

Parting Seas, Magic Stars, and Miracles

Can Science Explain Events in the Bible?

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IN THE SECOND CENTURY of the common era, the church father Origen made the suggestion that the star of Bethlehem described in the gospel of Matthew was a comet. Church annals dating as far back as the 13th century make the suggestion that the star was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, an idea that is commonly attributed to the astronomer Johannes Kepler, who mentions it in a tract he published in 1606. Variations of this same theory, most of which associate the star with a triple conjunction in the constellation of Pisces in 7 BCE, have been endorsed by a number of astronomers and commentators over the years and have become the basis of many articles, books, planetarium shows, and television presentations. Other writers have suggested that the star was a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in 3/2 BCE, a double eclipse of Jupiter by the moon in 6 BCE, or a supernova that appeared in the constellation of Capricorn in 5 BCE.

The Star of Bethlehem is not the only miraculous event in the Bible for which some believers, scientists, and other investigators have sought to provide a natural explanation. In 1950 Immanuel Velikovsky advanced the somewhat remarkable theory that a comet ejected from the planet Jupiter rocketed through the inner solar system and became the planet Venus, producing, among other things, the parting of the Red Sea during the Israelite exodus and the stopping of the Earth's rotation during one of Joshua's military campaigns. Others have sought to explain the incident at the Red Sea as a tsunami, or tidal wave, caused by the volcanic destruction of the Mediterranean island of Santorini, otherwise known as Thera, around 1440 BCE. Still other investigators argue that the book of Exodus places the miracle of the Sea not at the Red Sea but further north near the Bitter Lakes at the "Sea of Reeds" (this is the precise translation of the Hebrew *Yam Suph*), a site that in antiquity had large areas of marshland and one or more natural land fords just below the water line that could have become dry ground under heavy northwest winds. Another author writing in this same vein actually credits the Israelites with flooding the area in order to drown the pursuing Egyptians.

More recently, several specialists have turned their attention to the 10 Egyptian plagues that are described in the book of Exodus. According to Dr. Martin Blaser of Vanderbilt University, the death of the firstborn of Egypt during the evening of the first Passover was caused by the same agent that decimated a third of Europe during the Black Plague of the 14th century, a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis*. In

Europe the disease spread to humans from parasitic fleas carried on the bodies of infected rats. Dr. Blaser suggests that the Israelites were insulated from the effects of this deadly bacterium by their particular habit of disposing of their supplies of grain and unleavened bread on an annual basis, a practice which made their homes safer from rats and the infection these rats carried.

A more ambitious and sweeping theory of the plagues comes from Dr. John Marr; former Chief Epidemiologist for the New York City Department of Health. With the assistance of several specialists drawn from other disciplines such as marine biology, entomology and infectious diseases, Dr. Marr has constructed a complex, multi-faceted theory which purports to account for many of the 10 plagues of Egypt by treating them as interconnected elements of a single process rather than as isolated events. According to his argument, the process began when a massive bloom of deadly red algae called fysteria released toxins into the Nile, contaminating the water and poisoning huge numbers of fish (plague 1). With fewer fish to feed on frog spawn, frog numbers increased dramatically and these creatures swarmed and invaded the land (plague 2). These conditions gave rise to a dramatic rise in the population of stable flies (plague 4) and gnats and these afflicted humans and animals with diseases like glanders (plagues 3 and 6), African horse sickness, and bluetongue (plague 5). Later the Egyptians fell victim to a deadly mycotoxin called *Stachybotrys atra* that had been produced by molds growing on their wet grain and cereal supplies, foods that had been rushed into protective storage during the onslaught of the previous plagues. It was the first-born or eldest of each family who died from this toxin (plague 10) because it was they who ate most of this stored food (owing, we are told, to their traditional privilege of receiving double the food of their younger siblings).

In addition to the aforementioned theories, still others have been offered over the years to account for such biblical events as the great flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the fallen walls of Jericho, the burning bush, and the resurrection of Jesus.

Theories of this kind obviously vary considerably in their complexity and credibility. Some, like that offered by Velikovsky, are easily discredited because upon close examination they can be shown to stand in violation of numerous, fundamental scientific principles. Where others

are concerned, it is hard not to be impressed both with their sophistication and the scientific acumen that informs them. The complex theory constructed by John Marr to account for the plagues of Egypt is a good example: its multi-disciplinary approach and its thorough use of hard scientific data cannot help but inspire immediate confidence. In fact, it is precisely their appeal to the methods of empirical science rather than to supernaturalism that makes such theories so attractive to skeptics and humanists.

Yet strange as it may sound, this is precisely the problem, because such a veneer of scientific verisimilitude often conceals and distracts the observer from numerous serious flaws that affect such theories at the most basic methodological level. For underlying most of them is the assumption, rarely addressed let alone properly defended, that the passages of the biblical record under investigation are historical in nature and thereby open to rational inquiry. The proponents of these theories simply take it for granted that these biblical episodes speak, if in a highly exaggerated and fanciful way due to the influence of tradition, of actual phenomenon and events that the people of antiquity either could not explain or were inclined to interpret as miraculous.

Yet the relevant biblical scholarship provides little justification for this assumption. The events which comprise these stories are, by and large, fully explicable on their own terms, as elements of drama whose purpose and meaning are entirely controlled and defined by the dictates of plot and the underlying ideology of the texts as a whole. Moreover, many of the motifs and details in these stories have numerous parallels in the literature of the ancient world, evidence that the biblical writers have constructed their work from a shared reservoir of ideas.

Thus, the scientific theories that have been offered with regard to these episodes, however elegant and ingenious they have sometimes that the people been, are simply unnecessary and often serve of antiquity only to confuse, complicate, and mislead. In the worst cases they consist of little more than blithe speculation, driven in large measure by a highly selective and undisciplined reading of the texts.

With this in mind it is helpful to revisit this issue, the aim here being not so much to demonstrate the improbability of the scientific explanations themselves—as the science that informs them is not the problem—but rather to show, by reading and explaining the relevant biblical texts in their proper historical and literary context that such explanations reflect a deep misunderstanding about the nature of these texts. Regrettably, space prohibits an adequate examination of all of the theories mentioned above, but it is hoped that in re-examining two of the more popular subjects of such theories—the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the appearance of the Bethlehem star—the inappropriateness of applying an investigative scientific approach to such material should quickly become evident.

The Miracle of the Sea

It will probably come as a surprise to many readers to discover that the Bible records not one but four separate occurrences in which a prominent biblical figure miraculously divides a large body of water. In addition to the famous account in Exodus 14 in which Moses divides the Sea of Reeds for the benefit of the fleeing Israelites (an image forever memorialized by Cecil B. DeMille), there is the parting of the river Jordan for the Israelites entering the promised land under the command of Joshua (Joshua 3:14-17), the parting of the Jordan by the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:8), and a repeat of this same event by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 2:14).

Nor is the idea of parting waters unique to historical episodes. It also plays a prominent role in the mythology of the Hebrew Bible, starting with the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. The opening verses describe the nascent universe as a dark, formless watery mass. After creating light and separating the light from the darkness, God turns his attention to the waters and divides them into two discrete parts, preserving their separation by placing the dome of the sky between them. Then God forces the waters below the dome to gather into one place, thereby exposing the land. The creation of plants, animals and humans follow.

It is widely recognized by scholars today that the writer of this material has adapted a Babylonian variant of an ancient Mesopotamian myth of Sumerian origin called the *Enuma Elis*. Originally a creation myth, it evolved into a story about an ancient rivalry between competing divinities, one in which a young, powerful storm god defeats a rival who represented the forces of darkness and chaos and who was often portrayed as the tumultuous waters of the sea. In the Babylonian version the war god is Marduk and the defeated foe is Tiamat. With powerful winds and arrows Marduk splits the body of Tiamat in half and from the two parts creates heaven and earth. That the author of Genesis 1 has borrowed from this work is evidenced by their shared imagery and structure, the similar wording that opens both works, and by the term he uses to describe the primordial watery chaos that God subdues and divides: “tehom,” a word that is etymologically related to Tiamat.

The Israelites, like many of the other regional peoples, absorbed and adapted this ancient combat myth into their own traditions, tailoring it so that it became a story in which their God YHWH defeated the forces of chaos in ancient times, these forces being represented either by the sea itself or by some sort of sea serpent, identified in the Bible as Leviathan or Rahab. Several examples appear in the Hebrew Bible:

Was it not you [the LORD] who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? (Isaiah 51:9-10)

By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab...his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. (Job 26:12-13)

You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan., (Psalms 74:13-14)

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass.. (Psalms 89:9-10)

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. (Psalms 77:16)

On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea. (Isaiah 27:1)

The purpose of this ancient myth was twofold: first it served the ideological purpose of affirming the supremacy of the god who defeats the more powerful rival; second, it provided a kind of etiology for the existing order of the created world by suggesting that the ruling divinity brought about this order by subduing and defeating die original forces of chaos.

Of special importance for our purposes here is the fact that the miracle of the Sea in Exodus 14 is recognized by many scholars as yet another expression of this same ancient combat myth, one in which the God of the Israelites does battle with Yam, the chaos god of the sea who was defeated by the storm god Baal in Canaanite mythology. YHWH's splitting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds (the Yam Suph) deliberately echoes the splitting in two of the carcass of Tiamat by Marduk, the conquest of Yam by Baal, and the crushing of the heads of the sea monsters Rahab and Leviathan. The relationship is made explicit in the passage from Isaiah cited above. This is myth, not history, and the purpose of this "event" is theological and ideological, not historical: it affirms both the supremacy of Israel's god YHWH and the fact that Israel occupies the land by the authority and power of YHWH, the parting waters of the Sea of Reeds paving the way for the creation of the nation of Israel just as the dividing of the "tehom" and the slaying of the chaos monsters in ancient times paved the way for the orderly construction of the material world. The parting of the Jordan under Joshua further reiterates the point.

It is no accident that all theories offered to explain this event have emphasized those verses that speak of the wind gradually forcing back the water and have dismissed as legendary enhancements those that clearly state that the waters were divided instantly to become like walls. However, such an approach demonstrates little or no awareness that the story as we have it is an assembly of two different and independent versions of the tradition, each of which has adapted the combat myth differently. In the first

and older of the two versions YHWH drives back the waters over the course of an entire night using a strong wind, thereby exposing a dry seabed in an act that recalls the separation of sea and land in Genesis 1 (v. 21b-22a), and later throws the Egyptians into the sea (v. 27b). In the second version YHWH tells Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea and when he does so the waters are divided immediately, becoming like walls on each side of the Israelites (v. 21a, 21c, 22b). When the Egyptians pursue the Israelites into the divide (v. 23), Moses is told to repeat the gesture and this time the walls of water return to their natural state, covering the Egyptian army (26, 27a, 28-29). The theories in question then do not really explain anything at all, they merely restate the elements of the earlier tradition in somewhat more prosaic terms while ignoring those in the later tradition. Yet it is in the later tradition that we find all the genuine miracles that these theories claim to be explaining!

Whatever the historical credibility of the underlying claim that early in their history the Israelites were escapees from Egypt who later settled Canaan (a claim supported by few scholars today) there is certainly no historical basis to that component of the story that describes a miraculous parting of a body of water. This is a mythological element that was added to the tradition relatively late in its development in order to recast it in terms of the combat myth. That being the case one can no more provide a rational account of the parting of the Sea of Reeds than they can the defeat of Rahab or Leviathan by YHWH, Yam by Baal, or Tiamat by Marduk.

The Star of Bethlehem

The appearance of the Bethlehem star is mentioned only in the Gospel of Matthew, so it is important to begin by considering a few critical details regarding the particular theology and narrative style of its author and the context in which he makes reference to the star.

There is a strong consensus among scholars today that the author of this gospel, in all likelihood a Jew living in a gentile environment like Antioch, had a particular interest in the idea of Jesus as the Messiah promised by scripture who would bring salvation to the world and usher in a new era of righteousness. In this regard Matthew devoted considerable effort to emphasizing the many ways in which Jesus, in his birth, ministry, life and death, accurately fulfilled a number of predictions about the Messiah made by the ancient Hebrew prophets. His primary way of accomplishing this was through the inclusion of 14 so-called "fulfillment citations," passages in which he addressed some aspect of Jesus' life then explained how this was in fulfillment of a particular prophecy about the Messiah. One such citation concerns Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and appears in Matthew 2:4-6:

... he [Herod] inquired of them [the chief priests and scribes] where the Messiah was to be born. They told him "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are

by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

The prophecy being referred to here is in Micah 5:2 (with some borrowing from 2 Samuel 5:2 as well):

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel...

The identification of Jesus' birth place as Bethlehem then stems from the demands of prophecy and not from actual fact. However, it was common knowledge that Jesus was from the little Galilean town of Nazareth, not Bethlehem. Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, takes it for granted that Jesus was from Nazareth (he is either unaware of or unconcerned with the demands of the prophecy in Micah 5:2). The gospel of John, the last gospel to be written, specifically states that though the Messiah was expected to come from Bethlehem, Jesus was from Galilee (Mark 1:9 and John 7:41 respectively). Matthew was aware of the problem and solved it by stating that Joseph and Mary, following Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, fled to Egypt in order to protect Jesus from Herod's order that all male children under the age of two in or around Bethlehem be killed. They moved to Nazareth some time later following the death of Herod, avoiding Bethlehem because it was now under the rule of Herod's son Archelaus. (He even tries to make this relocation to Nazareth yet another fulfillment of prophecy, though there is no known passage in scripture that corresponds to his reference—2:23.)

No scholar today takes seriously Matthew's claims in this regard. Most agree that Matthew has invented (or perhaps repeated) this tale to explain how it was that Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem as prophecy required. It also allowed him to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses—a reoccurring theme in his gospel. For example, Jesus' escape from Herod's massacre of the children in Bethlehem echoes the escape of the infant Moses from the attempts by the Egyptian pharaoh to kill all of the male children of Israel.

Given then that the reference to Bethlehem is pious fiction, all theories about the star that take seriously the claim that the magi were directed there by Herod (Matthew 2:9-10) and that seek to explain how the star could lead them there are immediately suspect.

Matthew's approach to scripture is also evident in his statements concerning the arrival of these magi. Here is how he describes their arrival in 2:11:

On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Though he does not cite scripture specifically here, Matthew has nonetheless constructed this scene from popular themes and motifs in scripture, a practice similar to

what is known in Jewish tradition as Midrash and Haggadah. More specifically, he has drawn upon two passages that express a reoccurring theme in the Hebrew Bible—that of foreign rulers paying homage and bringing gifts to a Jewish ruler. Compare the passage in Matthew mentioned above with each of the following:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him May gold of Sheba be given to him,... (Psalms 72:10-15)

...all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.... (Isaiah 60:6).

Sheba was a region in southwest Arabia, identical with present day Yemen, and lay to the east of Judea. This was probably the basis of Matthew's claim that the magi came from the east (the word magi denotes any number of professions of eastern origin involving the magic arts, in this case astrology). Like their counterparts, the magi bring gifts of gold and frankincense (incense) and kneel or bow before Jesus in recognition of his kingship. That Matthew does not adhere to each and every detail in the scriptures that he uses here (e.g. the visitors are not kings) is not significant; such a free and creative use of scripture is a recognized characteristic of the technique being employed. And the similarities are striking enough in any event to point to obvious borrowing.

The presence of gentiles in this episode also serves an added ideological purpose. At the time of the writing of this gospel deep antagonisms had begun to develop between the early church and Judaism, mainly because of the inability of the first Jewish Christians to secure converts among the mainstream Jewish population. It was for this reason that the church turned its attention to the larger gentile world and eventually prevailed there, all the while condemning the Jews for having rejected the promised Messiah (John 1:11). These antagonisms, clearly visible in the gospel of Matthew (most notably in Chapter 27 where the Jews are condemned in perpetuity for securing Jesus' death), are given considerably added force by the fact that the Jews are absent at Jesus' birth, while gentiles make a special effort to recognize and commemorate the event.

Significant also is the fact that only the magi saw the star. Herod knows nothing about it until the magi explain their reason for their journey to Judea. Yet a genuine celestial object would have been as visible in Judea as it was in Mesopotamia, and Jewish culture had its own astrological professionals (namely within the priesthood) who would have been the first to appreciate the significance of such an object. The improbability of the scene is only increased by the suggestion that non-Jewish mystics were both sufficiently well-versed in Jewish messianic lore and took seriously its expectations and promises of a redeemer king, i.e. that they shared Matthew's own beliefs in this respect. The magi here manifest a familiarity with and devotion to Jewish messianic beliefs that were not even

shared by many Jews of the day!

The entire episode then is historically absurd on almost every level. Even so, it does not follow that the star must also be a fictional story element, It could be argued, despite its ring of convenience, that a genuine celestial event around the time of Jesus' birth inspired the birth tradition told by Matthew. But even here the available scholarship strongly indicates otherwise. For as it happens, the motif of a bright, rising star had strong messianic overtones in Jewish and Christian tradition, a fact that makes it almost certain that this was the reason for Matthew's decision to incorporate it into his birth story.

Beginning in the second century BCE various apocalyptic and messianic sects had become an increasingly visible element of Jewish religious life. Common to most of them was the belief that they were living at the end of history and that their members alone constituted the faithful remnant of an increasingly corrupt and impious Israelite nation. Such groups searched the Hebrew Scriptures for passages that spoke both of events in their own day and of messianic figures associated with the Day of Judgment. One passage in particular that caught their interest was an oracle in Numbers 24:17:

.a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...

In its original context the passage probably served as an oracle of King David, but in later times it came to be associated with messianic figures, probably because the idea of the Messiah was closely bound up with ideas about divine kingship. One of the earliest examples of this interpretation of the passage appears in a work called the *Damascus Document*, written no later than the second century BCE:

the star is the interpreter of the Law who came to Damascus, as it is written; 'A star shall come forth from Jacob and a scepter shall arise from Israel.' The scepter is the prince of all the congregation... (CD 7:19, 'translation by Davies).

The author of this material belonged to a community that had seceded to some degree from the formal religious establishment and Temple cult in Jerusalem over issues of religious observance and the proper interpretation of the Torah. This community was under the guidance or leadership of one or more messianic figures one of whom (the star) is identified here as the Interpreter of the Law.

More telling references appear in another work called *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a text which purports to be a record of the death-bed statements of the 12 sons of Jacob. Originally a Jewish work, it was reworked by Christian writers who saw in its expectations of an eschatological priest-king allusions to Jesus:

And then the Lord will raise up a new priest to whom all

the words of the Lord will be revealed. He shall affect the judgment of truth over the earth for many days. And his star shall rise in heaven like a king; kindling the light of knowledge as day is illuminated by the sun.... CFL 18:2-3, Translation by Kee).

And there shall arise for you a Star from Jacob in peace: And a man shall arise from my posterity like the Sun of righteousness, walking with the sons of men in gentleness and righteousness, and in him will be found no sin... And he will pour the spirit of grace on you.... ('IJ 24:14, Kee).

The oracle in Numbers also appears in an eschatological context in the writings of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo and in several of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The association between a rising star and the Messiah was not confined solely to literature. Half a century after the author of the gospel of Matthew penned his work, a Jewish rebel named Bar Kosiba (son of a ram) launched a revolt against the rule of Rome (the Second Jewish War of 130-135 CE) and came to be regarded by many as the Messiah. He was later remembered as Bar Khokba (son of a star, a name he was given, so tradition claims, when Rabbi Akiba identified him as the Messiah foretold in the prophecy in Numbers 24:17.

The messianic interpretation of the star in Numbers 24 is well attested in Jewish and Christian messianic tradition. The primary weakness of this hypothesis, insofar as the star of Bethlehem and Matthew's nativity story is concerned, is that in each of the aforementioned cases the star in Numbers 24 is equated with a Messiah figure directly and not with a sign or some other object associated with the arrival of the Messiah. However, it should be remembered that it is in the nature of such traditions for exegetes to make free and creative use of the original material for their own purposes. What is significant here is the strong association that existed in messianic circles between the motif of a rising star and the arrival of the prophesied Messiah on the basis of the oracle in Numbers 24.

Science and Faith

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the stories of the parting of the Sea of Reeds (i.e. the Red Sea) and the appearance of the Bethlehem star are not descriptions of real historical events, but are instead creative works that make theological or ideological points through literary techniques common in their time. The miracle of the Sea of Reeds builds upon the ancient combat myth in which a storm God defeats His rival the Sea; the rise of the Bethlehem star fuses details and ideas drawn from Jewish and Hebrew prophecy, poetry and psalmody in order to promote the claim that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in Hebrew scripture. Therefore, it is inappropriate to treat these stories as historical, and subject their particulars to scientific analysis with the intent of providing causal explanations.

Moreover, many of the theories in question are guilty, to varying degrees, of reading the biblical texts in a very selective manner and of ignoring those details that do not suit their theory. Mention has already been made of the fact that all theories of the miracle at the Sea of Reeds ignore those verses that state that the water was divided in an instant to form walls on each side of the fleeing Israelites, and focus instead on those that emphasize the gradual withdrawal of the waters under the force of steady winds. The situation is even worse where theories of the Bethlehem star are concerned. Advocates for these theories routinely ignore or gloss over the plain sense meaning of the text and interpret its description of the event as only an approximation of what the ancients actually saw. In this manner troublesome and inconvenient details are simply explained away.

For example, Matthew 2 clearly states that the star went ahead of the magi as they left Jerusalem and traveled south to Bethlehem. It then stopped over the place where the child had been born (Matthew 2:9, 10). Clearly the star is not a natural celestial object moving in accordance with natural law, and cannot therefore describe an actual astronomical event like a planetary conjunction, a comet, a nova or anything of this nature. Its behavior serves a simple and clear narrative purpose: it leads the magi to the place of Christ's birth. As Arthur C. Clarke observed: "Of course if one accepts as literally true the statement that 'the star which they saw in the east went before them until it stood over where the young child was', no natural explanation is possible."

Moreover, the most popular theory—that of multiple planetary conjunctions—fails to take seriously the claim of the story that the object seen by the magi was a single star rather than a cluster of objects moving in close proximity to one another. Again, Clarke has noted that modern calculations and measurements have demonstrated that the planets were always far enough apart to be distinguished

from one another by the naked eye and could not have appeared as a single bright star.

Such details, though, are hardly trivial or inconsequential to the story. To the contrary, they constitute the core of what Matthew has to say about the star, concerning as they do the very circumstances of its appearance and the manner of its behavior. Ultimately then, the theories in question pave the way for themselves by completely ignoring or explaining away almost everything of significance the story has to say about the very object they claim to be explaining!

Many of these theories have come from well-meaning scientists and the like whose theories are undermined not by bad science but by their unfamiliarity with the relevant biblical and literary scholarship. One can understand how astronomers, for example, unversed in such scholarship and looking at the matter from the perspective of their own training, might be tempted to see in Matthew's story allusions to a real celestial event, given that people throughout history have been prone to attributing mystical and magical properties and meaning to astronomical phenomenon.

The same cannot be said though, for those commentators who are pious Christians (or Jews) and who offer their theories as a way of defending the historical reliability and truthfulness of the biblical record. The irony here obviously lost on them is that if they are right, then what we have in these stories are not miraculous events made possible by the hand of God as claimed, but instead fully natural events that some ancients mistook for miracles and around which they built their traditions. At best, one would have to assume that God concealed His divine hand behind purely natural events. It is hard to understand why this strategy of purchasing historical accuracy by rationalizing away the most important part the story—the miraculous elements—would appeal to any person of faith.