

Rev Reg Weeks

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## ‘Epiphany’ ~ Following the Star

That star has always bothered me.

As a Boy Scout I learnt to find South by triangulating the stars of the Southern Cross ( how many learnt to do that?) Later as a pilot and a sailor I became much more aware of how important were the stars in navigation, before there were satellites and GPS.

When crossing the Atlantic on the Soren Larsen I had the opportunity to learn how to use a sextant, and I’ve read of the star maps made by early Pacific Island navigators from short sticks bound together in a portable map of the significant stars that they used for long sea voyages.

All that reinforced for me that stars remain in their places, nightly traversing the night sky in predictable patterns, and have done so for eons of time. Of course the planets appear to move from place to place among the stars, but always in predictable patterns.

So what phenomenon was it that those wise men were following that gave rise to the story recorded in Matthew’s gospel?

While our Christmas cards often portray a traveling star with a beam of light shining down on the stable like some heavenly police helicopter, and while a faithful heart may believe that for such a special occasion the good Lord suspended the laws of physics to produce a ‘once only’ celestial phenomenon, even my Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, published in 1968 has this to say:

“several attempts have been made to connect the star with unusual astronomical phenomena at the time but such rationalisations of the story have now been generally abandoned” all fuelling the sceptics’ regular attempts to dismiss the whole story as a myth.

Here was a mystery I just couldn’t get my head around and the science of astronomy in the early days of my ministry seemed unable to explain it.

Then on 24 of November 2002, Diane and I were visiting Wellington and came to church that Sunday right here in St Ronan's – the preacher was Dr Jeff Tallon, a member of the congregation and one of the elders. You probably know of his ground-breaking work on super-conductors, but on this day he was sharing among other things what his investigation of the Bible, ancient historical sources, the results of modern astrophysics, and the wisdom of those venerable, wise astrologers from the East had to reveal about the Star of Bethlehem.

His summary conclusion was, and these are his words:

“To set the scene let us take the first criticism that I mentioned, namely that Christmas was founded on a pagan feast celebrating the summer solstice. If one investigates the most likely contender for the Bethlehem star<sup>1</sup> one finds that it “stood over Bethlehem” due South of Jerusalem, as stated in Matthew, reaching both its zenith and the full extent of its retrograde motion precisely on the 25<sup>th</sup> December<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, it happens that in that year the Jewish feast of Hannukah<sup>3</sup> fell also on 25<sup>th</sup> December. The date of Christmas, then, has nothing to do with a pagan feast but seems to refer to the day that the Magi visited Jesus, not in the stable. but, 15 months or so after his birth, in a house when Jesus was a toddler – just as stated in Matthew<sup>4</sup>”.

“Let it be clear then”, he said, “that I want to step beyond the figurative, mythological interpretation of the birth of Jesus and approach it as an historical event. Let us see what can be found.”

His research, as he presented it was detailed authoritative and convincing. His scientific evidence establishes that Jesus would have been born... sometime in 2 BC...and visited by the wise men ...very likely...18 months later... December 25 the first day of Hanukka that

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<sup>1</sup> see e.g. R.W. Sinnott *Sky and Telescope* December 384-386 (1968).

<sup>2</sup> I carry out these simulations using the package *Starry-Night*, Space.com

<sup>3</sup> Hanukkah commemorates the dedication of the rebuilt temple in 163 BC.

<sup>4</sup> I will speak about this in detail in a public lecture at Eastbourne on the 17<sup>th</sup> December.

year...the Jewish holiday when gifts are given...precisely when we celebrate Christmas.

He established this working backwards... from verifiable events at the time of Jesus death...all recorded independently of the Gospel accounts.

But I just want to focus on the star. Remember the Magi were not kings but wise men from Babylonia in the East. They were astrologists rather than astronomers – the scientists of their day. The way the stars and planets behaved had great significance for them.

When we look at the astrological evidence through their eyes ...through the eyes of the Magi...here's what Jeff found.

Ancient Babylonian astrological records tells us that in 3 BC Jupiter 'danced'...that means viewed from earth Jupiter appeared to go back and forth.

Modern computerised astronomy, which can now regenerate for us the night sky at any time and any place, shows us what actually happened is that Jupiter and Venus... the two brightest planets ... went into conjunction twice...once in August 3 BC and again in June... 2 BC.

What would have made these two events so fascinating to the wise men looking for astrological signs and portents...is that between those two dates when Jupiter appears to dance, precisely on the 11th of September... 3 BC...Jupiter...which was known as the King planet... moved into conjunction with Regulus...the King star...and all this occurred in the constellation of Leo...the Lion ...to astrologers...the constellation of Judah!!!

Given their understanding of what this meant, they would naturally believe the stars they actually saw, were predicting that a king would be born to the nation of Judah. And on exactly the same night, September

11... 3 BC... the planet Venus moved into the constellation of Virgo ...along with Mercury and the sun.

To the ancient Babylonian Magi, the sun in the womb of Virgo (the virgin) would have been a most powerful image.

Now just in case you're dubious about star signs, and all this...we now know from ancient Hebrew scrolls discovered at Qumran that astrology was practised by Jews and Babylonians alike. And archaeologists have discovered that the 12 signs of the zodiac were imprinted in a mosaic on the floor of the Temple in Jerusalem...one constellation... for each tribe of Israel. This was their best attempt to understand their world, the 'science' of their day, if you will, and science continues to discover new things which render old ideas outmoded.

But what about the star of Bethlehem?

Matthew's version of the story tells us that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked "where is he who is born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

After they'd listened to what Herod had to say, the Magi went on their way and the star they'd seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

The star came to rest...**over Bethlehem.**

And here reproduced electronically we can see a faint image of where Jupiter was that very night.

And this isn't just any view of that night sky.

It's the view from Jerusalem...where the Magi spoke to King Herod and viewed from Jerusalem Jupiter is due south and lies right over Bethlehem.

When the Magi paid their visit to the child Jesus...

we now know that the planet Jupiter reached the full extent of its retrograde motion, as astronomers would call it, and came to rest... or appeared to stop, right over Bethlehem, on the 25th of December in 2 BC... After what the Herod's prophets had revealed about Bethlehem, can you wonder . . . that they were so excited to see Jupiter right over Bethlehem?

And can you also see ...what's just above the horizon?  
On the 25th of December in the year 2 BC...the Southern Cross... came up over the horizon for just a few days.

Today you can no longer see the Southern Cross from Jerusalem because the solar system is moving in our galaxy, the Milky Way.

But two thousand years ago... you could see it.

What struck Jeff was that not only does the Southern Cross pinpoint...precisely at the horizon...the town of Bethlehem...

But also, as viewed from Jerusalem, the figure of the cross stands upright. To him that meant 'The cross and the cradle were inseparable.'

However, what blew me away was that the cross would have had no significance to the astrologers of the day.

Only after the passage of two full millennia would Christians, having travelled to the ends of the earth, and seen the cross in the southern skies,

Only then, with the aid of computer technology, would they realise that from the dawn of creation, the Southern Cross was destined to stand upright over the temporary dwelling of the Christ child.

There where, in fact, two significant heavenly bodies over Bethlehem that night – the planet Jupiter, the actual Star of Bethlehem, and our Cross.

When faced with that, I must join with Jeff when he says:

“ Before this Jesus I surrender all my intellectual pride”

In the end, he says, we come to God in faith, not through logic. God is Spirit and not the stuff of this objective, material world, subject to logic, law and time. The true work of God is in our hearts and not our heads. Everything that is subject to logic, law and time are also subject to the principles of suffering, decay and death - for these are the inevitable outcomes of one of the most fundamental laws of the universe, the second law of thermodynamics. Yet in the fullness of time God somehow made himself subject to law and time by entering into our humanity, sharing in our pain, and surrendering finally to death so that time, pain and death may no longer be our masters.

So then, let us now remember Jesus, as he asked his friends to do. And every time you look at the Cross in our skies, remember that it once stood over Bethlehem.