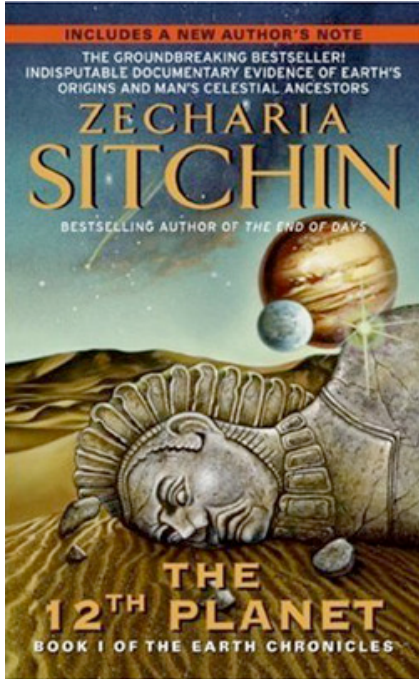


Pertinent & Impertinent Far Out



Where did we come from?

Uhhhh...aliens, you say?

It wasn't until the end of our few days' drive together through the extraterrestrial landscape of northern Colorado that this distant cousin of mine started talking about aliens. He was a bit older than my parents, and a Vietnam vet. Along the way he had shown me the remains of an old family farm, the high Rocky Mountain passes, and the endless shrub brush ranches on the other side. Then, back in the library of his home outside Denver, he showed me Zecharia Sitchin's *The 12th Planet*.

That summer, waiting for college classes to start again, I read Sitchin for myself and almost converted. His beliefs could have consumed me entirely if the books weren't dressed in such pulp sci-fi packaging. A few footnotes, a respectable cover, or a university press publishers, and I might have been done in for good.

The idea goes like this: If you read the Hebrew Bible closely alongside other ancient texts, it becomes clear that the gods they discuss are not really supernatural beings, but are instead extraterrestrials with advanced technology. This means, of course, accepting that the Hebrew *shem* can be translated as "rocket ship" instead of "name." Or that the desolation laid on Sodom and Gomorrah was the work of an atom bomb. These beings came to Earth, the thinking goes, genetically altered monkeys to create the human race, and revealed the secrets of civilization. They built giant pyramids and ziggurats as way-stations for their interplanetary activities. Like Olympians, they fought amongst themselves using humans as their proxies. And, of course, they promised to return.

Whether you thought gods were fantasies of the foolish or transcendent truth, Sitchin turns your world upside down. Compared to those views, his is clean and simple, free from metaphysics and murky psychology. It assumes only things perfectly understandable to 20th-century folks — rockets, genetics, nukes, and UFOs — that are more suggestive of science than religion. The ancients weren't, after all, living amidst delusion or special grace. They wrote down what they saw, but only today can we piece together what really happened.

The ancient astronaut idea has been appearing again in recent acts of fiction, reminding me of my summer with Sitchin. This year's *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (warning: plot spoiler) ends with a flying saucer blasting off from the remains of a buried South American city. Its crystal skull, too, is an ancient astronaut favorite. Hints of the idea also appear in the current *Battlestar Galactica* remake, as in the original. And a "space god" becomes a running joke in Bill Maher's film *Religulous*.

The 12th Planet was published in 1976, but by then the way had already been made ready for it. Jason Colavito, a skeptic who writes about the theory, has recently demonstrated the link between Sitchin and H.P. Lovecraft, a fantasist who wrote stories about a malevolent alien presence in ancient times. Working between the world wars, Lovecraft got the idea from Charles Fort, a collector of things unexplained who dropped hints that "we're property" of beings from above, as well as from the buried continents and ancient sages promoted by Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society.

Himself a dour doubter, Lovecraft didn't believe a word of it. But among his admirers were a pair of Frenchmen, Louis Pawles and Jacques Bergier, who published his stories in their magazine, *Planète*. In 1960 they wrote *The Morning of the Magicians*, a book that presents ancient astronauts as a real hypothesis: The idea had gone from science fiction to something resembling science, and the line between the two stayed blurry.

Ancient astronauts exploded into the public eye in 1968 with Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods*. Rod Serling, of *Twilight Zone* and *Planet of the Apes* fame, narrated a popular adaptation for American TV. Von Däniken's method was the whirlwind archaeological tour: Stonehenge, the Nazca Lines of Peru, the Egyptian Pyramids, Easter Island's impossible heads, and so forth. Noticing their similarities and their astronomical alignments he asks again and again, suggestively, "Coincidence?" Though mostly ignored by academic scientists and historians, von Däniken made ancient astronauts a transatlantic phenomenon. Simultaneously, the idea was making its way into cult classics like the original *Star Trek* series and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The same year that Sitchin came on the scene, Robert Temple published *The Sirius Mystery*, exposing remarkable astronomical knowledge among the primitive Dogon tribe in Mali. From the Dogon, he learns that the alien gods were amphibious creatures, the mermaids and mermen found in mythology the world over. In a later edition, Temple reports that this research attracted the attention of the CIA and the KGB.

By then, the UFO frenzy that was born with the Cold War was already mature. Roswell, Area 51, and men in black had fixed their place in public consciousness. The government wanted to be sure that if aliens were out there, we knew about them before the Russians did. UFOs became stock characters in fiction, conspiracy theories, and New Age religion.

At the same time, another Frenchman, Claude Vorilhon, was calling himself Raël and starting a religious movement based on what he claimed alien visitors had told him. *The 12th Planet* became woven into the Raëlian dogma, which took special pleasure in reinterpreting the Bible. Like humanity's otherworldly makers, the Raëlians tinker with genetic engineering and have been vocal advocates of human cloning. Ancient astronauts, the reality behind humanity's religious fantasies, became a religion of its own. Some Christian observers preach that Raël's alien friends, and UFOs in general, are demonic operatives. Provocatively, the Raëlian symbol shows a swastika inside a six-pointed star.

Ancient astronauts also took hold in imaginations less radical than the Raëlians'. Whereas 19th-century spiritualists would channel Indian chiefs or African shamans, the metaphysically-minded began meeting pyramid-building aliens. Lita Albuquerque, an artist who has created earthworks installations at the Giza pyramids and at the Earth's poles, speaks of our extraterrestrial origins as an inward quest rather than a task for archaeologists. "We are made of star stuff," she says. "I think it is embedded in our cells as a memory." In a meditation workshop she once attended, Albuquerque was amazed to discover that fully 80 percent of participants saw visions of alien visitors and pyramids.

From Sitchin to von Däniken to Raël, people came to the ancient astronaut idea by independent paths. But when they did, they entered a subculture. No one figure could be held responsible. For a time, at least, it was thoroughly in the air.

Since the 1970s, however, ancient astronauts have been relegated to the science fiction and spiritualism from whence they came. The few remaining systematic attempts to argue for them only rehash talking points from that fertile decade. "The biggest reason for the decline of the ancient astronaut theory," thinks Jason Colavito, "was the boring sameness of it." Today ancient astronauts have the marks of a fad whose 15 minutes have come and gone.

Meanwhile, traditional religions have been marching back onto the world stage. This "desecularization of the world," as sociologists call it, brought about a new Religious Right in the United States and militant Islamists from London to Indonesia. Explicitly religious perspectives became more and more welcome in postmodern academia, not to mention on the campaign trail.

Ancient astronauts thrived on the period of secularization that followed World War II. Science and technology seemed to be eroding old beliefs, opening the door for new ones. Mainline liberal churches were taking less and less of the Bible literally in order to make room for modernity — aliens become most plausible when gods fail to be.

Perhaps the earliest ancient astronaut tale was *Edison's Conquest of Mars*, penned by Garrett P. Serviss in 1898 as a sequel to H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. In tribute to Thomas Edison's Yankee (and "Aryan") ingenuity, it exchanges Wellsian ambivalence for unabashed technology-worship. Likewise, the Raëlians have made it their mission to emulate the technologies that aliens used to create humanity. "Everything," wrote Erich von Däniken, "is only a question of technology."

Just as ancient astronauts replaced religion with technology, nuclear war replaced final judgment. Nearly every major work on ancient astronauts is preoccupied with the apocalypse. Since prophecies for the return of gods really mean the return of aliens, they warn us (or reassure us), to be on the lookout. Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* novels tell of extraterrestrials manipulating human history from start to finish, and along the way they accidentally start World War III. Zecharia Sitchin, in his recent *End of Days*, repeats the cryptic mantra: "The First Things shall be the Last Things." The alien meddling which created human civilization, that is, will soon come back to end it.

In the '70s, talking about the end of the world could come quite naturally. The Cold War was already a quarter century-long habit. For any big idea to be worth its weight, it had to offer a way out of technological mass-murder. Aliens were one, to be sure. Concurrently, conservative Christianity offered others. 1970 saw the publication of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which brought biblical prophecy to bear on the Cold War. Like *Chariots of the Gods*, it became a movie in 1979, narrated by Orson Welles. The decade also saw the zenith of Henry Morris's "scientific creationism" which, like ancient astronauts, called into question the science establishment's assumptions about human origins and destiny.

Back then, ancient astronauts were a force to contend with in the struggle for public attention. *Chariots of the Gods* sold four million copies from 1968 to 1976, to say nothing of those who saw the film and television versions. Now, aside from its lingering subculture, the idea lives on only as a recyclable Hollywood plot device, a staple of the UFO mythology. In contrast, Christian apocalypticism has shown its muscle with Tim LaHaye's popular *Left Behind* franchise, which updates Hal Lindsey for the 21st century. *Left Behind* is fiction, but its end-times scenario is meant to be real. And creationism, though it continues to be knocked down by the courts, has the hearts and minds of almost half of Americans, including a vice-presidential candidate.

Given today's geopolitics, this should come as no surprise. The clash of civilizations — or rather, religions — has replaced the nuclear arms race. Theology has become tangible again, and technology feels tamer. People blow themselves up in gods' names and turn their decrees into legislation.

Gods are real enough not to need explaining away.

Meanwhile, old fears go forgotten. Though hundreds of ICBMs remain just as locked and loaded as ever, the worst we seem capable of imagining is a terrorist's dirty bomb or a few specks of anthrax. Maybe Tel Aviv and Tehran will be blown off the map, or even New York. But the real end of the world — back to caveman-status at best, I mean — has drifted from public paranoia as quietly as a weather balloon. Even global warming doesn't hold a candle to fiery clouds of death.

Fears of technological apocalypse have lost their urgency, and so have ancient astronauts. • 28 October 2008

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