

It started with a star

THE SKY'S
THE LIMIT



NEEL ROBERTS

The Christmas story is synonymous with the appearance of a star more than 2,000 years ago. The Gospel of Matthew (Matt 2:2-10) is the only text in the New Testament that mentions this celestial event based on a Old Testament prophecy from the book of Numbers. "A star will come out

of Jacob, a sceptre will rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17). Yet the questions many scrutinizers ask is what exactly was the object and when did this happen? While we in fact commemorate Christmas Dec. 25 each year, the Orthodox Christian Church does not endorse this as the actually birth date of Christ, but more as an agreed time to celebrate the promised Messiah's arrival.

Experts hint to Christ's arrival in the spring or fall of 3 BC with Jupiter and Saturn as the main planet conjunctions. However it requires us to go back in time to understand the ancient concepts of astronomy/astrology of the BC era. For many astronomers today, this is a difficult task. There is an essay on-line at <http://sciastro.net/members/portia.php/2009/01/30/the-star-of-bethlehem> that discusses this in detail. Whatever conclusion you draw there is something compelling about the star story that urges us as amateur astronomers' attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding it. Whatever the Star of Bethlehem was, one thing's for sure, its impact on humankind is more than any star before or since!

Sky watch for the next month

New Year's Eve Partial Lunar Eclipse — bring in 2010 by watching a semi-moon eclipse starting at 9:40 p.m. Dec. 31 in the southeast and ending at about 4

a.m. in the west. This is where the earth's shadow in being cast on our celestial neighbour.

Five planets at a time? — It's not uncommon for five planets to cross our sky in one night, but just before the winter solstice comes on Dec. 20 you can catch Pluto just on top of the sunset at about 6 p.m. in the southwest and make a 45 degree line towards the south-southeast, hitting Uranus about one-third of the way up. Sandwiched in between are Neptune and Jupiter next to the Moon and Mercury close to Pluto. Jupiter is viewable to the naked eye but the rest need a scope or binoculars!

Geminid and Ursid Meteor Shower — we actually have two mild meteor showers this month. Geminid peaks Dec. 14 and Ursid Dec. 22. For more on all meteor showers, check out the International Meteor Organization at www.imo.net/calendar/2009.

Open Cluster (M35) — Follow this cluster with the lunar eclipse just after sunset Dec. 31. It consists of hundreds of stars (minimum 120) brighter than magnitude 13 scattered over the area covered by the full moon. Located in the Gemini constellation, it follows the moon right until dawn so another thing to celebrate 2010 with!

Also, check out www.whatsuptonight.net, www.astronomy.com, www.space.com and www.nasa.gov. They have much more detailed information and great stuff for kids all for free!

Public events for the next month

Celebrate the winter solstice at the Rothney Astrophysical Observatory, near Priddis, about 30 kilometres southwest of the Calgary city centre, on Dec. 19 from 8-11 p.m. There's a \$20 per car admission fee. Check out <http://astronomycalgary.com/events/info/69> or call Jennifer Howse, 403-931-2366, for details.