

Christmas Star Not Identified, Says UM Prof.

For almost 2,000 years people have marvelled at the Christmas star.

Hazel M. Losh, University of Michigan associate professor of astronomy, says: "Although we are continually reminded by the limited description of the event and the uncertainties of early calendars that any exact astronomical explanation or determination of the time of the Christmas star is out of the question, the bright planets are always promising and alluring."

Mars dominates the night sky during December, although it is rapidly drawing away from us, she continues. "It shines more brilliant than any star except Sirius."

"Another planet, Venus, is just coming into the evening sky. By the end of December, it will set nearly an hour after the sun, and may be seen in the twilight near the southwestern horizon. This planet has often been pointed out as a possible interpretation of the Christmas star."

Meteors are also mentioned in connection with the Star of Bethlehem, but their transient character seems to rule them out immediately," she adds.

"After Orion comes after the horizon, he is followed by Gamis Major, his faithful dog. No difficulty ensues in identifying this figure, as Sirius, its brightest star, outshines all others in the sky. From time immemorial Sirius has been watched, admired and revered, rising in the early evening as it does around Christmas time. It was worshipped by the Egyptians, and temples were built in its honor."

Sirius, one of our nearer neighbors, is only 8.6 light-years distant, she notes. "It is about 27 times more luminous than our sun. If our sun were removed to the same distance as Sirius, it would appear to us only as bright as the North Star. On the other hand, if Sirius were as close to us as the sun, the earth would quickly be consumed."

Sirius' companion is believed to be so dense that if a pint were placed on the earth's surface, it would weigh more than 25 tons, she adds.

Another attraction in the Christmas sky is the Northern Cross or Cygnus. "It is at its best during the evenings of the month as an impressive symbol of the season. As it moves from the zenith to the northwest, it gradually assumes more and more of a vertical position, until by Christmas Eve it stands outlined against the northwestern sky, the long bar of the Cross standing upright," she concludes.

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