

HEAVENLY NEWS

“The Mysterious Christmas Star”

By Forrest Lockhart, Lead Docent, Rotary Club of Cameron Park, Community Observatory

For two millennia the star of Bethlehem has been a cornerstone of the story of Christ's birth in a small village in Judea. The biblical gospel of Matthew recounts that the Magi from the east followed a bright star in the vicinity of the constellation of Aries, the ram; that led them to what their tradition predicted would be the birth site of a powerful leader. Matthew recounts the Magi as declaring, "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."

Every year, the onset of the Christmas holidays brings new efforts by scientists and theologians to explain what the Magi may have seen. Over time there has been no lack of solutions brought forth. Biblical scholars have long suggested that the actual birth date of Jesus may have been a few years prior to that reflected by the Gregorian calendar. Dates ranging from 7 B.C. to as late as 3 A.D. have often been proposed. So, given a range of possible birth dates, what does history offer as a possible Christmas Star? Let's consider a few possibilities.

One explanation is the outburst of a stellar supernova, the light from a large star violently exploding at the end of its life. While supernovae do occur, one near enough to have been so visible would have left traces of its demise. No trace of a nova in the vicinity of Aries has been found. Also, a bright supernova would have been seen by everyone on Earth, yet no record from that time exists elsewhere for such a cosmic event.

Ancient Roman astrologers interpreted the infrequent conjunction, or alignment, of major planets and also the occasional eclipse of the planet Jupiter by the Moon as signifying great events such as the birth of a king. Records show a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 B.C. The Moon eclipsed Jupiter twice in the year 6 B.C. Also, during the winter of 6 B.C. the world witnessed a very rare conjunction of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Could any of these events have prompted the Christmas Star story?

A troubling fact regarding the Christmas Star question is that the only reference to the star is found in the gospel of Matthew. No other mention of the star has been found. There are many theories about why Matthew would have included the Star of Bethlehem in his record of Christ's birth. Some say it may have been a symbolic reference to the Old Testament prediction that the birth of the King of the Jews would be proclaimed by a bright star rising from the House of David.

Be it fact or fiction, myth or miracle, we may never know for certain. I'm content with that for, from cradle to grave, there should always be a place for mystery and wonder in our lives. With Christmas approaching, what better source of wonder than the story of a mystical light from the heavens above.

The Community Observatory located behind the El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College (off of Green Valley Road in Placerville) will be closed for the holidays and maintenance from December 22nd – January 4th. The Observatory will re-open Friday evening, January 9th, 2009, when we will begin the first of twelve monthly themes during the “**International Year of Astronomy**”, commemorating the 400th anniversary of Galileo’s use of a telescope to study the skies and other historic events (<http://astronomy2009.us/>). The Observatory is free to the public and will be open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 7:30 PM – 9:30 PM during the winter months (weather permitting). For more information about the Observatory, driving directions and closure notices go to www.communityobservatory.com