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Author(s): Paul Brian Thomas

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Bible Lessons with Raël

On Religious Appropriation in ET-Inspired Religions

Paul Brian Thomas

ABSTRACT: As an introduction to *Nova Religio's* special issue on ET-inspired (UFO) religions, this article maintains that despite less media attention since the furor surrounding the Heaven's Gate suicides, ET-inspired religions are still active. Moreover, increasing speculation linking extraterrestrials to 2012 apocalyptic scenarios, coupled with a significant percentage of the population who believe in extraterrestrial visitation, seems to indicate that purveyors of ET-inspired religious perspectives will continue to have a market. Rather than focusing upon the "strange" and seemingly "bizarre" nature of these religious groups, the articles in this special issue endeavor to demonstrate how members of ET-inspired religions appropriate materials and theological ideas from widely-accepted mainstream religious traditions. This article maintains that the value of such an approach lies in bridging the gulf between normalized religious perspectives and the marginalized religious "other."

“**N**ew Raëlian ‘UFOland’ to be built in Las Vegas” declares a 4 June 2009 press release from the media relations staff of the Raëlian Movement.¹ Since the deaths of 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate group on 26 March 1997, only Raël (Claude Vorillon b. 1946) has kept “UFO religions” (hereafter “ETI religions” as the materials examined in this special issue do not necessarily include UFOs)² in media headlines. As James R. Lewis has pointed out, the Heaven’s Gate deaths did much to legitimize the academic study of ETI

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religions.³ Though a brief and intense spotlight illuminated these religious groups for a time after the Heaven's Gate event, diminished attention in recent years should not be taken as an indication that those associated with ETI religions are not active. For instance, Raël was the subject of intense scrutiny with the creation of a cloning research organization called Clonaid, which claimed in December 2002 to have successfully cloned the first human being.⁴ Headlines of a different sort were made when Raël and several "Raël's Girls" appeared in the October 2004 issue of Playboy magazine.⁵

Other ETI religious groups and thinkers are speculating about the year 2012 and arguing that forthcoming apocalyptic events will be closely tied to extraterrestrial activity. According to Jelaila Starr, purported messenger and channel for the Nibiruan Council (a group of extraterrestrials living on an Earth-like planet in the Lyra constellation) the Nibiruans have been preparing humanity for ascension to the fifth dimension.⁶ In preparation for this event, called Project Earth Shift, Starr is currently offering a series of workshops across the country on the Nibiru, the year 2012, and why the events of that year are something "to embrace rather than fear."⁷

Likewise, Sheldon Nidle (b. 1946), founder of the Planetary Activation Organization (formerly of the Ground Crew) and purported contactee and channel for the so-called "Galactic Federation of Light" (a union of various extraterrestrial civilizations whose purpose is to "carry out the divine fate prophesied long ago for the Milky Way Galaxy") is preparing for first contact.⁸ According to Nidle, the period leading up to first contact is a time of great change as the Earth prepares to move into the fourth-dimension. Like Jelaila Starr, Nidle has identified the year 2012 as a pivotal moment for these changes stating, "In this regard, many psychics who have encountered the year 2012 AD have noticed that it contains a block around the magical date of December 21, 2012. . . . These coincidences point to the fact that this period is one in which our planet is moving towards a new reality."⁹

While people like Nidle and Starr may be looking forward to 2012 as the next stage of human evolution, aided by extraterrestrials, others are unconvinced that the ETs come with benevolent motives. Drawing upon the work of ancient astronaut theorist Zechariah Sitchin (b. 1922), Turkish author Burak Eldem claims in his text *Marduk'la Randevou (Rendezvous with Marduk, 2003)* that 2012 will mark the return of the Annunaki, an alien race he maintains has visited Earth in the past. In his recent fictional saga titled *2012: The War for Souls (2008)*, noted abductee Whitley Strieber constructs a fictional scenario in which the 2012 apocalypse is driven by malevolent aliens.¹⁰ Alien visitation and the year 2012 have also been addressed in Zechariah Sitchin's *The End of Days: Armageddon and Prophecies of the Return (2007)* and *Planet X Forecast and 2012 Survival Guide (2007)*.¹¹ If these books and an

increasing amount of deliberation on the Web are any indication, then apocalyptic speculation in these years prior to 2012 may include a renewed interest in the activities of extraterrestrial intelligences.

If belief in extraterrestrials is any indication, then recent polling data demonstrates that there are markets for the materials and ideas described above and fertile ground for the potential germination and growth of ETI religious movements. According to a 2005 Gallup poll, 24 percent of Americans believe that extraterrestrials have visited the Earth.¹² According to another recent survey conducted in 22 countries, an average of 1 in 5 people believe that aliens live among us, with a staggering 42 and 43 percent of those surveyed in China and India professing this belief.¹³

Very often I have encountered students who express fascination with ETI religions because they seem, at first blush, bizarre, and beyond the pale of the mainstream religions with which most of them are familiar. I would hypothesize that viewing ETI religions as uncanny and idiosyncratic holds true for many who have not engaged in an informed and critical study of these groups. In popular usage, to be uncanny is to be strange and unusual. However, there is another sense in which the word is understood, suggested by Sigmund Freud in his article “Das Unheimliche,” (1919) which touches upon a feature that unites the articles gathered together in this special issue of *Nova Religio* devoted to ETI religions. According to Freud, that which is *unheimliche* “uncanny” or, more literally “unhomely,” is that which is strange and unusual precisely because it has a repressed familiarity.¹⁴ As it applies to ETI religions, the first-time encounter with the theology of Heaven’s Gate or the Raëlian movement would likely seem theologically familiar for audiences acquainted with the Christian Bible. So, despite the seemingly “odd,” “sensational,” or “unusual” elements, perhaps it is this repressed, vague, and tenuous familiarity that helps breed fascination with these groups.

Rather than focusing upon any perceived bizarreness (as it relates to mainstream attitudes) in ETI religions, a theme that unites the articles in this collection is a sustained focus upon conventional theological source materials utilized by ETI religions, grounded in Jewish and Christian traditions. One of the consequences of such an approach is that it reduces the alleged strangeness of said groups by explicating the links they have to more commonplace religious groups (i.e. Christianity) and by demonstrating their reliance on familiar religious texts (i.e. Jewish and Christian scriptures). The articles presented here are united in presenting ETI religions as innovative, but nonetheless utilizing building blocks prized and widespread within conventional religious traditions. Jewish and Christian scriptures have played an important role in the formation of many ETI religions. This theme in particular is explored in depth in the articles of Eugene V. Gallagher, Benjamin E. Zeller, and Paul Brian Thomas.

The article by Eugene V. Gallagher represents one of two case studies in this special issue that focuses upon ETI appropriations of the Bible. In “Extraterrestrial Exegesis: The Raëlian Movement as a Biblical Religion,” Gallagher examines how Raël was influenced by and used the Bible in the development of the Raëlian movement. In fact, as Gallagher points out, it was through an intense week of Bible study that Vorillon forged his new prophetic and messianic identity. In his examination of Raëlian exegesis, Gallagher argues that Raël perceives himself as learning a more accurate understanding of what the Bible means, and that Raël claims to have recovered meaning from the text that has been obscured by human ignorance. Gallagher identifies five hermeneutic principles Raël employs to redress this ignorance, read between the lines, and recover the true meaning of the Bible.

There is a tension, Gallagher demonstrates, between Raël’s use of an authoritative text and the innovative interpretation that he brings to it. The Bible, because of its prestige in Western cultures, is a tricky text to appropriate, which implies that any interpreter like Raël, who would make innovative claims based upon the text, must go to extraordinary lengths to legitimate his authority to interpret the Bible. This includes, among other things, Raël’s claim to prophetic status and linking himself to Jesus. However, this same pitfall is also of great advantage because the Bible provides several models to legitimate Raël’s religious movement. According to Gallagher, this is a legitimation strategy that has been employed by many new religious movements.

Benjamin E. Zeller’s article “Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Makings of Heaven’s Gate” is the second case study examining how a specific ETI religion, in this case Heaven’s Gate, utilized the Bible. Zeller argues that for Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985), the Bible was central to their theology and that their reading of the Bible was informed by three fundamental assumptions. These included the ideas that life exists on other planets, that such alien life has interacted with Earthlings, and that biblical evidence proves the existence of these relationships.

Zeller maintains that Heaven’s Gate’s reliance upon the Bible is often obscured by an academic focus on New Age influences upon the group. [Gallagher makes similar claims about Raël, though Gallagher singles out the concepts of the cultic milieu and occulture as obscuring the biblical nature of the Raëlian Movement.] To illustrate what he calls the Heaven’s Gate “extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutic,” Zeller closely examined pages from the King James Version Red-Letter Bible formerly owned by Applewhite and Nettles. Noting places in the text marked by underlines, asterisks, and occasional marginalia, Zeller argues that Applewhite and Nettles had three topics of interest in the New Testament that served as the foundation for their extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutic. Indeed, as Zeller maintains, the core theological

beliefs of Heaven's Gate appear to have been borrowed from the New Testament—though combined with a New Age interest in UFOs. Understanding the approach of Applewhite and Nettles to the Bible casts new light on Heaven's Gate theology and history, especially their group suicide in 1997. This event is the fruition of a premillennial Dispensationalist reading of the New Testament, or as Zeller maintains, a technological Rapture.

Working at the broadest level, in "Revisionism in ET-Inspired Religions," Thomas examines the manner in which ETI religious thinkers use ancient religious texts to creatively reimagine a human past that includes visitations and contact by extraterrestrial intelligences. A common strategy utilized in the materials, including the works of Patricia Cori and George van Tassel is to argue that religious texts have been misunderstood and/or deliberately obscured to disguise narratives that describe alien visitation and interference in human affairs. Among the most cited, utilized, and reimaged texts used are the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The lynch-pin passages in these revisionist efforts is Genesis 6:1–4, which is reinterpreted as biblical evidence of an alien, represented in the text by the sons of God, encounter with humanity, represented in the text by the daughters of men.¹⁵

By examining how ETI religious thinkers use the Bible, Thomas argues that there is a revisionist mindset employed that has a common structure, or an "anatomy of revision." Following the work of Colin Campbell and Michael Barkun on the "cultic milieu," Thomas maintains that the anatomy of revision in ETI religions is derived from the characteristics of improvisational millenarianism.¹⁶ These include the notion that authors of ETI religious materials harbor suspicions about authoritative narratives, and present themselves as "intellectual mavericks," who create for themselves a conspiratorial and nonconformist discourse by working with materials and ideas deemed "stigmatized" by orthodox scholarship.

Finally, Robert Pearson Flaherty's article titled "These Are They: ET-Human Hybridization and the New Daemonology" further broadens the horizon by suggesting that the manner in which many contact experiences are constructed stands in a long line of Christian demonic speculation. Of particular concern in this article are accounts of ET-human hybridization, or reported contactee experiences of physical examination and experimentation for the purposes of producing new hybrid offspring. In keeping with the overall theme of this special issue of *Nova Religio*, Flaherty reports that such hybridization stories are not unique to contactee phenomenon, but emerge from many sources. As he claims, in this regard ETI religionists are reworking earlier traditions of superhuman-human hybridity, including the aforementioned ETI interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 where the sons of God mate with the daughters of men.

Those of us who have engaged in the academic study of ETI religions stand in the shadow cast by Carl Jung and his seminal work on UFOs titled *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (1959). In fact, Jung's notion that ETs are "technological angels" represents the broadly accepted perspective that the encounters described by those in ETI religions reflect religious experiences brought up to date for the modern technological age.¹⁷ Not many researchers, however, have analyzed the darker side of ETI experiences that do not mesh well with popular notions of the angelic as pure, white, winged guardians whose sole purpose is protection and support.¹⁸ It seems Jung would have done well to talk about technological demons as well. It is with these experiential legends that Flaherty is concerned. In sharing with us the frightening abduction experiences like those of Antonio Villa-Boas, Betty and Barney Hill, and Betty Andreasson, Flaherty reminds us that these sexually charged, late-night encounters properly belong to traditions of the incubi and succubi and other early myths of superhuman-human hybridity. However, unlike narratives of the incubi and the succubi, the ET and human encounter is not always driven by malevolent motivations. The ETs in this modern hybridization myth are sometimes imagined as partners in continued evolution and survival. Furthermore, not only are ET-human hybridization stories about incubi and succubi brought up to date, the physical depictions of these aliens curiously reflect what Flaherty claims may be the direction of human evolution. As reported by abductees, the typical alien (both short and tall), features a bulbous cranium, large, black, almond-shaped eyes, and spindly limbs. Such characterization reflects a projection of what has already been identified as the fetalized progression of human evolution.

In many interesting ways, the contactee experiences of the Zulu shaman Vasamazulu Credo Mutwa (b. 1921) embodies in one person many of the perspectives and opinions expressed by the ETI religions explored in these pages. According to Mutwa, African traditions have recorded the activities of extraterrestrials for generations. Mutwa claims that there are aliens with questionable motives who initiate the types of experiences described by Flaherty. These include the Muhondoruka, fifteen-foot tall aliens devoted to violence; the green, large-headed, white-faced Mutende-ya-negenge who cut up and reassemble their human victims; and the Mantindane, or "star monkeys."¹⁹ Mutwa's own 1959 abduction experience echoes many of the themes examined by Flaherty, including being forced into a sexual encounter with a female alien.²⁰ In addition to evil aliens conducting experiments in hybridity, Mutwa also claims that there are many extraterrestrials that are benevolent. Among these are the Mvonjina, three-foot-tall "messengers of the gods" who bring knowledge to humanity.²¹ These beings resemble the ETs of Jelaila Starr and Raël whose ultimate goal is to enlighten humanity and further our intellectual and physical development.

Regardless of the malevolent or benevolent nature of the experience, Mutwa insists that there is always the potential for human enlightenment through encounters with aliens. Mutwa claims, “I just get furious because the people from the stars are trying to give us knowledge, but we are too stupid.”²² In the pages that follow the reader will find that Mutwa has hit upon a theme that is prominent in the work of people like George van Tassel, Raël, Marshall Applewhite, and Bonnie Lu Nettles. They all claim, in one form or another, that ignorance is the biggest roadblock to the ET-assisted evolutionary advancement of humanity. Regardless of what one believes regarding the existence of life beyond Earth, it seems the message of ETI religious thinkers resonates because many of us do recognize the debilitating effect ignorance has upon human advancement. In many sectors of society and for much of history, knowledge has been viewed as salvific. Many of the ETI thinkers described in the following pages offer salvation through knowledge, and play upon the hope that, in one way or another, ignorance can be overcome for the purpose of building a more harmonious world.

ENDNOTES

¹ “New Raëlian ‘UFOland’ to be built in Las Vegas,” <<http://www.raelpress.org/news.php?item.146.1>>, accessed 24 May 2010.

² For more on the use of this term, see the article “Revisionism in ET-Inspired Religions” by Paul Brian Thomas in this issue.

³ James R. Lewis, “Introduction,” in *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 14.

⁴ Dana Canedy and Kenneth Chang, “Group Says Human Clone Was Born to an American,” *New York Times*, 28 December 2002, late edition, sec. A. Like many Raëlian organizations, Clonaid maintains a concise and well-organized website. See “History,” <<http://www.clonaid.com/page.php?7>>, accessed 26 May 2010.

⁵ “Raël Meets Hugh Heffner,” <<http://www.raelsgirls.com/news.php?item.4.1>>, accessed 24 May 2010. Raël’s Girls are Raëlian women who have either worked in the sex industry or seek to support women who work in the sex industry. Aside from media friendly Raël, there has been activity among other ETI religious groups as well. On the weekend of 13 and 14 September 2008 the Aetherius Society celebrated the grand opening of its new Michigan Temple. See “Michigan Branch Grand Opening,” <http://www.aetherius.com/michigan_opening>, accessed 24 May 2010.

⁶ Jelaila Starr, “Introduction for ‘The Mission Remembered’ by Jelaila Starr,” <http://www.nibiruancouncil.com/html/mission_intro.html>, accessed 24 May 2010.

⁷ “Countdown to 2012, a 2.5 Day Workshop by Jelaila Starr,” <http://www.nibiruancouncil.com/html/countdown_2012_workshop.html>, accessed 24 May 2010.

⁸ On their website, The Planetary Activation Organization publishes a useful glossary of critical terms. See “Glossary of Some Important Terms,” <<http://www.paoweb.com/glossary.htm>>, accessed 25 May 2010.

⁹ Sheldon Nidle, “Planetary Activation Organization (PAO) Message of Introduction,” <<http://www.paoweb.com/paomesg.htm>>, accessed 25 May 2010.

¹⁰ Whitley Strieber, *2012: The War for Souls* (New York: Tor Books, 2007).

¹¹ Zecharia Sitchin, *The End of Days: Armageddon and Prophecies of the Return* (New York: William Morrow, 2007); Jacco van der Worp, Marshall Masters, and Janice Manning, *Planet X Forecast and 2012 Survival Guide* (Silver Springs, NV: Your Own World Books, 2007).

¹² A summary of this poll can be found on Gallup’s website. See David W. Moore, “Three in Four Americans Believe in the Paranormal,” <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/three-four-americans-believe-paranormal.aspx#2>>, accessed 25 May 2010.

¹³ Erin Anderssen, “Looking for Aliens in all the Wrong Places,” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 April 2010.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1953), 217–256.

¹⁵ Genesis 6:1–4 reads 1 And it came to pass that humankind began to multiply upon the face of the earth and daughters were born unto them. 2 The sons of God saw that the daughters of Men were fair; and they took in marriage for themselves wives of their choosing. 3 Then the Lord said, “My spirit shall not dwell in man forever, for they are flesh and their days shall be one hundred twenty years.” 4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in unto the daughters of Men, who bore children unto them. These are the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown” (Translation from Hebrew, Masoretic text, by the author).

¹⁶ 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, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 16.

¹⁸ One notable exception is Christopher Partridge, “Alien Demonology: The Christian Roots of the Malevolent Extraterrestrial in UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities,” *Religion* 34 (2004), 163–189.

¹⁹ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religions and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 182.

²⁰ Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 183.

²¹ Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 182–183.

²² John E. Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 57, as quoted in Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 184.