

“How Can God Know All the Names of the Stars?”

February 27, 2011

Grove Presbyterian Church

It is quiz time here at Grove! Pull out your pencils. Number 2 please.

Star Quiz -- Match the following (correct matches here):

A. How many stars are visible to the naked eye from Earth?	1. <i>From both sides of Earth, approximately 5,600 of those stars +6 magnitude or less</i>
B. What does the Greek word for planet mean?	2. <i>Planes, ‘wanderer’</i>
C. What is the speed of light?	3. <i>186,282 miles per second</i>
D. How many miles are traveled by light in a light year?	4. <i>5.88 trillion miles</i>
E. How many light years away (and miles away) is our nearest star (aside from the Sun), Proxima Centauri?	5. <i>4.24 (25.12 trillion miles)</i>
F. How many light years away is the center of our galaxy, the Milky Way?	6. <i>26,000 light years</i>
G. How many light years away is our nearest galaxy, Andromeda?	7. <i>2.5 million light years</i>
H. Sirius, the brightest star in our night sky, is how many light years away?	8. <i>8.58 light years</i>
I. How many light years away is the star Betelgeuse?	9. <i>640 light years</i>
J. If Betelgeuse were to blow up, how long would it take for us on Earth to see it explode and disappear?	10. <i>640 years</i>
K. How many minutes does it take light to travel from the Sun to Earth?	11. <i>8.5 minutes</i>
L. If a car were going 100 miles an hour non stop, how many years would it take for that imaginary car to drive to the star Polaris?	12. <i>3 thousand million years</i>
M. How many miles away is the Sun from Earth?	13. <i>93 million miles</i>
N. What is the etymology of the word, zodiac?	14. <i>Circle of little animals</i>
O. What is the Greek word for star?	15. <i>Aster</i>
P. How many stars are believed to be in our galaxy?	16. <i>200 billion stars</i>
Q. How many planets have been found outside our solar system, so far?	17. <i>300 planets</i>
R. For each person on Earth today, how many galaxies are there in the known universe?	18. <i>20 galaxies</i>
S. Vega, the 4 th brightest star in our sky, gets its name from Arabic, meaning ‘swooping eagle.’ How many different names (historical, pre-historical, astronomical, religious) does it go by?	19. <i>40 different names</i>

T. Sirius means in Greek, 'scorching.' What is the Hebrew name for Sirius?	20. <i>Sihor (borrowed from the Egyptians)</i>
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Why the quiz?

Basically, to impress upon us how vast this astral reality really is.

Of course, the Galileans -- Jesus' family, friends, and all -- wouldn't have known 99.9 % of what we today know about astronomy. We have telescopes. We have Hubble orbiting up there taking pictures of the far, far reaches of the universe, peering toward the big bang, peering back in time. We have Stephen Hawkins and NOVA on TV.

The people of Jesus' time would have known only what they could see with naked eye. Given the reality of no electricity, no light pollutions, lives spent in deep darkness except for dimly burning wicks, they would have marveled at the patterned motion of that giant clock in the celestial sky.

Neither, of course, could they have guessed the three dimensional depth of that celestial show up there at night. For them it was flat, two dimensional, as if inscribed upon the bottom of an upside-down bowl.

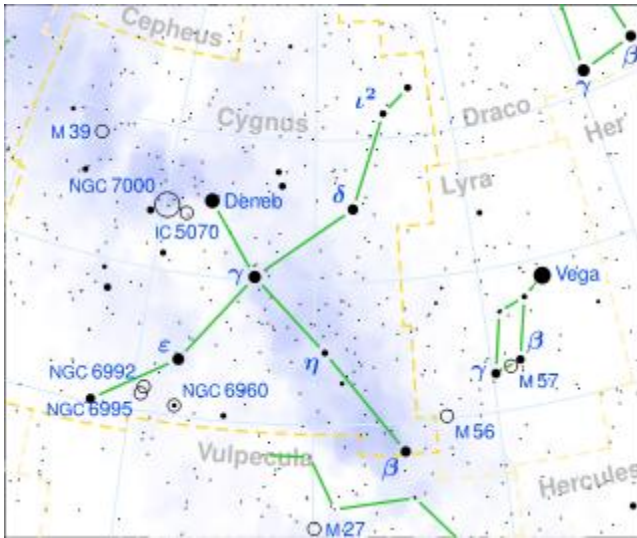
Let me demonstrate. I remember an experiment with the Boy Scouts one night at camp out over at Bill Cole's place. We grabbed three different Scout leaders and made them move across the dark field away from the pavilion where the boys waited. The leaders all carried flashlights. We had one stop about twenty yards out and kneel down. We had the second stop about forty yards out, pulled him a little to the side, and had him kneel down. The last leader we took sixty yards and had him stand tall and hold the flashlight as high as he could. With them pointing the flashlights toward the boys we told them to turn on the flashlights. Then we ran back to the boys. "What figure, what shape do you see framed by the flashlights?" We asked. "A triangle," they all replied. "Great."

Then we had them follow us around to look at the leaders holding their flashlights from the side. The flashlights weren't even along the same plane, but yards apart. The Scouts gained a sidewise sense of the layered depth of these constellations.

We gaze up at the stars that form the Northern Cross, an asterism within the Constellation of Cygnus the Swan, and it seems to us star-points drawn on flat paper. Not so. Deneb, the top point of the cross, is 3,200 light years from Earth, while Albireo, the bottom point of the cross is a measly 385 light years away.

Pretty cool. A source of sheer wonder and breathtaking awe.

***O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?***



Of course, there is nothing two dimensional about the cross.

What was the Confirmand Question for this morning? Oh, yes, time to get back to it:

How can God know all the names of the stars?

Are we talking about the ones the Hebrews could see only with naked eye? Or all the stars in all the galaxies we moderns suspect are out there? Which would be about 400 million stars times each of the 200 million galaxies. Check the math. That's a bucket-load of stars.

Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are!

Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle little star...

And which names? Hebrew, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Sumerian, Canaanian, English, astronomical?

My guess is this is more than describing a divine fact; something theological is behind all this. In fact, there is a Psalm that probably is the source of this young person's question. Probably taken from Psalm 147: 4:

Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.

Let's skip back to our reading from Isaiah, for Isaiah (as did all the Hebrew prophets), is busy here mocking astrology and the folly of astrologers. He's taunting proud Babylon.

...let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall you...

Remember, the Hebrews were unusual in their religious beliefs and practices, trying to stand out from the superstition prevalent in the cultures surrounding them. So the Hebrew prophets, as a warning, scoffed at worship of stars, the veneration of moon and sun. You think them gods. We laugh. Yahweh made them. They praise Yahweh. They do nothing but tell time, signs of the seasons of our lives, and give us wonder.

Much of the Babylonian religion viewed the stars as gods. Their heavenly movements determined our mortal itineraries, our fates on Earth. The Egyptians worshipped the star Sirius as the bringer of life, because the star shone coincident with the flooding of the Nile and the fertility brought to the sandy soil by the flooding. The Greeks borrowed the Babylonian horoscopes and began to soothsay and manipulate others through this astral superstition.

Of course, we could toss in here how we do the same. Check your horoscope lately? Scratch us and we are a superstitious lot. Come trouble, we lapse into turning even God into some talisman. God must be angry at me. What can I do to curry God's favor? What bargain can I cut?

And then there are the stars who walk among us. Them of special privilege and veneration. Them of gold oscar idols. Our overpaid athletes, movie celebrities, and darlings of the media. If Lady Gaga cuts her hair, so do millions of girls and boys.

My guess is that more than describing a divine fact, something else is behind all this disdain for star worship. We are not slaves to these stars.

*The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves...
Julius Caesar, 1:2:140-141*

Listen to the proclamation in the story. This is the key to the art of hearing the Bible and listening to its message. Listen to what Psalm 147 affirms. The Babylonians think their fate is caught up in the stars. Hence their devotion and fear of the stars. What you idolize you eventually resent. The stars take the blame. The stars dictate our fortune. The stars manipulate. The stars give us our sense of who we are.

They are wrong.

The folly of failed veneration. Looking for power, value, and importance from false sources. We hear this from today's reading from Acts as well. In this case, an astrologer, a sorcerer, repents of his silliness in thinking that stars control our human fate and give him his worth and purpose. He learns to repent of deceiving people and himself. He discovers the true source of who he is. Not fate, but faith.

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of

God that is called Great.” And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.