

Tim Ashbaugh

Presbyterian minister says UFOs coming from Heaven

By GEORGE W. CORNELL
AP Religion Writer

NEW YORK — Smile indulgently about it if so inclined. That's OK with the Rev. Barry H. Downing. But he firmly maintains that UFOs are real and that they have key religious significance.

He says recognizing the existence and operations of these Unidentified Flying Objects could do much to strengthen faith and renew confidence in biblical accounts.

"It would establish scientific plausibility for the whole biblical field," he says. "It would reinforce faith and make it possible in a scientific context."

Downing, a Presbyterian pastor with a scientific bent, says government equivocation has caused skepticism about UFOs and so he expects some scoffing at his views.

"You have to have a good humor about it," he said in an interview. "I can't prove I'm right, but there's lots of evidence for it, and until it wins out, some people are just going to have to laugh."

He theorizes that activities of UFO-borne "higher beings" or "angels," likely from another dimension rather than other planets, are indicated in biblical events ranging from guiding the Israelites from Egypt to Christ's ascension.

He said postulating such activities in forming biblical faith would open a middle ground between fundamentalist literalism and liberal theology's "demythologizing" of supernatural events as only symbolic.

"It would cut down the distance between liberals and fundamentalists, and serve as a mediating force between the two extremes," he said.

"The mythological concepts would have to be re-examined, which would be important for the liberal wing. The conservative wing, which stresses certainty and wants everything locked up tight, also would be impacted.

"This would mean unlocking things"

pastor, has a B.A. in physics and, after completing Princeton Theological Seminary, got a doctorate at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland on relations of science and religion.

He details his ideas about UFOs and about eternity as a co-existing universe, based on Einstein's relativity theory, in a new paperback edition of his book, "The Bible and Flying Saucers," issued by Berkely Books.

"What is clear through the biblical material is that God's will for the Jews, and eventually for all mankind, was 'revealed' by beings from another world," he writes.

"Usually these beings looked very much like ordinary human beings (they almost never have wings) ... Once the 'package' of biblical religion had been delivered, man became responsible for the distribution of the contents..."

Downing said a hovering, UFO-like "cloud" by day, and glowing "pillar of fire" by night guided the Israelites out of Egypt, projecting some propulsive force that parted the Red Sea, leading them for years across the desert.

Other events he sees as carried out by UFOs include:

The fire-like phenomenon on Mount Sinai in which Moses received the Ten Commandments, the Prophet Elijah taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, the star of Bethlehem, the engulfing light of Jesus' transfiguration, his being "lifted up" at his ascension and the blinding visitation of Paul en route to Damascus.

"All these were UFO types of reports," Downing said.

Downing, pastor for 22 years of Endwell's Northminster Presbyterian Church, also is theological consultant to the Mutual UFO network, based in Seguin, Texas, and Fund for UFO Research, based in Washington.

Recalling a 1969 government commission finding that Air Force observations offered "insufficient evidence" to substantiate UFOs, Downing said the government was "covering up" and the full report never was released.

R.-Ariz., saying the material was being withheld as "above Top Secret."

"If the government weren't lying in denying UFOs exist, we'd have had a religious revolution starting 40 years ago," Downing said. "It would not mean undermining biblical faith, but reinterpreting it in light of UFO

phenomena."

In the pulpit, Downing said he rarely brings his UFO ideas into sermons, recognizing the controversial aspects, although members are aware of his interest in the subject. He added:

"Three or four have said they've had UFO experiences."