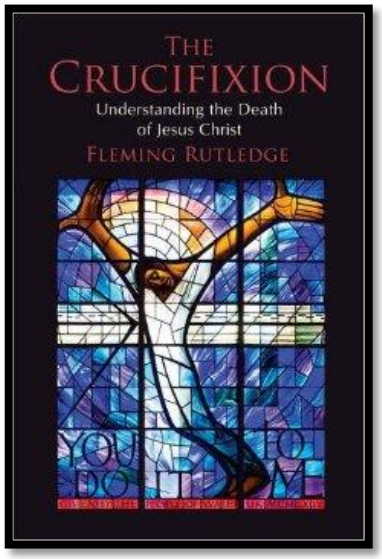
**Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop**
March 22, 2016 - Holy Week

What kinds of things do you think about during Holy Week? While the secularists and capitalists have largely succeeded in substituting Santa Claus for the scandal of the Incarnation, and the Easter Bunny for the scandal of the Cross, there nevertheless remains a wonder about CHRISTmas Eve and Holy Week that simply does not go away.




On the one hand, as I move through Holy Week, I think about theological things such as the New Testament's understanding of "justification." Fleming Rutledge's book, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, is a recent and profound grappling with that idea.

Mostly, though, I find myself thinking about the heavens through the lens of the ground-breaking research of attorney Rick Larson. You can learn more about what follows by visiting his website, www.bethlehemstar.com.

We live in a breathtaking era of scientific discovery in which it's easy to become somewhat jaded as we wait for "the next Big Thing." Technology news seems to report something fairly amazing at least several times a week.

What I'm about to outline for you is the result of several developments that have made examination of that first Good Friday possible in ways that could never be done before. The first of these developments isn't terribly new. This first development was Johannes Kepler's publication of the First and Second Laws of Planetary Motion in 1609 and his publication of the Third Law of Planetary Motion in 1619.[1]

Kepler's laws allow us to locate the planets with great precision at any moment in history and from any location on the earth. It is in large measure these three laws that make it possible for scientists down the road at the Applied Physics Laboratory to launch an interplanetary spacecraft and have it rendezvous with the intended planet or comet many years later.

The second development that made what I'm going to tell you discoverable is the development of computers that use Kepler's equations to calculate the motions of the heavens. Using readily-available and fairly inexpensive software such as


[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kepler%27s_laws_of_planetary_motion

*Starry Night*,[2] it is now possible to animate the universe at any speed and from any location we choose at any time we choose. This means that it is now possible to view the sky exactly as it looked over the Middle East two thousand years ago.

These first two developments make it possible for us to discover what the "Star of Bethlehem" actually was—*which has specific implications for Good Friday*—and the third development tells us when to look in order to see the "star."[3] We know from the New Testament that Jesus was born while Herod was King in Jerusalem, and so the date of Herod's death gives us a starting point for when to look in the sky.

The chief resource for dating Herod's death is the Jewish historian, Josephus. Most efforts to find the "star" have been hampered from the conclusion that Herod died in 4 B.C.; but recent studies have shown that this conclusion is the result of a copyist's error in A.D. 1544. All of the manuscripts of Josephus that date from before 1544 indicate that Herod died in 1 B.C. Since we know from the New Testament that Herod died not long after Jesus' birth, our examination of the heavens turns to the years 3 and 2 B.C., *which had never been done until very recently*. Researchers had been mistakenly looking in the years 4 and 5.

Now that we know when to look, we turn to the matter of what to look for. The New Testament gives us (at least) ten specific criteria that must be satisfied in order to say that we have found the "star":

1. The star had to signify kingship (Matthew 2:2).
2. The star had to have something to do with the Jews (Matthew 2:2).
3. The star had to signify birth (Matthew 2:2).
4. The star had to appear at an exact time (Matthew 2:7).
5. The star had to be visible during the reign of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1).
6. The star had to be subtle—neither Herod nor his advisors knew of it (Matthew 2:7).
7. The star had to be visible over an extended period of time (Matthew 2:9).
8. The star had to "rise in the east" as heavenly bodies generally appear to do (Matthew 2:2).
9. The star had to be visible over Bethlehem as the Magi left Jerusalem (Matthew 2:9).
10. The star had to "stop" over Bethlehem as the Magi approached (Matthew 2:9).

A meteor doesn't fit these criteria at all. A comet could have satisfied several of them, but the Chinese kept very careful astronomical records, and no comets were recorded in the years 2-3 B.C. A supernova could have satisfied several criteria, but none were observed during these years.

Since it was apparently possible to be looking at the "star" without realizing it, the "star" must have been something in the normal night sky whose significance was not obvious to most observers. The planet Jupiter now becomes a prime suspect.

Jupiter is the largest planet in the solar system, and it is named for the greatest god in the Roman pantheon. Further, Jupiter has been identified by multiple cultures as "the king planet."

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[2] http://astronomy.starrynight.com/

[3] See also Ernest L. Martin, *The Star that Astonished the World*, second edition (Portland, OR: ASK Publications, 1996).

In September of 3 B.C., Jupiter appeared to come very close to the star, Regulus, in what is known as a "conjunction." We get our word, "regal" from the same root word as "Regulus," and Regulus has been identified by multiple cultures as "the king star."

While such conjunctions are not particularly noteworthy, this particular conjunction occurred as Jupiter was going into what astronomers call "retrograde motion." Just as a car next to us appears to be going backward when we pass it on the highway, so the planets beyond Earth appear to move backward against the stars when Earth passes them on our way around the sun. This means that "the king planet" was in conjunction with "the king star" not once, not twice, but three times that month, and we can say that the **first sign** for the Star has been satisfied.

It's also noteworthy that this triple conjunction took place in the constellation, Leo, the Lion. The Lion was the symbol of the Tribe of Judah, from whom the Messiah would come. As it is written, "*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations is his*" (Genesis 49:10). The Magi could easily conclude that this sign had something to do with a Jewish king; and the **second sign** is satisfied.

The constellation that follows Leo into the sky is Virgo, the Virgin. Six weeks after Jupiter and Regulus met in this triple conjunction, Virgo rose with the sun, with a new moon at her feet. The constellation that rises after Virgo's right foot is Serpens Caput, "the head of the serpent." Now hear these words:

> *1 A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2 She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. 3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. 4 Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne* (Revelation 12:1-5).

These words are part of a vision God granted to the Apostle John while he was exiled to the island of Patmos in the first century. John was allowed to see the same sign in the sky that the Magi had seen, heralding the birth of Messiah. The vision has reference to the prophecy about Judah in Genesis 49, and the dragon, in this case, is Herod. The **third sign** is satisfied.

Nine months pass. As the Magi continue to watch this starry dance with intense interest, Jupiter, the king planet, continues to travel across the starry field until it comes into spectacular conjunction with Venus, "the mother planet," on June 17, 2 B.C. This conjunction was so close and so bright that it still used as an illustration in planetaria around the world.

This amazing conjunction resulted in the brightest star anyone alive had ever seen, and it happened, once again, in the constellation, Leo the Lion. Jesus had now been born—in June—and the Magi set out for Jerusalem, expecting the new king to be of the bloodline of the current king.

Because these signs in their entire sequence would not have been apparent to non-astronomers, Herod, the current king, had to ask the Magi for the exact time the "star" appeared. They had now been watching this starry dance for more than a year, satisfying

the **fourth**, **fifth**, **sixth**, and **seventh signs**. And because these phenomena were "ordinary" astronomical events, they "rose in the East," satisfying the **eighth sign**.

As the Magi left Jerusalem and headed south to Bethlehem, Jupiter appeared in the sky over Bethlehem, once again in the constellation, Virgo, the Virgin. Jupiter was entering retrograde, and it came to a full stop as it changed direction on . . . December 25, 2 B.C., satisfying **signs nine** and **ten**.

A reasonable person could conclude that we have found the "star." But there's still more. **All of this is prelude to The Day of the Cross**.

All four Gospels state that Jesus was crucified on "Preparation Day," the day before the Sabbath, and that this Sabbath was also the Feast of Passover. Passover takes place on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. We know Jesus was crucified when Pilate was Prefect of Judea, so we're looking for a Nisan 14 that fell on Friday while Pilate was in office.

We now know that Jesus was born in June of 2 B.C. We know that He was "*about thirty years old when he began his ministry*" (Luke 3:23), and John records three Passovers during that ministry.[4] This means that Jesus would have been about thirty-three when He was crucified, which puts the crucifixion in the early 30's. During those years, Nisan 14 fell on a Friday twice: April 7, 30 A.D. and April 3, 33 A.D.

A number of factors point to April 3. **First was Pilate's situation**. Pilate was appointed Prefect of Judea by Aelius Sejanus, who served for five years as regent of the Roman Empire under Tiberius Caesar. As time went by, Sejanus began eliminating potential contenders for the throne one by one, hoping to take the throne himself, and word of this came to Caesar on the island of Capri. Caesar had Sejanus executed on October 18, 31 A.D., and then began executing all of Sejanus's allies and appointees . . . one of whom was Pilate.

<u>After October 18, A.D. 31, Pilate lived in a lethal political context</u>. Up to that point, Pilate had generally done everything he could to offend the Jews he ruled; but if Jesus came before Pilate after this date, Pilate's situation made him unusually and uncharacteristically vulnerable to the charge, "*If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar*" (John 19:12). The A.D. 30 date doesn't fit this criteria, but the A.D. 33 date does.

A second line of evidence comes from the prophet Daniel. God granted to Daniel a vision that identifies the year of the Messiah's death:

> 25 *"Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.*
> 26 *After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary* (Daniel 9:25-26a).

King Artaxerxes I gave Nehemiah the order to rebuild Jerusalem in 444-445 B.C.[5] If we calculate what the angel Gabriel told Daniel, the numbers go like this:

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[4] John 2:23, 6:4, 13:1.

[5] Nehemiah 2:1-8; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artaxerxes_I_of_Persia

7 x 7 = 49
7 x 62 = 434
49 + 434 = 483
483 years x the 360-day lunar year = 173,880 days
173,880 days/the 365.24 day solar year = 476 years in our calendar system
444 B.C. + 476 years = 33 A.D. (there was no year "zero")

**The second line of evidence is that Gabriel told Daniel that the Anointed One** ("Messiah" means "Anointed One") **would be put to death in A.D. 33**.

**The third line of evidence comes from Peter's words in his "Pentecost Sermon."** Quoting the prophet Joel from the ninth century B.C., Peter told the crowd that what was happening on Pentecost morning was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy:

> 17 "'*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.* 18 *Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.* 19 *I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.* 20 ***The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord****.* 21 *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"*
>
> 22 "*Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him,* ***as you yourselves know***" (Acts 2:17-22).

Peter reminded this unruly crowd that <u>they themselves had seen the signs</u> confirming that Joel's prophesy had been fulfilled. At least three signs had occurred. First, all three Synoptics record a **terrifying and unnatural darkness** that came over Jerusalem from noon until 3 p.m. as Jesus died.[6] Second, Matthew records a **great earthquake** that shook the city at the moment of His death (Matthew 27:51-52). And third, that **the "moon turned to blood"** is especially telling.

Every total lunar eclipse includes a phenomenon known as a "blood moon." This happens during the time when the Earth blocks all of the Sun's direct light, and the Moon is illuminated only by reddish light that is refracted through Earth's atmosphere, the same phenomenon that causes sunsets to be reddish in hue.

There was only one lunar eclipse that fell on Passover while Pilate was Prefect in Judea. When the moon rose on Friday, April 3, 33 A.D., it was already in full eclipse, and it was a Blood Moon.

But the celestial dance is even more amazing than this. Remember that when Jesus was born, the new moon was at Virgo's feet. **Now, on the Day of the Cross, the full moon, the blood moon, is at her feet once more. The heavens record a life fully lived, blotted out in blood.**

But there's still one more thing. Although it has only been a few hundred years since Kepler discovered the Three Laws of Planetary Motion, those laws have been in force since Creation itself. What I have just outlined means that **from the very moment God spoke the universe into existence, God has known the very moment that He would enter**

[6] Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44.

**human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and He marked that moment in the stars**.

**God also knew the very moment when Messiah would breathe His last on the cross, and that moment was marked in the stars as well.** Jesus is "*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8).

Long ago, when Moses saw the burning bush that was not consumed, he drew near to see what was going on, and it was then that he met the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:1-4:31). When I think about Holy Week, I am overwhelmed once more with the realization that *1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge* (Psalm 19:1-2).

**Will you draw near, that you, too, might know this God,**
**who loves you with a fierce and passionate Love?**