

The Myth of Nibiru and the End of the World in 2012

An astronomer tries to counter misinformation on the Internet about claims of a supposed rogue planet and an impending catastrophe, encountering troubling credulity, scientific illiteracy, and conspiracy thinking along the way.

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Some proponents claim Nibiru is depicted in this Sumerian seal.



SKEPTICAL INQUIRER readers may not be aware that a rogue planet on a 3,600-year orbit is about to enter the inner solar system and visit a catastrophe upon Earth. This threatening planet was discovered by the ancient Mesopotamians, who named it Nibiru. It was known also to the Mayans, who associated it with the end—December 2012—of their “long count” calendar. Although astronomers and space scientists are tracking Nibiru, this information is being kept from the public as part of a worldwide conspiracy. This official silence cannot be maintained for much longer, however, since by 2009 Nibiru will be visible to the naked eye from the southern hemisphere, and already Earth’s axis is tilting, changing the length of the day under its influence. As one aficionado recently wrote to me: “Why are you lying? It’s coming, and everyone knows it.”

I was introduced to this conspiracy theory in December 2007, when I began to receive questions about Nibiru submitted to NASA’s “Ask an Astrobiologist” Web site (<http://astrobiology.nasa.gov/ask-an-astrobiologist>). I normally receive about a dozen questions per week from the public dealing mostly with life in the universe, but sometimes they include UFOs and visiting aliens. Nibiru seemed different, since it was claimed to be an actual planet that was being tracked by astronomers but hidden from the public. Knowing that the astronomers of the world, both professional and amateur, are a free-spirited group who couldn’t keep a secret even if ordered to, I assumed that Nibiru was the sort of Internet rumor that would quickly pass.

However, I also remembered that Nibiru had briefly been prominent among conspiracy buffs in 2003, when there was a similar rumor of the coming destruction of our civilization. The source of this information was a specific warning said to have been sent to the people of Earth by an advanced alien civilization on a planet orbiting the star Zeta Reticuli. A woman named Nancy Lieder claimed to be channeling this information from the Zetans, who warned that a worldwide cataclysm would strike the Earth in May 2003. Phil Plait described this situation in detail on his “Badastronomy” Web site (www.badastronomy.com/bad/misc/planetx/). As it turned out, May 2003 passed with no pole shift or other cataclysms, so I figured that would end the Nibiru interest. Yet here it was again, the same story recycled with an end-of-the-world date reset to December 2012.

In the six months since I first mentioned Nibiru on my Web site, this topic has threatened to take over “Ask an Astro-

biologist.” I now receive at least one question per day ranging from anguished (“I can’t sleep; I am really scared; I don’t want to die”) to the abusive (“Why are you lying; you are putting my family at risk; if NASA denies it then it must be true”).

This article is based on more than one hundred questions submitted in the first four months of 2008, only a few of which were actually answered online. Except for some condensing, I’ve left the questioners’ text as it was originally submitted.

Initial Questions: The Distinction between Nibiru, Planet X, and Eris

Although the name of the Sumerian god Nibiru is most often given to this object, I quickly learned that some Web sites were also calling it Planet X or Eris. Planet X is a generic term used by astronomers over the past century for any unknown or hypothesized planets beyond Pluto. Eris is an actual, newly discovered dwarf planet, a little larger than Pluto but much farther away. By conflating these, some were claiming that NASA had found Nibiru or that Eris was going to fly past Earth in 2012.

Q: I was on the NASA home page and searched Planet Nibiru. Come to find out there actually is a planet beyond Pluto and they are calling it Nibiru. Some said Planet Nibiru didn’t exist but now we know it does! There haven’t been many straight answers on this subject so I don’t really expect to get the total truth, but here I go. Is there ANY chance of a Nibiru flyby in 2012? And if there is why don’t the public have a right to know so that we can prepare ourselves?

A: *I’m sorry if the NASA web page confused you. I just checked, and there is no mention of Nibiru other than recent statements that it does not exist and is a hoax. The web site does include a 2005 news story on the discovery of one of the transneptunian dwarf planets, 2003UB313. UB313 was subsequently given the name Eris, and there is plenty of information about Eris on the web, including a good introduction in Wikipedia. But this has nothing to do with Nibiru. Nibiru is a hoax, linked to a religious cult, and having nothing to do with science.*

Q: How can you call Nibiru a hoax when your own IRAS detected it and you issued a press release in 1982 which made it to eight major newspapers?

A: *When looking into this sort of thing, you need to read past the first paragraph, since new data are always coming along in science. IRAS (the first infrared survey satellite, which flew more than 20 years ago) cataloged 350,000 infrared sources, and initially many of these were unidentified (which was the point, of course, of making such a David Morrison is the Senior Scientist at the NASA Astrobiology Institute, where, among other things, he answers questions from the public submitted to the Web-based “Ask an Astrobiologist.” A fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and author of numerous books and articles, Morrison is a recipient of the Carl Sagan Medal of the American Astronomical Society for his contributions to the public understanding of science.*

survey). All of these observations have been followed up by subsequent studies with more powerful telescopes both on the ground and in space. The rumor about a “tenth planet” erupted in 1984 after a scientific paper was published in *Astrophysical Journal Letters* titled “Unidentified point sources in the IRAS minisurvey,” which discussed several infrared sources with “no counterparts.” But these “mystery objects” were later found to be distant galaxies. The bottom line is that Nibiru is a myth, with no basis whatever in fact. To an astronomer, persistent claims about a planet that is nearby but invisible are just plain silly.

Q: I have been reading the questions and answers about Nibiru.

Time is not speeding up, and the days are not shorter. You know as well as I do that there are still the usual 24 hours in the day, not 16! Please don't be scared; the entire Nibiru story, as well as any concerns about Eris threatening Earth, are a hoax, nothing more.

I am glad you say it does not exist. However Eris does exist and I see they were going to call it Xena . . . planet X. On this Website when you type in Nibiru Eris comes up and it clearly states it is the 10th planet. Will Eris do a flyby since it is considered a planet and the 10th one? Is Eris coming toward us? Could this even be possible that we would be thrown off our axis? Are Pluto and others really slightly off their normal gravitational paths because of this planet that is supposedly coming toward us? Why do they say time is speeding up because of the magnetic pulse this planet is creating? Is this true that there are only really 16 hours a day now because time is moving faster? Is that possible? Why do the days seem so much shorter? I am scared about this whole 2012 thing. Eris seems to be in the position that everyone says Nibiru is and the same size. Maybe we are asking the wrong question. Maybe we should be asking about Eris and not Nibiru. Thank you for your time as I am scared to death!

A: *There is no factual basis for the many Nibiru stories. This Internet chatter originated from the claim by Nancy Lieder that she was warned about this planet by aliens from the star Zeta Reticuli. In the absence of real information, however, people speculate and embellish this fictional story. One such addition is to link Nibiru with “Planet X,” a term used for many years by astronomers to refer to any*

unknown planet that might exist beyond Pluto. Far from being a real object, this term indicates an unknown or undiscovered object (that is why it is called “X”). Another false link is with Eris, the largest of the dwarf planets recently found beyond Neptune, designated 2003 UB313 when it was discovered in 2003. Before Eris was given its formal name, its discoverer, Mike Brown of Caltech, informally referred to it as Xena, a word play on “Planet X.” The name Eris was officially adopted by the International Astronomical Union in 2006. However, this has nothing to do with Nibiru. Nibiru is supposed to be a large planet on a highly elliptical orbit with a period of 3,600 years, which comes onto the inner solar system and will disrupt Earth in 2003 (the original claim) or 2012 (the current claim). Eris is a dwarf planet (smaller than the Moon) with a period of 557 years, currently far beyond Neptune or Pluto at a distance of about 10 billion miles. Its orbit will never bring it into the inner solar system; the closest it will come, in about 2255, is 4 billion miles. Eris does not match the fictional object Nibiru in distance, orbit, size, or any other property, and it does not threaten Earth in any way. The other items you mention from the Internet are untrue. Neither Pluto nor any other transneptunian object is deviating from its normal path. Time is not speeding up, and the days are not shorter. You know as well as I do that there are still the usual 24 hours in the day, not 16! Please don't be scared; the entire Nibiru story, as well as any concerns about Eris threatening Earth, are a hoax, nothing more.

Trying to Contain the Topic

At the beginning of February, I combined several similar questions in the hopes that I could lay this topic to rest and get back to writing about real science.

Q: Recent questions about Nibiru: (1) I have found a lot of stuff about a so called planet. Planet x or Nibiru. If anything they say [is] possible like revolving around the sun clockwise and it has been said that its orbit is way far out past Pluto. Also there are statements that it has a 3600-year orbit around the sun and that [it] is supposed to return in the near future. Is this possible at all? It sounds fishy to me, but there are supposed pics of it and a lot of scientist talk about it. I even wikipedia searched it. I would just like to find out some info please. (2) Nibiru does exist and I can prove it. Nibiru is in the old testament Exodus 6:4. and you are watching Nibiru from a lab on the south pole. also I have images from a telescope of Nibiru. and people from the southern hemisphere can see Nibiru in the daytime. is that proof enough for you? (3) many signs tell that something big is out there coming and why wouldn't it be true about nibiru / planet x? why build a telescope at the south pole an photos and such with this redish dwarf star moving fast in 1983 it was 50 billion miles away and 10 years later it is alot closer is it hiding behind the sun i know you all dont want to start a world wide panic. (4) I read were you said that Nibiru is a hoax. My question to you is why would anyone let the american population know about such a catastrophe? Isnt it the governments job to keep the population at ease? (5) What is this a picture of? <http://www.greatdreams.com/nibiru-possible.jpg> It's said to be Nibiru, but as you say Nibiru is a hoax. so what is this really a photo of?

A: *I hope this is my last comment on the Nibiru hoax, but questions like the above five keep coming in. Most of the entries on the Internet about Nibiru are false. Wikipedia has it correct when they write that "Nibiru is a name in Sumerian, Babylonian astrology associated with the god Marduk, generally accepted as referring to the planet Jupiter." The rest is a hoax, including all the "stuff" questioner #1 found on the Internet. Questioners #2 and #3 mention the astronomical observatory at the South Pole, but I assure you these astronomers are not looking at Nibiru. The Antarctic is a great place for infrared astronomical observations, and it also has the advantage that objects can be observed continuously without the interference of the day-night cycle. Questioners #3 and #4 seem to think that the government would hide information about Nibiru and the catastrophe coming in a few years, but I can't imagine why. My experience is, in fact, that sometimes parts of the government do just the opposite, as in the frequent references to various terrorist threats. In any case, the job of NASA scientists is to discover and tell the truth! Finally, questioner #5 asks me to identify two pictures. I can only guess that these might be images of an expanding gas cloud (nebula) ejected by a star in its old age. They are obviously very distant, since we see stars in the foreground superposed on the nebula. [A sharp-eyed reader later identified these photos as an expanding gas shell around the star V838 Mon].*

Questions Become Angry and Threatening

Having called Nibiru a hoax on a NASA Web site, I had opened myself to a growing series of abusive emails (which I did not answer). Here is a sample:

Q: I can't believe This!, you still have the gall to lie to the hole world about planetX Nibiru, How dare you do that, yet you keep on calling yourself a Senior Scientist, shame on you, people must keep on knocking hard on your door until you give up and come clean.

Q: Sorry but you say Nibiru is a Hoax? Doesn't Exist? So maybe The Sumerian people doesn't exist also! Nibiru does exist and it's the new Planet discovered in 2005 size of Pluto. It is talked about centuries ago in Sumerian Civilization. Stone Plates with the planet were found! It's possible to say that this planet giant orbit passes between Sun and Earth and causes the Glaciar Eras to happen. I talk about the facts! Like science usually does! So how can you say it's a hoax???

Q: I hope I can get an honest answer and not a lie. I would like to know more about this Nibiru thing. Not that your really going to tell me the truth here are you? I have been told that by May 2009 it will be seen by the average person is this true? I will not take kind to someone endangering my family because they want to keep a secret.

Q: The question isn't why are you lying to the people about the existence of Nibiru, the question is do you think you will be spared when it's effects come to pass.

Q: Why are we (the people) not informed of a possible catastrophe, especially one of this magnitude to take into consideration. I

really don't expect the truth from you guys.

Q: So if you all are watching Eris and it's trajectory, why can't you tell us about how it's going to come between the sun and the earth? Where is the info on your webpage of the *true trajectory* which will cause the perturbing of all our solar system heavenly bodies? If this is nothing to worry about, then *why don't you talk about its trajectory?* *Why don't you have people partnering to watch it, track it and be actively talking about this huge new planet that is coming?* Why are you so quiet about this new discovery? Your behavior is suspicious and your actions will be discovered soon so I would suggest a full disclosure.

Q: I know for a fact that Nibiru is a planet the Sumerians knew

Q: I can't believe This!, you still have the gall to lie to the hole world about planetX Nibiru, How dare you do that, yet you keep on calling yourself a Senior Scientist, shame on you, people must keep on knocking hard on your door until you give up and come clean.

this. We discovered Pluto in 1930 but the Sumerians knew it existed in 4500 B.C. Voyager 2 made the first close-ups from Neptune and Uranus in 1986 and we saw how the planets looked like up close. The Sumerians in 4500 B.C. knew that already. How is it that there info is so accurate and Nasa with all this technology cannot find Nibiru? Is Nasa keeping this planet from us?

Q: Why do you continue to claim this is a hoax? what is it in 1983 the heavenly body that you discovered then covered up saying it was nothing? why is it that closer to 2012 we see increased volcanic activity, earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, droughts, and much more? it's not from global warming! this activity is happening on other planets as well.

Q: I think NASA is trying to cover up the up coming of planet X or Nibiru in year 2012. Is it because this world is over population and some of us need to die? Why is NASA being fishy about this?

Q: Why would you people rather die than warn people and prepare for this kind of thing?!

Q: Don't play stupid with me because you are obviously not going to answer my question with truth not like it's your fault but the governments and higher powers.

Q: I understand you don't want to lose your job. So I know your

answer about Nibiru. You, Nasa, the USA government and whoever else will deny till it will be undeniable. Mankind is going to disappear and nothing will change this truth. I hope you couldn't live with this lie over your shoulders anymore.

Q: Everybody knows that planet x and nibiru exist, when is NASA and the government going to come clean and stop bold face lying to the american people. People have a right to survive this calamity. No wonder everybody say's NASA stands for never a straight answer!

A: The website you sent me is pretty funny. For example, the statement that the Earth's axis had tilted and the Sun had shifted from its correct place in the sky; anyone with eyes can see this is not true.

The Questions Keep Coming

Following are a few of the questions from March and April, which I (perhaps foolishly) have continued to try to answer. These include some new twists, such as the claim that the Sun will be in the center of the Milky Way Galaxy in December 2012, and this is what will cause "pole shifts" and other cosmic catastrophes.

Q: Now if the Nibiru topic is a hoax, then what are the infrared images of the alleged Nibiru??? And i also heard that NASA saw it with IRAS and reported it and all that.. Why does NASA deny anything about it instead of telling the public so (if Nibiru is in fact a hoax) they dont take drastic measures such as my family was planning on doing. I need more proof that Nibiru is a hoax because the government and NASA are keeping to much from us for us to make full judgement on it. . . .

A: I really am sorry that you have taken the Nibiru hoax seriously, and that this hoax is causing you and your family distress. This Nibiru stuff is all pure fiction, without any core of fact or truth. Specifically (1) There are no infrared images of Nibiru—period. (2) IRAS (the Infrared Astronomy Satellite, which carried out a sky survey for 10 months in 1983) discovered many infrared sources, but none of them was Nibiru or Planet X or any other objects in the outer solar system. (3) NASA scientists tell the truth. There is no reason why we would not do so, and besides truth-telling is a fundamental value of scientific research. (4) It is unreasonable to ask us to prove that Nibiru is a hoax. Your questions should be to Nibiru proponents to prove to you that what they are saying is true, not for NASA to prove it is false. The burden of proof falls on those who make wild

claims. Remember the often-quoted comment from Carl Sagan that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary levels of evidence if they are to be believed.

Q: I understand that you said nibiru is a hoax but why on this website <http://www.detailshere.com/nibiru.htm> they have live picture of nibiru.

A: The website you sent me is pretty funny. For example, the statement that the Earth's axis had tilted and the Sun had shifted from its correct place in the sky; anyone with eyes can see this is not true. Or the comment about building observatories at the south pole to observe Nibiru. There is no celestial configuration possible that could be seen only from the Antarctic and not from the whole southern hemisphere. And they ask why no observatories have been built near the North Pole. The last time I looked, the North Pole was in the middle of the Arctic Sea, not exactly the sort of place to build a telescope. I am also bemused by the claims that Nibiru has remained hidden behind the Sun for years. The impossibility of such an orbit has been clear since Johannes Kepler published his first two laws of planetary motions in 1609. Anyway, thanks for a good laugh.

Q: When most of the planets align in 2012 and planet earth is in the centre of the milky way, what will the effects of this be on planet earth?

A: There is no planet alignment in 2012 or any other time in the next several decades. As to the Earth being in the center of the Milky Way, I don't know what this phrase means. If you are referring to the Milky Way Galaxy, we are rather far toward the edge of this spiral galaxy, some 30,000 light-years from the center.

Q: I was wondering what the conclusions were about the possibility of a polar shift, and if that happened what the effects would be to everyday living.

A: Quite a few people have been asking me about the danger of a polar shift, and I must confess that I don't know what you mean by the term. "Polar shift" seems to have become a buzzword on websites that promote catastrophist ideas and various conspiracy theories, and so this phrase gets passed on from one blog to another without ever being defined. If this means some sudden change in the position of the pole (that is, the rotation axis of the Earth), then that is impossible. There is no point in speculating about the consequences of something that has never happened and never will. Before geologists discovered the role of plate tectonics (about 60 years ago), there was some speculation that a polar shift was involved in transforming the Antarctic from a warm to a cold climate, but now we know it was the Antarctic continent that moved, not the rotation pole. The very small and gradual changes that do take place in the position of the pole are responses of the Earth to changes in the distribution of mass on the surface, for example due to freezing or thawing of glaciers. The bottom line is that there is no possibility of a "polar shift" and no danger associated with one.

Q: How can you say that a pole shift is impossible? The geological

record shows repeated reversals of the Earth's magnetic field.

A: *Thanks for pointing out an ambiguity concerning the term “pole shift”. As I wrote in my previous answer, everything I have seen predicting destruction from an alleged pole shift concerns the rotational pole of the Earth. There is no chance that this rotational pole will shift to a significant degree. The magnetic pole is different; it regularly shifts position by a small amount, and as you note, the polarity of the Earth's magnetic pole reverses roughly once per million years (on average). This magnetic reversal appears to be generated internally and not to be influenced by any outside events. There is no indication that it will happen anytime soon, but more to the point, a magnetic reversal would not cause any of the horrible consequences that you find associated with “pole shift” on the catastrophist Internet sites.*

Q: If the world was going to end would you tell us?

A: *The short answer is “of course I would tell you.” Science is about discovering and communicating the truth about nature, not keeping secrets. But on a more basic level, I don't understand questions that ask about a possible end of the world in 2012. This world has been peacefully going its way for 4.5 billion years, with life evolving for probably 4 billion years. Do you really imagine that after 4 billion years it is all going to end 4 years from now? And how could it possibly happen? There is nothing around that could destroy a planet. The worst damage that we could inflict on our ecosystem is probably associated with global warming and loss of habitat, which are already causing a mass extinction, but none of that threatens the future of the planet itself.*

Weirder and Weirder

As I write this in June, questions keep coming in. In addition, nine out of ten of the “most popular” questions and answers on “Ask an Astrobiologist” are about Nibiru, not astrobiology. This experience is baffling on several fronts. While I hope that many people who read my replies are pleased to learn that the world is not about to end, I am surprised at so many angry responses. These come from people who seem to want the world to end in 2012, who are upset to be told that this catastrophe will not happen. I am also struck by their lack of perspective about time or space. For example, my correspondents seem to accept the claim that the magnetic influence of Nibiru is already causing a pole shift even though the object is invisible to astronomers. Some even accept that the tilt is already apparent, or even that the world is “turning upside down.” They also accept that we will be in the center of the Milky Way Galaxy, 30,000 light-years away, in 2012. The fact that none of this is being reported in newspapers or on television is simply accepted as evidence of a grand conspiracy. Do they ever ask themselves why governments are pursuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, worried about global warming, and conducting an energetic presidential election in the U.S. if they all know the world will end in four years? It has been a revelation to me to glimpse this underworld of conspiracy theories and doomsday predictions.

To conclude on a lighter note, the following recent questions are actually quite amusing:

Q: I have read about the things all about nibiru, and i was completely shocked from this matter, but for many years untill now as i gazed towards the sky during at night, i have noticed a huge star beyond us, I would like to ask is that eris? because the size has dramtically increased over the last couple of years?

Q: Recently there have been a good amount of scary stuff going around in the world. An earthquake and a cyclone. Not only that but it seems that the world is turning upside down.

Q: I am an experimental physicist. I am currently working on anti-gravity technology. I have recieved an infra-red reading of an object travelling into our solar system. This lab does not contain any astrophysicists but we believe this object (around 1.2

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times the size of Jupiter) is the new planet Niribu (Planet X). As rumours here have circulated. Its orbit is highly elliptical and will pass into the inner-solar system. I would like to comfirm a couple of things for me. Is this accurate—Our facts are based on rumour, the scan is only a basic, find objects to test on scan. Does this object pose any danger to the Earth? Would any danger occur in a test of experimental technology to deviate the object from its current course? The generator we have created theoretically can move any object of any size, as mass should not affect the fields created.

Q: I hear that the beings who are on the Nibiru mother ship which houses smaller ships inside are coming to help the inhabitants of Earth to raise their polarity levels up so the plane would shift up to 4D. Have you heard about this? Please be honest. Theres a lot of information on YouTube that speaks about this. I always knew that another advanced lifeform was here and is working to get us ready for the shift. I would like for one of them to reveal theirselves on TV on CNN. Wouldn't you? □