





Jupiter and Saturn will be the brightest things in the sky after sunset on Monday

OLLIE TAYLOR/BNPS

# Jupiter and Saturn: Heavenly sight to appear for first time since 1623

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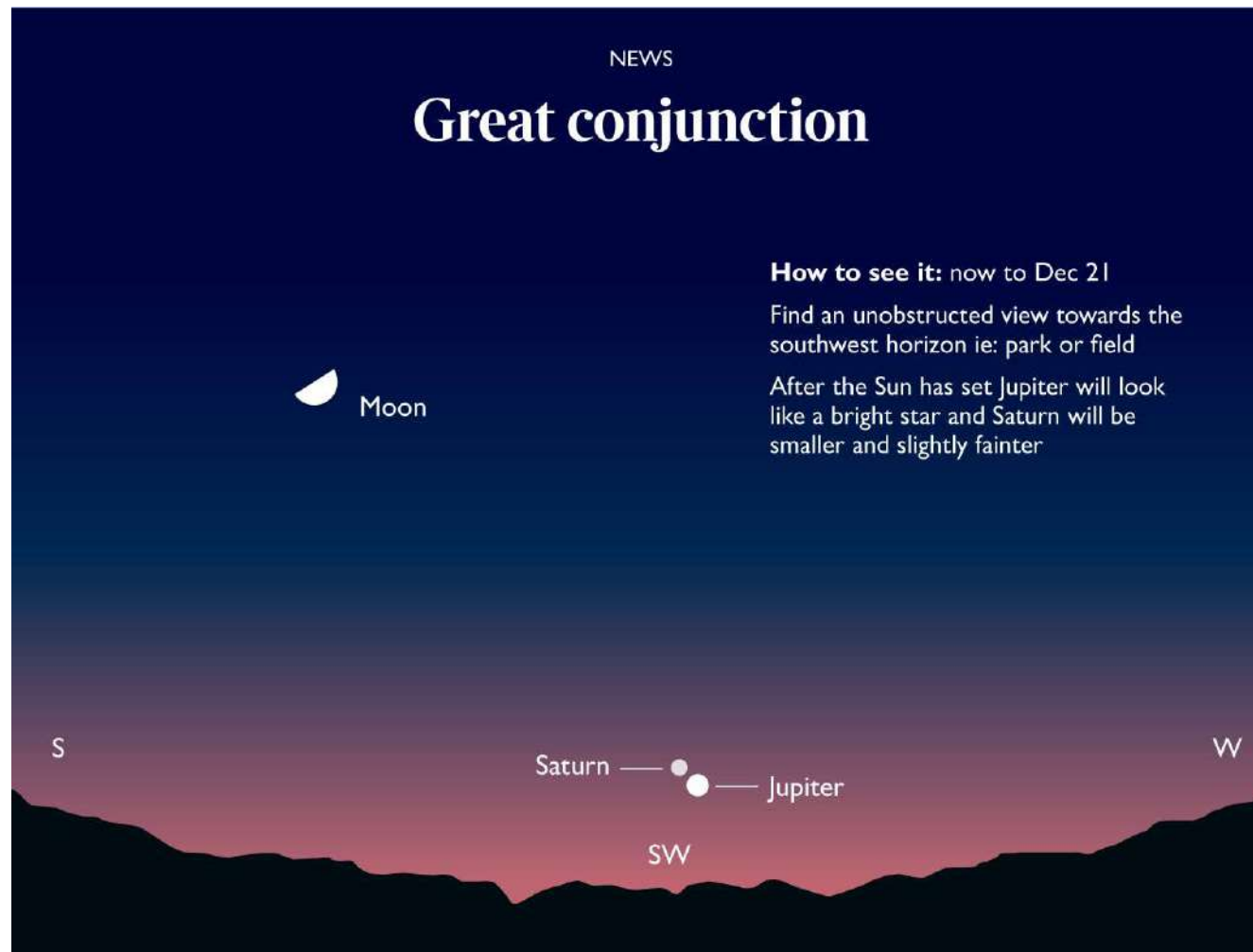
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The two largest planets in our solar system are to provide the first glimpse in centuries of a celestial phenomenon that the Vatican has said may explain the Star of Bethlehem.

[Jupiter and Saturn](#) will appear closer in the night sky on Monday than at any time since the 17th century, coming together in an event known as a great conjunction.

To find them, look south-west low into the sky as soon as the sun sets.



They will be the brightest things you can see, just 0.1 degrees apart, separated by a distance about one fifth of the diameter of the full Moon.

Conjunctions like this are unusual, with Jupiter and Saturn last appearing so close in 1623, the year in which Shakespeare's collected works were first published and 14 years after Galileo made his first telescope. On that occasion, the two planets were

close to the sun and difficult to see and they do not appear to have been observed. The last time they were both this close and so easy to spot was in 1226.

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Brother Guy Consolmagno, the astronomer who leads the Vatican Observatory, said a conjunction was one of many potential explanations for the star described in Matthew's Gospel that leads the wise men to the infant Jesus. "This year is special because one of the more popular explanations for the star is a close conjunction of bright planets [and a] conjunction just like that is going on overhead and it's going to be visible to anybody with a clear sky," he told an online lecture arranged by BBC *Sky at Night* magazine.

Since the exact date of Jesus's birth is unknown it is hard to say what heavenly signal might have marked the event, he said. It was likely to have been between the

years 8 and 6BC and other theories include a comet or a brightly shining nova.

Johannes Kepler, the 17th-century German astronomer, investigated whether the Star of Bethlehem was a great conjunction (conjunctions are “great” when they involve Saturn and Jupiter). He calculated that the planets did meet in 7BC. There was also a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in 2BC.

“It’s not that modern astronomy can’t find an explanation for the Star of Bethlehem, it’s that we’ve got too many candidates,” Brother Consolmagno said. “Maybe it wasn’t a star at all. What if the Star of Bethlehem was a miracle?”

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The positions of Jupiter and Saturn grow close in the sky about once every 20 years. Henry Throop, an astronomer in Nasa’s Planetary Science Division, said: “You can imagine the solar system to be a racetrack with each of the planets as a runner in their own lane and the Earth toward the centre of the stadium. From our vantage point, we’ll be able to see Jupiter on the inside lane, approaching Saturn all month and finally overtaking it on December 21.” The two gas giants will remain roughly 450 million miles apart in space.

Robert Massey, deputy executive director of the Royal Astronomical Society, said: "It's one of these phenomena that don't mean very much scientifically but nobody alive has ever seen anything like this before. And for people who have never seen a planet it's a good way to introduce them. It's a free treat and after a complicated year we could all do with one of those."

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