
Dr. Barry Downing's Response to Gary Bates

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An Exclusive for The Strong Delusion

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Gary Bates

Gary Bates statement on Dr Barry Downing being a wolf in sheep's clothing.

I have also received numerous letters from Christians challenging me as to my views that there is no other intelligent life in the universe (see Did God create life on other planets?). This view that we are alone in the universe (except for angels) is derived by starting with Scripture and based upon our understanding of it as the final authority in all things. In most cases, the challengers had derived their views that there could be extraterrestrial life because they had seen 'something' they could not explain, that is, a UFO. The reality is that a UFO is what it means— an unidentified flying object, and 90–95% can always be explained as either natural (a planet or a star— even ball lightning on occasions) or man-made phenomena (satellites etc.). The few that defy naturalistic interpretation usually display supernatural characteristics not in keeping with physical craft.

However, the major issue here is the Christian using or relying upon their experiences over God's Word. In other words, their experience is used to explain the Bible, when it should always be the other way around. Regardless of what the experience is, this is dangerous ground to tread because it automatically leaves oneself vulnerable to deception, no matter how seemingly virtuous or even godly it can appear on occasions. Believe me when I say that you would not believe the stories I've heard based on people's experiences. For example, supposedly 'good angels' visiting folk to tell them that the aliens are real and that God is using them to effect his purposes on Earth. There is no doubting that experiences can be real and extremely powerful but the only way to discern them is through the filter of Scripture. The very instant it is not in accord with God's Word, like the example I just mentioned, then you can be sure it did not come from God. (See Aliens, evolution and the occult for more on this). This is why for non-Christians, such supernatural feats are not understood by them as such, so they believe they have been really visited by aliens.

However, I don't understand the rhetoric that claims people are somehow demythologizing God's Word though. What does this mean? The comment fails on its own logic because believing that UFOs are piloted by angels doing God's bidding etc. is actually imposing or forcing something upon the text that is not there. In other words they presuppose that these "ancient UFOs" are real physical craft and therefore they have to be squeezed into the Bible somewhere. If God's Word says pillars of fire and a cloud went before the Hebrew nation, then it was a pillar of cloud and the fire is not the exhaust of a jet engine.

These faulty views of real craft piloted by angels is one that being promoted by the Rev. Dr Barry Downing in his book, *The Bible and Flying Saucers*. Frankly, I regard Downing as a wolf in sheep's clothing and feel that his views do great harm to the authority of God's Word. I have mentioned his views in my own book *Alien Intrusion: UFOs and the Evolution Connection*. Downing was, and might still be, the chaplain of the world's largest UFO group, MUFON (Mutual UFO Network) in the United States. This shows the high regard in which he is held, particularly from a group that promotes the idea that extraterrestrials are visiting the earth. Such groups love nothing more than to hear Christians themselves reinterpret Scripture to allow for a UFO or two because they feel that yet another powerful historical document supports their own views. This is the danger of accepting UFOs in the Bible. [Read full article here](#) .

CHRIST AND UFOS: INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

Dr. Barry H. Downing

INTRODUCTION

Jim Cunningham has asked me to comment on some of the things Gary Bates has written about my work interpreting UFOs and the Bible. My book, *The Bible and Flying Saucers*, was first published in 1968, and has been reprinted many times since then both in England and the United States. I had a major role in the History Channel production "UFOs in the Bible," and have been a theological consultant to the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) since 1972. Mr. Bates describes me as the "chaplain" of MUFON, which is a bit of a stretch, but I have published more articles on religion and UFOs in the MUFON UFO Journal than anyone else, and have addressed several MUFON symposiums. I have also published several articles in *The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters*, edited by Ronald Story.

I earned a bachelor's degree in physics, a divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, including studies in Greek and Hebrew, and then earned a Ph.D. degree from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where I specialized in the relation between science and religion. My dissertation was: *Eschatological Implications of the Understanding of Time and Space in the Thought of Isaac Newton*. Mr. Bates is more interested in biology (evolution) than physics, but I understand his concern to maintain our faith in God as creator. In the summer of 2007 I presented a paper at Oxford University on the writings of Phillip Johnson, an authority on intelligent design.

For more than 40 years I have specialized in the relation between science and religion, while serving as a Presbyterian pastor. All of my education does not mean I know what I am talking about, I realize, but at the same time, I don't think it hurts.

Mr. Bates has said of me, "Frankly, I regard Downing as a wolf in sheep's clothing and feel that his views do great harm to the authority of God's Word." If Bates is right, I am even worse. Since I am a pastor, I am a wolf in shepherd's clothing.

I have no proof that I am not a wolf in sheep's clothing, as Bates charges. But I do think that modern UFOs are a

challenge to the church, Mr. Bates understands this, and the question is: What is the proper interpretation of our modern UFO experience in light of the Bible? I will be giving this answer from the point of view of a Protestant pastor. Keep in mind that Muslims, Jews, and Hindus would see it all quite differently. Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians would use different standards of truth.

But even worse, not all Protestant Christians are going to have the same point of view. Obviously, Mr. Bates and I do not have the same point of view. I will try to explain my point of view and the reader can decide for himself or herself who is nearer the truth. (It may be that neither Mr. Bates nor I see all of the truth that we should see.)

THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

Mr. Bates is concerned that my views "do great harm to the authority of God's Word." I do not see how this is possible. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." How could anything I do or say harm the Word of God? Jesus spoke, and the lame walked. No human can destroy the authority of God's Word. Jesus is God's ultimate Word, and God raised him from the dead. The Word of God will not be thwarted by humans.

What I would say is that humans can deny the authority of God's Word, and they can misinterpret it. I would say that the real problem for Mr. Bates is not that I have harmed God's Word, but that I harm Mr. Bates's interpretation of God's Word. The Bible may be infallible, but Mr. Bates's understanding of the Bible is not infallible (nor is mine). Our task as Christians is to study the Word of God in Scripture together, and look at the signs of the times, and try to discern the work of God in our midst.

I have a series of questions that go something like this: What are the angels of God doing now? If they were to fly in our skies now, how would we identify them? If the "pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night" of the Exodus (13:21,22) [Biblical quotes are from the Revised Standard Version] were to fly across the United States at a height of 1000 feet, and be seen by millions of people (about 40 million Americans claim to have seen a UFO), how would Mr. Bates interpret this sign?

I think Mr. Bates has a right to be worried that I am guilty of a false interpretation of UFOs in relation to the Bible. Maybe I am wrong, although I do not want to be. But my concern is that UFOs may be a sign to our generation that we should repent, and believe the Gospel of Christ. Jesus condemned the people of his day for not recognizing the divine signs he was performing. "For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day." (Matthew 11:23) What worries me more than being wrong about UFOs is being right. If I am right, then the people of God have been all but blind to the presence of God's angels in our skies. I understand Government lies have helped keep us blind, but why should the church ever trust Pharaoh, or Caesar, to interpret the signs of the times?

EXPERIENCE AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Bates is against the way I use UFO evidence in my biblical interpretation. J. Allen Hynek, former U.S. Air Force advisor on UFOs, wrote a book called *The UFO Experience*. Mr. Bates supposes that it is a mistake to take UFO evidence, and treat it as having any authority unless the Bible confirms this authority. "However, the major issue here is the Christian using or relying upon their experiences over God's Word."

It has long been a Christian view that the authority of the Bible is above the authority of human experience. Suppose that I claimed that a UFO landed in my back yard, I went on board, I met a being who said he was Jesus, and he sent me back to my home to proclaim that UFOs carry the angels of God. I suspect that I would lose my ordination if I were to say anything like that. (I have never even seen a UFO.) The church has always been skeptical of private visions.

But at the same time, the Bible says visions do happen—if they did not, there would be no such thing as biblical revelation. The Jewish Exodus was an experience first, and then it was written in a book. The Transfiguration of Jesus was a shared experience of Peter, James and John first (Matthew 17), and then written in a book. It was experience of the divine that created the Bible. So experience counts for something.

Peter talks of the voice of experience when he describes the Transfiguration with the words, "we heard this voice

borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.” (2 Peter 1:18) The Resurrection stories of Jesus are about seeing, hearing and touching—experiencing the Resurrected Christ.

We are called to hold our human experience up against Scripture, in order to interpret both Scripture and Experience, and that is what I have tried to do.

I am finding myself wondering what Mr. Bates does with “facts.” I cannot help remembering how Galileo tried to get religious leaders to look through his telescope, and they refused. They did not want to confuse their faith with facts. I worry that in trying to defend the Bible, Mr. Bates may require a certain blindness to the facts of our modern UFO experience.

He says “Powerful angels may indeed have the ability to construct material things or even flying machines, but I don’t recall any occurrence in Scripture where this is recorded.” So what? The Bible does not contain all truth, only the truth God intended to be in it. $E = mc^2$ is not in the Bible either, but that does not mean it is not true. John’s Gospel finishes by saying he left out lots of information about Jesus (John 21:25).

Roman Catholic Theologian Corrado Balducci has argued that so many people have seen UFOs that we should take these reports seriously. If we cannot trust sincere eye witness reports, how can we trust the reports of the Resurrection? I think this is a good question. (See my article “The Balducci Interview and Religious Certainty,” first published in the September 1998 issue of The MUFON UFO Journal, and published on line at www.21stcenturyradio.com/t-ufos-c2-vaticanmufon.html .)

I believe the proper process of biblical interpretation involves taking our human experience seriously, but at the same time remembering that in the end of the day, God is God, and we are not. And we may not be totally capable of understanding either the Bible, or ourselves, or finally, the full mystery of God, at least this side of heaven. That means, humility is always a good choice.

EXPERIENCE IN SCRIPTURE AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Part of the difference between Mr. Bates and me is perhaps in our understanding of the nature of biblical authority. Most Protestants believe the Bible is inspired by God, some go further and suppose that the Bible, like the Roman Catholic Pope, is infallible. I do not work from the assumption that the Bible is infallible, although if it is, it is fine with me. I believe the Bible is trustworthy, and has all the information we need to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is what Jesus commanded. But for evangelical purposes, I do not think the concept of biblical infallibility is helpful in our modern scientific culture. If we say to an atheist like Richard Dawkins, “God made the Bible infallible,” he would likely laugh and say, “No he didn’t, he made me infallible.” A priori arguments do not carry a lot of weight with scientists. And so I have tried to do my biblical interpretation in light of what the Bible says, not in light of a doctrine laid like a blanket over the top of the Bible. (Dawkins is author of the book *The God Delusion*.)

But the way in which I understand the inspiration of the Bible is different from the way Muslims understand the inspiration of the Koran. The Koran was written by one person, Mohammed. Muslims believe every word was directed by God through Mohammed.

Some Protestants see the Bible this way, although these same Protestants would probably say they do not believe in the Infallibility of the Pope, because no human is perfect.

The Bible, unlike the Koran, is not one book, but 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament. This is the Protestant Bible. The Roman Catholic Bible contains some books left out of the Protestant Bible. All of this is the result of “canonization,” the decision of church people hundreds of years ago about which books met the standard of “inspired by God,” and which did not. (The Book of Revelation almost did not make it into the Bible.)

Needless to say, the Apostle Paul who lived hundreds of years after Moses has quite a different point of view about God than Moses. And even more to the point, Paul was brought up in the Jewish tradition, and originally he was as horrified by the stories about Jesus as Gary Bates is horrified about UFO stories. Paul was trained in theology as a Pharisee.

But then he "saw the light," quite literally, as he was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to put some Christians in jail. The story of Paul's conversion is told in the book of Acts—scholars believe Luke was the author of Acts. "Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do.'" (Acts 9:3-6) This is perhaps the most important conversion in the history of Christianity—Paul ended up writing more books than any other New Testament author.

And this is what I call a biblical UFO event. We have a bright light in the sky. We have a voice coming from the light. The voice identifies itself as the voice of Jesus, as the voice at the burning bush of Moses identifies itself as the voice of God. This is parallel to the "bright cloud" in the sky at the Transfiguration, from which the voice of God came. (Matthew 17)

One of the issues of interest to UFO researchers is: was this a single witness, or multiple witness, experience? This is a multiple witness experience, like the Pillar of Cloud of the Exodus, or the Ascension of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11, and unlike the single witness experience of Ezekiel. There were other men traveling with Saul (whose name was changed to Paul).

What was the impact of Paul's UFO experience on those with him? "The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one." (Acts 9:7) That would seem to be the last word on the question: the other men stood speechless, heard the voice, but saw no one.

But it is not the last word. This same conversion story is told two more times in the book of Acts, in chapter 22, and then again in chapter 26. What was the experience of the men who traveled with Paul in chapter 22? "Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me." (vs. 9) So in chapter 9, the men heard the voice, in chapter 22, they did not.

What about chapter 26? In this chapter, the other men apparently see the light, and fall to the ground with Paul, but whether they heard the voice or not is not mentioned. "And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language..." (vs. 14) So then chapter 26 contradicts chapter 9 concerning body posture: in chapter 9, they stood speechless, in chapter 26 they fall to the ground. In chapter 26, Paul is making his defense before King Agrippa, and it is worth mentioning that the words of Jesus to Paul in this conversion story are substantially more numerous than that found in either chapter 9 or chapter 22. What I think we should notice here is that biblical interpretation is not easy, not only between different books of the Bible, but within a single book by the same author. One can argue that every word in the book of Acts is exactly as God wants it to be, but that does not make it any easier to understand exactly what the "experience" of those with Paul really was. I believe it is the will of God that it is so. But I also believe it means that often the Word of God in the Bible frustrates—humiliates—our efforts at interpretation.

As a student of both the Bible and UFOs, I would really like to know: did the other men hear the voice of Jesus, or not? On the basis of my way of interpreting the Bible, I have to say: I do not know. I would like to know, but I don't.

What do I sense is God's message to me here? I think it this: "Barry, you do not have to know everything, in fact, you do not really know much. But if you know Christ crucified and raised from the dead, you know enough."

And one more thing. I believe we should all be filled with wonder, like the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, at our modern UFO lights in our sky. And I do not believe I undermine the authority of God's Word when I say that. If I am a wolf in sheep's clothing, I am pretty sure my teeth are missing.

Barry H. Downing

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