

Cleansing The Temple

7 March 2021

Kippax Uniting Church

Robbie Tulip

<https://rtulip.net/blog/>

Psalm 19:1-8, John 2: 13-17

Our readings for today are from Psalm 19 and the Gospel of Saint John. The Psalm explains how the glory of God is revealed in the magnificent order of the visible heavens. The Gospel reading tells of Jesus driving the moneychangers and their animals out of the temple in Jerusalem. I will use this opportunity to explain how these texts relate to my own theology, which differs quite markedly from conventional approaches.

Before getting into my own interpretation, it is important to reflect on the great power of the Gospel story of the cleansing of the Temple. The courage and vision of Christ are presented by John at the beginning of Jesus' public work with a physical attack on the hypocrisy of the established religion of his day. The underlying message of this dramatic event is that the institution of the temple had lost its way. Instead of a focus on divine truth, the temple had allowed shallow commercial interests to come to dominate its practice. Materialistic priorities had crowded out reverence and prayer. For Jesus, taking a whip to the traders showed his view that salvation comes through an ethical focus on high ideals. His strategic vision involved a complete reformation of Judaism to put God at the centre.

The true greatness of Christ emerges in this story of cleansing the temple. Jesus is the perfect man. After taking time in the wilderness to fast and contemplate the message of God, Jesus had come to see how the world fails to understand what God demands. His ministry sought to address the dangerous implications of continuing on this path of easy corruption and delusion. Jesus understood what had to be done to change the paradigm from the wide and easy path to hell to the narrow and difficult path to heaven. He explained the transformation needed through brilliant moral stories and actions, and had the integrity to follow through completely on his vision, suffering a cruel execution on the cross. His message of messianic leadership was vindicated through his resurrection from the dead, demonstrating that goodness is stronger than evil, and that hatred and error can be overcome through the pure love of God.

The Gospels tell a story with a profound ring of truth, providing a way to transform the degraded situation of our world. Unfortunately, the church today has difficulty getting people to listen to its message. This situation makes me wonder if the church today is in a similar spiritual mess as the Jerusalem temple that Jesus tore into. What really worries me is that Christian theology is viewed in the wider world as deeply flawed, with considerable justice. A profound existential conversation about the basis and direction of faith is needed, making sure our faith is grounded in reality rather than fantasy.

Modern culture has become quite hostile to religion, and instead largely takes its ethical compass from commerce and celebrity, with some recognition of the moral value of science. We are far from implementing rational scientific ideals throughout society, but it is well worthwhile comparing theology against the modern framework of scientific enlightenment. Science demands a central focus on evidence and logic, looking at the morality of our beliefs and actions in terms of their results in practice. When Christians assert that events occurred which science regards as impossible, and can only point to the claims in the Bible for evidence, a barrier of mistrust arises. Going back to the start of the modern scientific enlightenment, the philosopher Voltaire commented that believing absurdities permits atrocities. He meant by this that the church of his day had an imaginary fantasy mentality that was closed off to evidence. This attitude of believing things that were absurd resulted in

the church ignoring evidence of corruption, hypocrisy and immorality, with severe damage to its reputation.

Scientific criticism of faith has become even more influential today, with the rise of the internet. Everyone can now check and discuss claims that seem untrue. The modern trend is to be sceptical of claims that rest on traditional authority. As we know, the average age of church members is steadily getting older. Many churches face an inability to win new young members and transmit the faith between generations. And the parts of the church that do have success with the young are often more sectarian, holding to literal beliefs that are rejected by scientific people. That is an approach that can only offer short term success. The future renewal of the church has to rest upon a reconciliation of faith and reason. That means the church has to become more open to a discussion about how some core Christian beliefs have a primarily symbolic rather than historical meaning.

My view is that the roots of the moral problem of the church go all the way back to the establishment of Christendom by the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD. The message of the New Testament is morally sound, but was corrupted when the Emperor Constantine used the Nicene Creed to insist everyone in the empire should hold to the same doctrine. To end the political struggles caused by theological debate, Rome wanted to replace the early diversity of views with a single unified belief system. That meant that any ideas in conflict with the creed were declared heretical and anathema. Unfortunately, that caused the rich complexity of the early church to be lost.

The political victory of Christianity led to the idea of Gospel Truth, the belief that everything in the Bible is undeniably true. My view is that such literal approaches are incorrect. The real truth in the Bible is symbolic rather than literal, emerging with the underlying message about the presence of God in the world and how we can connect to God. This message is too important to allow disputes about historical facts to distract us from it. If we take the Bible too literally, Christians accept a lower standard of historical evidence than is generally used, which damages the whole reputation of religion. Instead, we should accept that the purpose of scripture to deepen our faith in God means scripture should be revered as a sublime poetic work of spiritual imagination. It really does not matter for Christian faith whether any specific claim in the Bible is historically accurate. Christ is the mediator between our world and God, and the point of the stories about him is to illustrate the meaning of this profound spiritual connection with the eternal divine truth of our creator.

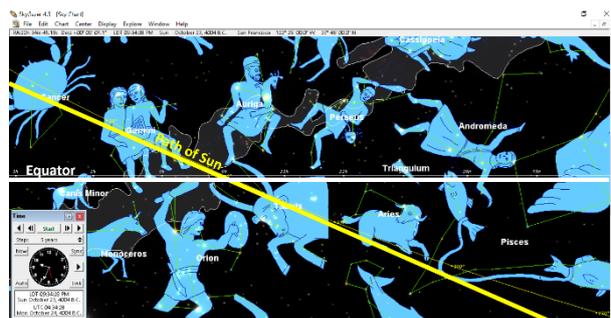
The two texts we have today can help us to reconstruct some of that lost complexity of early faith, by exploring how ancient theology was intimately connected to astronomy, a connection that was largely forgotten under Christendom. The three wise men in the birth story came from Chaldea, a nation with detailed records of stellar observation going back to a thousand years before Christ. Across Babylonia, Egypt, India and Greece, as well as in Israel, this religious function of astronomy was central. Watching the stars had the practical importance for the ancients of marking the seasons for agricultural production, defining the calendar. The stars of the sky were also imagined as symbolising the state of divine grace, while life on earth is by contrast in a state of deluded corruption.

My view is that astronomy strongly informed the underlying rationality of the original Christian theology, and that restoring this original linkage to observation of nature can put faith onto a more compelling and coherent foundation than conventional church dogma. Psalm 19 says the heavens pour forth speech. This remarkable image of cosmic order and beauty helps us to see how the eternal power and divine nature of God are manifest in the things he has made, as Saint Paul commented in Romans 1.20. The orderly stability of the visible heavens was a source of great wonder and awe and reverence for ancient religion. This sense of astonishment at the scale of the universe has only deepened within modern astronomy, although the religious connection has largely been lost.

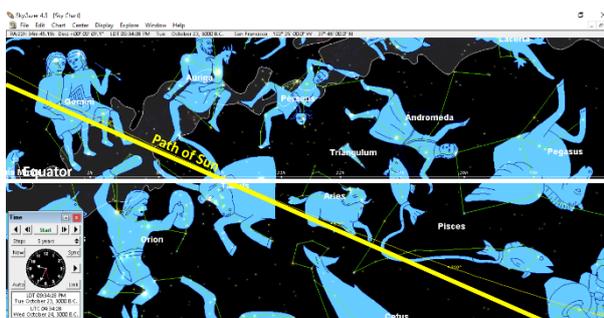
Exploring what Psalm 19 might mean by the speech pouring forth from the heavens, one intriguing possibility is the astronomical movement known as the precession of the equinoxes. This movement is caused by a slow wobble in the axis of our planet, like we can see in a spinning top. Each wobble of the earth takes nearly 26,000 years, and causes a slow shift of the stars against the seasons. Ancient astronomers from well before the time of Christ could measure this celestial motion, because every 2000 years the stars that used to rise or set at harvest time now appeared a month later, creating the idea of successive “ages” in history.

An intriguing question is how much this accurate observation of the slow shift of the heavens influenced religious ideas. The psychologist Carl Jung observed that the birth of Christ corresponded to the movement of the equinox point into the constellation of Pisces the Fish, suggesting that this slow shift of the stars matches well to Gospel ideas about Jesus as a fisher of men.

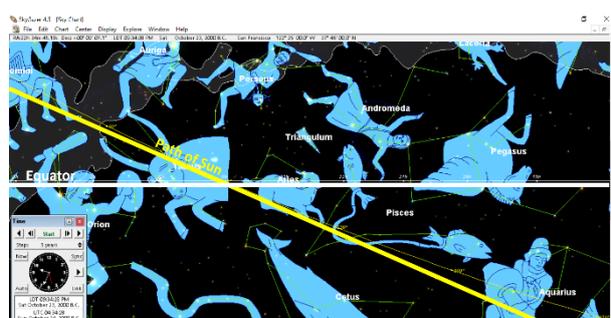
Here are some star diagrams I have made showing 7000 years in the stars, illustrating how the conventional Biblical timeline of history could have arisen out of astronomical stories. Beginning in 4004 BC, conventionally imagined as we can see here how the equinox point, where the path of the sun crosses the equator each year at Easter, was then in between the constellations of Taurus the Bull and Gemini



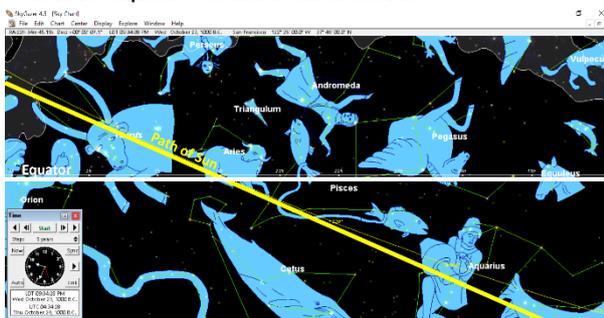
4004 BC - Equinox between Gemini and Taurus in Milky Way



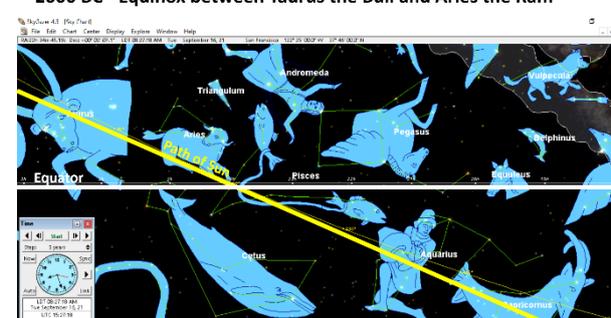
3000 BC - Equinox in middle of Taurus the Bull



2000 BC - Equinox between Taurus the Bull and Aries the Ram

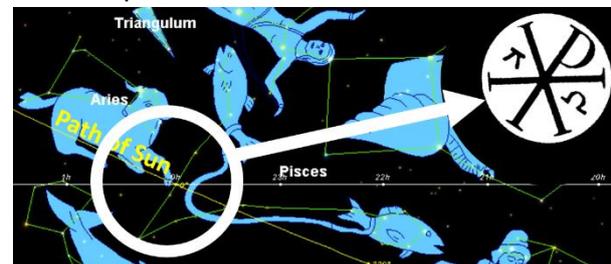


1000 BC - Equinox in middle of Aries the Ram

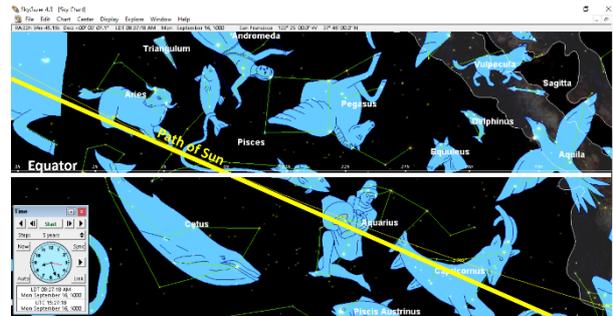


21 AD - Equinox between Aries the Ram and Pisces the Fishes

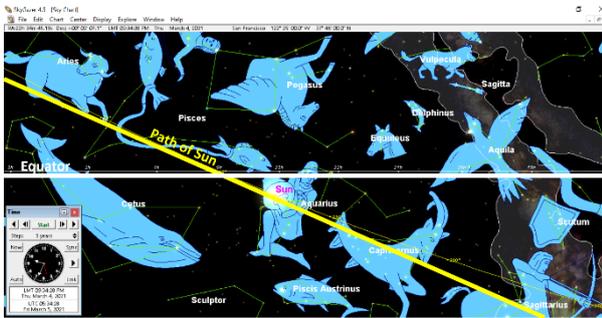
the twins. Moving forward in thousand-year steps, we see the Easter or Passover point in the stars had moved back through Taurus into Aries the Ram. By the time of Christ, the equinox point was about to enter the constellation of Pisces the Fish. The alpha and omega point of Christianity, the time of Christ, occurred when this X in the sky



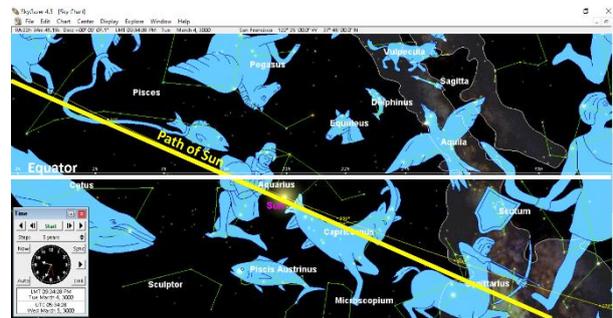
crossed the line of stars known as the first fish of Pisces. This moment created an imaginary shape the same as the Chi Rho Cross, marking a moment of celestial harmony between the stars and the seasons. Since then, the equinox has moved through Pisces, and is now nearing Aquarius the Water Bearer, which is why we are now said to be entering the Age of Aquarius.



1000 AD - Equinox in middle of Pisces the Fishes



2021 AD - Equinox between Pisces and Aquarius the Water Bearer



3000 AD - Equinox in middle of Aquarius the Water Bearer

This is all simple well-known astronomy. My view is that the authors of the Bible story were well aware of this information, and were part of a tradition that linked their observation of the slow movement of the stars to the ideas of faith.

John's account of the cleansing of the temple presents a remarkable example, one of many in the New Testament, that supports this theory. John tells us that Jesus made a whip of cords and drove the traders out of the temple, together with their sheep and cattle. The original community who developed the ideas in the gospel could readily see that this story was a parable for the



astronomical movement of precession of the equinox, which was then moving out of the signs of the sheep and cattle. Jesus began the new cosmic age of the Fishes, replacing the then ending age of the sheep, the two millennia when Passover occurred with the sun in Aries the Ram, defined in Judaism by the law of Moses, whose covenant had replaced the even earlier age of cattle, when the equinox was in Taurus the Bull. Therefore, for Jesus to end the corruption of the temple of God symbolised by trading of sheep and cattle also told a cosmic story of the birth of a new era. Jesus driving the sheep and cattle out of the temple of God represented the replacement of the old covenants of traditional Judaism by the new covenant of Christ, directly symbolised by the observable movement of the heavens.

My view is that the influence of this way of thinking on Christian origins was immense, but the clash with the simplistic supernatural dogmas of Roman Christianity meant that the role of astronomy in religion was suppressed and then largely forgotten. The authors of the Nicene Creed did not welcome discussion about how the timing and nature of Christ matched the stars. The whole Christian view that pagan thought was corrupted by fortune telling meant that such analysis was viewed with hostility.

Opening this discussion now presents an opportunity for dialogue about the underlying meaning of Christian faith. The Lord's Prayer invites us to hope the will of God should be done on earth as it is in heaven. The grandeur of the slow shift of the equinox explains the parable of speech pouring forth from the heavens, and the removal of the sheep and cattle from the temple is equally a parable for the observed movement of the stars at the time of Christ. Just as Christ provided the earthly reflection for the heavenly movement of the equinox point into Pisces, so too the Gospel story of the Second Coming of Christ reflects the ancient imagination of the distant future, the time now approaching as the equinox point enters Aquarius, a time when the message of Christ will finally be fully understood and implemented.

This explanation offers a way to place Christian theology into a scientific framework while retaining and deepening its moral meaning for our world through a vision of transformation and liberation, integrating our fallen situation into the big history governed by the slow sweep of the heavens. This material provides a way to make sense of Biblical theology in a systematic way that coheres fully with modern scientific knowledge. It invites us to ask who are the moneychangers in our temples today, and how the message of Jesus provides rich parables for the need to renew and reform our thinking to do the will of God, on earth as in heaven.

Amen

Readings

Psalm 19

19:1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. 19:2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. 19:3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; 19:4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, 19:5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. 19:6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. 19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; 19:8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; 19:9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. 19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. 19:11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. 19:12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. 19:13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

John 2:13-22

2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2:14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 2:15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 2:16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 2:18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 2:20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 2:21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 2:22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.