

IV. PRE-1947 ACCOUNTS

Those who believe in UFOs often like to remind skeptics that stories that could be construed to suggest extraterrestrial visitors have been around not just since 1947, but throughout recorded history. Erich von Daniken has studied ancient skies in some detail, as will be discussed in the appendix. Among the references used for this purpose is, perhaps surprisingly, the Holy Bible.

A. BIBLICAL SIGHTINGS

It is difficult to assess what import stories from the Bible really have for the study of UFOs, since the Book concerns itself with powers from the heavens that can visit Earth and perform remarkable feats. Opinions vary on how much of this is actual factual reporting and how much is symbolic interpretation. Some UFOlogists, however, seem to claim that most of the references to the Lord and his angels are in fact references to extraterrestrial visitations misunderstood by the people of those times. Some oft cited examples follow.

As I looked out, behold a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands.

Ezekiel 1:4-6

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give to them light, that they might travel by day and by night; the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

Exodus 13:21-22

When they had crossed, Eli'jah said to Eli'sha, 'Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.' And Eli'sha said, 'I pray you let me inherit a double share of your spirit,' And he said, 'You have asked a hard thing yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.' And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Eli'ja went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Eli'sha saw it and cried 'My father, my father' the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more.

2 Kings 2:9-12

Brinsley Le Poer Trench has written extensively on Biblical sightings (The Sky People, The Eternal Subject) and calls the Bible "really the greatest flying saucer book of them all. . . ." 47/ Certainly if one were scrupulously to read the Bible, one could probably come up with hundreds of incidents that could be called UFO accounts, although some disagree on what the real catalysts for the writings were.

B. OTHER EARLY REPORTS

In addition to Biblical accounts, many other early accounts have been cited. An example of this would be a 213 B.C. episode written about by Jacques Vallee:

. . . in Hadria an 'alter' was seen in the sky, accompanied by the form of a man in white clothing. A total of a dozen such observations between 222 and 90 B.C. can be listed, but we have eliminated many more sightings reviewed in the literature because we felt that they could best be explained as misinterpretations of meteors or atmospheric phenomena. 48/

The theme expressed in the last sentence is carried through in the Condon Report by Samuel Rosenberg. He keenly points out that:

The wealth of ancient 'UFOs' is due to a basic fact about man's perception of his contemporary universe. A concentrated glance

47/ Le Poer Trench, Brinsley. The Eternal Subject. London, Sovenir Press, 1973. p. 36.

48/ Vallee, Jacques. Anatomy of a Phenomenon. Chicago, Henry Rengery Co., 1965. p. 3.

backward in time quickly reveals that throughout our recorded history (and presumably before that), mankind has always seen UFOs and reported 'sightings' that remained unexplained even after examination by persons believed to be competent. Our earliest ancestor gazed earnestly into terrestrial and outer space to witness an infinite variety of phenomena and--understood virtually none of them. . . . In short, to him everything was a UFO. 49/

He also describes some of the problems facing readers of anthologies of ancient sightings. None of the techniques described in chapter 2 of this report are available to determine the credibility of those reporting the sightings, there is no way to know if the author is quoting from an original document or from someone else's translation, and perhaps most importantly one can't determine author credibility.

An excellent example of the latter is provided by Rosenberg. First, the account of an ancient Indian sighting, as reported by Frank Edwards in Flying Saucers--Serious Business.

A chronicle of ancient India known as the Book of Dyzan is in a class by itself, not only because of its age, but because of a surprising account given therein. The Book is a compilation of legends passed down through the ages before men were able to write, and finally gathered by the ancient scholars who preserved them for us.

They tell of a small group of beings who came to Earth many thousands of years ago in a metal craft which first went AROUND Earth several times before landing. 'These beings,' says the Book, 'lived to themselves and were revered by the humans among whom they had settled. But eventually differences arose among them and they divided their numbers, several of the men and women and some children settling in another city, where they were promptly installed as rulers by the awe-stricken populace.

The legend continues:

Separation did not bring peace to these people and finally their anger reached a point where the ruler of the original city took with him a small number of warriors and they rose into the air in a huge shining metal vessel. While they were many leagues from

49/ Condon, op. cit., p. 481-2.

the city of their enemies they launched a great shining lance that rode on a beam of light. It burst apart in the city of their enemies with a great ball of flame that shot up to the heavens, almost to the stars. All those in the city were horribly burned and even those who were not in the city--but nearby--were burned also. Those who looked upon the lance and the ball of fire were blinded forever afterward. Those who entered the city on foot became ill and died. Even the dust of the city was poisoned, as were the rivers that flowed through it. Men dared not go near it, and it gradually crumbled into dust and was forgotten by men.

When the leader saw what he had done to his own people he retired to his palace and refused to see anyone. Then he gathered about him, those of his warriors who remained, and their wives and their children, and they entered into their vessels and rose one by one into the sky and sailed away. Nor did they return.

This would seem to be an account of an attempt by some extra-terrestrial group to establish a colony on Earth in the distant past. Like so many colonizing attempts by man, it appears to have ended in dissension and conflict. The most interesting portion of the story is the description of the great 'lance that traveled on a beam of light,' which bears a surprising resemblance to a modern rocket and its jet of flame. The effect of this so-called 'lance' brings to mind a rather detailed picture of a nuclear blast and its catastrophic sequels.

If this is a mental concoction of some primitive writer, it is at least remarkable. If it is a reasonably accurate piece of factual reporting, then it is even more remarkable. Since it is unverifiable, we must at this late date classify it as 'interesting, but unproven.' 50/

This would certainly be an excellent example of a UFO landing and another civilization trying to colonize Earth--if it were true. Rosenberg investigated the Book of Dyzan and found that it was not "a compilation of legends passed down through the ages" at all, but rather was written in 1886 by Madame Helene Petrovna Blavatsky in The Secret Doctrine. An unauthorized biographer declared that "the mysterious 'Dyzan manuscript' like the 'Senzar' language they were

50/ Ibid., p. 495-6.

written in, seem wholly to have originated in Madame Blavatsky's imagination" and Rosenberg says that the stanzas are part of "her preposterous Atlantean 'Theory of Cosmic Evolution.'" 51/

The conclusion can be drawn from the above account that second hand reports may lose something in the translation, and even well-meaning authors (which we assume Mr. Edwards to be) can be misled. Therefore, much care should be taken when accounts of ancient extraterrestrial visitors are given.

C. THE WAVE OF 1896

Strange sightings have been made throughout history, including the middle ages in Europe, up to the first "wave" of sightings in 1896. Jacques Vallee in Anatomy of a Phenomenon devotes an entire chapter to sightings preceding the modern wave. Some of the examples he lists involve not only common folk, but astronomers. The latter group was able to explain some of the sightings as astronomical objects, but they themselves experienced some strange events.

On March 6, 1716, the astronomer Halley saw an object which illuminated the sky for more than two hours in such a way that he could read a printed text in the light of this object. The time of the observation was 7:00 p.m. After two hours, the brightness of the phenomenon was reactivated 'as if new fuel has been cast on a fire.' 52/

It is not surprising that with the advent of the telescope and therefore the rise of interest in astronomy, more UFO reports were forthcoming. More and more students were studying the heavens in an attempt to explain the motion of the planets and stars, and most importantly, the position of the Earth in relation to them. Vallee cites numerous cases and notes:

51/ Ibid., p. 496.

52/ Vallee, op. cit., p. 9.

It is certainly audacious to declare that astronomers are unaware of any reliable observation of a UFO when so many computations have been made by some of the founders of modern astronomy in an effort to interpret coherently their observations of strange objects. . . .

We are not, however, claiming that the alleged 'objects' were of artificial construction . . . or that they even existed at all. . . . But we do think that such reports should be assimilated into the general body of observations involved in the UFO problem; those who claim that nothing out of the 'ordinary' has ever been seen in the sky by professional astronomers should be reminded of the existence of these data. 53/

Although most of the sightings in this period were made in Europe, a few were made in the United States. The real beginning of UFO sightings here occurred in 1896. These are usually referred to as "airships" since their general description resembles that object; however, airships were not in evidence for several more years. Le Poer Trench notes that many reports were found to be hoaxes or misidentifications, but quotes Donald B. Hanlon as saying:

After sifting through data . . ., one is left with a hard core of sightings (now over 200) of a rather unlikely looking aerial craft which created much commotion among the observers. The only detectable effect the sightings left on the society of 1896-7 is exactly the same as that left by the modern UFO phenomenon--a psychological impact.

It is clear that the origin of the airship is still very much an open issue. It is also clear that the mystery surrounding its appearance at that particular time in history has deepened. 54/

The sightings occurred over 19 states from November 1896 to May 1897, with a break from January to the middle of March. Descriptions varied considerably from an object 18 inches in diameter and 12 to 30 feet long, to a 70 foot long structure with wings or sails. Lights were usually reported

53/ Ibid., p. 10-11.

54/ Le Poer Trench, op. cit., p. 96.

on the object and it moved both erratically and smoothly. David Michael Jacobs prepared a history of the airship sightings which is published in his book The UFO Controversy in America. One of the most famous of the airship incidents, involving occupants as well, happened on April 19, 1897 in Leroy, Kansas. Jacobs' recounting of the story goes like this:

Alexander Hamilton, his son Wall, and his tenant Gid awoke to cattle noises. Going outside they discovered--to Hamilton's 'utter amazement'--'an airship slowly descending over my cow lot about forty rods from the house.' The cigar-shaped object was three hundred feet long with a carriage made of 'panels of glass or other transparent substance alternating with a narrow strip of some other material'; a large searchlight and smaller red and green lights were attached to it. As it descended to thirty feet above ground and witnesses came to within fifty yards of it, Hamilton could see 'six of the strangest beings I ever saw' inside. The occupants were 'jabbering' but Hamilton could not understand anything. Then the witnesses noticed that a heifer was attached to a red 'cable' emanating from the airship and also was caught in a fence. Unable to free the heifer, the witnesses cut the fence and stood in amazement to see the ship, cow and all rise slowly and sail off.' The next day a neighbor recovered the calf's hide, legs, and head a few miles away. 55/

The case of the mystery airship has never been solved. At that point in time inventors were discussing the building of a vehicle that could travel through the air (not balloons or aircraft, but an airship) and some believed that the first such vehicle had, in fact, been developed and its inventor was making test flights. All those who were working on the problem said that they had not gotten that far in their research or the money was not available for the project. Thus, according to the scientists of the day, no such object was within the technological domain. Just as is done today, some tried to explain all the

55/ Jacobs, David Michael. UFO Controversy in America. Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1975, p. 15.

sightings as hoaxes (and there certainly were a lot of them) or astronomical objects. And again just as is done today, believers said that astronomical objects could not move in the way the airship did, have occupants, land and take away cattle, etc. As Jacobs points out:

To explain the enigma, the public then, as did the public later, looked first for rational explanations--those that would make sense in terms of the scientific and the experimental knowledge of the time. When these were not completely satisfactory, the public turned to more irrational theories. An airship seemed so far out of the realm of current technological knowledge that a gap resulted in people's idea of what should be and what was. Since airships, given the technology of the times, could not have existed, then witnesses who claimed to have seen one obviously had not seen one. . . . This attitude is the crucial link between the 1896-7 phenomenon and the modern unidentified flying object phenomenon beginning in 1947. 56/

D. THE POST-WAR EUROPEAN SIGHTINGS

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, what is called the modern wave of UFO sightings had many precedents, even if one discounts those of ancient origin. From 1897 to 1947, sightings continued, mostly in Europe. Many of these occurred during the last year of World War II and in post-war Europe, centering in Scandinavia.

In 1944, allied bombers reported seeing strange balls of light which paced their planes or danced off their wingtips. Dubbed "foo fighters" from the French word "feu" (fire), they were originally thought to be some type of enemy weapon. Since they never attacked the planes, some considered them psychological warfare weapons, sent to frighten or distract the pilots. Another explanation was that they were static electricity charges, although to date no definite explanation has been uncovered. Jacobs reports that "Ironically,

56/ Ibid., p. 33-34.

after the war the American public learned that the Germans and Japanese had encountered the same strange phenomenon and had explained it as Allied secret weapons." 57/ No further investigation was made.

After the war, reports began coming in from western and northern Europe, centering on Scandinavia, Sweden in particular. Donald Menzel reported that more than 1,000 sightings were made in 1946 in Sweden alone. 58/ Again the first hypothesis was that these were secret weapons made by the Russians with the help of German scientists, although investigators were able to solve 80 percent of the cases as natural phenomena.

The real importance of these sightings is that they set the stage for the beginning of the UFO controversy in America. Objects of unknown origin had been reported, some described as discs or cylinders. The U.S. Air Force was prepared in some respects when, in 1947, Kenneth Arnold began the modern wave of UFO interest.

57/ Ibid., p. 36.

58/ Menzel, Donald. In Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 131.