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Extraterrestrial Exegesis

The Raëlian Movement as a Biblical Religion

Eugene V. Gallagher

ABSTRACT: Interpretation of the Bible has played a central role in the origins and development of the Raëlian movement. Claude Vorilhon's first encounter with the "Elohim" was immediately followed by an intensive week of Bible study that gave him a new identity as the messianic prophet "Raël," a new direction for his life as the earthly ambassador of the Elohim, and a new doctrine that would serve as the intellectual foundation of a new religious movement. The Raëlian movement and other new religions in which interpretation of the Bible figure prominently do not originate one-sidedly in a "cultic milieu" or "occulture" that is divorced from the broad biblical tradition. Rather, they represent creative blendings of biblical and other sources. Part of the attractiveness of the Bible for new religions is that it contains and legitimizes multiple examples of successful religious innovation.

Any tale about a human's meeting with an extraterrestrial being is liable to include extraordinary details. But Claude Vorilhon's recollection of his first encounter with an entity from another world contains a particularly interesting twist. At the end of his first visit with a figure who he will come to know as one of the "Elohim,"¹ the advanced beings who created life on Earth, Vorilhon receives a simple directive. He is told, "come back tomorrow at the same time with the Bible and something to take notes with."² Thus begins, on 13 December 1973, an intensive week of Bible study that will furnish Vorilhon with a new identity as the messianic prophet "Raël," a new direction for his life as the earthly ambassador of the Elohim, and a new doctrine that will

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serve as the intellectual foundation of the new religious movement that he will create and lead.

Vorilhon's conversation with the "Eloha" (singular of "Elohim") reveals a potent model for the generation of new religious movements, one that has actually been in operation for more than two thousand years. The Raëlian movement proceeds directly from the Eloha revealing to Vorilhon the proper understanding of *what the Bible really means*. Vorilhon's primary privilege is that he has been chosen by the Elohim for an intensive tutorial in how to read the Bible. Their extraterrestrial exegesis reveals the "traces of truth" and "deepest meanings" of a very familiar text.³ Guided by the superior knowledge of his otherworldly visitor, over the course of six days that echo the span of the original creation recounted in Genesis, Vorilhon works his way selectively through the entire Christian Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, with even a brief detour into the Apocrypha.⁴ Vorilhon is never led to doubt the central, controlling authority of the Bible, only its accurate interpretation. In that sense, the movement he will found is both thoroughly biblical and thoroughly Christian; it advocates a return to the authoritative scriptural sources whose full and fresh meaning has finally been decoded.

Such a return to the sources is portrayed in Raël's own writing as a simple recovery of meaning that has always been there, but which humans have been too ignorant to grasp. Raël thus adopts the rhetorical pose of a "self-effacing narrator" who intentionally minimizes and obscures the interpretive decisions that he has made in order to authorize the particular readings of the Bible that he endorses.⁵ But, of course, the extraterrestrial exegesis of the Bible that Raël learns and then promulgates in his own books is more innovative than he lets on. The tension between reliance on a widely-recognized and long-established authoritative text and a dramatically innovative reading of that text lies at the heart of Vorilhon's attempts to legitimize his own status, message, and mission.

Since interpretation of the Bible plays such a central role in the Raëlian movement, it is appropriate to devote sustained attention to how Vorilhon constructs his authority to interpret the Bible, crafts the hermeneutical principles on which his interpretation is based, and produces and communicates through various media the actual interpretations that he offers. Although Raël does occasionally acknowledge that the scriptures of other religious traditions, particularly Buddhism,⁶ also contain traces of truth, his central text, published under several different titles but originally called *The Book Which Tells the Truth*, maintains its focus squarely on the Bible.

In anchoring his new religion in the Bible, Raël constructs a variation on the primary legitimation strategy of new religious movements in contexts where knowledge of the Bible is widespread and its authority is widely acknowledged. He joins, among many others, Joseph Smith, Jr.,

who also asserted that the Bible had not been translated properly and who produced his own texts that attained scriptural status for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mary Baker Eddy, who offered a selective re-reading of the Christian Bible in her own scriptural text, *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures* (1875); the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who provided a thoroughgoing re-reading of the biblical narrative in the *Divine Principle* (1973); and Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who produced five volumes in the 1980s on both the “lost years” of Jesus and his “lost” teachings. Appealing to the Bible, in each instance, roots a new religious movement in a legitimate, and ancient, past. As Jan Shipps puts it in her study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, “the past is of fundamental importance to new religious movements.”⁷ Portraying new religious movements as necessary continuations and developments of the biblical past combats the perception that they are wholly novel, and thus potentially unimportant, ephemeral, and dismissible. But that legitimacy is purchased at a cost. A movement that simply re-presents the Bible will risk losing any sense of its originality, its innovative claim on human attention. To secure their novelty, new religious movements that ground themselves in the Bible must offer a fresh account of its true meaning. That new perspective will claim to be so unprecedented that, as Shipps argues, it “inevitably alter[s] the prevailing understanding of what has gone before, creating situations in which past and future must both be made new.”⁸

The Raëlian movement’s appeal to the Bible as a legitimating source is one way in which it establishes cultural continuity with the conventional religious tradition of the societies in which it originated and to which it spread, one of the eight factors described by Rodney Stark as influencing the success of a new religion.⁹ Although many new religions have been described as arising in a “cultic milieu” that is conceived as “the cultural underground of society” or as being part of an occulture that “includes those often *hidden*, *rejected* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, Theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices,”¹⁰ in the case of the Raëlians, such characterizations would emphasize only one aspect of the movement and should not be taken exclusively. On the other hand, the Raëlians, by virtue of their strong focus on the Bible, also participate, however idiosyncratically, in a more mainstream and aboveground biblical culture. The distinctiveness of the movement results from the creative ways in which Raël blends elements from the cultic milieu or occulture with elements from the broad biblical tradition. In his own works Raël sketches out a dynamic balance between utterly familiar stories like the Genesis accounts of creation and the parable of the sower in the gospels, for example, and the strikingly unfamiliar interpretations that he gives to those well-known texts. When it is accepted as persuasive by a particular audience, it is just that blend of

the biblical and occultural that allows the Raëlian movement to maintain a moderate degree of tension with its immediate social environment, another of Stark's keys to how a new religion can succeed.¹¹ It always runs the risk, however, of appearing either to be too familiar and hence barely worthy of special notice or too idiosyncratic and thus of only very limited appeal. For as long as he leads the movement that he founded, it falls to Raël to steer a path between those extremes as he endeavors to spread the word about the "designers" of human beings and prepare the embassy, a structure he hopes to build in Israel, for their return. To do that Raël needs to construct, maintain, defend, and extend his own authority.

CONSTRUCTING AUTHORITY

Anyone proclaiming a dramatically new reading of a familiar text must satisfy a potential audience's questions about the authority of such claims if the claims are to have influence on anyone beyond the individual who makes them. Bruce Lincoln clearly lays out the kinds of questions that can come up:

Who is able to speak with authority? Where and how can one produce authoritative speech? What effect does such speech have on those to whom it is addressed? What responses does such speech anticipate? What responses does it allow? And what consequences can unanticipated and disallowed responses have for the construction, exercise, and maintenance of authority?¹²

Vorilhon sets out his answers to the issues raised in those questions in his description of his first encounter with an Eloha, reinforces them in the story of his subsequent encounter in what was originally his second book, *Extraterrestrials Took Me to Their Planet*, and gives them further support in briefer mentions of subsequent confirming experiences. Throughout his prophetic career Raël has continued to develop and extend the basis for his authority, just as he has continued to fine-tune his "charismatic persona" both through his own writing and through the inclusion of enthusiastic testimony from members of the Raëlian movement in his books.¹³ But it was his first encounter with an extraterrestrial visitor that accomplished the transformation of the small-time journalist and aspiring race-car driver Claude Vorilhon into the prophet and ambassador of the Elohim, Raël. Raël's prophetic authority was initially generated in that first encounter at an extinct volcano near Clermont-Ferrand in south-central France.¹⁴ And that first encounter was entirely focused on the Eloha's teaching the prophet-in-the-making how to discern what the Bible really means.

In Raël's presentation of his first encounter, the Eloha is quite direct about why he has appeared at an isolated French location. After

establishing that he comes from another planet, speaks French and all other human languages, and has visited the Earth multiple times, the Eloha tells Vorilhon that he has come specifically to talk to him. He reveals to Vorilhon that he “used telepathy to get you to come here because I have many things to tell you.”¹⁵ The Eloha reinforces his claim by asking Vorilhon if he has read the Bible; when Vorilhon replies that he had only purchased a copy a few days before the fateful first encounter, the Eloha chalks that up to telepathic communication as well. Vorilhon learns that the Bible is at the core of his call and commission since the Eloha tells him that “I have chosen you for a very difficult mission” that for the first time will reveal to everyone on Earth “what they are, and . . . what we are.”¹⁶ Like many other prophetic figures, part of Vorilhon’s mission will be to promulgate the teachings of the Elohim in a book that he himself will compose. As the first encounter unfolds, it turns out that that book, which at this point in Raël’s career should be identified with his first opus, *The Book Which Tells the Truth*, will consist primarily of an interpretive re-reading of the Christian Bible. Even though Vorilhon’s exchange with the Eloha on the first day is relatively brief, it succeeds in assimilating him to a familiar prophetic paradigm. Literally out of the blue, he experiences a completely unanticipated call from a superior being that lifts him out of his mundane existence and bestows upon him a mission of extraordinary importance. His task at a crucial juncture in human history will be to communicate the as yet unknown message of the Elohim, both orally and in writing. For those who accept it, that message will effect a complete transformation of how they understand themselves, their history, their creators, and their heritage of sacred texts.

Raël’s sense of mission is reinforced in multiple ways over the course of his six days of instruction by the Eloha. As he develops his interpretation of the biblical story, the Eloha reminds Vorilhon that humanity stands at a turning point and that the return of the Elohim is an imminent possibility, and that he is “the one who will spread the truth throughout the world.”¹⁷ But the clearest description of Raël as a present-day prophet comes during an extended discussion of the biblical book of Ezekiel. After offering a detailed commentary on how Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 1 gives ample evidence that he had actually seen one of the creators’ “flying machines,” the Eloha focuses on the incident in which Ezekiel is given a scroll, covered with writing on the inside and outside, to eat (see Ezek. 2:9–10; 3:3). The Eloha offers this interpretation to his pupil, “then the scroll is ‘eaten.’ This means that Ezekiel absorbed its meaning. *What he learned is what you are learning now about humanity’s origins.*”¹⁸ The last sentence makes Vorilhon into a “new Ezekiel.” Like the Israelite prophet, he has the privilege of receiving special knowledge about the nature of the creators and the nature and potential destiny of human beings.

The change of Claude Vorilhon's name to "Raël" symbolizes his new, prophetic status. As the Eloha puts it towards the end of their tutorial,

You, Claude Vorilhon, you will spread the truth under your present name, which you will progressively replace with RAËL, which means literally "light of God" and if we translate it more accurately, "light of the Elohim" or "Ambassador of the Elohim," because you will be our ambassador on Earth, and we will come officially to your Embassy. RAËL can be simply translated as messenger.¹⁹

At the end of his first book, Vorilhon shows that he is well aware of the extraordinary claims that he is making. In an effort to head off any criticism and to blunt the suspicions of skeptics, he exclaims "What a story! What a revelation!" and follows it with the more sober assertion that "I never drink alcohol and sleep very well at night. One can neither dream for six consecutive days, nor invent all this."²⁰ Soon after that he addresses his readers directly, stating that "if you simply think that I have a great imagination and that these writings were produced just to amuse you, then I will be profoundly disappointed."²¹ Finally, at the end of his first book he issues a challenge that could be taken as a motto for the Raëlian movement, "if you still have doubts, read the papers and look at the sky."²² By the conclusion of his first encounter, then, the newly minted prophet Raël rests his authority on four bases: the sheer fact of his educational encounter with one of the Elohim; the similarities between his experience and that of ancient prophets like Ezekiel as disclosed by the Eloha's exegesis of the Bible; his disclaimers that he was neither drunk, overly imaginative, nor dreaming during his first encounter; and the assertion that those who read the signs available in their own lives will understand the rationality of his claims.

In his second book Raël buttresses those claims to authority with accounts of additional experiences. Most notably, as Raël expands his autobiography beyond the first encounter, he endeavors to align his own history with that of Jesus of Nazareth. In the two years after the first encounter the slow but steady progress in gaining an audience for the message about the designers gives Raël the opportunity to muse that his seven hundred acolytes are "many when we consider how few people had decided, after two years, to follow the man who, two thousand years ago, had the equally heavy burden of being initiated and then initiating the primitive people of his time."²³ Raël tailors the account of the circumstances of his birth to evoke widely known elements of the story about Jesus, noting that he was conceived on 25 December 1945 and fathered by a little known Jewish refugee.²⁴ As he had in the story of his first encounter, Raël weaves together comments that align him with authoritative biblical figures with commentary on flying machines of extraterrestrial origin and other sources of legitimization. In his second book, he reports that his grandmother had only recently told him that

she saw a “strange craft flying” over her house, where Vorillon lived with her, in 1947.²⁵ Vorillon leaves it up to his readers to deduce the meaning of that omen. He is more explicit, however, about an initiatory encounter with an old man whom he claims later to have learned was the last living “Pope” of the Druids. Raël relates that when he was a child he followed an eccentric old man of the village to his small home, where he was invited to enter, as if he had been expected. Once there, Raël relates, “he laid his hand on my head, and I felt a strange sensation. At the same time, he looked up in the air and uttered some words that I did not understand. After a few minutes had passed, he let me go, still without saying a word, and still smiling the same mysterious smile.”²⁶

In the opening pages of his second book, Raël directly acknowledges that he is in the process of reconstructing his own life story in light of the dramatic event of his first encounter. He observes that “I have to admit I have only recently begun to look back on my life to figure out exactly how it had been guided for me to be available and ready to go into action on the spiritual, psychic and emotional levels at that time.”²⁷ As he reconstructs his autobiography to conform to his new sense of self, he finds new and greater significance in details of his early life, which in turn deepens his sense that he has been chosen for an unprecedented mission. Throughout the course of his mission Raël’s construction of his “charismatic persona” is a dynamic process that is shaped by his own introspection, his interaction with others, and the shifting contexts in which he works. The relative success of his missionary efforts supports his extension of his prophetic self-understanding.

Raël’s account of his first encounter with the Elohim legitimized his prophetic status in part by drawing parallels between his experiences and those of ancient prophets like Ezekiel. In the second encounter he also meets his peer group face-to-face. When the Eloha whom he comes to know as Yahweh takes him to the planet where the Council of the Eternals dwell, he sits down to a meal with some of those assembled. Raël notes that among his dinner partners were “a young bearded man, very handsome and very slim. He wore a mysterious smile and an expression filled with fraternal feeling. To his right was a man with a noble face sporting a black beard that was very thick and very long. To his left was a more corpulent man with an Asian face. He had a shaven head.”²⁸ Only with Yahweh’s explicit commentary does Raël realize that he is dining with Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha, among others. In fact, Yahweh informs him, he is joining forty men and women who are “all representatives of the religions created after our contacts on Earth.”²⁹ If he is to be known by the company he keeps, Raël has graduated from being a prophet to being, like Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha, the founder of a new religion.

In Raël’s third book, *Let’s Welcome the Extra-Terrestrials*, that impression of his new, exalted status is confirmed when Yahweh informs him

that his birth itself had been arranged by the Elohim beforehand. Again emphasizing the similarities between Raël's life and the life of Jesus, Yahweh claims that:

After the explosion at Hiroshima, we decided that the time had come for us to send a new messenger on Earth. He would be the last prophet, but the first one to address Mankind asking them to understand and not to believe. We then selected a woman, as we had done in the time of Jesus. This woman was taken aboard one of our ships and inseminated as we had done with the mother of Jesus. Then she was freed after we had totally erased from her memory all traces of what had happened.³⁰

The man who Vorilhon has known as his father is simply performing the same function in his life that Joseph had performed in the life of Jesus. But Yahweh also informs Raël, "your real father is also the father of Jesus, and that makes you brothers . . . you are my son and I am your father."³¹ Although it takes place at a different point in Raël's life story, that affirmation recalls what the synoptic gospels report as the words uttered by a heavenly voice at the baptism of Jesus, "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."³²

With that revelation the progressive disclosure and construction of Raël's true identity reaches its climax. Far from being just another claimant to prophetic status, or even a new Ezekiel, Claude Vorilhon stands revealed as the actual son of Yahweh and the brother of Jesus. That claim to extraordinary status is designed to establish his authority, particularly as an interpreter of the Bible and the promulgator of a new authoritative message based on the Bible, as unimpeachable. David Bromley observes that establishing a prophetic persona "involves constructing an extraordinary persona that transcends normal human qualities and acts through the actual individual."³³ In that sense, by the end of *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers* the prophetic Raël persona has completely displaced the persona of Claude Vorilhon.

The full impact of Raël's construction of his authority has not been lost on his followers. In one of the testimonials included in *Intelligent Design* Yvan Giroux asserts that he "recognized in Raël, Jesus speaking in his own era" and that when he read the messages "everything became clear: the messages awakened me, they stared me in the face. All at once I could understand *The Bible*, Jesus and Yahweh."³⁴ Giroux gives voice to precisely the type of transformation that Raël's mission seeks. After his enlightening encounter with the message about the designers, Giroux sees the Bible and Raël's own message as inextricably intertwined; each explains and confirms the other. Apart from *Intelligent Design*, the most recent compendium of Raël's teaching, the Bible makes no sense. But the converse is also true; apart from the Bible, *Intelligent Design* makes no sense. Despite the infrequent nods to the truths conveyed in the

scriptures of other religions,³⁵ Raël's message focuses overwhelmingly on the biblical narrative, from Genesis to the end of the world as outlined in Revelation. Raël's extraterrestrially-inspired exegesis focuses on biblical figures like Ezekiel, Moses, and Jesus, and the true identity of the biblical Yahweh. Raël's carefully crafted charismatic persona legitimizes a specific way of interpreting all of those figures and events.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL HERMENEUTICS

In Raël's encounters with the Elohim he learns not only substantive interpretations of specific biblical events like the creation, passages like the parable of the sower, and figures like the prophet Ezekiel, he also learns interpretive principles that he is expected to be able to apply on his own and teach to others. As the Eloha puts it at the end of the third day of Raël's first encounter, when he has gone through most of the biblical narrative, "we shall not continue to read further in the Gospels where there are many more references to the creators, because they are less important. You can interpret them yourself for those who ask you questions in light of the explanations I have already given you."³⁶ From that perspective, at least, *Intelligent Design* is portrayed as containing a set of explicit and implicit interpretive guidelines that comprise a developed hermeneutic of the Bible capable of producing the same type of insights into the true meaning of that sacred text that the Eloha has given Vorilhon in their six-day Bible study. The Eloha's interpretive efforts thus provide both detailed instruction in the true meaning of the Christian scriptures and paradigms for further readings of the Bible and, by extension, other sacred texts. The hermeneutical principles of the Elohim are not gathered together into a single sustained presentation, but enough of them are sprinkled throughout *Intelligent Design* to give a sufficiently clear indication of the interpretive program advocated by the Elohim and taken up by Raël.

The fundamental assertion about the Bible in *Intelligent Design* is that it does contain deep meaning and traces of the truth. Its meaning is obscured, however, by the circumstances of its composition. It all goes back, the Eloha informs Raël, to the creation of life on Earth. In a summary that also evokes the cloning controversy in which the Raëlian movement has been enmeshed,³⁷ the Eloha tells Raël that,

on our home planet people were outraged when they heard that we were making "test tube children" who might come to threaten their world. They feared that these new human beings could become a danger if their mental capacities or powers turned out to be superior to those of their creators. So we had to agree to leave the new humans to live in a very primitive way without letting them know anything scientific, and we mystified our actions.³⁸

From the beginning, then, humans have labored under substantial burdens placed on them from superior beings beyond the Earth and their meager intelligence and paucity of communication skills are evident in the Bible. The obscurity of the biblical text is compounded by the subsequent errors that were introduced as it was copied and recopied. Nonetheless, the Eloha tells Raël, “the purpose of the biblical and evangelical writings: [is] to preserve traces of the work and presence of your creators, so that they will be recognized when they return.”³⁹ Raël thus learns that the Bible is a complex document. On one hand it contains traces of the deepest possible truths about who humans are and who their creators are; on the other its authors lacked the scientific sophistication to explain things clearly and in the appropriate terms. One of the problems that Raël confronts, for example, is that “the creators were deified and made into something abstract because human beings were unable to understand scientific facts.”⁴⁰ Raël thus needs to provide a reading of the Bible that is both atheistic and scientific.

In light of what he learns about the composition of the Bible, Raël’s mission then becomes one of *translation*; he needs to render the truths of the Bible in language that is appropriate to what actually happened and accessible to his contemporary audience. His translation, of course, is interpretive, but Raël’s extraterrestrial tutor chooses to describe the process in a different way. Translation, as practiced by Raël and taught to him by his extraterrestrial guide, appears to refer primarily to the decoding and re-expression in contemporary atheistic and scientific terms of the hidden meaning from obscure texts like the Bible, rather than the rendering of words and phrases from one language into another. Raël’s six-day tutorial with the Eloha constitutes his training for that mission. One dimension of Raël’s interpretive task is to sort out what is worth paying attention to and what can safely be ignored. The Eloha tells him during their first session that “only the parts of the Bible that I will translate are important. Other parts are merely poetic babblings of which I will say nothing.”⁴¹ Even with the passages that are worthy of attention, however, a reading strategy that reveals their true significance needs to be employed. For example, concerning Isaiah 13:5, “they come from a far country, from the end of heaven,” the Eloha asserts that “the whole truth is encapsulated in that quote, it is just a matter of reading between the lines in order to understand.”⁴² Reading between the lines of that particular passage yields the certain knowledge that Isaiah understood the true origins of the creators, a knowledge he shared with the author of Genesis and other prophets like Ezekiel. Between the lines of any passage that the Eloha chooses for commentary, Raël will find traces of the creators’ actions.

Raël’s tutor also makes a couple of allusions to another factor that might be employed to explain the obscurity of the Bible. The Eloha describes Joshua 10:13, “and the sun stood still and the moon stayed,

until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies,” as “one of the most distorted passages” in the Bible, because in its primitive and clumsy language it really refers to what *Intelligent Design* calls a brief “flash war” which lasted less than an entire day.⁴³ In contrast, the Eloha informs Raël that, “the Bible has preserved a sentence, which is close to the original document,” in Genesis 3:22, “behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.”⁴⁴ When those two passages are read together, they hint at a mythology centered on an “original” copy of the “Bible,” or at least the message about the creators, that suffered substantial degradation when it was first written by human beings and subsequently copied multiple times. Those passages in *Intelligent Design* at least faintly echo the mythology of the heavenly book that was widespread throughout the ancient Near East and which was perhaps most clearly expressed in the Qur’anic notion of the “mother of the book,” of which the earthly Qur’an is merely a reflection.⁴⁵ While it is impossible to recover with any certainty the full structure of the concepts that *Intelligent Design* is relying on when it describes some passages as distortions and others as very close renditions of some original text, at the very least the materials about heavenly books in the ancient Near East offers some possible comparative contexts for Raël’s efforts at both reading pre-existing scriptural texts and writing his own.

On close inspection, the hermeneutical principles that Raël learns turn out to be relatively simple, but powerful in their ability to generate new readings of the Bible. In summary, they are:

- (1) The Bible is an authoritative text for learning about who humans are and who their creators are.
- (2) The Bible, unfortunately, does not generally express its message clearly because of the intellectual limitations of those who wrote it and copied it.
- (3) Nonetheless, the Bible contains “traces of truth” and “deep meanings.”
- (4) In order to recover those traces and meanings, the reader must “read between the lines.”
- (5) In his first encounter Raël received privileged knowledge about precisely how to read between the lines.

To that short list of principles that should guide anyone’s reading of the Bible or, for that matter, any other sacred text, Raël also insists on adding another. By no means should anyone accept the reading of the Bible taught by the Roman Catholic Church. The Church is the great opponent in Raël’s writings, not least because although it has spread the word of the Bible throughout the world, “its mistakes have been great, particularly when it injected too much of the supernatural into the truth, and wrongly translated the scriptures in ordinary Bibles.”⁴⁶ The

fundamental mistake, of course, was to have translated “Elohim” as “God,” which obscured both the plurality and the true identity of the creators. In this instance, Raël undertakes a restorative re-translation that allows anyone reading the Bible to see with fresh eyes what and whom it is really describing. Although Raël’s treatment of some of the passages already considered here gives some indication of the types of readings his hermeneutical principles can produce, it is worth looking at least a few of them in further detail in order to get a fuller sense of him as a biblical interpreter.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIBLE: THE CREATION AND THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Genesis receives more attention than any other book of the Bible in *Intelligent Design*. The Eloha informs Raël about what actually happened in the process of creation on Earth, its part in a much broader scenario of creation throughout the galaxy, and the meaning of individual events and personae in the biblical creation story. The key to the new reading of Genesis is the recognition that “Elohim” in the Bible refers not to a single creator God but to “those who came from the sky.”⁴⁷ They came, in fact, to conduct an experiment in the creation of artificial life. The Earth they made was a “magnificent and gigantic laboratory” and they were joined in their efforts by a group of “the most brilliant artists.”⁴⁸ The creation of beings like the creators themselves, however, alarmed some of the Elohim on their home planet. The Elohim at home demanded that the humans be denied knowledge of the scientific means by which they had been created. In the Bible that prohibition is described as the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As the Eloha interprets it to Raël, “this means that you—the created—can learn all you want, read all of the books that we have here at your disposal, but never touch the scientific books, otherwise you will die.”⁴⁹ The serpent of the traditional story also takes on a new meaning in this reading; Raël’s teacher discloses that “the ‘serpent’ was this small group of creators who had wished to tell the truth to Adam and Eve, and as a result they were condemned by the government of their own planet to live in exile on Earth, while all the other scientists had to put a stop to their experiments and leave the Earth.”⁵⁰ Thus Raël learns both a new identity for the serpent and a new explanation for the traditional idea of the “Fall of Adam and Eve.”

In several ways what Raël hears from his extraterrestrial tutor is reminiscent of the ancient Gnostic texts that frequently offer their own re-evaluations of the creation story in Genesis.⁵¹ Raël receives special knowledge or *gnosis* from a being who is not of this Earth. That knowledge enables him to discern the true meaning of the creation stories of Genesis and the true nature of the “God” mentioned in those stories

and of human beings. The early Christian writer Clement of Alexandria preserved a succinct summary of what gnosis revealed according to the Valentinian school, “who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth.”⁵² That passage is echoed in the Eloha’s charge to Raël that he will inform human beings about “what they are, and . . . what we are.”⁵³ In *Intelligent Design*, Raël’s readers actually do encounter the type of knowledge that the ancient Valentinian Gnostics had in mind. They learn that in the beginning we were the products of a vast scientific experiment, but that we have become ignorant of our true origins; our birth as humans can be traced back to that original experiment and we have been placed on this Earth by creators endowed with intelligence substantially greater than our own. Because human history is at a turning point, we are hastening towards a new era in which the atheistic and scientific religion promulgated by Raël will prevail and in which we will be redeemed from our ignorance. Although Raël doesn’t explicitly use the language of birth and rebirth, it is clear that those who have joined the movement have experienced some sort of revivification. Victor Legendre, for example, reports that upon reading Raël’s books, he “was transported with joy into a state of well-being or an indescribable euphoria and a profound sense of peace, with a new outlook. No! A renewed outlook on everything.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Marcel Terrusse claims to “have found a blossoming through the in-depth study of the messages, a better understanding of others and of myself.”⁵⁵

The structure of the revelation given to Raël, its emphasis on containing knowledge heretofore hidden from all humankind, and the effects that it has on those who accept it, all suggest that the Raëlian movement shares several characteristics with ancient Gnostic systems of thought. Like them, Raël’s new religion expresses its message through a sustained and novel re-reading of the creation stories in the biblical book of Genesis; like them, it is oriented around the special, unprecedented knowledge given to a prophetic figure, and like them, it results in the production of new texts that themselves become authoritative for the movement. The Raëlian movement conforms to the same paradigm for the generation of a new religious movement within the broad biblical tradition that the ancient Gnostic movements do.⁵⁶

Those conclusions are reinforced by the way that Raël’s guide explicates the parable of the sower from Matthew 13 in the Christian New Testament. Recalling the description of the Earth at the time of Genesis as a “magnificent and gigantic laboratory,” the Eloha interprets the sowing of seeds by the wayside, in stony places, among thorns, and on good ground where alone they took root and flourished as “an allusion to the various attempts to create life on other planets—and three of them failed.”⁵⁷ The Eloha ventures a more detailed metaphorical explanation for each place in which the seeds were sown, but the first can serve as

an indication of his interpretive strategy. Concerning the seeds sown by the way side which were eaten by fowls or birds, the Eloha proposes that “this was a failure caused by the proximity of the planet in question to the creators’ original planet. Those who were against the creation of people similar to themselves saw a possible threat in the experiment and therefore destroyed the creation.”⁵⁸

The Eloha’s gloss of the parable of the sower shows the interpretive power and scope of the back story that he reveals to Raël. Once the true story of the creation of humans as part of an enormous scientific experiment by the Elohim is known in any detail, it simply becomes a matter of aligning its details with those in the biblical narrative and translating the biblical narrative into terms more evocative of the story of the Elohim’s experiments. Despite the way it is depicted by his extraterrestrial tutor, Raël’s new reading of the Bible relies less on the translation of specific biblical items into their “Elohistic” counterparts and more on a wholesale transformation of the biblical narrative, from Genesis through Revelation, into a story not about its superficial referents but about the previously hidden story that has lain buried just beneath its surface until it was revealed to Claude Vorilhon during the week of his first encounter in December 1973.

FROM READING THE BIBLE TO WRITING A NEW ONE: THE SCRIPTURES OF THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT

As dramatic and far-reaching as it is, Vorilhon has not been content simply to let his message stand as a new interpretation of the Bible. He has instead pushed on to claim for his own writings an authoritative status that at least equals the Bible’s. At the end of the second book, the Elohim issue the following plea through Raël: “Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and all you who have other religions, open your eyes and your ears; re-read your holy writings and you will understand that this book is the last one—the one predicted by your own prophets.”⁵⁹ Raël’s own writings, particularly *Intelligent Design* as the compendium of his three most important books, thus claim the status of scripture in their own right. The strategy of claiming to encompass and surpass all previous revelations is familiar from how the Christian scriptures appropriate and turn to their own purposes the Hebrew Bible, how the Qur’an in turn claims to absorb and express even more clearly the Torah and Gospel, and how the Baha’i scriptures strive to incorporate all previous revelations. The account that Raël gives of writing *Extraterrestrials Took Me to Their Planet*, reinforces that claim. He describes his composition of the book in this way:

I returned home, where I immediately set to work to write down all that I had been told. Everything was perfectly clear in my mind, and I was

surprised to find that I was writing it all at one stroke, recalling without any hesitation the sentences I had heard. The words remained as if engraved in my mind just as I had been told they would at the beginning. . . . I began writing again, all the while observing closely what I was putting down as if I was simultaneously discovering it as a reader. I was writing, but this time I did not feel like the author of what was appearing on the paper. The Elohim were starting to speak through my mouth, or rather, to write with my hand.⁶⁰

Raël is producing, literally, holy writ. Not only the substance of his writings, but also their mode of production, assure the reader that they convey a message of unquestionable legitimacy. In fact, one member of the Raëlian movement identifies Raël's writings as the books prophesied in such biblical passages as Ezekiel 2:9–10, Daniel 10:21, and Revelation 5:1.⁶¹ Those comments fit nicely with Wilfred Cantwell Smith's observation about scripture that "it is the people who make it, keep making it, scripture."⁶² As long as Raël's writings are accepted as authoritative accounts of who human beings are and who their creators are, they will be functioning for those who see them that way as scripture. Developing that idea further, Smith proposes that "for a work to be scripture means that it participates in the movement of the spiritual life of those for whom it is so. At times they poured into it, but also then they got out of it, the highest, best, fullest to which their mind or imagination or heart could rise."⁶³ If the testimonies of members of the Raëlian movement that are collected in *Intelligent Design* are any indication of how the members in general think of Raël's writings, that is exactly what they have found there. Given that, and the fact that the movement is still in its formative stages, it is not surprising that Susan Palmer reports that Raël's texts "are presented (and accepted) as precise, literal, factual accounts of truth."⁶⁴

The image of Raël as the bearer of new scriptures crowns his transformation from marginally successful singer-songwriter, small-time journalist, and aspiring race-car driver to a prophet who has been chosen by a group of superhuman beings to join the ranks of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha. The new religion that he preaches through many means but especially through his new scriptural texts is avowedly atheistic and scientific, but it is also inextricably biblical. Without the infrastructure provided by the Eloha's extended interpretation of the Bible and Raël's face to face encounters with his prophetic peers, there would not be much left to his message.

CONCLUSION

The centrality of the Bible to both Vorilhon's construction of a new identity as the prophet Raël and to the substance of the new religion that he preaches makes it impossible to treat the Raëlian movement wholly as a product of the cultic milieu or a development within Western

occulture. It is precisely the interweaving and interaction of elements from both the cultic milieu, or occulture, and the broad biblical tradition that continues to make both Raël and his movement what they are today. In many ways, moreover, exegesis of the Bible dominates the Eloha's instruction of Raël, particularly in their first encounter. That should not be at all surprising, however, because Raël is far from alone in relying on a re-reading of the Bible to legitimate his establishing a new religion. In contexts where general knowledge about the Bible has had and retains some cultural currency, appeal to new readings of familiar texts can be a powerful strategy for claiming cultural continuity for a new movement.

Part of the reason for its centrality in the legitimation of new religions is that the Bible itself enshrines and canonizes multiple examples of new religious movements. Among others, they include the "Yahweh-alone" movement that strenuously promoted a monotheistic religion for ancient Israel; the Maccabees who seized on the ancient example of the zeal of the priest Phineas in Numbers 25 to inspire their sectarian attempt to re-establish rigorous observance of Jewish monotheism; and the early Jesus movement itself.⁶⁵ Max Weber was well aware of that transformative potential of such biblical paradigms when he focused on Jesus' assertion in the Sermon on the Mount that "it is written, but I say to you" as a primary example of the revolutionary power of charismatic claims to authority.⁶⁶ Like the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, Raël, too, claims charismatically legitimated authority as well as a special gnosis that is part of his gift from the Elohim. The substance and implications of his claims are initially worked out over the course of his intensive six-day tutorial with the Eloha who first contacted him. In Raël's self-presentation, the biblical paradigm of the prophet-led new religious movement and elements of the contemporary mythology about UFOs and superior alien races are superimposed on each other as the two primary resources that guarantee the worthiness and urgency of Raël's mission. Combined, the two sources forge a new, distinctive alloy that is stronger than its constituent parts.

In a string of strikingly mixed metaphors Christopher Partridge describes occulture as,

the spiritual *bricoleur's* Internet from which to download whatever appeals or inspires; it is the sacralizing air that many of our contemporaries breathe; it is the well from which the serious occultist draws; it is the varied landscape the New Age nomad explores; it is the cluttered warehouse frequently plundered by producers of popular culture searching for ideas, images, and symbols.⁶⁷

But this analysis of the biblical foundation of the Raëlian movement shows that the spiritual Internet provides easy access to sites about the Bible and even the Apocrypha as well as more esoteric subjects; that the

sacralizing air of countries like France, Canada, and the United States in which the Raëlians have been successful in gaining adherents is heavily scented by biblical stories, themes, and characters; that the well from which the occultist draws also yields deep draughts of biblical literature; that the contemporary landscape is also marked by places like Eden, Galilee, and Jerusalem, and that the contemporary warehouse of spiritual ideas, images, and symbols is in part stocked from floor to ceiling with materials about biblical events, themes, and personae. The case of the Raëlians shows that the ideological resources from which prophets cobble together contemporary new religious movements can not be rigidly separated from each other. As mentioned earlier, that is the case not only for the Raëlians but also for groups like the Latter Day Saints, Christian Scientists, Unificationists, and the Church Universal and Triumphant, among many others. Among “UFO religions,” interpretation of the Bible plays an important role for example, in Heaven’s Gate, whose founders for a brief time saw themselves as the “two witnesses” mentioned in Revelation 11, and in *The Urantia Book* (1955), which devotes nearly 800 pages to the life and teachings of Jesus. Multiple examples therefore suggest that to emphasize one-sidedly the cultic or occultural wellsprings of new religious movements would be to ignore the powerful influence that the Bible still can have in generating new religions both within Judaism and Christianity and, most importantly in this case, on their outskirts as well. Even when they are not viewed favorably by mainstream congregations, many new religions, like the Raëlians, can lay fair claim to being biblical religions. That is a claim that deserves substantial analytical attention.

ENDNOTES

¹ Vorilhon translates Elohim as “those who came from the sky” and uses Eloha for a single one of the Elohim. See Raël (Claude Vorilhon), *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers* (np: Nova Distribution, 2005), 11.

² Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 9. This work describes itself as “a newly combined re-translation and updated edition of Raël’s three original French books,” iv.

³ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 11.

⁴ It is not entirely clear which Christian version of the Bible Raël is using, but given the attention to the Apocrypha, it may be a Roman Catholic one.

⁵ On the rhetorical strategy of the self-effacing narrator see Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78.

⁶ See, for example, Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 88, 89, and 360.

⁷ Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 53.

⁸ Shipps, *Mormonism*, 53.

⁹ See Rodney Stark, “How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model,” in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, eds. David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–29, quotation from 13.

¹⁰ On the cultic milieu see Colin Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,” in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 12–25, quotation from 14 (originally published in 1972). For the concept of occulture see Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume I: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London, T & T Clark, 2004), 55–85, quotation from 68, with emphasis in original.

¹¹ Stark, “How New Religions Succeed,” 13.

¹² Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

¹³ On the concept of “charismatic persona,” see David G. Bromley and Rachel S. Bobbit, “Challenges to Charismatic Authority in the Unificationist Movement,” in *Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide*, eds. James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 129–146; and David G. Bromley, “Making Sense of Scientology: Prophetic Contractual Religion,” in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83–101.

¹⁴ Susan Palmer notes that the date of the first contact, 13 December 1973, is the feast of Saint Lucy, whose name means “light” in Latin. See Susan J. Palmer, *Aliens Adored: Raël’s UFO Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁵ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 7.

¹⁶ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 7.

¹⁷ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 63, 61, 83.

¹⁸ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 48. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 94.

²⁰ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 115.

²¹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 116.

²² Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 117.

²³ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 122.

²⁴ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 123.

²⁵ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 124.

²⁶ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 125.

²⁷ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 123.

²⁸ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 161.

²⁹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 165.

³⁰ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 290.

³¹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 290.

³² See Mark 1:11; Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:22.

³³ Bromley, “Making Sense of Scientology,” 89.

³⁴ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 346, 347.

³⁵ See Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 312.

³⁶ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 79.

³⁷ See Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning: Eternal Life Thanks to Science* (np: Nova Distribution, 2001) and the news stories archived at <<http://www.raëlianews.org>>, accessed 19 February 2010.

³⁸ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 15.

³⁹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 76.

⁴⁰ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 60.

⁴¹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 15.

⁴² Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 44.

⁴³ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 33f.

⁴⁴ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 17.

⁴⁵ See Qur'an 13:38; 43:1–4; 85:21–22; see also Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala: A. B. Lundequistska, 1950).

⁴⁶ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 84.

⁴⁷ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 11.

⁴⁸ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 13.

⁴⁹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 16.

⁵⁰ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 17.

⁵¹ For English translations of the collection of Gnostic texts found in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt see Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

⁵² For an English translation of Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta Ex Theodoto*, 78, see <<http://www.hypotyposis.org/papers/theodotus.htm>>, accessed 19 February 2010, which reproduces the 1934 English translation of Robert Pierce Casey.

⁵³ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 7.

⁵⁴ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 335.

⁵⁵ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 343.

⁵⁶ For a sustained treatment of ancient Gnosticism as a new religious movement, using many of the ideas developed by Rodney Stark and his collaborators, see Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵⁷ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 70.

⁵⁸ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 70.

⁵⁹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 222.

⁶⁰ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 178.

⁶¹ Raël, *Intelligent Design*, 336.

⁶² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19.

⁶³ Smith, *What Is Scripture?*, 36.

⁶⁴ Palmer, *Aliens Adored*, 100. On the movement still being in its formative stages see George D. Chryssides, "Scientific Creationism: A Study of the Raëlian Church," in *UFO Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2003), 45–61, esp. 46.

⁶⁵ On the “Yahweh-alone” movement see Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). On the Maccabees see Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees: Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962) and Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987). For the Jesus movement, among many other titles, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ See Max Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” and “The Nature of Charismatic Authority and Its Routinization,” in *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 24, 51, respectively.

⁶⁷ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. I, 85.