

Is There a Gospel in the Stars?

Is There a Gospel in the Stars, a Christian Zodiac?

by Charles Strohmer

Synopsis. 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 non-occult meaning for the Hebrew patriarchs and ancient Israel about the story of Israel's Messiah-Redeemer, which today Christians know as the gospel of Jesus Christ. The story of ?the gospel 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, if not 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. Proponents merely purport to have uncovered the gospel-meaning of the stars and constellations, which ancient cultures clouded over through astrology. This article examines why a normative view of Scripture and history suggests the doubtful merit of the theory.

Nineteenth century connection

At the very outset, it must be said that the 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, as here, it will be necessary to avoid secondary considerations that may be interesting but would sidetrack us.

Seminal background material for 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, through an impressive and systematic exegesis surrounding hundreds of verses from the Bible, she proposed gospel-meanings for these signs and stars. In 1862, this encyclopedic knowledge eventually became the 4-part book *Mazzaroth, or the Constellations*.¹

By the late-nineteenth century, two ministers, one in the United States and one in Britain, released books almost concurrently that quarried extensively from Rolleston, popularizing her theory and eventually over-shadowing it. The first of these, *The Gospel in the Stars; or, Primeval Astronomy* (1882),² was written by Joseph A. Seiss (1823-1904), a prolific theological author, eloquent orator, and Lutheran minister in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. In Britain 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 had 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. Something doesn't seem to be sitting quite right with many Christians about GIS theory.

In recent years, a number of parachurch organizations and respected 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 websites that now promote it and the cassette tape sets now being circulated. Some enterprising folk in North Carolina even hold an annual ?Mid-Atlantic Star Party? every year for amateur astronomers and stargazers that 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 (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 seems to be preventing 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 key biblical texts, especially Genesis 1:14-18; 3:1-15; Job 26:13; 38:31-32; Psalms 19:1-6; 147:4; and Matthew 2:1-12. Advocates employ these passages to support the ABCs 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 began to get lost after the Fall; nevertheless, the heavens still "declare" this special message, as people like 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" (Ibid., pp. 49-50). Hickey, in *Signs in the Heavens*, includes Leviticus 10:16 ("the goat of the sin offering") for Capricorn, which astrologically is "the goat," 6 and Psalm 92:10 ("a wild ox") for Taurus, "the bull" (Ibid., pp. 89-100). 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." 7

The astrological meaning of 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, pp. 107-115) or "Prince and Savior" (Fleming, pp. 115-121). 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, pp. 19-25) or "the coming Shepherd" (Fleming, pp. 35-41). Using Psalm 91:13, Seiss "redeems" the Scorpio myth from its astrological meanings (surrounding Mars and Juno) by giving it the biblical identity of the Genesis serpent and the story of the battle between Christ and Satan (pp. 43-51).

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" (Ibid., p. 15).

The insider's Eden

The origin of the theory sounds strange, too, and Seiss fails to bolster the credibility of GIS theory by his view of its origin. Citing the Jewish philosopher Philo and the Jewish historian Josephus, Seiss states that the patriarch Abraham, when sojourning in Egypt, taught the true meaning to the Egyptian priests, who eventually distorted that meaning in astrology (Ibid., cpt 16) But Seiss then goes farther back. He suggests that Abraham received the true meaning through Noah, who probably received it from Methuselah, who had received it from the sons of Adam, especially Enoch and Seth.

But where did these two men get it from? Seiss states that they got 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" (Ibid., p. 152), apparently including the gospel message written in the stars, which Seiss calls "a pictorial memorial of [the] promised Redeemer" (Ibid., p 158).just when this alleged knowledge was given to Adam reveals the most fundamental flaw in GIS theory

Adam, therefore, was the first person to have the original true meaning of the stars: how human salvation and history would play out in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This meaning of the stars began to be passed on from Adam generationally but at historical points became distorted through pagan mythology and astrology (Ibid., p. 150).

A careful look at just 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" (Ibid., pp. 151-152). 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" (Ibid., p. 158). (Although much of that language and reasoning sounds like a doctrine straight out of nineteenth century New Thought, we must ignore those implications here.)

What Seiss is saying that God gave Adam the gospel story before the Fall. I have not been able to find where any contemporary GIS

advocate disagrees with this belief. Fleming, 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" (Fleming, p. 15). Kennedy writes 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; Kennedy, p. 12).

The probationary pickle

Knowing when indicates the theory's fatal theological and philosophical flaw: Adam knew "from the very beginning" that he was destined to sin. The irony is that GIS theory gets trapped in what its Christian advocates would accuse astrologers of: 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 blame 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 quite plainly indicates 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 been 'written' in the stars for them to 'read' before they sinned. The irony is that GIS theory gets trapped in what its Christian advocates would accuse astrologers of: the determinism of a fatalistic worldview.

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, because 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 okay. We're simply not allowed to think like that (see Romans 6).

If the gospel in the stars message was given to Adam and Eve before the Fall, it makes God's original command to them meaningless 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. 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 . . ." 8 "Adam, who first heard that wondrous promise, repeated it, and gave it to his posterity as a most precious heritage" (Ibid., p. 27). Bullinger knew Seiss's work, but it is not clear if by such statements Bullinger meant to refute Seiss's belief that Adam had been given 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. [For Part 2 of this article, click on "View All", below.]

Confusing nature with the Bible

Another basic flaw in GIS theory is its confusion of the theological categories of special revelation with 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 writes that the heavens "prophesy" God's purposes and counsels (Ibid., p. 6), 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" (Seiss, p. 12). Inappropriate moral authority of nature is also exemplified when Fleming speaks of the "prophetic outline" of the twelve signs (Fleming, p. 30) and when Hickey states, "The reason God placed stars and planets in the heavens was to reveal knowledge about His Son, Jesus Christ" (Hickey p. 10).

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 some 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 just enough to condemn you. By locating God's prophetic testimony in the stars, GIS detracts from the significance and necessity of special, propositional revelation ? that is, the Bible.

Ironically, 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 general and special revelation. The psalm is divided into two parts (vv. 1-6; vv. 7-14), with each part describing a source for acquiring 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. The order and design of this ?natural witness? of sun, moon, and heavens points to a Creator. 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. To the psalmist, this is such obviously ubiquitous ?speech? that it is here personified as a ?words? and ?voice? that ?goes out? everywhere in the world (vv.2-4).

But this is not describing a prophetic, or even a propositional, 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's a figure of speech, but you get the message.

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. in particular. 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. salvation, the gospel. There is no evidence anywhere in Scripture to suggest a hidden or overlooked propositional, moral revelation in the stars, or in any other objects of nature. By locating God's prophetic testimony 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 surrounds with GIS pertains to its advocates' interpretation of the 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? (Fleming, pp. 17-18).

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. 9 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 (Num. 2:2; a tribal ensign); confirmation of a prophetic word (1 Sam. 2:34; Isa. 37:37), a prophetic symbol enacted 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. Another example of context-specific usage is ?signs? to remind people of significant divine actions of the past and the special covenants God has established with them, such as the rainbow and circumcision (Gen. 9:12; 17:11), or eating unleavened bread (Exod. 13:7-9), or consecrating the firstborn (Exod. 13:15-16). The Sabbath, too, which clearly has nothing to do with the stars or other heavenly bodies, is even referred to in the Torah as an ??ôt.?it is easy to imagine the Bible's quite perfunctory attitude toward the stars here as being a kind of slap in the face to the Babylonians' all-encompassing use of the stars

The context-significant 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 regulated. The stars of verse 16, which GIS theory makes the principal focus, are quite junior to this primary meaning, so much so that they seem to be stuck in the background as a rather minor element, almost as an afterthought worth a mention but not deserving the attention the text gives to the creation of 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 imagine the Bible's quite perfunctory attitude toward the stars here as being a kind of slap in the face to the Babylonians' all-encompassing use 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 was meant to suggest a kind of prophetic message written in the stars and its consequences, we would expect to see a word like "dûr, 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 which 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.

GIS theory would gain some credibility if the Hebrew patriarchs had been carrying on generationally from Adam a tradition that taught their version of GIS theory about a Messiah-Redeemer to come. But Dr. Edward Goldman, Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati), doesn't buy it. There is no Hebrew literature that confirms the existence of an ancient Israelite GIS theory. Although there were, in Rabbinic literature, a few scholarly references now and then to astrological symbols, Dr. Goldman told me, "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." 10

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 at trying to do that, and also to then develop and use their 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 and moral authority upon mere natural objects (stars and planets) that they don't have

An analogy not quite as distant from us may help illustrate this point. Take the palm of the hand a quite natural enough object meant for quite 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 use tea leaves to make a hot 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 the person 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. Years ago, crystals were naturally used in radio sets, and today 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 are several Swarovski crystals so that we can see the colorful rainbow designs made by the morning sun as it shines through the crystals into our kitchen. So there is a natural, or proper, use of crystals. It would be another story entirely if my wife and I believed, as some people do, 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 (non-idolatrous) way in which the stars can be known or used, such as for a natural revelation of the knowledge of God, or in the science of astronomy to help determine tides, eclipses, growing seasons, and so on. Further, 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 a spiritual and moral authority on them. That is the real distortion. That is how the "message," the natural message of the stars, is falsified.

The known unknowns

History presents GIS advocates with many other problems that their theory has not been able to sufficiently resolve, such as (1) the ambiguities surrounding the origin of the constellations, (2) its advocates' reliance largely to the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman zodiacs, and (3) who the Magi were, and what was the 'sign' they followed. Further, many of the myths surrounding the stars are so lost in antiquity that it is not possible to determine with any kind of faithfulness what pagan meanings they may have once had. Yet advocates even bring up 'lost' meanings (to build up their interpretive pattern) as authoritatively as they do the known pagan meanings.

And we have not even discussed the implications of their reliance on pagan authorities. For instance, as just about everyone knows, astrologers use Aries as the starting point of the zodiac and Pisces as the end. But that mythology start and end is completely wrong for supporting the course of history that GIS theory purports to advance. To get around this discrepancy between theory and history, GIS advocates begin and end their zodiac where the mythology is more supportive of their interpretation; that is, with Virgo and Leo. Why? Incredibly, appealing to pagan sources of authority, both Bullinger (pp 20-22) and Seiss (p. 27.) advocate 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. It's the sort of mischief one eventually lands in when persisting to get round the cherubim who guards entrance to Eden with his flaming sword.

(Charles Strohmer is the author of several books, including *What Your Horoscope Doesn't Tell You*, *The Gospel and the New Spirituality*, and *America's Fascination With Astrology*, which includes a comprehensive Appendix critical of GIS theory.)

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