

READERS' FORUM

On the Star of Bethlehem

Your 1998 article "The Star of Bethlehem" [*Biblical Astronomer* no. 86] is quite exhaustive. The quantity of historical facts included certainly shows extensive research. Furthermore, you can make your own Greek translations. Even so, the emphasis on certain scriptural citations could have more significance than they have been credited with. Emphasis as we both understand constitutes personal preference. But perhaps a different view point is not unworthy.

The advent of Jesus Christ is the most significant event in all history. Genesis 1:14 which you cited states that lights in the heavens are "for signs and seasons and for days and years." Certainly for the greatest event in all history there should be an impressive sign. Furthermore, it has to be a sign that the Magi can interpret. Eclipses come and go. A nova is a singular event, but unless it can be determined what the Chinese star (Crab Nebula) signifies, it is doubtful that the Magi could use a nova event. And as you pointed out, there really isn't a nova candidate.

Planetary conjunctions can constitute an impressive sign framed along with a constellation and there is one of these. According to the astronomer at Griffith Observatory, the planets actually overlapped slightly during the June 17, 2 B.C. conjunction, forming a single star. So this is a particularly impressive sign that took place in the western sky. Interest could have built up for a period of days as the planets approached each other.

But the Scriptures seem to say that the star was seen in the east. Quoting from the King James Version, Matt. 2:1, 2, & 9:

... 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 one looks east after dark, the stars all ascend. Since a star rising in the east does not provide a notable sign, the same verse in the *New King James Version* will be considered.

... wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.

... and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

This shows that the translators of the *New King James Version* capitalized East to indicate a geographical location, rather than a direction where stars rise. It cannot be determined what the original translators of the King James Version thought since they capitalized neither the east nor the personal pronouns that refer to the Lord.

The actual birth of Christ had no special star visible in Bethlehem. Luke 2:8-20 states it was an angel that informed the shepherds of the Savior's birth. The miracle announced to Mary by Gabriel was the conception of the Son of God (Luke 1:31). So the planetary-conjunction sign would have signified the conception. Using this interpretation and the fact that it takes 38 weeks from conception to birth, the Lord would have been born about March 9, 1 B.C. [The Jewish month] Nisan started with first crescent visibility on April 6, 1 B.C. Jesus was crucified on April 2, 33 A.D., so He would have been slightly older than 33 years at the time of His crucifixion.

The earliest that the wise men arrived in Bethlehem would have been after Mary's purification and the events recorded in Luke 2:25-38. The account that Luke assembled from eyewitnesses does not include the flight to Egypt, so Luke 2:39 concords with Matthew 2:23. Now I personally prefer this interpretation because it agrees better with the solar-planetary alignment you located that occurred on October 15, 4001 B.C. The March date puts Christ's birth in the last year of the fourth millennium, about six months before the start of the fifth millennium. Somehow this time-mesh seems preferable to the birth event occurring in the autumn of 2 B.C.

Best regards,
John Read

The immediate problem with that birth date is that Jesus would have been born after the death of Herod.

As for the meaning of "east," Bible critics make much of the Greek *en te anatole* here, claiming that this is a technical term meaning heliacal rising. They then go on to proclaim that the translators of the King James Bible mistranslated the term, not knowing of this technical definition. But such is not true, for the criticism is groundless. The phrase "in the east" must of necessity refer to the prior noun, the star, rather than to the subject of the sentence (the wise men). Hence the star was seen in the eastern sky, which can only be the morning sky, here. I have been unable to trace the criticism back any further than Keller's book, originally in German, which was translated into English by William Neil in 1956 under the title *The Bible as History*, (NYC: Wm. Morrow and Co.), page 350. Keller's original criticism was directed against the German translations, but Neil applied the criticism to the KJB in translation. The German bibles use *Morgenland*, which literally means "morning country," but even in German the phrase is placed to describe the star and not the location of the wise men. This latter is the case for all Reformation translations and so the criticism is spurious.