

Is There a Gospel in the Stars?

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A little more than a century ago, two books were published that put forth the theory that God's story of redemption is revealed in the constellations found in the sky. One was Joseph A. Seiss's **The Gospel in the Stars**, published in 1882, and the other was **The Witness of the Stars** by E. W. Bullinger, published in 1893. Both have been republished and are available from Kregel Publications. Their basic thesis is that either God himself revealed the star patterns and their meaning to the patriarchs, perhaps as early as Seth, or that the early patriarchs developed the constellations to preserve and pass on what they knew of the plan of salvation. This would have predated the giving of the Law, and hence it would have predated any written revelation of God (although many creationists believe that Moses edited tablets of Genesis written by the patriarchs). Obviously, early believers in Yahweh passed down oral traditions, and so what better object lessons than the stars would aid this? There are many interesting parallels between the plan of salvation and mythologies found in the constellations. Examples would be the virgin, the ram, the bull, various serpent-like creatures, and various strong men, some with dual natures. It can also be conjectured that certain star names fit with God's redemptive plan. It is argued that the original purpose of the constellations has been perverted and added to by pagan mythology. These books are an attempt to re-establish the original purpose.

ARGUED FROM SILENCE

On the surface, these two works seem to be plausible, even scholarly, but is this teaching Biblically and factually correct? It would seem that such an important 'doctrine' (a description used by Seiss) would be clearly taught in Scripture, but nowhere are we told the meanings of the various star patterns that we see. Failing any explicit teaching, at the very least one would expect that any current thoughts at the time would have been reinforced in the Bible. For example, the prophet Isaiah in foretelling the virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14), or Matthew in noting the fulfillment (Matthew 1:23), would have had opportunity to compare to the sign in the sky, but neither did. Or in giving instructions of a proper sacrifice, would not have Moses mentioned the analogy found in the sky? Or the New Testament discussions of Jesus' dual nature would

have been good opportunities to compare to the celestial counterparts. In none of these cases is any mention made of the Gospel in the sky, all the while other customs or beliefs of the times were recorded (though not necessarily endorsed). Just one example of extra-Biblical beliefs recorded is the alleged angelic stirring of the pool where Jesus healed the man lame from birth (John 5:4 Majority Text). If the constellations are a God-given revelation, why did the Lord choose not to acknowledge this in His Word?

While snippets of quotes by Josephus and other secular sources are given, there is no clear historical evidence that any of this Gospel in the stars has survived from antiquity. Both Seiss and Bullinger credit Frances Rolleston's notes published in 1862 as **Mazzaroth: or, the Constellations** as their initial inspiration, but it appears that much of what has been written arose from the mind of Seiss himself. We will examine the Biblical passages that Seiss and Bullinger used to suggest the necessity of this doctrine. It has often been said, and it is a good rule of exegesis, that if one sees a new meaning in a Scriptural passage that no one else has seen before, there is probably a very good reason: the meaning is not there. Keep this in mind when we examine these.

SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS

The earliest Scripture quoted is Genesis 1:14, which tells us that the purpose of the stars was to be 'for signs and for seasons, and for days, and years'. Seiss points out that the meanings of seasons, days and years are pretty straight-forward, but asks what is meant by signs? He answers the question that they (the stars) are to be signs of God's plan of salvation to come. But no other commentators support this view. Furthermore, the subject of Genesis 1:14 is the greater and lesser lights (the Sun and Moon); the stars are mentioned in a separate context. The Sun and Moon are used for signs in Scripture. The Apostle Peter quoted the prophet Joel on Pentecost that in the last days 'the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood' (Acts 2:20, Joel 2:31). Thus there is nothing in Genesis 1:14 that demands any more than this sort of thing.

It is also asserted that Psalm 19 tells us 'the heavens declare the glory of God', and since Romans 1:20 tells us

the creation reveals God's 'eternal power and Godhead, so that they (mankind) are without excuse', this means that the Gospel is revealed in the heavens. But note that these two passages very carefully proscribe what the creation reveals. Romans tells us that there are two things: His Godhead (His existence, His deity) and His eternal power (presumably only a very powerful God could create all that we see). Psalm 19 merely states that the heavens, in their marvellous beauty, declare God's glory in His creative acts.

To come away from these passages with any more than what is explicitly stated is to misuse them. Seiss and Bullinger claim that one can deduce additional attributes of God, such as his holiness and love by looking at the stars. Hugh Ross, in his book, **The Fingerprint of God**, makes a similar mistake in that he lists five additional attributes of God (for a total of seven) other than His existence and power that one can see from the Universe using Romans 1:20 as his basis.

Nowhere in Scripture are we told that one can discern the Gospel by studying the sky; indeed we are told that the Gospel can only be known by the Word and by preaching (Romans 10:14). An example of the Word and preaching working together is the interaction of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Furthermore, this teaching places the constellations on an equal footing with Scripture with regards to revelation. To elevate anything with the Bible should make Christians pause. How is the Gospel in the stars different from the double revelation theory, that God has revealed His Divine nature in the natural world? Hugh Ross elevates the role of the creation when he claims that nature is like a sixty-seventh book of the Bible that reveals more than it does about God's attributes; how is the Gospel in the stars different from this alleged but untrue idea of the sixty-seventh book?

There is also the problem of certain things having significance before their time. Despite Isaiah's foretelling, the virgin birth was not fully understood until the writing of the Gospels. In a similar way, despite Jesus' prediction of His death and resurrection, His followers did not understand until after it had happened. Before the crucifixion and resurrection, what was the significance of the cross? None, but Seiss and Bullinger attach much predictive significance to Crux, the Southern Cross. So what role did it play? It could not have been a part of an Old Testament Gospel, because crucifixion was a much later invention widely used by the Romans, and so would have meant nothing to the patriarchs. And what kind of prediction would it have been, given that no New Testament allusion is made to it? The Gospels, particularly Matthew's, clearly note fulfillment of Old Testament predictions, but a cross in the sky is never mentioned.

DIFFICULTIES WITH SECULAR SOURCES

Beyond the Biblical problems are difficulties with

secular sources. Most of what we know of ancient astronomy comes from the **Almagest**, a second century AD book written by Claudius Ptolemy. According to Ptolemy there were 48 constellations, 12 along the zodiac with 36 others. Seiss and Bullinger preserve this number, but by deleting three and replacing them with three others. The ones deleted are Corona Australis (the southern crown), Equuleus (the small horse), and Triangulum (the triangle). The replacements are the Bands (binding together Pisces the fish), Coma Berenices (Berenice's hair), and Crux (the Southern Cross mentioned earlier). The latter two are now recognised as constellations, but are of more recent origin. Crux is sometimes attributed to Augustin Royer in 1679, but Jakob Bartsch listed it separately in 1624, and Emerie Mollineux illustrated Crux on a star globe as early as 1592. On the other hand, Johann Bayer plotted Crux only as part of Centaurus in his 1603 work **Uranometria**. The addition of Crux may have been part of an attempt to depaganise the heavens that goes back at least to the time of Bede. Coma Berenices was suggested by Tycho Brahe a few years earlier than Bayer, which was probably prompted by the hazy appearance of a star cluster located there. Seiss and Bullinger claim that Coma Berenices was originally depicted as a woman nursing a young boy, but if that is true, it was only as a portion of Virgo.

It is also claimed that Crux was an ancient constellation that was once visible from north temperate latitudes, but due to an effect called precession ceased to be visible. It is further asserted that as navigators sailed southward 500 years ago it was rediscovered. Ptolemy supposedly deleted Crux from more ancient star catalogues because he could not see it. This 'history' is probably suggested by the fact that Crux began to appear on star charts 500 years ago, but does the fact that we do not know who originated it mean that it must be of ancient origin? This claim is seriously undermined when one realises that almost all of what we know of ancient astronomy came through Ptolemy, since copies of earlier manuscripts have not survived. Seiss and Bullinger substitute conjecture for evidence of Ptolemy's deletion, because there is absolutely no evidence that the ancients named this constellation.

This criticism was made against Seiss' thesis even before it was published. This and other criticisms caused enough concern for Seiss to insert a supplement in his book where he dealt with them. He appealed to Ptolemy to justify his case:-

*'Ptolemy himself also confesses that in the tables and charts presented by him liberties were taken to change figures and the places of stars in them . . . Whether, therefore, the Southern Cross belongs to the ancient forty-eight constellations or not cannot be determined from its absence from the Ptolemaic tables, as that can argue nothing for or against the assertion that it does so belong, apart from other showings.'*¹

This is a remarkable admission. Seiss cannot prove that Ptolemy deleted the Southern Cross, so his entire argument

is conjecture based upon Ptolemy's vague statement. The references that Seiss quotes after this are irrelevant in that they are equally vague and post-date Ptolemy by many centuries. This episode underscores the whole foundation of the Gospel in the stars — conjecture and plausibility. It could be true, but no positive evidence of its existence is given.

What of the claim that Ptolemy and Hipparchus could not see Crux? It is true that this part of the sky was once visible from the latitudes where the ancients observed, and that precession has caused this part of the sky to be lost today at these latitudes. In contradiction to clear statements by Seiss, the stars of the Southern Cross would have been visible (though low in the sky) to both Hipparchus and Ptolemy. For instance, calculation shows that at the time of Hipparchus (140 BC) and from his location on the island of Rhodes, the southernmost star of the Southern Cross, a Crucis, attained an altitude of about 3° above the horizon. For comparison, where I live the star Canopus only gets 3° above the horizon, but it is an easily spotted object on most winter nights. When Ptolemy observed in Alexandria about 140 AD, a Crucis would have reached about 9° above the horizon. The other stars of the Southern Cross would have been even higher, making this group of stars quite visible with only a little difficulty. At earlier epochs these stars would have been higher in the sky and hence were more obvious, but they hardly were a faint memory at the time of Ptolemy. So the contention of Seiss and Bullinger that Ptolemy deleted the Southern Cross because he could not see it is simply not tenable. Secular authorities on constellations state that the ancients did see the stars of the Southern Cross, but always considered what is called Crux today as part of constellation Centaurus. It is not clear where Seiss and Bullinger got their bogus history.

STAR NAMES AND MEANINGS

Further problems develop when one examines the star names and the meanings ascribed by Seiss and Bullinger. The standard source for this sort of thing is Richard Hinckley Allen's **Star Names; Their Lore and Meaning**, published in 1899 and available in paperback from Dover since 1963. (By the way, Allen mentions Seiss's and Rolleston's works in unflattering terms.) For example, Zuben el Chamali and Zuben el Genubi mean 'northern claw' and 'southern claw' respectively, because some cultures considered these stars in Libra to be the claws of Scorpius the scorpion, which is a nearby constellation. Bullinger has these two names meaning 'the price which covers' and 'the purchase' or 'the price which is deficient'. The bright star Deneb marks the tail of Cygnus the swan. Its name means 'tail', which can be verified with anyone who knows Arabic, but Bullinger renders its meaning to be 'the judge'. A more embarrassing example are the two brightest stars in the constellation Delphinus, Svalocin and Rotanev, which Rolleston rendered Scalocin and Rotaneb.

These two star names are not ancient, but instead began appearing on star charts in 1814. Many years ago it was discovered that these two star names are 'Nicolaus Venator' spelled backwards. Venator, a Russian, was assistant to the great Italian astronomer Giuseppe Piazzi, and is often referred to by the Latin equivalent, Niccolo Cacciatore. These two star names seem to have surfaced in Italy during their lifetimes, though it is not known who placed them there. Rolleston somehow managed to find meanings for these names in Arabic, Syriac, and Chaldean. These are only a few examples, but there are many others. Unfortunately, neither Rolleston, Seiss or Bullinger give clear references for their word studies. It is possible that they simply looked for Hebrew or Chaldaic words that had similar sounds.

INFERIOR AND NOT NEEDED

The frustrating thing is that both Seiss's and Bullinger's books seem so scholarly that many may take their work as definitive. Simply put, we do not know who invented the constellations or what purpose or purposes they fulfilled. It has been suggested that they were early navigation aids, or were to mark locations of the equinoxes and solstices that later underwent embellishment with pagan meanings. If Seiss and Bullinger can see their religious beliefs inscribed in the heavens, why could not other cultures? Numerous studies have shown that the constellations are very old, dating back to the beginning of civilization. Since this dates to shortly after the creation, many of them could have originated with or at the time of the early patriarchs, but this hardly identifies the patriarchs as the source. The teaching of the Gospel in the stars is based solely upon conjecture. It could be true, at least in some elements, but there is no evidence that any of it is true. Given that, it is very important that we do not elevate it above speculation and into doctrine.

The concept of the Gospel in the stars actually undercuts itself. The conjecture is that before the Bible was given, the patriarchs needed some way to pass along spiritual knowledge and that the constellations were the vehicle to do this. It should be obvious that this method of revelation and preservation, being subject to misunderstanding (much garbling of the original message is acknowledged by its proponents), is vastly inferior to the revealed Word. If this line of reasoning is correct, then when the Bible was revealed to man, the stellar Gospel ceased to serve a purpose — it had been supplanted by something better. In this late age why would we want to return to such an imperfect vehicle? Does this alleged Gospel in the stars have any significance for us today?

CONCLUSIONS

The Gospel in the stars is such a positive-sounding teaching that it has much appeal. Several arguments have

been presented here against its acceptance. First, it is based entirely upon conjecture and presented as a feasibility, but with no real evidence. Second, it contains numerous factual errors which raise serious credibility problems. Third, it is extrabiblical in that it presents a doctrine that is nowhere taught in Scripture, though there are many passages in the Bible that provide ample opportunities. Fourth, by its very premise, the Gospel in the stars has no relevance for those who possess the Bible, God's completed revelation.

But there is a final, very serious objection to the Gospel in the stars: it goes beyond being extrabiblical into being unbiblical. The New Testament refers to the Gospel as a 'mystery' (I Corinthians 2:7, Ephesians 6:19, 3:8-12, Colossians 4:3). In the New Testament a mystery is something that was previously unknown, but has now been revealed to us. Romans 16:25, 26 states that this mystery was hidden for long ages and was revealed through prophetic writings (that is, in the Old Testament, not in the stars). I Corinthians 2:8 goes on to tell us that if the princes of this world would have known of this mystery, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory'. I Peter 1:10-12 suggests that while the prophets 'searched diligently' they failed to grasp fully the Gospel before its time. Genesis teaches us that the patriarchs knew that God required a blood sacrifice, but apparently had no idea of what God's full plan of redemption would be. If they would have known the full plan as Bullinger and Seiss would have it, then this knowledge would have been available to the princes of this world, and there would have been no

crucifixion of Jesus. So the Gospel in the stars is in direct contradiction to the clear teaching of I Corinthians 2:8. In his second epistle, Peter (1:16-21) cautions us about cleverly-devised fables. His message here relied upon two solid foundations:

- (1) the eyewitness account of his legitimate experience at the transfiguration, and
 - (2) more importantly, the testimony of Scripture.
- The Gospel in the stars does not seem to fit into either solid foundation, but instead appears to be a fable.

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REFERENCE

1. Seiss, J. A., 1882. *The Gospel in the Stars*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 170.

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COMMENT— CARL WIELAND

Dr Faulkner makes some very important points on this subject of the Gospel in the stars, particularly about the danger of looking for an 'extra' revelation. However, I am concerned that we might 'throw out the baby with the bathwater' before it has been more thoroughly explored. For the sake of launching further discussion, therefore, let me take a (friendly) adversarial stance to some of his.

He asks, '*the constellations are a God-given revelation, why did the Lord choose not to acknowledge this in his Word?*' However, this overlooks what I have always understood to be the most interesting suggestion as to why many of the stars appear to have had names in antiquity which so often seem to have a connection to the Gospel. That is, that the stars were named by God (Psalm 147:4 says 'he calleth them all by **their** names' — see also Isaiah 40:26) to provide a basic outline of the Gospel message, which was **intended** to be replaced by the complete and sufficient written Word of God in due course. The star names would have served as a mnemonic for oral transmission, perhaps because of restricted availability of any written records.

In this view, the purpose of forensic enquiry in our day into the tantalising piecemeal evidence remaining would not be to seek additional revelation to add to or complement the Bible, but in order to be able to have another weapon in the armoury of Christian apologetics.

The concept of such a proto-Gospel may not be as radical as it seems. Remember that many people would have lived and died from the time of the Fall to when even the Old Testament canon was complete. Such a mnemonic may have served to reduce the likelihood that any oral hand-me-downs corrupted the basic message. The fact that such a primeval hint at the coming Saviour would be greatly lacking in detail, and not fully understood by its recipients, would not prevent some people from being able to get the basic idea that God wanted them to have. If such were not even allowed as a possibility, we would wonder why God gave the protevangel (in Genesis 3:15, about the coming seed of the woman), since, this too would have been rather cryptic from the standpoint of someone living prior to the Redeemer's first advent.

Danny Faulkner writes that Psalm 19 '*merely states*