



STATEMENT DU-164

BOOK REVIEW

URANTIA: The Great Cult Mystery

by Martin Gardner

For several years, I've tried to read every new book that Martin Gardner has written. Gardner is a deist who believes that no Scriptures come from God, that fundamentalists are ideologues, and that creationism is an unscientific, witless swindle. Despite his stereotyped and sometimes condescending remarks, what engages me to continue reading is his insistence on testing religious and scientific truth claims.

A founding Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and a regular contributor to *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Gardner generally focuses his skeptical eye on occult phenomena: astrology, ESP, channeling (mediumship), "new energies," and other forms of quackery and pseudoscience (and yes, he often includes creationism among his targets). His *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, written over 40 years ago, has been of value in exposing movements such as Flat Earthers, pyramidologists, dowsing, Dianetics, radionics, homeopathy, and Reichian orgone energy.

Behind his jabs at the Christian faith (though it's usually "young earth" creationism that raises his ire) stands a confirmed naturalist who asks how channeled revelations square with science. Unlike Christians, rationalists do not believe demons exist, so they cannot dismiss the difficulties posed by occult phenomena or *The Urantia Book* as manifestations of demonic power. In other words, humanists don't have a "Satan of the gaps," as Christians do, to account supernaturally for problematic occult experiences. Their very rationalism forces them to seek natural explanations, often long after evangelicals have despaired of earthly answers and begun talking about demons.

While I certainly believe in supernatural agents, both demonic and divine, who influence people on earth, my point is that we theists sometimes give up too easily. In this case it took a hard-core skeptic to unwind methodically the tangled origins and material fallacies embodied in *The Urantia Book (UB)*. His chronicle is a landmark exposé of the origins of the Urantian movement.

Gardner's interest in the *UB* was aroused in part by the long-maintained secrecy regarding its true author. He also describes himself as "fascinated by the enormous amount of science in the *UB*" (p. 181). Most channeled writings are deadly dull and palpably untrue where they touch on scientific matters. The *UB* is an exception. Its discussions of cosmology and anthropology are more erudite, and its errors and internal contradictions more difficult to detect.

The *UB* claims to be authored by supermortal, celestial beings through an unnamed "human subject" who conveyed messages from them in his sleep. A prominent Chicago psychiatrist, Dr. William S. Sadler, privately transcribed the contactee's messages, and in 1923 assembled a small group to study the messages while hiding the contactee's name and identity. The supermortals described themselves as extraterrestrials from other planets and star systems. Their name for earth is Urantia; they claim to have been observing and guiding the evolution of our planet (Adam and Eve, we learn, were actually transported here from the planet Jerusem). They say Christendom has distorted the true nature and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the time is now ripe for mankind to receive this "epochal revelation."

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Sadler's study group submitted written questions to the contactee and eventually came to believe the Urantia Papers were a new revelation from God, on a par with the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Inner circle members funded its printing, and the first edition finally appeared in 1955, weighing in at 2,097 pages.

Looking for the human sources behind the *UB*, Gardner zeroes in on two former Seventh-day Adventists: Dr. William S. Sadler and his brother-in-law, Wilfred Custer Kellogg, who lived with the Sadlers in Chicago. The unnamed contactee was Wilfred (a nephew of W. K. Kellogg, the cornflake king), an identification Gardner first made in 1991. In *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery*, he sets forth the full range of evidence to support this conclusion.

Gardner begins with Dr. Sadler, who taught at Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary. (The *UB* reflects that school's liberal views on the dating and origin of the biblical texts.) Sadler was previously employed by John Harvey Kellogg, an eccentric Adventist doctor who became skeptical of biblical miracles and the Atonement (93). Sadler's own theories about eugenics and racial inferiority seem to surface in the *UB*, and Gardner believes "too much material in the *UB* comes straight out of early books written by Sadler" (283).

Seventh-day Adventism looms large in Gardner's narrative, which notes that the *UB* contains Adventist doctrines (e.g., soul-sleep and Jesus being Michael the Archangel) and even the names of famous Adventist leaders. Later in the book, Gardner admits that he himself was an Adventist in his youth, for about one year (181). Thereafter, Adventist offshoots have continued to fascinate him.

Eventually, Gardner comes to the science of the *UB*. If the *UB* really were an extraterrestrial revelation, it should accurately describe our universe. It fails this test miserably. The *UB* claims the universe is over one *trillion* years old; most scientists date it at about 15 billion years (186). The temperature it assigns to the sun's surface is off by thousands of degrees (190); it falsely says that Mercury keeps the same face towards the sun (196). The *UB* teaches that humans have 48 chromosomes; it should be 46 (217). Atoms supposedly cannot possess more than 100 electrons; this "limit" was broken in 1955, as any periodic table will confirm (214).

Once or twice Gardner slips up. The *UB* claims our solar system was formed with 12 planets, and Gardner notes the improbability of "three undiscovered planets beyond the orbits of Neptune and Pluto" (189). He apparently missed its statement that the fifth planet between Mars and Jupiter "fragmentized" and became the asteroid belt (*UB*, 658). This leaves two undiscovered planets, not three. He also refers to gamete reproduction as *mitosis*, instead of *meiosis* (217).

Like a good storyteller, Gardner saves the best for last. A lengthy chapter reveals scads of plagiarisms in the *UB*, originally discovered by Urantian believer Matthew Block. In 1992, Block wrote a paper on "bibliographic" sources used in the *UB*. The paper reveals shameless plagiarism of earlier works, sometimes word-for-word but more frequently thought-for-thought. Gardner develops these discoveries in parallel-column comparisons and points out that Seventh-day Adventist founder Ellen White had a bad problem with plagiarism (he devotes a full chapter to this), as did Sadler occasionally (290).

The final chapters disclose important recent developments. We learn that since the 1980s the Urantia Foundation has taken legal action against organizations that used the word "Urantia" in their name, even if a group was friendly to the *UB* itself. The biggest blow occurred in 1989 when the Urantia Foundation "denied the [Urantia] Brotherhood the right to sell the *UB*, or to use the name 'Urantia' or the three-circle logo" (396-97). The Urantia Brotherhood — founded in 1955 with the Foundation's approval by 36 members of Sadler's study group, and located *at* the address of the Foundation — then disbanded and reorganized under another name. The Foundation seems to have become very territorial.

The idea of copyrighting a "divine revelation" was directly challenged in 1990, when Kristen Maaherra distributed free Folio Infobase copies of the *UB* on computer diskette. (It is now available at several Internet sites.) The following year the Foundation sued her, claiming copyright infringement. Maaherra countersued, arguing that the copyright renewal for the *UB* was invalid, since copyright can only be granted to human authors. A federal district court agreed, striking down the copyright to the *UB* in February 1995. The case is now on appeal.

We are also told of a virtual explosion of alleged contact with *UB* deities over the past decade. Urantians claim they have increasingly been contacted with end-times messages from the celestials. Like other occult movements such as Theosophy, the Urantian revelation provided the seedbed for a new crop of contactees or "Transmitter-Receiver" (Urantian term) to appear later and diversify into new submovements.

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In the absence of a good Christian response to the *UB* in English, this volume by Martin Gardner will have to stand as the thinking person's premier exposé on the Urantia movement.

—*Eric Pement*

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