

PREPARING FOR SCHOLARLY EVALUATION OF THE URANTIA BOOK

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With The URANTIA Book distribution now well over the hundred thousand mark, it already enjoys a readership achieved by only a relatively small percentage of the books published. As more and more people in mainline Christianity become readers of the book it hastens the day when The URANTIA Book will be subjected to critical scholarly analysis and criticism. My guess is that many students of The URANTIA Book are ill prepared for such an evaluation.

Last month I received a 715 page copy of Dr. Jacques Rheume's doctoral thesis written for degree requirements at the University of Ottawa entitled "An Analysis of a Revealed Text: The URANTIA Book." The manuscript is written in French. Dr. Rheume's critical analysis is but the first in a long line of empirical studies evaluating The URANTIA Book.

This long dissertation approaches The URANTIA Book from the linguistic analysis point of view, a discipline which has become quite popular among the social sciences in recent years. The thesis is composed largely of descriptive material relating obvious details of the book familiar to anyone acquainted with the content of The URANTIA Book. The most valuable sections of the analysis are those which examine the parables and miracles contrasting them with Biblical data and which identify various categories of knowledge found in the book such as Biblical, scientific, philosophical, theological, historical, etc. Dr. Rheume finds twenty-two such categories.

Although the manuscript professes to be an objective, scientific study, even the descriptive sections are filled with subjective, degrading remarks. A few quotes illustrate the obvious bias of the author: "The author feels the need to say all he knows about science." p. 89 "A Biblical quote justifies everything." p. 93 "It is the URANTIA game to make us believe in a lot of science by the simple listing of a multitude of proper names." p. 152 "The author then begins to classify as he does so often when he feels incapable of arguing or of using his sources." p. 158 "The author doesn't want any miracles but since there are some in the gospels, he has to use his cosmology in order to explain them." p. 205 "The author wants to impress by the details and his scholarship." p. 293 "He limits himself to a few names and a few cliches." p. 293

Even in the evaluative sections of the thesis the author frequently lacks philosophical objectivity and intellectual discrimination as the following statements reveal: "If (the origin) is revealed The URANTIA Book disappears into the multitude of ordinary books whose impact is no longer notable." p. 587 "We must conclude that in the long run the innovative material of the narration does not convey any new truths to the reader who evaluates the text." p. 608 Added to these indiscriminating subjective remarks, there are errors of fact in a few places in the paper which further contribute to the derogatory connotations of the study. Although there is some truth in the observation that The URANTIA Book is likely to appeal to American Protestants, statements like the following have questionable validity: "The author lets us see by his statements that he is proud of being an American. America, therefore, becomes the place where The URANTIA Book can best be appreciated." p. 365

Fortunately, Dr. Rheume does not completely fail in his attempt to achieve scientific and philosophic objectivity. In general his knowledge of The URANTIA Book is accurate. The following statements illustrate the quality of his philosophic objectivity: "If a work that attempts to unify all of the sciences and all of the historical details is a revelation, we must admit that The URANTIA Book answers this criteria." p. 521 "The URANTIA Book coherence is assuredly remarkable." p. 522 "The paradox is that The URANTIA Book becomes more acceptable if we consider it as being not revealed." p. 612 "The URANTIA cosmology could be subjectively accepted as correct and hypothetically true as long as it leads its readers to the discovery of 'religious truth.'" p. 615

Dr. Rheume gives his final personal reaction to the book in saying, "It seems that as a human project The URANTIA Book would have been acceptable but as a celestial 'revelation' a very special faith is needed and the analyst does not possess it." p. 627. In summary, Dr. Rheume arrives at three basic conclusions regarding The URANTIA Book:

1. Verifiable material in the book is generally accurate and reliable. A competent human being could have written such material.
2. Non-verifiable material in the book cannot be proven true or false. It could have been produced by human imagination.
3. Dr. William S. Sadler is the author of the book. Study shows that he had the competence to write the verifiable material and the imagination to write the non-verifiable material.

In order to understand Dr. Rheume's point of view one must realize that his graduate committee at the University of Ottawa would demand an objective, scientific approach to the book. Dr. Rheume's religious background is in conservative European Catholicism which is a long way from the growing edge of Christianity in Protestant churches in the United States.

Not only must one realize that academic research demands objectivity but that any religionist who is intellectually honest and knowledgeable cannot be a Christian fundamentalist or a URANTIAN fundamentalist. It may be helpful to review the pilgrimage of mainline Christian theology regarding revelation. The early church and the church of the middle ages regarded the Bible as revelation because they believed the books it contains were inspired by the Spirit of God. Logically, they deducted, if it is inspired by God it is true--all of it. So we had the doctrine of literal inspiration and the infallibility of the Bible.

Modern scholars and "free-thinkers" have documented errors and discrepancies in the Bible. After years of debate and critical thinking the theologians of mainline Christianity have transcended this "inerrancy" doctrine and discovered not only that the Bible was just as meaningful without it but that this intellectual maturity opened the doors of new spiritual growth. They said the Bible "contains" the word of God, not "is" the word of God. Scholarship, spiritual insight, and wisdom must determine what is and what is not spiritual truth in its contents. It is a reliable guide to faith and practice for Christians.

Mature and intelligent students of The URANTIA Book ought also to give up any "inerrancy" doctrine--hopefully many never have held such a view! The URANTIA Book has errors or discrepancies in Biblical references, in scientific statements, in historical references, and in logic. I have never been much interested in these historical, scientific, and logical aspects of The URANTIA Book because they are peripheral to the real purpose of the book--spiritual enlightenment. It is not primarily a book of history or science; it is a book of spiritual insight and guidance. I regard The URANTIA Book revelatory for the same reason I so regard the Bible. It contains the highest quality of insight into spiritual truth and Reality of any book I know. It presents the most meaningful spiritual cosmology available on the planet. The best in Christian eschatology pales by comparison. It contains the most dynamic and spiritually uplifting picture of the life and teaching of Jesus available. It integrates science, philosophy, and religion more effectively than any other religious source. It is validated more completely by experience than any religious view with which I am acquainted. This is the important thing about The URANTIA Book.

Just as the Bible has been subjected to objective scientific study, so The URANTIA Book must be critically analyzed if it is to become a reliable source of spiritual guidance for humanity. Errors or discrepancies of fact or logic should be pointed out and examined. Philosophical and spiritual truths should be studied and evaluated. We must understand, however, that such objective study cannot prove or disprove spiritual realities; it cannot determine what is or is not revelatory. It can be an important tool in helping the individual and society make evaluations and judgments regarding such truths. It is generally assumed by religious scholars that spiritual reality does not contradict scientific fact or the authentic aspects of human experience.

From a scientific, empirical point of view Dr. Rheasume's manuscript has numerous weaknesses. Among these weaknesses I would list the following:

1. He does not adequately document errors or discrepancies in The URANTIA Book concerning Biblical, scientific, historical, and logical material.
2. Although he recognizes the remarkable coherence and integration of science, philosophy, and religion in the book, he does not adequately perceive its unique standing in such integrative attempts in contemporary literature.
3. He does not have a very realistic empirical knowledge of the limits of human creativity regarding authorship nor an adequate comparison with parallel philosophic-religious literature.

Almost every critical student of religion after reading The URANTIA Book first tests the hypothesis that Dr. Sadler or a group of scholars wrote the book. Some twenty-five years ago we had a group of around a dozen theologically trained people who thoroughly examined this thesis. We came to the conclusion on empirical grounds that no one person could have written it. The background knowledge required is simply too comprehensive for one person to have mastered. The spiritual insights

were at too high a level over too extensive a span to believe one person could have written it--there are no historical parallels that are this extensive. The coherence of this entire and complex book are amazing and surpass that of the best authors of past and present. Against such odds, if we still assume Dr. Sadler wrote the book, we would have to recognize him as one of the greatest geniuses who ever lived--which Dr. Rheume not only does not do but seems to imply that the author needed only quite ordinary scholarly abilities to produce the book.

Dr. Rheume's analysis can be classified among the many reductionistic, "nothing but," studies of spiritual truth in the past. Classic examples are David F. Strauss, Leben Jesu, 1835 and Ernest Renan, La Vie de Jesus, 1863. They attempted to show that Jesus and his teachings were purely human and that the supernatural aspect is a myth created by the early church. Albert Schweitzer has pointed out in The Quest of the Historical Jesus (1910) that all attempts to interpret Jesus from a purely human point of view have failed to account for the facts of his life and the effect of his teachings and personality in history. I am confident that Rheume's analysis and those like it in the future will meet with the same historical judgment.

4. Probably the most serious objective weakness of Dr. Rheume's analysis is his failure to realize that authorship technically has nothing to do with the quality of a literary or religious production. Truth is not determined by the fact of authorship. Whether or not a religious work is designated as revelation is not determined by authorship. The authorship of much of the Bible and material in other sacred books is not known. Literature which is classified as revelation is the result of the judgment of many people over many years of experience. I am confident this judgment will be made of The URANTIA Book in the centuries to come.

An individual can make the judgment that The URANTIA Book is revelatory now. But this evaluation is a personal decision and an act of faith--hopefully after thorough intellectual and experiential analysis has been made. For all practical purposes, it makes little difference whether a person classifies The URANTIA Book as revelation or not. "A rose by any other name smells the same." I usually advise people when starting to read the book not to view it as revelation. Read it critically like any other book. Truth either speaks to us personally or it does not. Much later we can decide whether or not we think the spirit of God speaks through the book.

Finally, inspite of its limitations, we should thank Dr. Jacques Rheume for his research in writing "An Analysis of a Revealed Text: The URANTIA Book." Critical research is an important step in the academic and social acceptance of The URANTIA Book as a source worthy of study. Once a work achieves research respectability, it is a good sign that it will eventually attract wider attention in the traditional institutional channels of society. If this exposure

produces positive responses in the recognition of spiritual truth its place in the future of society is assured. I am confident that in time The URANTIA Book will become the "spiritual touch-stone" of the planet.

It is important that we prepare ourselves psychologically and intellectually for scholarly evaluations of The URANTIA Book. Rather than having the theological and literary scholars of our culture pointing out errors and discrepancies in The URANTIA Book, we should be documenting them ourselves. We should make available to scholars the list of small changes in the text which the Foundation has made from time to time. We should contemplate hypotheses as to how or why these errors and discrepancies occur. Above all, we should be clear in our minds that the value of The URANTIA Book is not dependent on some literalistic inerrancy doctrine. Its true worth is in its expanded and enhanced insights into spiritual Reality. No analysis of Biblical, scientific, historical, and logical errors or discrepancies has much relevance to the central purpose and message of the book: man's spiritual enhancement and salvation. Fortunately, this difficult lesson has already been experientially learned by mainline Christianity and, hopefully, it will not have to be relearned by students of the fifth epochal revelation. On the finite level there are always ambiguities in all revelation which require judgment and faith. This is the special challenge and glory of the inhabitants of Urantia!