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Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time by Michael Lieb

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program in ways acceptable to government leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Quite the opposite: as David Noble has shown in *The Religion of Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1997), contemporary technological elites invest space exploration—as well as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and nuclear weapons—with extraordinary religious significance, leading to a new sense of mankind's outright divinity.

Festinger would not be surprised at the refusal of true believers in space exploration and other high-tech enterprises to give up their grandiose visions in the face of what, to them, are only temporary setbacks. Surely this technological elite, as much as an ever more demanding public, is to blame for the gap between prophecy and fulfillment in contemporary public policy that McCurdy understandably laments.

HOWARD P. SEGAL

Dr. Segal is professor of history at the University of Maine. His most recent book, with Alan I Marcus, is the second edition of *Technology in America: A Brief History* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

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### **Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time.**

By Michael Lieb. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. x+308; illustrations, notes/references, index. \$54.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

The prophet Ezekiel described a vision of God that appeared to him by the shores of the Chebar River in the sixth century B.C. Strange creatures with four wings and four faces appeared in the air amid clouds and fire. Accompanying the creatures were machines of unknown purpose; wheels within wheels (or hoops within hoops), with mysterious "eyes" set all around their periphery. The wheels or hoops could fly about in the air, and as Ezekiel watched they settled briefly on the ground and then rose up. Their only apparent function was to accompany the winged creatures, whose movements they shadowed. Suddenly God himself appeared, sitting on a fiery throne. This vision, Michael Lieb argues, has had a lasting influence on religious and secular thought, and its mysterious technological components have been reinterpreted by various authors, prophets, and cults. The influence of Ezekiel's wheels, for example, is evident in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet recast these mysterious flying objects as weapons of war. The fiery throne became a fiery "chariot of paternal deitie" that the Son of God employed to defeat his enemies in battle. Starting from this literary foundation, Lieb argues that Western society has sustained a culture of biblical reinterpretation that he calls "technologizing the ineffable," that is, the tendency to describe otherwise inexplicable visions in terms of known technologies, particularly technologies of war. Visionaries seem to have a need to interpret the unexplained in military terms. His book draws

on literary and historical evidence from varied sources to demonstrate the persistence of this phenomenon as well as its connection to another powerful biblical notion, that of Armageddon and the Day of Judgment.

Lieb demonstrates the ways that modern people have modified the biblical notion of Armageddon so that it assumes a distinctly technological tone. Apocalyptic religious movements, mainstream politics, and popular culture have all contributed to the maintenance and continual modification of the original idea of Armageddon, transforming it into an ultimate military confrontation between good and evil involving high technology. The author is convincing in demonstrating that some recent self-styled prophets, such as the founder of the Nation of Islam, were heavily influenced by their readings of the Bible, resulting in visions that were clearly little more than updated, technologized versions of Ezekiel. Further, he shows how such imagery has crept into mainstream thought, as revealed by political, military, and religious leaders who think of modern warfare and weapons in apocalyptic terms.

Lieb also makes some intriguing connections between biblical prophecy, the UFO phenomenon, and the plight of African Americans. The concept of “technologizing the ineffable” applies both to the popular understanding of advanced weapons and to sightings of unidentified flying objects. Just as God became the wielder of advanced weapons, so too did extraterrestrial visitors become masters of technologies far beyond our reach. In the original teachings of the Nation of Islam, God and his minions operate a “mother plane” (today it might be called a mother ship) in space around earth, and will someday liberate black people and destroy whites. While most recent UFO reports, including abduction accounts, do not necessarily assume that alien visitations are military in nature, they do seem to technologize the sightings—for example consistently identifying “unidentified” flying objects as space craft rather than simply as something that is unexplained.

The author is less consistently effective at demonstrating how such beliefs spread beyond the original literary sources, although it seems clear that they have. Implicit in his argument is the assumption that the statements or writings of particular individuals or groups can be taken literally and that they have a demonstrable influence on the thinking or actions of others. However, it is sometimes too great a causal leap from the biblical, apocalyptic language of, for example, Ronald Reagan’s public statements to his policy decisions or to subsequent political or military events. Further, the religious movements that Lieb examines, particularly the Nation of Islam and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are more marginal than the author may believe. In other words, it remains to be shown how beliefs spread. Similarly, he is not effective enough in demonstrating the connections between isolated sightings of UFOs and the development of popular beliefs about what these sightings mean. His treatment of the UFO phenomenon

is less satisfying than, for example, the recent *UFO Crash at Roswell* by Benson Saler, Charles A. Ziegler, and Charles B. Moore (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

However, historians of technology will find much in this book that resonates with current scholarship on consumers and users of technology and the processes they develop to appropriate, redesign, redefine, or reinterpret the meanings of the technologies they use, experience, or encounter. In Lieb's book, even marginalized groups and individuals take a stake in technologies that bear a general resemblance to devices and systems controlled by powerful elites, except that they do so through belief, revelation, or fantasy. The way that happens is quite fascinating. The average person has no actual firsthand experience with atomic weapons, for example, but that fact does not mean that average people's lives are not shaped by the perception that atomic bombs are a real threat. Lieb's examples show that the social implications of a technology do not necessarily depend on that technology's physical presence in ordinary people's lives. Further, the author suggests that popular culture and traditional beliefs, such as the teachings of the Bible, do influence the thinking of those in control of large and (to the rest of us) seemingly autonomous technologies, redefining, giving new meaning to, and possibly even influencing the uses of technological systems.

DAVID MORTON

Dr. Morton is research historian for the IEEE History Center at Rutgers University. His current research focuses on the history of reports of extraterrestrial space craft and similar phenomena.

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### **Turing's Legacy: A History of Computing at the National Physical Laboratory, 1945–1995.**

By David M. Yates. London: The Science Museum, 1997. Pp. 347; illustrations, bibliography, index. £19.95.

With all the hype surrounding information technology in the United States, including the burgeoning "information superhighway" and skyrocketing Internet stocks, it is easy to forget that institutions in both the public sector and countries other than the United States have made significant contributions to the development of computer technology. One of these is Britain's National Physical Laboratory (NPL). From World War II to the present, NPL's string of achievements has been noteworthy but not well noted. *Turing's Legacy* sheds a welcome ray of light on these achievements, but also leaves much to be desired.

This is to a certain extent a firsthand account of computing at NPL, as the author was a staff member for a majority of the period covered. One therefore might naturally expect a special degree of insight into both NPL and its people. Such expectations, unfortunately, are mainly in vain. So concerned is the author with avoiding anything that might be considered "opin-