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Is There A Christian Zodiac, A Gospel In the Stars?

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Since the 1980s, an increasing number of Christian ministers, authors, and apologists have been teaching that the signs of the zodiac and the names of certain stars once carried a nonoccult meaning to the Hebrew patriarchs and ancient Israel. Allegedly, this meaning was conveyed in the story of Israel's Messiah-Redeemer, which today Christians know as the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel story in the stars has been overlooked, proponents of the theory say, because astrological and other pagan myths have dominated star and constellation meanings for millennia. The gospel in the stars theory attempts to disconnect, or redeem, the constellations and the stars from their pagan associations to reveal their original gospel meaning. It must be stressed that this is not an attempt to legitimize or Christianize astrology or to practice divination. It merely purports to have uncovered the gospel meaning of the stars and constellations, which ancient cultures distorted through astrology. At the very outset, it must be said that the biblical exegesis used to justify the gospel in the stars (GIS) theory is esoteric and complex. It is impossible in one article to canvass all the esoterica and the quite complicated biblical and historical arguments and interpretations that GIS advocates may deem important to their theory. In order to examine GIS theory in fundamental ways, it will be necessary to avoid secondary considerations that may be interesting but would cloud the issue in this forum.

NINETEENTH CENTURY CONNECTION

Seminal background material for today's GIS theory comes from Frances Rolleston's (1781–1864) extensive research, during the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, into the ancient names of the signs of the zodiac and numerous stars. Rolleston elucidated their pagan meanings in various cultures and then proposed gospel-meanings for these signs and stars through an impressive and systematic biblical exegesis surrounding hundreds of verses. In 1862, this encyclopedic work eventually became the four-part book, *Mazzaroth, or the Constellations*.¹

By the late nineteenth century, two ministers, one in the United States and the other in the United Kingdom, almost concurrently released books that quarried extensively from Rolleston, popularizing her theory and eventually overshadowing it. The first of these, *The Gospel in the Stars; or, Primeval Astronomy*² (1882), was written by Joseph A. Seiss (1823–1904), a prolific theological author, eloquent orator, and Lutheran minister in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. In the United Kingdom in 1893, E. W. Bullinger (1837–1913), an Anglican minister, theological author, and creator of the massive *Companion Bible*, published the second of these works, *The Witness of the Stars*.³ Bullinger met Rolleston, who lived in Keswick, and remained in correspondence with her. He said that she was the first to create an interest in the subject.

In recent years, a number of parachurch organizations and prominent Christians, including Dr. D. James Kennedy, Kenneth C. Fleming, Marilyn Hickey, Chuck Missler, Henry Morris, and the Southwest Bible Church radio program, have promoted GIS theory in books and sermons. This has steadily raised grassroots Christian interest in the theory, as can be seen by the many Web sites that now promote it and the GIS cassette tape sets now being circulated. Some enterprising folks in North Carolina even hold an annual "Mid-Atlantic Star Party" every year for amateur astronomers and stargazers, which includes a "biblically based" GIS astronomy program. Reprints of *The Gospel in the Stars* and *The Witness of the Stars* are published in our day by Kregal, and contemporary advocates of GIS theory, although they add their own interpretive nuances, generally follow Bullinger and Seiss when replacing astrological and mythological meanings with ideas and stories of the Christian religion.

The contemporary push of GIS theory is causing a lot of confusion. At least this is the impression I get from people (on both sides of the Atlantic) who ask about it while I travel and speak. Something doesn't seem to be sitting quite right with many Christians about GIS theory. They would like it to be true, but something prevents them from accepting it. The Bible and history can assist intuition here and clear away confusion.

THE BIBLE AND THE THEORY

GIS proponents cradle the theory in a number of biblical texts, especially Genesis 1:14–18; 3:1–15; Job 26:13; 38:31–32; Psalms 19:1–6 and 147:4; and Matthew 2:1–12. Advocates employ these passages to support the structure of the theory, which in brief is: God created the stars as “signs” having the unique message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but this message got lost after the Fall; nevertheless, the heavens still “declare” this special message, as people such as the Magi knew.⁴ Numerous biblical verses and phrases are also retained to illuminate the names of certain stars and the 12 zodiac signs with various gospel themes. The object is to find biblical passages that “redeem” the “distorted” astrological and mythological meanings of the stars and the zodiac signs.

Kennedy, in *The Real Meaning of the Zodiac*, includes Daniel 5:27 (“You have been weighed on the scales...”) in his interpretation of the sign Libra, which astrologically is “the scales.”⁵ He includes Psalm 21:12 (“drawn bow”) and Psalm 45:5 (“sharp arrows”) for the sign Sagittarius, which mythologically is the “the archer.”⁶ Hickey, in her *Signs in the Heavens*, includes Leviticus 10:16 (“the goat of the sin offering”) for Capricorn, which astrologically is “the goat,”⁷ and Psalm 92:10 (“a wild ox”) for Taurus, “the bull.”⁸ Fleming, in *God's Voice in the Stars*, includes Revelation 5:5 (“The Lion of the tribe of Judah...hath prevailed”) in his interpretation of the sign Leo, which astrologically is “the lion.”⁹

The astrological meaning of the constellation Gemini, which includes myths about the twins Castor and Pollux and the messenger of the gods, Mercury, is given the Christian images of Jesus Christ as “Judge and Ruler” (Kennedy)¹⁰ or “Prince and Savior” (Fleming).¹¹ To replace the myths associated with Demeter, Persephone, and Astrae (goddess of innocence and purity), the constellation Virgo is superimposed with stories about the virgin Mary, the desired Son, the despised sin offering, and “the coming One” (Kennedy)¹² or “the coming Shepherd” (Fleming).¹³ Using Psalm 91:13, Seiss “redeems” the Scorpio myth from its astrological meanings (involving Mars and Juno) by giving it the biblical identity of the Genesis serpent and the story of the battle between Christ and Satan.¹⁴

This is but the tip of a vast iceberg of Christian religious ideas substituted for pagan myths to bolster GIS theory. Seiss himself admits that exegesis like this “may sound strange.”¹⁵

THE INSIDER'S EDEN

Seiss fails to bolster the credibility of GIS when he theorizes as to how it was originally discovered. Citing Josephus and Philo, Seiss states that the patriarch Abraham, while sojourning in Egypt, taught the true meaning of the stars to the Egyptian priests, who eventually distorted that meaning in astrology.¹⁶ Seiss then suggests that Abraham had received the true meaning through Noah, who had probably received it from Methuselah, who had received it from the sons of Adam, especially Enoch and Seth. But from where did these two men get it? Seiss states that they acquired it from their father, Adam, who got it from God. “It is a matter of inspired record,” Seiss writes, “that God gave Adam special revelations.”¹⁷ Thus to Adam was revealed the gospel in the stars, which Seiss calls “a pictorial memorial of [the] promised Redeemer.”¹⁸

Adam, therefore, was the first person to have the original true meaning of the stars: how history would play out in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This meaning was passed on generationally but at various points in human history became distorted through pagan mythology and astrology.¹⁹

A careful look at *when* this alleged knowledge was given to Adam reveals the most fundamental flaw in GIS theory. Because Adam “was in perfect fellowship with the Divine Intelligence,” he “came out of the hands of his Creator indued with innate science, and...did not lose it by sin.”²⁰ Seiss continues:

God certainly did not make man without at the same time beaming into him all the light and intelligence to equip him fully for all the requirements of the highest perfection of his being in his sphere, and for the intellectual and physical mastery of the whole earthly creation at the head of which he stood. The first man fell, but that fall did not

*obliterate from his intellect the knowledge which his Maker had previously shined into it. An apostate from Christianity does not thereby lose that knowledge he possessed. Judgement came upon Adam, and hard necessities, but there was no obliteration of his intellectual treasures or his intellectual powers. Much as they have depreciated in transmission to his posterity, they were not blotted out of Adam himself.*²¹

Although much of this language and reasoning sounds like a doctrine straight out of nineteenth century New Thought, we must ignore those implications here.

What Seiss is saying is that God gave Adam the gospel story, which somehow became saved in the stars *before* the Fall. I have not been able to find where any contemporary GIS advocate disagrees with this belief. Explaining Genesis 1:14, which describes a time before the Fall, Fleming writes, “Signs and seasons were therefore ordained by God to indicate happenings and the periods of time pertaining to them. God designed the stars with the purpose of using them to signify specific historical incidents at chosen times which would come to pass as the plan of salvation unfolded.”²² Kennedy states that “from the *very beginning*, God has given a story of His salvation from which have come most of the ancient mythologies and ancient traditions. The signs are describing the salvation that would be wrought by Christ, and was given by God to Adam in the Garden of Eden” (emphasis added).²³

THE PROBATIONARY PICKLE

Knowing *when* brings us to the theory’s fatal theological and philosophical flaw: Adam knew that he was destined to sin. The irony here is that GIS theory gets trapped in the very error of which its advocates would accuse astrology: the determinism of a fatalistic worldview. Like people today who claim they are not responsible for their bad actions because they have suffered as “victims,” Adam and Eve could have blamed their sin on its inevitability. “*Was it not written?*” One can almost hear this among the litany of their excuses during their interrogation by God (Gen. 3:10–13).

As it is presented in Scripture, however, the Eden story reveals quite plainly that God gave the first couple a choice. This choice would have been a meaningless command had they known that they were going to sin, which is what they would have known had they been told their history (future!) ahead of time, if the gospel story had been “written” in the stars for them to “read” before they sinned. On God’s part, it would be like a parent teasing a child: “Don’t touch that hot stove, you’ll burn your hand. But, don’t worry, *when* you do touch it...” What is the point of the prohibition? So, too, with the first couple. The choice was meant to place them in a probationary period, the object being the development of their moral character. Of course, they failed. Yet, to think that they failed because they had to would be like the Christian who thinks, *I better not sin, but when I do, God will forgive me, so it will be OK*. We’re simply not allowed to think like that (see Rom. 6).

If the gospel in the stars message was given to Adam and Eve before the Fall, it makes God’s original command meaningless to them because their sin was inevitable. Why even bother to command it? Why even bother to try to obey it? The history is already set out, and they never had a chance. This would have been a terrible blow to their morale. It would have seemed like bad news to them, not good news.

Bullinger may have seen the problem of such deterministic fatalism. Although his GIS theory does not avoid getting caught by its consequences, he does state, “These pictures were designed to preserve, expound, and perpetuate the one first great promise and prophecy of Gen. iii. 15 [after the Fall], that all hope for Man, all hope for Creation, was bound up in a coming Redeemer...”²⁴ “Adam, who first heard that wondrous promise, repeated it, and gave it to his posterity as a most precious heritage.”²⁵ Bullinger knew Seiss’s work, but it is not clear if by such statements Bullinger meant to refute Seiss’s belief that Adam had the gospel in the stars before the Fall, or if Bullinger was merely anchoring what he believed Adam had been told by God *before* the Fall to a biblical text given *after* the Fall.

CONFUSING NATURE WITH THE BIBLE

Another basic flaw in GIS theory is its confusion of the theological categories of *special revelation* and *general revelation*, resulting in an inappropriate attribution of moral authority to nature. This confusion is evident through the language that GIS advocates use, such as when Bullinger states that the heavens “prophecy” God’s purposes and counsels,²⁶ or when Seiss writes that the Magi “never could have understood as they did” how to find Jesus, “if there had not been associated with the stars some definite evangelic prophecies and promises which they could read, and believed to be from God.”²⁷ This confusion is also exemplified when Fleming speaks of the “prophetic outline” of

the 12 signs,²⁸ and when Hickey states, “The reason God placed stars and planets in the heavens was to reveal knowledge about His Son, Jesus Christ.”²⁹

GIS teachers, here, are making general revelation (nature) function as special revelation (God’s redemptive interventions through word and deed in history, especially in Christ and the Bible). While general revelation does impart some knowledge of the existence, attributes, and law of God and therefore does have moral authority (Rom. 1:19–21; 2:14–15), it does not reveal anything about the Incarnation or salvation. The Bible is the source of authority for that. As has often been said, nature reveals enough to condemn you but not enough to save you.

Interestingly, the first part of Psalm 19 is a favorite proof text of GIS advocates for nature providing special revelation, and yet a main purpose of the psalm is to clarify and distinguish the functions of general and special revelation. The psalm is divided into two parts (vv. 1–6; vv. 7–14), with each part describing a source for a particular kind of knowledge about God. In the first part, people are said to gain tacit knowledge of God by inference from the created order. This “natural witness” of sun, moon, heavens, and earth points to a Creator by reason of order and design. The first part of Psalm 19, then, implies a general revelation in which the visible things of creation “declare” (Ps. 19:1) God’s glory and handiwork. This is such a strong and convincing “speech” that it is personified as a “voice” and “words” (vv. 2–4). But this is not describing a propositional or prophetic revelation through nature. It merely employs a literary device, a figure of speech — nature personified to show the force of the communication. If someone says, “Time talks, and it can speak louder than words,” no one thinks that “time” actually talks.

It is the second part of the psalm that reveals where the special revelation of God’s salvation is found: the “law of the Lord,” that is, *the written Word of God*. It is the Law of the Lord that is “perfect” (v. 7), that “converts” (v. 7; KJV), that “makes wise” (v. 7), that “gives joy” and “light” (v. 8), and so on.

The psalm, therefore, teaches that from the natural world people gain a tacit knowledge of the Creator, and from the written Word they find help for their souls — ultimately the gospel. There is no evidence any place in Scripture to suggest a hidden or overlooked propositional revelation in the stars, or in any other objects of nature. By locating God’s prophetic testimony of salvation in the stars, GIS detracts from the significance and necessity of special, propositional revelation — that is, the Bible.

“SIGNS” OF THE TIMES?

Another basic problem with GIS pertains to its advocates’ interpretation of Genesis 1:14, which is another key proof text used to justify the theory. Proponents explain that the Hebrew word ‘*ôwth*, translated “signs” in Genesis 1:14, is an allusion, if not a direct reference, to what we today call the “signs” of the zodiac.” Interpreting Genesis 1:14 in a manner typical of GIS advocates, Fleming writes, “The signs were to indicate prophetic events, and the seasons were to indicate the times pertaining to the signs. Thus the great prophetic events in the eternal plan of God were foretold. These events had to do with the great drama of redemption... By means of these star-signs man was to be continually reminded that what God had promised in the hearing of our first parents was certainly going to come to pass.”³⁰

The words ‘*ôwth* and a kind of synonym, *môph t*, are the two most frequently used words for “sign” and “signs” in the Old Testament. Yet nowhere, not even in the Genesis 1:14 usage of ‘*ôwth*, are these words ever used as a reference, direct or indirect, to constellations or star meanings.³¹ Neither is their primary root, ‘*ôt*. ‘*Ôwth* and *môph t* have many other uses, such as to describe a mark (Gen. 4:15, Cain’s; Exod. 12:13, the blood on the doorpost); a standard (tribal ensign; Num. 2:2); confirmation of a prophetic word (1 Sam. 2:34; Isa. 37:30), a prophetic symbol acted out (Isa. 20:3; Ezek. 4:1–3; 12:6; 24:24–27); and direct divine intervention (1 Kings 13:3–5).

The interesting feature of ‘*ôwth* and *môph t* is that their meanings are highly dependent on their scriptural contexts, and these are quite unmistakably spelled out, such as in the previous citations, so that there should be no mistake. Other examples of context-specific usage would be “signs”: to remind people of significant divine actions of the past and the special covenants He has established with them, such as the rainbow (Gen. 9:12), circumcision (Gen. 17:11), eating unleavened bread (Exod. 13:7–9), and consecrating the firstborn (Exod. 13:15–16). The Sabbath, too, which has nothing to do with the stars or other heavenly bodies, is even referred to in the Torah as an “*ôt*.” In its context, the meaning of ‘*ôwth* is clear in Genesis 1:14–18, and it does not link the text to constellation meanings. It refers primarily to the sun and the moon as the bodies of light that are the dividing “marks” for day and

night. After all, this is the *creation* story, so one would expect some indication as to how such essential phenomena as day and night are determined. “The stars” of verse 16, which GIS theory makes the principal focus, are secondary to the primary meaning, so much so that they seem to be stuck in the background as a rather minor element, worth noting, but not deserving the attention the text gives to the creation of such entities as light, sun, moon, water, ground, fish, birds, animals, and so on.

If one considers the Babylonian context in which the text is placed, it is easy to understand the Bible’s quite perfunctory attitude toward the stars here as being a slap in the face to the Babylonians’ all-encompassing use of the stars. God, it seems, was not making a great deal of them. Certainly this then becomes a warning to all who make too much of the stars. It is possible the GIS proponents overlook the primary meaning because today we use the English word “signs” for “zodiac” and “constellations.” If the Hebrew in Genesis 1:14 were meant to suggest a kind of prophetic message *written* in the stars, we could rightly look for a word like ‘*dût*, or one of its derivatives, being used (cf. in the niv, Gen. 43:3; Exod. 21:29; 1 Kings 2:42; Neh. 13:15, 21). But this never occurs.

THE MISSING LINK OF SCHOLARSHIP

A related issue is the missing link of ancient Hebrew scholarship. True, we have many writings that reveal that ancient Israel occasionally turned astrologically to the stars for guidance and divination, even though Moses had warned them not to do so (Deut. 18:9–13). But that is not under discussion here. If the Hebrew patriarchs were carrying on generationally a tradition from Adam of reading the stars for a prophecy about a Messiah-Redeemer to come, ancient Hebrew literature would have confirmed this practice. Dr. Edward Goldman, Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew Union College Cincinnati, however, doesn’t buy it:

Although there were, in Rabbinic literature, a few scholarly references now and then to astrological symbols, these were probably taken over from the Hellenistic world that surrounded them, and Rabbinic Judaism pays very little account to such things as astrological symbolism. The Rabbis indicate that spending your time with such things is really a waste of time. Even in the Midrash and in the mystical traditions, one finds no understanding of the stars and constellations as you have represented it to me.³²

REDEEMING THE REAL DISTORTION

The nature of the distortion is also significant. Believing that astrologers and other pagan mythologists have counterfeited the original and true meaning of the stars, GIS proponents want to recover, or undistort, the true meaning. They have worked hard to do that and then to develop and use GIS theory as an apologetics tool. One can appreciate the vast amount of effort and sincerity that has gone into this labor. Nevertheless, the actual distortion is not the counterfeiting of original true constellation meanings. The distortion is that astrologers superimpose a mythological meaning and by implication a spiritual authority upon mere natural objects (stars and planets).

An analogy not quite distant may help illustrate this point. Take the palm of the hand — a quite natural enough object meant for natural uses; that is, I can use my hand to shake your hand, or lift food to my mouth, or turn the ignition key to start the car...or to use tea leaves to make a hot or a cold drink. There are, then, normal or proper uses of these “things.” But what if a fortune teller says, “Let me read your future from your palm or from these tea leaves”? If I let him or her do that, then the proper use of these natural objects falls into a form of idolatry because they are superimposed with a meaning and an authority that God never intended.

Another common example today is the use of crystals. They can be naturally used in radio sets, and they are used in chemistry, electronics, and photography. Some years ago, my wife and I discovered our own natural use. Hanging from our kitchen window today are several Swarovski crystals so we can see the colorful rainbow designs made by the morning sun shining through them. So there is a natural, or proper, use of crystals. It would be another story entirely if my wife and I believed, as many people do today, that these stones carry a spiritual or mystical meaning that influences (has some kind of authority over) our lives.

So, too, with the stars. There is a proper (nonidolatrous) way in which the stars can be studied or used, such as for a natural revelation of the knowledge of God, or in the science or astronomy, which helps determine tides, eclipses, growing seasons, and so on. Furthermore, just as people have done with palms, tea leaves, crystals, and a host of other objects of nature, *astrologers have distorted the natural use of the stars by superimposing a mythological*

meaning and spiritual authority on them. That is the real distortion. That is how the “message,” the natural message, of the stars is falsified.

PICKING UP THE STICKS

GIS's fundamental flaws reveal many structural problems, such as (1) the ambiguities surrounding the origin of the constellations, (2) why its advocates appeal largely to the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman zodiacs, and (3) who the Magi were, and what was the “sign” they followed. Furthermore, many of the myths associated with the stars are so lost in antiquity that it is not possible to determine with any kind of certainty what pagan meanings they may have had. Yet, advocates of the theory even bring up “lost” meanings (to build up their interpretive pattern) as authoritatively as they do the clearer pagan meanings.

We have not even discussed the implications of this reliance on pagan authorities, which can become quite authoritative indeed. For instance, astrologers use Aries as the starting point of the zodiac and they end with Pisces, but the mythology behind this astrological entry and exit point for history is wrong for supporting GIS theory. So GIS advocates begin and end their interpretation where the mythology is more supportive of GIS theory; that is, with Virgo and Leo. Why? Incredibly, appealing to pagan sources of authority,³³ GIS advocates use the Sphinx because it is a figure with the head of a woman (Virgo, the virgin) and the body of a lion (Leo)! Ah, well. Perhaps this is the kind of mischief one eventually gets into when trying to get round the cherubim's flaming sword in Eden.

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- 1 Frances Rolleston, *Mazzaroth, or the Constellations* (London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1862; Keswick, 1863; new Rivingtons ed., 1882). Research copies of the 1862 and 1882 editions are available at the London St. Pancras branch of the British Library.
- 2 Joseph A. Seiss, *The Gospel in the Stars; or, Primeval Astronomy* (Philadelphia: E. Claxton, 1882). A new and enlarged edition was published in 1884/1885 by J. B. Lippincott (Philadelphia). Since 1972, several reprints of the 1882 edition have been published by Kregal.
- 3 Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Witness of the Stars* (London: self-published, 1893). Reprinted in 1967 by Kregal.
- 4 Joseph A. Seiss, *The Gospel in the Stars* (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1978), 13.
- 5 D. James Kennedy, *The Real Meaning of the Zodiac* (Ft. Lauderdale: CRM, 1989), 29–36.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 49–58.
- 7 Marilyn Hickey, *Signs in the Heavens* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1984), 51–59.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 89–100.
- 9 Kenneth C. Fleming, *God's Voice in the Stars* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), 135–141.
- 10 Kennedy, 107–115.
- 11 Fleming, 115–121.
- 12 Kennedy, 19–25.
- 13 Fleming, 35–41.
- 14 Seiss, 43–51.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 16 *Ibid.*, chap. 16.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 151–52.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 22 Fleming, 15.
- 23 Kennedy, 12.
- 24 E. W. Bullinger, *The Witness of the Stars* (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1967), 19.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 27 Seiss, 12.

- 28 Fleming, 30.
- 29 Hickey, 10.
- 30 Fleming, 17–18.
- 31 This is true even of Jeremiah 10:2, which uses “signs” similar to the way Jesus answered the disciples’ questions about the signs of the end of the age (Matt.24).
- 32 From a taped interview by the author with Dr. Goldman, 3 February 2000.
- 33 Bullinger, 20–22; Seiss, 27.