

ICON OF THE MONTH

Is there anything more iconic than the heavens above our heads? ‘Day after day they pour forth speech,’ the psalmist said, ‘night after night they display knowledge.’ And yet this deluge of communication is entirely wordless.

This icon changes constantly and yet is always the same. Farmers still judge the seasons and sailors set their courses by the movement of the constellations as they have done for millennia. The skies that wheel above us now are to all intents and purposes identical to those our prehistoric ancestors once saw.

And yet none of us sees exactly the same thing. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any image so apparently simple – a splatter of white, with hints of yellow, blue and red, on a black background – that is so variously interpreted and understood.

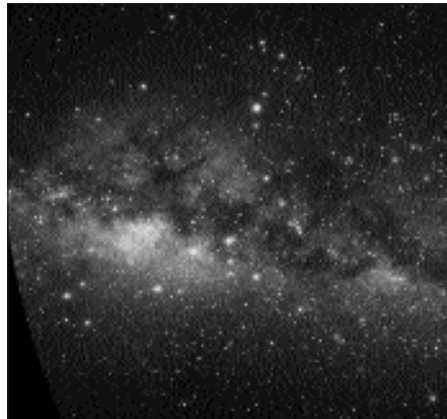
Astrologers instate the stars as mystical rulers of human destiny; astronomers reduce them to balls of incandescent gas. Folklore has seen them as gods and heroes. Poets have invoked them as witnesses, chaste or cruel, wise or indifferent. William Blake imagined them watering heaven with their tears. J M Barrie saw one wink at Peter Pan.

Today, the cosmos has been opened up in a truly giddy way. The nearest star to us is, in fact, the Sun – at an average 93.4 million miles away so close that its (only moderate) light floods our skies. The next nearest is Proxima Centauri, at a little under 25 million million miles away too faint to be seen without a telescope.

‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore,’ God told

Abraham. One wonders which figure would have seemed the larger to the patriarch. In fact, the stars outnumber all the grains of sand on Earth by a factor of thousands, if not millions. At a very rough estimate, there are 10,000,000,000,000,000,000 of them – but there could be a hundred times as many. God’s promise, it has to be said, was somewhat hyperbolic.

The impact of these astronomical



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numbers on us varies. White giants and red dwarves, quasars, pulsars and supernovas, all are, in physical terms, extremely crude. Only their vast scale – their distance, their size, their mass, their temperature, their age – impresses (and perhaps oppresses) our minds.

The complexity of a star, the Astronomer Royal has said, is nothing compared with the complexity of an insect – yet we stand in awe of one

while we tread on the other without a moment’s thought.

‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,’ said another psalmist with famous ambiguity, ‘what is Man that you are mindful of him?’ The stars – breathtakingly beautiful, though it is hard to say why – make us feel very small. Indeed, modern science is going further, with the discovery that the very atoms that we and the galaxies alike are made of may constitute only one-20th of the stuff of the cosmos. You and I and Andromeda are merely impurities in the mix.

And yet such thoughts only point up the all but incredible sophistication of the human mind, that can begin to gauge and comprehend and assess this magnitude from our vantage-point orbiting a minor star on the edge of a middling galaxy. We even have the cheek now to give a dismissive name to the event that began it all: not a cosmogenesis, just a big bang. What is Man indeed?

Today, there is another twist. The same technological revolution that, through the likes of the Hubble space telescope, has shown us previously unimaginable images of stars – being born, dying, in the outer reaches of the universe – has also denied to most of us the ancient experience of seeing the night sky for ourselves. The ‘light pollution’ from our towns and cities – the by-product of both our obsession with security and our carelessness with the resources of our little planet – casts a sickly orange veil before the icon above our heads. The heavens declare the glory of God, but most of us no longer see it. **Huw Spanner**