

Scientists explain the miracle of Beth

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nearly 2,000 years ago, the story goes, a light in the sky guided three men to the crib of a newborn infant. That beacon has become the center of faith, puzzlement and debate ever since.

The gospel of Matthew reports the event, with the three wise men saying they came to Bethlehem to see Jesus because "we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

While theologians tend toward divine origin for the star of Bethlehem, scientists have proffered other possibilities.

If it was a natural phenomenon there are many

possible explanations, said LeRoy Doggett of the U.S. Naval Observatory.

But Doggett added that, in addition to the scientific ideas, "two options have to be considered that would take it out of the hands of astronomers altogether. One would be for it to be a real miracle. The other is if the story, in some form or another, is a myth."

Otherwise, Doggett said, "there is a wild array of possible explanations."

One possibility is a conjunction of planets, an occasion when two or more planets appear to be close together in the sky, or even line up with one another, making them

seem unusually bright.

The actual birth of Jesus is believed to have occurred sometime from 3 B.C. to 7 B.C., Doggett said. A conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, both bright planets, occurred in 3 B.C. Another, involving Jupiter and Saturn took place in 7 B.C.

"If wise men were systematically watching the sky and watching the motions of the planets, they might have inferred something significant" from such events, Doggett said.

And he noted that astrology was very popular in that era. "It was the science of the time."

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Scientists disagree over origin of 'Star of W

WASHINGTON (AP) — That "star of wonder" that guided the wise men nearly two thousand years ago continues to burn brightly in human thought and memory, despite disagreement over the actual source of the unearthly light.

A nova, comet, conjunction of stars and other possibilities have been suggested by scientists as explanations for the star.

And many people think the light is simply one of divine origin.

The Bible is direct in its

approach, set forth in Matthew's gospel:

"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.'"

But no further description of the star is offered, an omission which has led scientists to spend countless time and energy discussing what natural phenomenon could have accounted for the light seen in the sky that night.

Astrology was very popular at the time of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and astrologers often sought explanations for earthly events in the movements of stars.

The actual birth of Jesus is believed to have occurred between 3 B.C. and 7 B.C., so celestial events during that period have been studied for something that might have seemed special.

LeRoy Doggett of the U.S. Naval Observatory reports that the bright planets Venus and Jupiter appeared close together in 3 B.C. and

another conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 7 B.C.

Also in 3 B.C., Jupiter appeared close to the star Regulus, Doggett noted, an event which might have spurred speculation by astrologers since Jupiter was known then as the King Planet.

Regulus was also associated with Kings, and it was the brightest star in the constellation Leo, which was the astrological sign for the ancient tribe of Judah in Israel. Thus, this combination could have been interpreted as meaning a king was

to be born among the Jews.

The same conjunction has occurred at other times, however, Doggett noted, without stimulating the same sort of interest.

A nova, or exploding star, has been suggested by other scientists as a possible explanation for the star of Bethlehem.

Chinese records indicate a nova occurred in 5 B.C., and perhaps that was the light which guided the Magi.

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Astrologers, who believe movements of the stars either foretell or affect Earthly happenings, might have seen significance in the appearance of the planet Jupiter near the star Regulus in 3 B.C., added Doggett.

Astrologers in Persia and Babylonia knew Jupiter as the "king" planet. Regulus was also associated with kings. And the constellation Leo, where Regulus is the brightest star, was the astrological sign for the ancient tribe of Judah in Israel.

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Aquila with what appears to be an extra star. A nova, flaring up and disappearing, could account for that.

Comets have also been suggested. Halley's comet made an appearance in 12 B.C., and other comet sightings were reported in both 4 B.C. and 5 B.C.

At any rate, no major astronomical sights are scheduled for this Christmas. The planets Mercury and Uranus will be close together on Dec. 26, but neither is unusually bright.