

MENU

MONDAY JANUARY 25 2021



A shooting star during the Geminid meteor stream in the starry sky above Lake Kochelsee in Germany

MATTHIAS BALK/DPA/AP

WEATHER EYE

## Jupiter and Saturn produce a sight not seen for nearly 800 years

Paul Simons

Tuesday December 15 2020, 12.01am, The Times

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Heavenly sights appeared on Saturday night in parts of the country where the sky was clear. The annual Geminid meteor shower put on a magnificent display of shooting stars, as debris from a rocky asteroid called 3200 Phaethon burnt up in the Earth's upper atmosphere. This year's display was particularly good because there was almost a new moon, so there was no interference from moonlight — video of the display is [here](#). The meteor shower will continue for a few more nights, although it will not be as intense.

A pair of unusually bright lights also shone in the western sky in the evening — these were Jupiter and Saturn, with Jupiter the larger of the two. Over the coming days the two planets move

even closer together in the night sky until on December 21 they will almost converge. This is the first so-called conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in nearly 800 years, so no one is exactly sure what the sight will look like, although it will partly depend on local atmospheric conditions and how good someone's eyesight is — poor vision will make them look like one big light. An added bonus is that the planets will also appear to be larger when they are low on the horizon, although this is an optical illusion. This is a phenomenon best known from when the moon seems much larger when low in the sky, and is known as the moon illusion. To prove it is an illusion, if the moon is looked at through a tube it appears smaller, probably because the tube blocks out any comparison with objects on the horizon.

Is it a coincidence that the celestial spectacle is happening so close to Christmas? There is a thought that a conjunction of Jupiter with another planet, possibly Saturn or Mars, may have been involved in the story of the Star of Bethlehem. The conjunction of planets had great astrological or mystical significance in ancient times, but any astronomical explanation for a Christmas star is in the realms of speculation.

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Mrs Jane Fraser ▾

M

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B

**Bernard Treanor** 19 DECEMBER

Planetary conjunction was the Star of Bethlehem?

"The Star", a short story by Arthur C Clarke, is a more potent and thought provoking explanation.

A nice cheering seasonal read too.



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**Chris Andersen** 15 DECEMBER

C

I have read that the conjunction happens every 19.3 years -ish.  
Who is correct?

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B

**B00ts** 15 DECEMBER

The 60 year Jupiter-Saturn conjunction cycle (and the oppositions) is thought to be a precursor of a major recession>  
This could be a biggy.

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**Dave Hill** 15 DECEMBER

Might have been a tad more interesting if previous dates of major planetary conjunctions could have been posted.

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**David Hargreaves** 16 DECEMBER Dave Hill

is that you Dave from Totty on Irwell?

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D

**Derek Lamport** 15 DECEMBER

Jesus was definitely born on 25th December. I met Millenial man recently. He told me that he knew Jesus as a teenager who assured him of his birthdate. "Jesus was a tall thin guy, wore sandals, had long hair and went around with about a dozen other guys and Mary a local barmaid. When he came into my shop he never bought anything...just asked for water."

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**Pete Howthorn** 15 DECEMBER Derek Lamport

Makes sense - he could just change the water into wine.

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**johanne sebastien** 15 DECEMBER



Nice little musing, but Jesus almost certainly wasn't born on 25 December. We don't know when at all. The 25 was chosen as far as I know as it was an existing festival for other pagan religions. That along with things like Christmas trees and a few other things were absorbed into Christian tradition.

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**Chris Andersen** 15 DECEMBER    ↩ johanne sebastien

Winter equinox. I celebrate it with gusto. The daylight hours increase, it starts to get warmer, plants start to grow. What's not to celebrate? Different religious nutters hijacked it.

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**Dangermouse** 15 DECEMBER    ↩ johanne sebastien

I believe it was the old pagan feast of Saturnalia.

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