

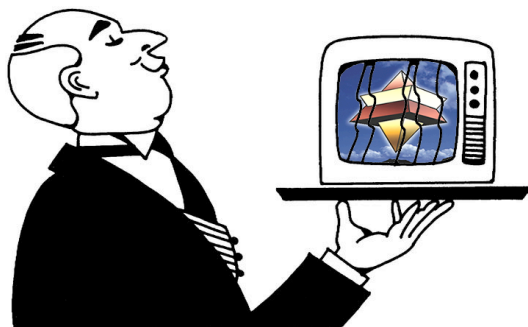
Issue 22 Winter 2008

CLOISTERS

Give your
brain a
treat

The
magazine
of The
New
Curiosity
Shop



Cloisters**The magazine for The New Curiosity Shop****Issue 22 Winter 2008****Contents**

Editorial.....	2
So you want to be a writer.....	3
Was there really a Christmas Star?..	4
Christmas Present.....	10
The Desert Saga continues – the search for the ancient Holy Pathway.....	12
Book Review.....	16
Paul's Puzzle.....	18

Want to comment on any item in Cloisters? Visit our blog at:
blog.newcurioshop.com

Editorial**Mark Toner**

Well, here it is: Merry Christmas, as they say. We hope you'll enjoy curling up by the fire and reading our winter edition of Cloisters.

In the Christmas theme, I've produced a little guide to what the Star of Bethlehem may have been. Follow up the references and make what you will of the various arguments about this iconic star.

Also, in keeping with this time of looking back and reminiscing, Jo Howard has provided a little scenario with which you might identify. If you do, maybe you'll want to do some writing in the long dark winter evenings. Noel Chidwick has some ideas to help you with just that project. He has identified a number of courses that might get the budding writer off to a good start.

The next instalment in our Desert Archaeologist's adventures finds Howard in a seasonal mood. This issue we learn about the Coptic connection to Christmas.

The New Curiosity Shop has just entered a new chapter in its history and Arthur Chapman has the details. The NCS has just become a LearnDirect Scotland Branded Learning Centre and he explains it all on page 13. Our reviewer, Alison Tunnicliffe, has been learning about "Bad Science" with Ben Goldacre. She gives us her view on this eye-opening book.

You may need to wake up the old grey matter after the onslaught of Christmas fare and Paul's Puzzle is a lengthy and involving affair, just the thing to stretch the intellect. Olly is on hand there too, an antidote to an over-stressed brain.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from us all.

Cloisters - Magazine of the New Curiosity Shop

Published by the New Curiosity Shop.

Address: Newbattle Abbey College, Newbattle Road, Dalkeith, Midlothian, Scotland, EH22 3LL.
Web: www.newcurioshop.com. e-mail cloisters@newcurioshop.com. Phone: +44 (0)131 208 1900.
Skype: newcurioshop

Editor: Mark Toner, Executive Editors: Noel Chidwick and W Arthur Chapman.

©2008, The New Curiosity Shop.

So you want to be a writer...

Noel Chidwick

You know you want to be a writer when all you want to do with your time is write. But sometimes you need to pause, try something new, take a fresh look at things. We have a few online courses here at the NCS that you might find useful.

For the budding journalist, we have **Understanding Journalism.**

Krys Wareing, our tutor and course

writer, is an experienced journalist and will give you the low down on the world of the journalist, and help you on your way to becoming a journalist. Or if you are looking to write your own life story, how about our latest course, **Your Story - Writing a Life?** This course will help you organise the events that happened in your life and help you write your memoirs for your own family to enjoy, or even beyond. Jo Howard is your life guide for this course.

If you are plotting your first crime thriller, you would find **Introduction to Forensic Psychology**

invaluable. Dave Webb, your hard-



boiled tutor will take you safely by the hand through the murky underworld of the criminal mind. With the **Wonderful World of Psychology**, Zaynab D'eElia



will help you understand what makes us tick: invaluable support for character development in

your new novel.



Or how about understanding a whole new field to help you create a strong background for your

characters? **Introduction to Archaeology, Astronomy for**

Beginners, The Ecology of Your Garden will each

give you the opportunity to learn something new, maybe inspire

a new character for your stories? And we have a modest history section for you to peruse too!



Our courses are short enough to get you started, and online you can take

them in between spells of writing: a whole new perspective for a New Year of writing.

To find out more, visit our web site at **www.newcurioshop.com**



Was there really a Christmas Star?

Mark Toner

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel'."

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you have found him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Questions, questions...

We astronomers are often asked the question, particularly at this time of year, "Was there really a Christmas Star?" This is often followed by, "Which one is it?" As a result, many astronomers have delved into the possibilities and come up with a few answers. The result really depends on whether you treat the bible as literal truth or as poetic truth.

The author of Matthew was beginning the story of how Jesus of Nazareth came to deliver his message of good news and wanted to convey the importance of this event, basing the narrative on an oral tradition handed down since the days of Jesus' ministry. Some of these stories may



have been factual, others may have borrowed from other traditions; we just have the Gospel of Matthew to go on and make our own decision on the truth.

Look at the text

A good place to start is with Matthew's Gospel itself. Reading the text above, you will see that a group of Magi came from the east. We don't know how many there were, nor do we know their names. However, we do know that the Magi were likely to have been Zoroastrian scholars from Persia, as believed by early Christians. In any case they would have approached their astronomy in the spirit of their age; that is with a strong mix of science and magic. This means that the star may have been prominent astrologically, rather than visibly, a possibility supported by the fact that Herod's men were unable to follow the star for themselves. Their religion forbade astrology and so they would not have known that the conjunction of the Moon

and Jupiter in Aries was significant.

So, the text gives us Magi from the east who saw "the star" of "one who has been born King of the Jews." The star did not lead them directly to a stable, either. It just alerted them to the birth of a king and they had to ask where he was. It was the Jewish

priests and teachers who identified Bethlehem as the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah. After they set off for Bethlehem, they saw the star again and this is where the story of following it to

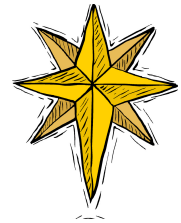
Bethlehem comes in. There are actually two star appearances in the text; the first in the east and later in the south-west, if you follow the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem as the Magi must have done.

Another point of timing might be significant here. Notice that Herod asks the Magi exactly when the star appeared. Later he was to order the execution of all boy children aged two and under. Perhaps the star had appeared two years earlier?

When was Jesus born?

For an astronomer to calculate what was going on in the sky around the time of Jesus' birth, we need to know when Jesus was born. "That's easy," I hear you say. "He was born on the 25th December AD 1." That would be a safe bet if anyone had recorded his birth at the time, but no-one did. Our dating system of Anni Domini being the years of the Lord was introduced in AD 531 by Abbot Dionysius Exiguus when he sorted out the date of Easter. He had to go on a lot of tradition and guess work and we are pretty sure he got it wrong. Also the date of 25th December was borrowed from the Roman feast of Sol Invictus in an attempt to Christianise a popular pagan winter festival. Looking at our current celebration of Christmas, this may not have been a successful effort.

Matthew's Gospel has Jesus born during the reign of





Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC. The other Gospels and historical sources have Jesus born between 7 BC and AD 7 with the favourites being 5 BC or early 4 BC.

Early Christian Tradition

Christian writer Origen wrote his interpretation of the Christmas story in AD 248. He was of the opinion that the star was a comet. This is not an unusual idea at a time when comets were considered to be sent as warnings by God, usually involving a change of king somewhere.

A survey of classical paintings of the Nativity will reveal many comet images. Olga's Gallery is a good place to look. There you will find Giotto's Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, with the comet high above the stable.

Astronomers come up with some ideas

The first big name astronomer to tackle the Christmas star question was Johannes Kepler, the man who came up with the three laws that describe how the planets

orbit the Sun. He had observed a sequence of conjunctions between 1603 and 1604. All planets move around the sky near a great circle that represents the projection of the Earth's orbit on the sky. This circle is called the ecliptic. A conjunction is an astronomical event where two planets appear at the same part of the ecliptic as observed from the Earth. Kepler watched Jupiter and Saturn do this three times in December 1603, an event called a triple conjunction. Then Mars joined with both planets in a triangular configuration, called a massing, in the autumn of 1604. There was great interest in this event as ancient astrological texts predicted that a comet or some other unusual omen would follow such a sequence of triple conjunction and massing, and so Kepler and other astronomers of his day looked for something to happen. By an amazing coincidence a nova appeared between Jupiter and Saturn on the day following the massing, thus "confirming" the astrological prediction. A nova is an explosive event when a star expels some of its outer material into space and brightens dramatically, sometimes making an otherwise invisible star seem to appear as a new star in the sky; hence the name nova. The nova of 1604 was a particularly violent event more correctly described as a supernova, in which most of the outer material of the star is blown off.

Now Kepler did some research and calculated when such a triple conjunction, followed by a massing, would have happened before. He found one in 7 BC, followed by a massing in 6 BC, and assumed that this must have created a

nova too. The nova would have made a good Star of Bethlehem. A place to look for ancient nova events is in the records of Chinese imperial astronomers whose job it was to look out for startling changes in the sky. Although we now know that a nova is not caused by planetary conjunctions, Mark Kidger weighed in recently with a new nova theory in his book *The Star Of Bethlehem* (Princeton University Press, 1999). He identifies the star DO Aquilae with Chinese and Korean records of a nova in 5 BC or in 4 BC. The 5 BC event would fit in with the chronology of Herod's death in late 5 BC or early 4 BC. However, this "guest star" as these events were recorded is listed as a "hut" star. This is a guest star with a tail - a comet. The new star of 4 BC is listed as a "po" which has no tail and could be either a comet or a nova but leaves little time for the events to unfold before Herod's death.

If the Star of Bethlehem had been a nova, The Magi would have needed other information to prompt them to travel to Jerusalem. All objects in the sky appear to travel from east to west throughout the day and they would have been very silly to follow every new star in this way. Over a longer period of time, it can be noticed that planets tend to drift to the east relative to the stars and comets generally tend to do the same, although some comets go in the opposite direction. The Magi would have been aware of these phenomena and would not have been prompted into unusual action by them. We need to find a motivation for their journey and their interpretation that the star heralded the birth of a king of the Jews. Perhaps the answer is more in the



precursor events of the triple conjunction and massing of planets that would have caused some expectation?

Mix in some astrology

Conjunctions and the constellations in which they occur are the bread and butter of the astrologer and all have symbolic meanings. Any astrological event would have to have been an unusual one to prompt the Magi's journey. So anything that tends to happen every year or so, would not count for much.

We need a few more facts about ancient astronomical and astrological practices before we delve in here. Since the days of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, the times when constellations and planets rose just ahead of the Sun have been treated with importance. The Egyptians divided their year according to these "heliacal risings". The time is defined to be the morning when a particular object is seen to rise in the east, just before the glow of sunrise renders it invisible. As the Sun appears to drift eastward against the fixed stars, this date signifies the return of a constellation of stars to the night sky after it had been hidden in the glare of the Sun during the day. The phrase translated in our Gospel passage as "We saw his star in the east"



actually translates from the Greek as “We saw his star as it rose.” This phrase has often been interpreted to mean a heliacal rising but the Greek does not unambiguously say that. However, a heliacal rising would be an important moment in the eyes of the Magi.

This takes on some importance when we note that, in March of 7 BC, Jupiter and Saturn rose together just ahead of the Sun, and then made by a proper conjunction in May, in the constellation Pisces. So the conjunction happened shortly after the heliacal rising. Due to the relative motions of the two planets and the Earth, the Magi would have seen the planets make another conjunction in Pisces, in September, and then, again, in early December, completing the triple conjunction, a very rare event. This was followed by another rare event as Mars joined Jupiter and Saturn in a triangular massing at the end of February of 6 BC,

just before all three planets disappeared into the west behind the Sun.

In Babylonian astrology, Pisces was considered the constellation of the Jewish people, Saturn represents the divine father and Jupiter his son. A significant astronomical event involving Pisces, Saturn and Jupiter would have implied something was about to happen involving a divine son in the land of the Jews.

Jupiter is implicated in another theory, not surprisingly as it is the star of kings. Michael Molnar suggests that Jupiter and the Moon might be involved. When one astronomical body passes in front of another, it is said to occult that other body. An example is an eclipse of the Sun, when the Moon occults the Sun. At a very close conjunction, it is possible for an occultation to take place and this often happens when an apparently large body like the Moon is involved.

There was a close conjunction of Jupiter and the Moon, on 17 April of 6 BC, just at their heliacal rising. It is very likely that it was also an occultation but might have been difficult to see, so close to the Sun. This happened in the constellation of Aries. So an astrologically important event happened in the east. Now Aries, in Greek astrology, which was dominant at the time, represents the people of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Palestine, and Coele Syria, all within Herod's kingdom. Jupiter represents a king and a conjunction with the Moon a king's birth. This gives a prediction of a king's birth in the kingdom of Herod. As you can see, a lot depends on which astrological system was used by the Magi: Greek or Babylonian. In the time of the Roman Empire, the Greek systems were the rule of the day. Later in 6 BC, there were other events involving Jupiter. Due to the relative motion of Jupiter and the Earth, it appeared to stop in its movement against the stars and even went into reverse for a time. This could have been interpreted by the writer of the Gospel, who was not an astronomer, to mean that the star stopped over Bethlehem.

So What Was The Star?

The astrological interpretations make the star of Bethlehem the planet Jupiter. Maybe you prefer a nova? Then again it could all just be a story embellished with portents and signs gathered from the culture of the time in order to fill in gaps in the early story of Jesus. Or, it could be that an angel led the way to Bethlehem, looking like a star. We cannot know for certain.

References

The Bible http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3822

The Calendar, David Ewing Duncan, Fourth Estate, 1988, ISBN: 1-85702-979-8

National Maritime Museum: <http://www.nmm.ac.uk>

The Nativity Pages, <http://www.btinternet.com/~prgreetham/Wisemen/home.html>

Olga's Gallery, <http://www.abcgallery.com>

Planetarium Show Errors, John Mosley of the Griffith Planetarium, http://www.ips-planetarium.org/planetarian/articles/common_errors_xmas.html

Space.com http://www.space.com/spacewatch/spacewatch_001226.html

The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi, Michael R. Molnar, Rutgers University Press, ISBN: 0-8135-2701-5 and interview at <http://www.eclipse.net/~molnar/>



Christmas Present



Jo Howard

The sky gleamed as the sun moved behind a pile of low clouds. Jessie looked out through the sitting-room window at the darkening winter street and thought about her life. She did that a lot these days; her memories dragging behind her like the train of a wedding dress, luxurious on top and picking up dust and curious oddments underneath. A sharp grinding noise as a boy went by outside on a skateboard, trying a trick – he always did it just outside her house, perhaps because it was the smoothest part of the pavement. Noticing again his sharp face and intense concentration, she was reminded of her brother.

She picked up the album from the sofa beside her to look for that exact photo, the one of

William on his bike, looking ahead down the hill with that same expression on his face. It must be somewhere in the “pictures from William” section; she remembered coming across it and remembering that look, the look he had when all he was thinking of was the next thing he was going to do, always some new trick. She found the picture, smaller than she remembered and barely fixed in – the glue must have dried out over the years. It fell from the page, fluttering upside down to the floor. On the back she saw her own childish writing – “William. May 1950 Box Hill. Taken by Sammy.” How particular she had been in those days, needing the security of detail. They had laughed at her then, but now it was paying off, as the facts of the family story were all here, neatly annotated and connected.

She liked this one too much to give it away, and anyway it was a summertime picture. This presentation was to be about





Christmas, all their Christmases over the years. Nothing like as many photos of course, as it was summer holidays that drew out the cameras. But she had old Christmas cards, some treasured ones drawn by children, there were photos of Christmas trees with the same decorations over the years. The decorations – they told their own story. They wouldn't fit in a book, though. How else would she put the thing together? She remembered the little wooden deer that she had loved so much, glued it together every time it broke or got trodden on, wrapped it in cotton wool on Twelfth Night when everything went back in the attic.

Suddenly the whole project seemed to be changing. She could certainly throw something together for May's seventieth on Christmas Eve – few pictures, some old mementos, maybe a tape of the old songs she used to dance to in the kitchen. "Some kind of rag bag"

she found herself thinking, like the bag that they used for patchwork. A bit of this and that. She remembered how a pattern had seemed to grow as they sewed, and wondered what would emerge from this collection for her aunt. Would May like it? Would it make sense to her?

Putting the album back on the side-table, Jessie found herself thinking "May's not the only one who's had a life", and wondered what someone else might make of all the bits and pieces of her own life. The idea didn't appeal. An urge to find the appropriate pattern from the fragments of her own memories took over – it was her story and suddenly she wanted to be her own author, make sense of it all now, in the present. She went back to the desk and started to write as the street lights came on.

Jo is tutor of *Your Story - Writing a Life and Coping with Change* at The NCS Online College.



The Desert Saga continues – the search for the ancient Holy Pathway

Howard Middleton-Jones

As we are rapidly approaching the traditional time of the Christmas celebrations, no matter what take one has on the actual origins of this period, I thought it would be appropriate to continue from where I left the readers in the Egyptian Western Desert in the last issue, and to track down a lesser known route of the flight of the Holy Family.

Christmas is celebrated world-wide on December 25th, and you may read in another article in this issue that date is not actually 'cut and dry', however, as my main interest is in Coptic archaeology (The Early Christian Period in Egypt) I am due for another Christmas, as the Coptic Christmas is celebrated on January 7th. Bear in mind that the Coptic calendar follows closely the original ancient Egyptian calendar.

The Coptic tradition adheres to the 'Flight into Egypt' by the Holy family, and it is this theme that I work around by sharing our experiences and discoveries while on one of our trips in the desert in 2005-06.

On our second trip to the Wadil El-Rayan, located in the Western Desert approximately 350 Kilometres south of Cairo and considered one of the driest areas in the world, we were greeted by the Coptic monks, who live in the cave hermitages, with the usual excitement and hospitality and who were only too eager to hear of our latest news. On this occasion we had more time to search around a wider area, such as up on the high Plateau and a number of cave sites. It is at one of these cave sites that we discovered a number of interesting finds and artefacts that had possibly never been seen outside the local monks living in the area.



On our previous visit, we were shown the site of a 'lost' monastery apparently this area during the 4-5th Centuries were festooned with Monastic communities where approximately 4000 monks lived. However, when the Arab invasion occurred circa 650 CE (AD) many monks fled these communal areas to live in various caves throughout the area, as was common in many other areas in Egypt. All that is remaining today are scattered pottery shards of the period and remnants of a number of walls, level with the sandy surface.

To cut an extremely long and bizarre series of events short, our second forage in

the desert areas nearby came up 'trumps' in a variety of ways. One of my theories was to ascertain if the route of the recorded Holy Family came within striking distance of the area we were staying, especially as there is a known ancient caravan trail passing through the area from the Nile Delta in the North and from the east, going south to the Kharga oasis. However, as far as we are aware, no research or work has been carried out in this area of the Western Desert, it is an area in one way that could be regarded as the 'forgotten land'.

Back to our discoveries; One of the monks led us to a cave high on a plateau, where within we discovered not only human remains, including a skull, but the remains of a horse, that of the lower cannon bone (foreleg) and lower phalange. But the important find here was that the hoof of the horse was fully shod with a special type of shoe. In the early Roman period, when horses were being used in desert areas they were shod with a leather shoe called a 'hipposandle' which had a curved up front (much like a snow ski) for walking through sand. The important discovery we came across however was that this 'hipposandle' was constructed from iron. From other discoveries made within the cave, it became apparent this was a site used by early travellers, circa early 1st C – 4th Centuries CE (AD).

The Coptic monks informed us that we were the first 'outsiders' to see these remains, and that there were several other cave sites with similar remains. This fact appeared to confirm my original idea that this ancient caravan route from the North East may have indeed been the very one





that the Holy family used. In addition, it is only about 40 kilometres away from one of the known recorded religious sites that the family visited, that of Ihnasiya. The original church at this site unfortunately was destroyed in an earthquake over 700 years ago.

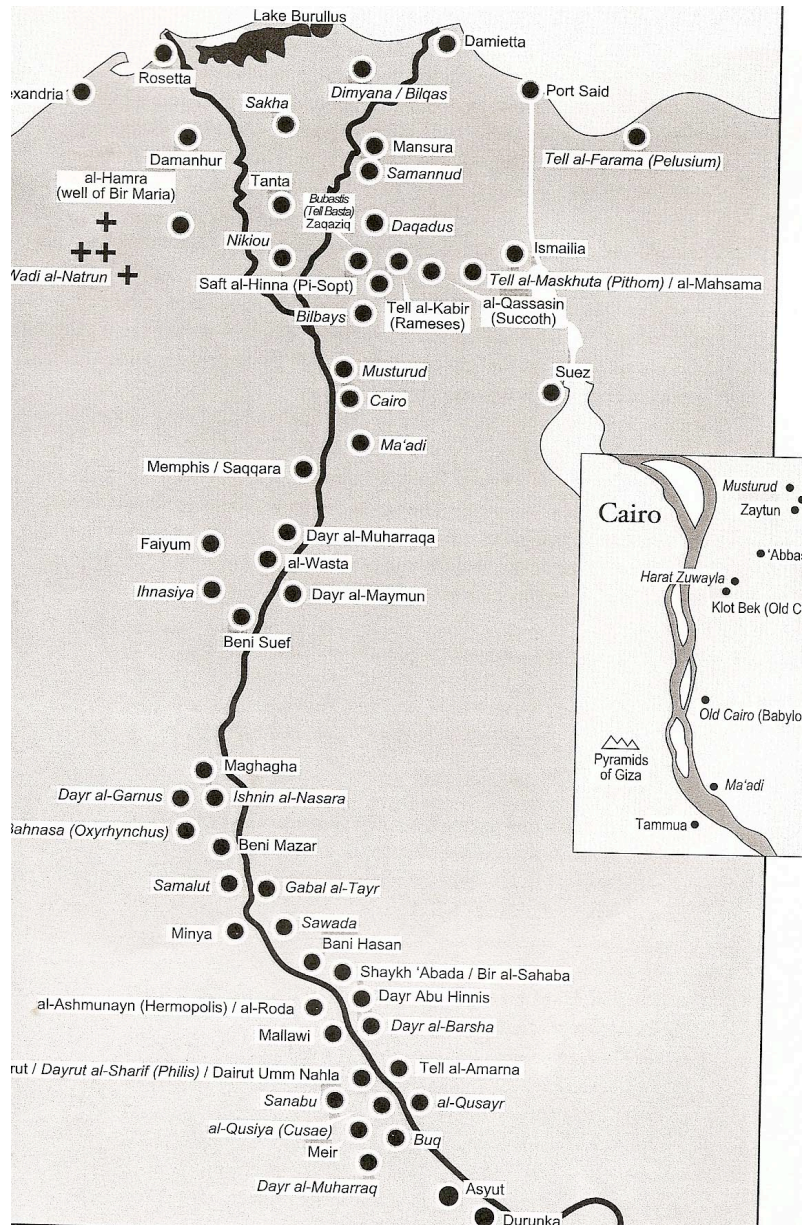
Naturally more research is required, but this was a great start on our journey of discovery. Unfortunately, due to the restrictive political and cultural legislations in Egypt, we were unable to bring back any samples for further analysis. I should offer a caveat here in that we were in the area as the guests of the Coptic monks and thus under their guidance and beliefs.

The Flight of the Holy Family

So where did the traditional 'flight' take place and what areas were visited? There are many recorded sites throughout Egypt where it was considered that the Holy family stayed during the period circa 7

and 4 BCE (BC). In essence, it is known that they fled to escape the repressive legislation of King Herod, fleeing Bethlehem and headed for Egypt via Hebron, and Pelusium, crossing the isthmus at Al-Qantara arriving at the Nile Delta through the Wadi Tulimat. They continued south to Heliopolis (now a Northern suburb of Cairo) then onto the Roman fortress of Bablyon (Old Cairo). The sights and wonders of the pyramids of the Giza Plateau, the stepped pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara and the Dashur pyramids further south must have been an awesome sight for travellers at that time.

The southernmost area they visited and stayed was at the site of Dayr al-Muharraq, now also called the monastery of the Holy Virgin, and according to tradition, this was the place where the first church in Egypt was built. It was here that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and asked him to return to Israel. Thus



the family retraced their steps north, lodging in a cave at Old Cairo, which is situated below what is today the church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus.

According to Coptic tradition, the flight of the Holy family lasted for three years, six months and ten days.

Whilst I have visited Egypt twice in 2008, I have yet to return to the 'forgotten

lands' in the Western desert, however, I do intend to return soon to pick up the trail of this 'holy pathway'. I wonder what 'treasures' and discoveries await me?

May I wish all the readers and staff a Happy Christmas, a peaceful new year, and a Happy Coptic Christmas for January 7th.

Book Review



Alison Tunnicliffe



Bad Science by Ben Goldacre is an excellent book, written by a man who is clearly extremely angry at the misrepresentation of science in the media, especially with relation to health. The book might have been more aptly named 'Bad Scientists' or 'Bad Health Science', as these are two main areas he concentrates on.

I found the first half of the book to be an invaluable, easily digested guide to important medical concepts such as what makes a rigorous clinical trial, the placebo effect, and how to analyse scientific literature to see if a medical trial was a fair test. People as a rule are 'blinded by science', and Goldacre explains how this can be exploited by charlatan alternative therapists, nutritionists and ultimately the media to persuade the general public to

buy into products and theories which at best, do nothing, and at worse, cause illness or death.

He uses the chapter on homeopathy to introduce trials. There have been many trials on homeopathic remedies. Most have found the remedies to be no better than placebo (a dummy pill), and he explains in detail how the remaining seemingly triumphant trials were fatally flawed. His explanations on areas such as statistics and how to analyse huge collections of trials at the same time were so well written that you will not even realize that you are learning a difficult concept. While it is true that homeopathy can help if we believe it can, wholly due to the placebo effect, it is sobering to read that there is a homeopathic version of the MMR jab. Bad science indeed.

He goes on to talk about the lack of evidence for supplementation of our diets with products such as antioxidants and fish oils, before analysing the credentials of two of their main champions, Dr Gillian McKeith and Professor Patrick Holford... to their detriment. He is disgusted by McKeith's lack of basic scientific knowledge, but acknowledges that she appeals to the public's desire for scary women and humiliation.

After concentrating on alternative therapies in the first half of the book, he moves onto mainstream medicine in the latter part. He uses the same analyses of trials to explain how big pharmaceutical companies can attempt to hoodwink doctors into believing in their product. Techniques such as ignoring dropouts (who tend to drop out because the

medicine hasn't helped), and manipulating the data to their advantage are subtle tricks companies can use to trick busy, tired doctors if they are not paying close attention.

He blames the media for misrepresenting research in order to sell papers; indeed, he blames them for keeping ill people out of hospitals for fear of contracting MRSA and he blames them for the reintroduction of a measles problem in the UK, following the MMR jab hysteria. The problem with the media, he explains, is that we are all exposed to it, and if something sounds sciency, then we are very likely to believe

that the writer knows what they are talking about. What a horrible thought: that the need to reach a deadline and sell a story can, and does, cost lives.

This book is selling in huge volumes all over the UK, which is excellent news, as it will serve to educate its readers in all of the areas mentioned. Its moral is don't believe what you read in the papers... investigate the original literature yourself. Goldacre has now given you the tools to do it.

Alison is tutor of Researching Herbal Remedies: The Science behind the Old Wives' Tales at The NCS Online College.

NCS achieves "Branded Learning Centre Status"



Arthur

We are pleased to announce that early this month we were successful in our application to become a Learndirect Scotland Branded Learning Centre. We anticipate that this will help to raise our profile within Scotland and help to increase the importance of online learning in general and increase the interest in our courses in particular. Look out for more news and developments over the coming months.

What is Learndirect Scotland?

Learndirect Scotland is part of Skills Development Scotland and supports the Scottish Government's - Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy. Its mission is to "help individuals and small businesses across Scotland to realise their potential through learning, at a time, place, pace and style that suits their needs." It seeks to bring people back to learning and so improve their personal and work-related skills. For more information go to: www.lds4partners.com.

What are Branded Learning Centres?

These are centres, ranging from small groups with one

or two staff members to large colleges and other academic institutions, which are committed to the Pledge to Learners (www.learndirectscotland.com/Whoarewe/Pledge+to+Learners/) and offer a variety of ways of learning often more informal and flexible than traditional methods. We believe that NCS online College fits in well with three of the key aims of branded learning centres by offering courses which suit the needs of our students (time, place, pace and style of learning), are flexible and informal. See our Pledge to Learners at:

www.newcurioshop.com/learners_pledge.html



Paul's Puzzle



Paul Holmes

Farrendepth

Standing in the conference hall bar before dinner on the first evening, I encountered two puzzling experiences. I had bumped into an old acquaintance at the lobby of the hotel who I hadn't seen since our first year at the Galactic Flying Academy some years previously. He had stayed at the Academy to pursue a teaching career, while I had sought my fortune as a trader.

"Hey, Singleton, you old space pirate" came a loud and raucous shout from the other end of the reception counter, "How are you keeping?", he asked, not waiting for an answer. "Let us have a drink in the saloon, I've so much to tell you."

My friend, commonly known as Bob, since his name is almost entirely

unpronounceable by humans, continued to talk loudly and swiftly, while managing to place an order at the bar at the same time.

"One pint of Old Extraordinary for my Earth friend, please, and I think I'll have a sonic screwdriver, and a small packet of those cheesy things."

"Coming up, Sir," said the bar-creature. "That'll be six credits, please".

We found a table and waited for the robot to deliver. Bob regaled me with tales of his unusual and occasionally dramatic escapades, when suddenly he let out a cry which, if at all possible, was even more animated than his previous conversation.

"Hey, Pucini, you old tax dodger. How are you keeping?"

His friend walked across the saloon grinning self-consciously. "Walls have ears, Bob" he chastised. "What are you drinking?"

We gave him our order and he trotted over to the bar. "One pint of Old Extraordinary for the Earthling, and two sonic screwdrivers, please. Oh! and three packets of those cheesy things."

"Coming up, Sir. That's ten credits, please. The robot will bring them over in a minute."

"Let me introduce you. Pucini, this is Captain Singleton. Singleton, this is Pucini Farrendepth."

"Farrendepth !" I exclaimed, not meaning to be rude.

"What an interesting name. Why, on earth we use to have a temperature scale called Fahrenheit." I told my new acquaintance about the scale that was in use before Celsius had been adopted universally. "Freezing water was 32°F (and 0°C)" I explained, "and boiling water was 212°F, for some strange reason, and 100°C. I have no idea why he chose those numbers, but I do remember that -40°F was the same as -40°C."

"This is all quite extraordinary," chirped up Pucini. "On my home planet, we have a temperature scale just like your Celsius, called Centiscale, with zero and 100 being freezing and boiling water. But we have, or at least had, and this is the extraordinary bit, a Farrendepth scale, named after one of my ancestors 15 generations back, who was an eminent professor of astronomy."

"The scale differs from yours only slightly. Freezing water was actually 33°F while boiling water was 213°F. I wonder if you can work out at what temperature both scales coincide. I'll wager you

a drink that you don't get it right first time."

I peeled a drip mat and scribbled for a moment.

"-41½", I declared confidently.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Pucini and Bob together. "But not quite right. Try working it out again on your way to the bar."

I stood up and took a few paces when Pucini called to me. "Captain, let me give you a clue." He held up both hands to reveal just four digits on each hand.

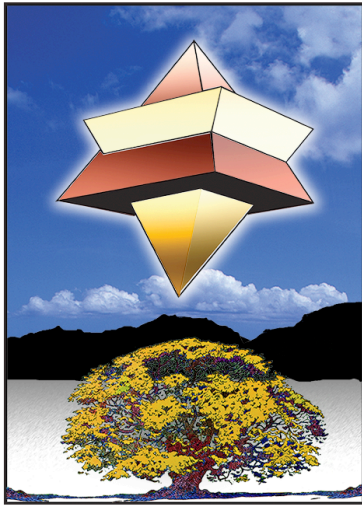
When I got to the bar, I ordered myself a pint, 4 screwdrivers (2 each to pay off the bet) and 7 packets of those terribly more-ish cheesy things. I was so engrossed in thought that I failed to hear the bar-creature ask for

payment. Casually, I proffered my card. "Galactic Express?"

"That'll do nicely, Sir".

How much was the round of drinks, and when does Farrendepth equal Centiscale?





The New Curiosity Shop
Online Learning College

Give Your Brain a Treat with Online Distance Learning

At The New Curiosity Shop we provide distance learning courses over the web: all you need is access to a computer and a desire to learn something new. All our courses are fully supported by a tutor.

Subjects include:

**Family History
Forensic Psychology
Astronomy
Archaeology
Italian for the Tourist
Philosophy
Journalism**

**HIV/AIDS
Scottish History
Science of Herbal Remedies
Understanding Dreams
Ecology of your Garden
Coping with Change
–and more.**

Most courses are ideal for the beginner

**Enrol at any time, learn at any time
phone: 0131 208 1900
email: contact@newcurioshop.com**

www.newcurioshop.com

