

Astronomy Delight!

by Ed and Susan Forrest

The Three Wise "Peekers" or "Observers?"

"We three kings of orient are"

Such is the first line of the popular Christmas carol sung throughout the ages to relate the story of the three wise men traveling to Bethlehem. Many modern day astronomers would love to finish the song by saying "We three kings of orient are... peekers!"

What's the difference between a "peeker" and an "observer"? During our observational astronomy classes we define a "peeker" as a person who looks but doesn't see what is being observed, whereas an "observer" looks and sees everything!

Such may have been the case of the three wise men following the "star" of Bethlehem. Did the wise men really observe closely this remarkable celestial event in the sky? Perhaps they just peeked and without further observation concluded this event was so astronomically unique it was time to hop on the camels and head out across the desert in search of the Messiah.

Ironically the three wise men along with most of the wealthy and ruling class of the time were fairly knowledgeable about both the science of astronomy and the pseudo science of astrology. Constant monitoring and extremely accurate observations of celestial events by some early scholars and civilizations was done for hundreds of years prior to the birth of Christ. In fact, many of the early astronomical observations, which were recorded, are still used today by astronomers in a variety of research projects. Early scholars were able to fairly accurately predict such events as eclipses, meteor showers, and planetary conjunctions. Conjunctions being when planets or stars appear closest to each other in the sky. The closer they appear to each other, the visually more impressive to the naked eyes of both humans and camels.

Could the three wise men have only peeked at a predicted planetary conjunction and believed that it was a unique astronomical occurrence? One that if observed more closely would have been nothing more than an interesting sight in the sky which reoccurs on a fairly regular basis? Perhaps they did.

The historical record clearly indicates that the wise men lived during the reign of King Herod and that Christ was born during this period of time. Since Herod was of

the ruling class, it is accurately recorded that he died in 4 BC. Since that time, numerous changes were made to the calendar by vain kings and rulers, which prevent us from knowing exactly the year of Christ's birth. However modern day scholars and clergymen believe that He was born somewhere between 4 and 1 BC., coincidentally a period of time where some very interesting celestial events appeared in the sky. However, most all of these events were predicted, known and observed by the scholars of the time.

Many modern day planetariums can reproduce the images



of the sky as they appeared 2000 years ago during the time of the birth of Christ. These images when combined with the remaining historical records indicate that conjunctions of the planets Jupiter, Venus, Mars and the star Regulus were all fairly common during this period of time.

For example, during September of 3 BC the planet Jupiter came into conjunction with the bright star Regulus in the constellation Leo. Leo was known as the constellation of kings and by the occurrence of this event in this area of the sky may have had some importance to the ruling class. However,

since this conjunction was somewhat accurately predicted many years earlier, was it cause to hop on the camels and traverse the desert? Probably not, as just a month earlier the planets Jupiter and Venus appeared very close to one another during a conjunction in the same constellation, and during 2 BC both Jupiter and Regulus were in conjunction not once, but twice during February and May. Events that although interesting, were not that astronomically significant to the real observers of the time.

Although these events were predicted with a fair degree of accuracy long ago, there remains one date during which even the scholars of the time may have failed to predict with the precise accuracy needed to signify a truly unique celestial happening. One which would have been impossible for even the peekers of the time not to declare a truly exceptional and magnificent stellar appearance, and one that the observers of the time if they had observed closely would have concluded was of natural occurrence.

During June of the year 2 B.C. two of the brightest objects in the sky, the planets Jupiter and Venus would appear in such close conjunction that they would appear to touch each other. The combined brightness of these two planets

would produce such a rare naked eye spectacle in the sky, that without the use of a telescope (which would not be invented for over 1600 years), would be impossible to distinguish as two separate planetary objects.

Surely the wise peekers would have hopped on the camels and set out following this "star", while the observers of the time would eventually conclude the event was nothing more than two ordinary planets in close conjunction and left their camels in the garage.

Could these events explain what the star of Bethlehem really was? Hardly! The changes made to the calendar over thousands of years combined with legend, story and lore still leaves both the astronomical peekers and observers in wonder of exactly what transpired in the desert skies of so long ago. The sudden appearances of exploding supernova stars would have been recorded by the Chinese, comets whose tails can sometimes point downwards in the sky would have been observed and recorded by many, and events such as meteor showers were all well known to civilizations of both peekers and observers. But the sudden appearance of this "star" still remains a mystery to many. Perhaps there was no star at all

and only imagination conceived it.

Astronomy is the oldest science of both fact and imagination. The winter sky is one of the best seasons for observers and those with imagination and a quest for an understanding of the universe. This season the sky abounds with stars, planets, and constellations proclaiming the magnificence of a universe so infinite at times only imagination can conceive of it. Whether you are a peeker or observer take the time to wonder and imagine while enjoying these celestial delights. Perhaps by doing so a bright "star" may guide you and your camel to the answer.

Happy Holidays!

Astronomy Delight! in Hyde Park, N.Y. welcomes your questions and comments regarding this column and offers day and night after-school enrichment programs, classroom events, scouts, camps, group lectures, individual astronomy programs, and observation courses for families, parents, and children of all ages throughout the country and Tri-state NY area. FRANCHISE INQUIRIES ARE WELCOME (845) 229-4434 www.Astronomydelight.com

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