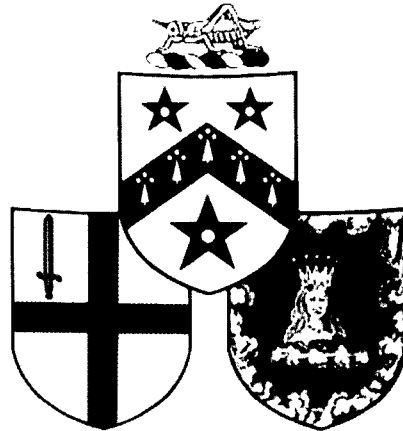


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THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

A Lecture by

PROFESSOR HEATHER COUPER BSc DLitt(Hon) FRAS
Gresham Professor of Astronomy

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THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

HEATHER COUPER

Low in the east on clear Christmastime nights, you'll spot a brilliant star. Flashing all the colours of the rainbow as it twinkles, Sirius - the brightest star in the sky - pierces you with its light. Was it the star that, according to the Bible, came and stood over the place that Jesus lay?

Ever since Jesus was born, people have been pondering on the identity of the Christmas Star. One thing is certain: it wasn't Sirius. Astronomers have been familiar with Sirius for millennia - ancient Egyptian astronomers believed it somehow caused the annual floods on the Nile - and the Star of Bethlehem was clearly a very *unusual* sky-sight.

We all know the old, old story. According to Matthew's gospel: "... when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea 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.'" (Matthew Ch.2, vv.1-2)

To find *what* the star might have been, we first have to establish when Jesus was born. Just to complicate things, it wasn't the year 0 (which didn't exist), and nor was it 1 CE. A sixth-century monk rejoicing in the name Dionysius Exiguus got his sums wrong when working out an early calendar - he managed to leave out the 4-year reign of the Roman emperor Octavian. So, confusingly, Jesus was born BCE!

We know that Herod was alive at the time of the birth - and according to biblical sources, he died shortly after an eclipse of the Moon. There was one in 1 BCE, but to fit the calendar, the eclipses of 4, 6 or 7 BCE seem to be more likely. So what was on view around that time?

We can eliminate one candidate at once. Halley's Comet, which plunges past the Earth every 76 years, put on a spectacular show in 1301. It so inspired the Italian Renaissance painter Giotto di Bondone that he used it as the model for the Star in his beautiful nativity scene (his camels - which look like small-eared horses in the painting - had obviously not inspired him to the same degree). But Halley's Comet's nearest appearance to the real Nativity was in 12 BCE - too early by any reckoning.

On first sight, 5 BCE looks promising. Chinese astronomers had a tradition of logging everything that suddenly appeared in the sky. Comets, eclipses, "new stars" (novae) that appeared out of nowhere - everything was recorded, lest it had astrological import for the ruling dynasty. In that year, they recorded a "broom star" lasting for 70 days - probably a comet with a tail. But apparently the Chinese didn't report the object moving over the ten-week period it was visible, which a comet certainly would have done. Another interpretation is that what they saw was a nova - not actually a new star, but an old one that dramatically flares up after having material dumped on it from a companion star.

Both are unusual and arresting sky-sights. But how was it that no-one in the Western world seemed interested enough to report them? In particular, why was Herod so surprised when the Three Wise Men claimed to have seen Christ's star in the east?

There may be another explanation. The “star” may not, in fact, have been a brilliant, unmistakable apparition after all - but something much more subtle. The “Wise Men” were almost certainly astrologers hailing from Babylon. Like those who write newspaper horoscopes today, they would not have been interested in sudden, unexpected happenings in the sky - like comets and novae - but in the predictable movements of the Moon and planets. By ascribing a ‘character’ to each planet, and observing their inter-relationships as they slowly waltzed against the distant background of the stars, the Wise Men would claim to be able to predict earthly events.

Today, astrology has been shown to have no more substance than tea-leaf reading. But 2000 years ago - especially in the Middle East, where the Wise Men came from - it held great sway. Before people realised what the planets and the stars actually were, they put their faith in the heavens.

Around the time of Christ’s birth, there were two rare astrological portents - both of them unusual groupings of planets. The first took place in 7 BCE, when Jupiter and Saturn got up to antics they only indulge in every 139 years. In May, October and December of that year, in the constellation of Pisces, the two planets appeared to draw close together. This event - known as a ‘triple conjunction’ - was laden with astrological meaning. Jupiter was the king of the gods, Saturn represented both the land of Palestine and the principle of justice, and Pisces was the sign of the zodiac that represented the Jewish peoples. The Wise Men would have interpreted the conjunction as a sign that a Jewish Messiah would shortly be born.

There was an even more spectacular conjunction - this time between Jupiter and Venus - in 2 BCE. While the 7 BCE conjunctions were astrologically very meaningful, they would not have looked particularly arresting. The two planets were never less than a moonwidth apart, and would never have looked like a single object. But the 2 BCE conjunction - which occurred in Leo, another constellation associated with the Jews - would have been a different matter. This time, the ‘female’ Venus and the ‘kingly’ Jupiter lined up so closely that they appeared to merge. The merger, as well as being deeply propitious astrologically, would have temporarily created a single, brilliant “star”.

However, it was probably not the Christmas Star, for Herod was almost certainly dead by then. The more subtle conjunction of 7 BCE appears to fit the facts better. The Wise Men would have first seen the signs in May. Remaining in Babylon over the long, hot summer, they would have started their trip to the Holy Land in the autumn. Around that time, they would have seen the two planets rising close together in the east just as the Sun was setting - the astrological interpretation of “we have seen his star in the east”. The planets finally came together at the end of the year as if to serve as confirmation.

So - if this was the case - when was Jesus actually born? Not on December 25th, for sure. This is the date of the ancient pagan midwinter festival, “hi-jacked” to fit into the Christian calendar. The real date may forever elude us, but there are a few slender lines of evidence. One is that, according to the gospels, the sheep and shepherds were out in the fields when Jesus was born - so it couldn’t have been that cold. The second is the instant the Wise Men first saw the star rising in the east - which, knowing the movements of the planets, we can accurately date to September 15th, 7 BCE.

Was this the date of Jesus's birth? And was the 'triple conjunction' the Christmas Star? We may never know. But if it was, then we should belatedly be reaching for the fireworks and the bunting - for we should have celebrated the Millennium in 1993.

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- to engage in study, teaching and research, particularly in those disciplines represented by the Gresham Professors;
- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.

Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk