



“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1)



REASONS TO BELIEVE - SEATTLE AREA CHAPTER

NEWS AND VIEWS

DECEMBER 2002

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STAR OF WONDER

PATRICIA LEWIS

Thrilling and mysterious, the story of the Star of Bethlehem is a well-loved part of our Christmas tradition. Inevitably the question arises, what sort of celestial phenomenon could this have been? Was it a star, planet or comet? To answer this, we must note what the Scripture says. Using Matthew and Luke, we will attempt to place the events in chronological order.

Luke 2:1-38 explains that Joseph and Mary had to travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. A government decree compelled them to go even though Mary was pregnant. (They may even have welcomed the trip as a way to avoid hometown gossip about the birth.) Evidently Mary was in labor as they arrived. No room was available at the inn so they stayed among the pack animals, near a manger. There her Son was born.

Later that night they were visited by shepherds. The shepherds had seen angels and the shining glory of the God, which terrified them. The angels reassured them and told them a Savior was born that day. They went to town and found the newborn baby. Beautiful crèches and pictures portray this scene. Most show shepherds, the Wise Men and animals, with a great star overhead. However, Luke says nothing about wise men or a star.

The little family could not remain long in that rough place. Joseph would have sought out a decent home for Mary and the baby. The Scripture tells us that the child was circumcised on the eighth day and after forty days they presented him at the Temple. There, two devout elderly citizens recognized him as the One promised by the prophets. Otherwise, Jesus' first months passed in obscurity.

Turning to Matthew 2:1-16, far to the east in the region of Babylon a group of *Magi* or Wise Men saw a special star. Since Daniel had lived in Babylon 400 years earlier, they would have been familiar his writings. They knew Daniel foretold that an Anointed One would arise in Judea at this very time (Dan. 9:25).

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Experts in the skies, the Wise Men interpreted the Star as a sign that the King of the Jews had been born. They desired to see this king and offer him homage so they packed up their camels and headed west. There is no indication that the Wise Men were led on their journey by any unusual sign, nor did they need one. Their goal was the capital city of Judea where one would expect to find royalty.

It would have taken them some months, perhaps a year, to get there. When they reached Jerusalem they asked about a child born King of the Jews. They said they had seen “his star” in the east. It’s difficult to tell just what they meant by this. Did they mean they had seen the star rise in the east or that they had seen it their home country to the east?

Though King Herod knew nothing of the baby, his scribes knew Micah’s prophecy and directed them south to Bethlehem. As they traveled, the star they had seen in the east appeared moving ahead of them. Finally, it stopped over a house where they found a young child or toddler (Gr. *paidon*, not an infant, *brephos*), worshiped him and presented costly gifts. Then, they left for home by another route. Thus it is clear that the Wise Men came at a different, much later time than the shepherds. And only the Wise Men, not the shepherds, needed special guidance by a star.

So, what was the star? Many suggestions involve planets. Scholarship places the year of Jesus’ birth about one to four years before Year 1 of our calendar. With modern astronomical methods we can plot the courses of the planets at that time. The bright planet Jupiter had several interesting conjunctions (events where two bodies appear close together in the sky) at about that time. However, these conjunctions occur often enough that experienced observers, like the Wise Men, would not have been unduly concerned about them.

Could the star have been a recurrent nova? There are certain stars, members of binary pairs, which undergo occasional explosive events during which they shine much brighter than usual for a few days. The Star of Bethlehem appeared on two occasions, shone for a time, then disappeared. A nova could do this. However, one thing makes it difficult to accept a nova or any other normal celestial event as an explanation. Matthew 2:9 states, “the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.” Whatever the celestial object was, it moved southward for an hour or two, then stopped over one particular house.

As far as we know, no ordinary celestial body can behave this way. Because of the earth’s rotation, the heavens – stars, planets, moon and sun – all appear to circle from east to west every 24 hours. The only body that might move southward is

a comet, but even a comet cannot appear, move rapidly and then stand over a certain place. Also, many observers would have reported a bright comet and, at that time, comets were thought to be bad omens.

If no natural phenomenon can satisfy the facts stated in Matthew, may we not look for a supernatural explanation? A Scriptural precedent comes to mind from the book of Exodus. Exodus 13:21 records that, “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.” Exodus 40:38 tells us that this sign continued to guide the Children of Israel in their later wanderings in the wilderness.

My conclusion, therefore, is that the Star of Bethlehem must have been a supernatural luminary. Initially it was given to start the Wise Men on their journey. Later it guided them to the house where Christ child lived. It was right that they should go and worship Him because He truly was the Anointed One that Daniel had foretold. The story of the Star has gladdened the hearts of millions of believers from that time until now. May we all be blessed by it!

Patricia Lewis is a member of the chapter steering committee. She worked as research technologist at the University of Washington. Now retired, she is an avid amateur astronomer.

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DEATH BEFORE THE FALL

GREG MOORE

Many young-earth advocates claim there was no death before the fall (i.e., before Adam and Eve sinned). Some hold that this is an essential doctrine of Christianity that is necessary for salvation. However, not all Bible-believing Christians agree that this claim is supported by Scripture. It is useful to examine a few of the major suppositions:

- Adam and Eve were created as immortal creatures who would have lived forever. This claim is contrary to one of the central teachings of the Bible that mankind is never autonomous but always dependent on God. It is also refuted by Genesis 3:22. In this passage, Adam and Eve had to be banished from the Garden after they sinned to deny them access to the tree of life. This indicates they were not inherently immortal but eternal life was dependent upon their eating the fruit that God provided. Therefore, Adam and Eve had the same mortality before and after the fall. What changed is God withdrew some of his providential support from them.
- There was no animal death before the fall. This teaching is often argued on the basis of Romans 5:12, “*Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.*” However, it is clear that this passage is talking about the death of “men” being the result of sin, not animal death. Besides, since animals do not have the moral capacity to sin, their death cannot have arisen because they sinned. Therefore, animal death must have come with the creation. This is also supported by the fact that, unlike Adam and Eve, the animals in the Garden were not offered access to the fruit of the tree of life and had no possible way to attain eternal life.
- The creation was eternal but lost its eternal character at the fall. This is often argued on the basis of the “bondage to decay” spoken of in Romans 8:21, which many young-earth advocates equate with entropy. However, Genesis 3:17 clearly states that the curse that resulted from the fall was on the ground, not the whole creation. Moreover, nowhere does Scripture say that the universe was created perfect or was meant to be eternal. In Psalm 102, we are told that the heavens and earth “will perish” and “wear out like a garment.” Matthew 24:35 states that they are temporary and “will pass away.” This may explain why God calls the creation “very good” in Genesis 1 but never “perfect.”

- The fall spoiled God plans. If God intended mankind, animals and the creation to be eternal, what happened? Was he unaware of the choice that Adam and Eve would make? Did He change His mind and institute a new plan? If God is omniscient, He must have known what was going to happen in the Garden of Eden. He never intended the creation to be eternal. It was designed as a transitory place where He would atone for mankind’s sin, put an end to evil and bring in everlasting righteousness. After all, did God really intend to provide eternal life to Adam and Eve and all of their descendants through the fruit of the tree in the Garden? Not at all! The Bible is emphatic that Jesus Christ is the only source of eternal life.

In the final analysis, Biblical interpretation does not demand that there was no death before the fall. While some venerable people in church history may have agreed with this belief, it has never been the majority view. The current popularity of this doctrine can be attributed to the creationist movement of the 1960’s. In their 1961 book, *The Genesis Flood*, John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris invoked no-death-before-the-fall to defend the young-earth theology. Their objective was twofold. If all of the death in the fossil record could be restricted to after the fall, it supported flood geology, their view that the fossil record was the result of Noah’s Flood. And once “flood geology” was established, it eliminated the need for millions or billions of years of Earth history thus closing the door on the day-age view of Genesis.

As Christians, we have an obligation to pursue truth in all things. We need to evaluate our beliefs not on the basis of our personal preferences but by the standards God has provided in His word (the Bible) and His creation. While we can stand firm on the fact that there was no human death before the fall, there is no compelling reason to demand that there was no animal death. Because of the common apprehension and fear of death, this notion may appeal to us but we have no evidence that animals experience such emotions. Even for humans, it is not God’s plan that we think of death with horror as if it were the ultimate triumph of evil. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for us to deliver us from that fear. To hold on to it is to give human feelings more credence than the teachings of the Bible. Such attitudes only create unnecessary roadblocks to reaching the hearts and minds of non-believers.

Greg Moore is a trained apologist and works for the City of Everett. He is president of the Seattle-Area Chapter of Reasons to Believe.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

SETH COOPER

Like many who grew up in the 1990s, I was drawn to the modern rock scene. In 1998, I was in Seattle to hear Pearl Jam. One moment that remains with me is when Eddie Vedder, the band's singer, spoke to the crowd. Eddie said that he had found God that summer. After an awkward silence he continued, "Yep, we found God. It turns out we've been evolving all this time and that is God. Evolution is God!" From there, Eddie spoke about how the Bible described the world as being a few thousand years old while science told us it is billions of years old. With that, the band launched into their new song, "Do the Evolution."

I happen to think that Eddie Vedder is a nice man and have no quarrel with him. Nevertheless, his statements bothered me. Aside from the fact that I did not believe that evolution is God, I took exception to his claims about the Bible and the age of the Earth. Yet, this was not the first time I had heard misrepresentations about the Bible. For example, my high school biology teacher told me that the theory of evolution recognized that species change over time but the Bible taught that God created everything "as is" and species did not change. Even though he was a non-Christian, I do not believe he was trying to disparage the Bible. He simply knew little about the Bible and adopted a naturalistic philosophy that excluded God from the realm of science.

Yet, I could never accept that the Bible demanded a young Earth or a rigid fixity of species. In fact, my own conclusions had been precisely the opposite. I can remember having a series of friendly debates in high school over the issue of evolution. I asserted that I believed in the inspiration of the Bible but I was not prepared to dogmatically adopt a young Earth view. In fact, I told my friends that the Bible might teach that the Earth is very old. Since I was never exposed to any views regarding the age of the earth, this was on my independent reading of the New Testament and 2 Peter 3:8 (NIV) that, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

Two years later I was sitting in my car during a lunch break at work. Flipping the AM dial, I tuned into a station with two men discussing something called the space energy density of the universe and how it had to be fine-tuned for life to be possible. As I listened, I discovered they were discussing science and the Bible and one of the voices was Dr. Hugh Ross. A few weeks later on the program, Dr. Ross discussed the age of the Earth issue. I was amazed as he laid out a compelling case for why the Bible taught that the Earth was old from a Biblically-conservative, scholarly point of view.

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Here I had found the Bible and science reconciled just as I knew it was supposed to be. From that point on, I have followed Dr. Ross and the Reasons to Believe ministry. Not only has my intellect has been sharpened my faith has dramatically increased. Now I have become involved in the local chapter and recently completed the apologetics training program. I challenge you to take the next step and get involved. Together, we can change lives and open people's eyes to the Truth.

Seth Cooper is a trained apologist and member of the chapter steering committee. He is a third year law student at the Seattle University School of Law.

THE DISTINCTIVELY HUMAN "SELF"

STAN LENNARD, M.D., Sc.D.

The highest mental experience is self-awareness or "knowing that one knows."¹ It is the most fundamental characteristic of the human species² and emerges from levels of linguistic communication not shared by other creatures.³ But the human mind and language are more than physical things. They reflect a spiritual component that cannot be explained in material terms and enables man to bridge the gulf between mind and matter. This is what lifts human beings to a unique eminence in the cosmos – truly made in the image of God.⁴

Unfortunately, there is an obsession by 'advanced' thinkers to discredit the idea that the human mind has a spiritual component because of the religious connotation. They claim that the non-material features of human mind and language can be explained in strictly material terms.⁵ Contemporary neuroscience, for example, argues that everything ultimately reduces to neurophysiology.⁶ In other words, the spiritual component of human self-awareness is nothing more than patterns of neuronal activity.

One proponent of that view is John Searle⁷ who believes that the mind and body do interact but are not different things. According to him, "nothing is more common in nature than for surface features of a phenomenon to be both caused by and realized in a micro-structure, and those are exactly the relationships that are exhibited by the relation of mind to brain." Therefore, mental phenomena are merely features of the material brain without meaning, caused by and realized in the brain's microstructure.

Bruce L. Miller,⁸ neurologist at the University of California, San Francisco, contends that clinical data has identified one area of the brain that controls much of the sense of "self." By studying people with frontotemporal dementia (a degenerative brain disease) he argues that the architecture of "self" lies in the right frontal lobe where awareness and self-reflection patterns are influenced. According to Miller, "The self is anatomy and biology, and it develops through experiences. It is the coding of these experiences into our brain that is the key to maintenance of self. When we lose that coding, the self becomes fragile, and it is easily tilted over... It may be deflating to some people that the very essence of who they are – including their beliefs and values – is merely another anatomical process."

However, not all agree. Self-awareness cannot be pinpointed in the brain, contrary to what Miller claims. Karl R. Popper⁹ conjectures that the locus of interaction between the "self"

and the brain is in the speech center, testifying to its unique functional importance in human beings who can communicate with God through the Holy Spirit.^{10,11} Popper places "self" in what he calls "World 2." Here reside subjective experiences, thought processes, states of consciousness, the mind, the soul and (*I propose*) the spirit.

While materialists like Miller posit that immaterial mental events, such as thinking, cannot act in any way on electrophysical structures such as neurons since the domains of matter and energy are sealed against this interaction, Popper disagrees. He maintains that the physical brain, which resides in what he calls "World 1" and consists of matter and energy, is not sealed-off from effects outside of matter and energy and *interacts* with "World 2." The bridge between mind and brain is the flow of information. There is no net energy expenditure in this interaction, countering the objection of materialists who claim that such bridging violates the law of conservation of energy. But by what means does this flow of information occur?

Popper's colleague, Sir John Eccles,¹² proposes a role for quantum mechanics in the interaction between mental intention (World 2) and transmission of neural signals to the brain (World 1). Henry Margenau,¹³ his colleague and coauthor, explains it this way. Mental events, including intentions and planned thinking, can select by *choice* vesicular transmission across synaptic clefts to other electrophysical neural structures. The extremely small size of the presynaptic grid places it within the range of quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. In other words, neural transmission of information occurs between "World 2" and the physical neural structures of "World 1."

A final refutation of Miller addresses the "fragility" of the "self."⁸ Eccles¹⁴ explains that the basic connectivities of the human brain are built by genetic determinism before birth in readiness for the subtle changes that occur throughout the learning process. The "self," however, remains in continuity with the past and extends into the future. It is comprised of unique accumulated experiences over a lifetime and our behavior, memories and the whole content of our inner conscious life are dependent on these experiences. No matter how extreme the changes at given decision points caused by circumstances, one remains the same "self" through a lifetime.

The "self" is what makes man distinctive from all other creatures. The human mystery is demeaned by naturalists who try to account for the non-material components of mind and language as emerging from patterns of neuronal activity.

See THE HUMAN "SELF," next page

According to Eccles,¹⁵ "This belief must be classified as a superstition...we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world." But it's easy to understand their motivation. William A. Dembski⁶ puts it this way, "Within [a] richer world of both material and nonmaterial things, physical laws lose their status as absolutes and become subject to principles that may be quite metaphysical (principles like intelligent agency and divine providence)."

Stan Lennard is a medical doctor and trained apologist. He is past president of the Seattle-Area Chapter and works with groups that are interested in starting local chapters of RTB.

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