah.

They would also have been familiar with Balaam's prophecy. (Numbers 24:17). Messiah would be announced by a "star" which would come "out of Jacob." These men were well schooled in astronomy and astrology. Paganism the world over, in Babylonia, Egypt, India, Greece and Persia was marked by worship of the sun, moon, planets and stars. Various mythological figures were associated with stellar constellations. (Job 9:8-10, 35:31-33; Amos 5:8) The ancients are not to be thought naive in assigning personality to inanimate objects. They felt they were worshiping real powers, the true "host of heaven." (II Kings 17:16; II Chronicles 18:18; Ephesians 6:12; I Corinthians 10:19-21) Stars thus were to them the realities behind their idols. These angelic "stars of heaven" followed

the “*day star*” (Lucifer) in his primeval opposition to God. (Revelation 12:3-8; Isaiah 14:12-15) The study of the stars has long been associated with paganism, pantheism, and the worship of the creator rather than the Creator. (Romans 1:25) Christians are warned against this practice. (Isaiah 8:19-20, 47:12-15)

II. THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM MAY HAVE BEEN A FLARE-UP OR NOVA:

Skeptics have dismissed the star as a myth and others have felt that it goes beyond scientific description as a miracle of God. Other people have taken a middle position and sought to find some astronomical and historical explanation. Perhaps the most unusual of these comes from the Russian, V. Zaitsev who feels the star was in reality no star at all. It was a spaceship from an advanced civilization carrying the cosmonaut Jesus to planet earth. We needn't spend much time with that suggestion, but there are three reasonable suggestions worth considering.

1. Close Passage or Planetary Conjunction:

The Annals of the Abbey Of Worcester for 1285 record that in that year Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction, “which has not happened since the Incarnation.” In the early seventeenth century Johannes Kepler computed that for ten months in 7 B.C., Jupiter and Saturn traveled very close to one another, and that in May, September, and December conjoined in the night sky. It was also felt that in February of 6 B.C. Mars joined the configuration. A year ago Dr. David W. Hughes of the physics department at the University of Sheffield in England restated the conjunction of 7 B.C. “It was a triple conjunction, not one involving three planets, but a sequence in which one planet passes the other, is overtaken, and then passes again, leading to three close encounters.”

2. The Comet Theory:

The Gospel of Matthew in describing the heavenly or celestial event uses the Greek word “*aster*” for star. The word meant or described any luminous body including meteors, comets, novas or planets. It is noted that the movements of planets were followed closely in those days and a conjunction was not a cause of astonishment. Not so with the comet. The slash of the comet across a night sky was particularly noted and very often associated with important changes in government and history making events. The most exact records of such comets come to us from the Chinese. One source is the Astronomical Treatise of the History of the Former Han Dynasty. It states

that in 7B.C.a “hui-hsing” appeared in Capricorn. The word means “broom-star” or comet. Another source is John Williams (1871) authoritative list of comets drawn from Chinese sources. Comet No. 52 appeared for some 70 days in March through April of 5 B.C.

3. A Stellar Flare-Up or Nova:

A search of astronomical records by Dr. David Clark and his associates reveals another plausible event from 10 B.C. to A.D. 13. It was the appearance of a comet without a tail what has become to be called a “nova.” Novas are not new stars but stars which have a sudden increase in brilliance due to an internal explosion. Comet No. 53 on the Williams list appeared in March and April of 4 B.C. in the constellation Aquila area which is visible throughout the area traversed by the Magi. Here, then is a reasonable attempt at reconstructing that event recorded by Matthew. It can also be noted that nowhere does the Bible say the star shown continuously Thus, all three of these explanations are plausible in progress of the story.

III. TRUE FAITH RESTS UPON THE CHARACTER OF GOD AND NOT AN APPEAL TO SCIENCE:

I want to bring this study to a close by introducing a thought in the interests of Biblical faith. Mindful of the fact that there are honest intellectual doubts which a mustering of evidence may help to resolve, the faith of the true Christian resides in the moral perfection of the God who cannot lie. Those who feel a necessity to prove the truth of Scripture by an appeal to science actually prove something else beside, that is their own unbelief.

A former pastor of mine, Dr. A.W. Tozer has well written, “To dig among the rocks or search under the sea for evidence to support the Scriptures is to insult the One who wrote them. Certainly, I do not believe that this is done intentionally; but I cannot see how we can escape the conclusion that it is done nevertheless.” We can take the Christmas star as an example. If the above evidence is insufficient to convince, no belief is possible. What shall we do then with the record that claims to be Divinely authored? The fact of the matter is that faith is the gift of God to the repentant soul. It may have little to do with the five senses and the conclusions which can be drawn from them. That ancient star was a signal to those watching that God was about to fulfill in miniature His prophecy, *“The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy*

rising." (Isaiah 60:3) The star was real, conjunctions, comets and novas notwithstanding.

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