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THE URANTIA BOOK AND CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM

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Many devout Christians of conservative or fundamentalistic background have read sections of The URANTIA Book and recognized the superb quality of its spiritual insights but have been troubled by the revelatory claim of the book or positions taken which differ from some of the literalistic doctrines of fundamentalism. These people over the years have written to ask questions, express perplexity, seek help, or challenge statements.

This paper seeks to speak with constructive understanding to these questions and spiritual anxieties. In many ways it has been the Christian fundamentalists who have maintained the vibrant spiritual emphasis of religion in America. Our intent is not to contend with fundamentalistic beliefs but, rather, to set these spiritual truths in a larger frame of reference which, hopefully, will enable those who hold to a conservative theology to more adequately understand that we subscribe to the same spiritual realities and are brothers in Christ.

Most people who accept the Bible as revelation do not do so because some one demanded obedience to this belief. They accept the Bible as the word of God because they recognize its spiritual truths. Your approach to The URANTIA Book should be made the same way. Before you read The URANTIA Book you should not regard it as revelation. Only after you have read it are you in a position to begin to consider whether or not it may have been inspired by God. Faith and conviction must come from honest and sincere inner leading and not from external authoritarian claim or demand.

How We Got Our Bible

In thinking about the entire question of revelation it may be helpful to know how we got our Bible. Theological schools devote entire courses to this question and dozens of books are available on the subject. But you can get a short, synoptic knowledge of the Bible's origin by going to the Public Library reference shelf and get a copy of Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible. Look up the term "canon," which means "officially accepted standards or books" and read about how we got our Bible.

You will find the Old Testament evolved in three main stages over thousands of years of history. It was edited periodically by many scholars. The entire canon of the Old Testament was not decided until around 90 A. D. at the famous Council of Jamnia where Hebrew scholars finally determined which books should be included in the "official" scriptures of Judaism. The process and the conclusions are much more complex and extensive than this brief description might lead you to believe.

The New Testament began in the early Christian Church as a series of papers and letters written by numerous people. These papers were circulated among believers, edited, combined, and added to by many early scholars and church leaders. The names of apostles were often attached to the better papers so that they would have more authority for church members. From around 144 A. D. to 367 A. D. various scholars and bishops drew up their own lists of books which they thought should be canonical or officially recognized books. Finally, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote an Easter letter to the churches of his diocese in the year 367 in which he discusses the books which he considered canonical. This is the

first list which includes all of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we now have it. His list, however, was in a different sequence than our current New Testament. At various church councils in the years that followed, Athanasius' list was widely adopted and in this way we got our New Testament.

In Athanasius' pastoral letter he wrote with all of the authority of a bishop, "let no one add to them (his list) or take away aught of them." Such authoritarian exhortations were considered necessary to protect the purity of revelatory teachings; and statements like the admonition in Rev. 22:18-19 "I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book..." were common. In the same way the revelators of The URANTIA Book requested that the book be published under international copyright protection so that the purity of these teachings could be safeguarded. These precautions are not meant to imply that God ceases to enlarge the revelation of himself and spiritual truth to succeeding generations. The history of the Bible shows that God does progressively reveal larger truths to a developing world. Early religious leaders used authoritarian warnings and admonitions frequently to protect the latest prophetic messages.

Once you understand how the content of the Bible was accumulated, edited, adopted, and officially approved, you realize that revelation is validated by centuries of experience. Many people recognize revelation immediately because the indwelling spirit of God confirms what they hear or read but it takes many people over a long period of time to establish a social tradition of revelation such as the Bible. This tradition along with the authority and prestige of the institutional church results in a cultural conditioning which largely determines how the average person thinks and acts.

Recognizing New Revelation

The URANTIA Book being very new must be evaluated by the indwelling spirit of God working in the mind and heart of each individual. You should accept nothing in The URANTIA Book or any other book unless it passes this inner test of truth. I am confident that a thousand years hence, we will have a solid social tradition witnessing to the revelatory quality of The URANTIA Book.

Revelation is always the product of the action of God in the life of man. God has an infinite number of ways to do this. In Jesus of Nazareth he used both genetic-physical and spiritual means to bring revelation to us in the form of a person. In the writings of Paul he used spiritual inspiration in the mind of Paul to bring us revelation in the form of brief letters to churches. In John's book of Revelation he used a vision to the mind of John to bring us revelation. In The URANTIA Book he used high spirit personalities, ~~the indwelling spirit (Thought Adjuster) of an individual and Midwayer help~~ to bring revelation in the form of a book. God could use an infinite number of channels and manifestations to bring revelation to his mortal children. It is God's wisdom which determines the time, place, method, and form of revelation. We might speculate on why God uses certain channels and forms but this would only be an educated guess. The spirit of God is always active in the world and in this sense revelation is continuous - usually through inner guidance to individuals who share these prophetic insights with their society. Periodically epochal revelations occur - such as the coming of Jesus. Epochal revelations naturally have a much greater effect on our world than the continuous forms of evolutionary revelation. A study of these epochal revelations show that each succeeding one enlarges and enhances the earlier spiritual understanding.

Revelation must always be given in the language, forms of knowledge, and

philosophical concepts which are meaningful to the people given this revelation at the time in which it is given. As human knowledge expands revelation uses these more advanced concepts to convey its spiritual message. This is a never ending process.

The New Fulfills and Enhances the Old

Just as the New Testament fulfills and upsteps the Old Testament, The URANTIA Book confirms and enlarges the truths of the Bible. Most people have a much greater appreciation of the Bible after reading The URANTIA Book. The Bible and The URANTIA Book are companion volumes. Not to recognize this close supportive relationship is to repeat an ancient error. Early in the Christian Church a wealthy ship-owner by the name of Marcion headed a movement to eliminate the Old Testament from Christian literature. The church wisely rejected his views. Any reader of The URANTIA Book who took this same attitude toward the Bible, in my judgment, would be making this same mistake. There are many people, in fact, who have not been interested in the Bible until after they have read The URANTIA Book.

Because of the natural suspicion conservative religionists have toward any claim of new revelation, a rather common reaction which well meaning fundamentalists have toward The URANTIA Book is that it could be a work of Satan. This is an understandable attitude of people who do not have a scholarly background in religion and who have been taught to zealously defend the Bible. It is also interesting to recall that this was the same possibility raised in connection with the message of Jesus. Jesus' response to this accusation, I think, is as good as can be made. He said he should be judged by the fruits of his life - "How can Satan cast out Satan?" The URANTIA Book should be judged in the same way. You will find it supports the mission and message of Jesus and refutes the intentions and message of Satan! Epochal revelation will probably always meet the same reception given the message of Jesus. The leaders of traditional religious institutions are likely to oppose it; but, in time, the common people will receive it gladly.

The Human and the Divine

A careful study of the life and teachings of Jesus reveals there is no contradiction between the spiritual teachings regarding Jesus found in The URANTIA Book and the Bible. Certain physical and cosmological facts or assumptions are corrected and Jesus' entire life and teachings are enlarged by The URANTIA Book; but the essential spiritual truths do not change.

For instance Christian theologians generally affirm that Jesus was both a human and a divine personality but the majority of scholars in mainline churches have long recognized that the story of the immaculate conception and virgin birth were added by the early church to make his divine nature more believable for the church members of those times. An interesting observation is that today, except for the most unlettered people, this story is generally a stumbling block to belief in the authenticity of the Biblical record of the divinity of Jesus. If the virgin birth is a historical fact, the reverse argument is a much sounder philosophical position. That is, since God could have used any method he desired to incarnate his son, the fact of the divinity of Jesus makes the virgin birth a possible option of the divine plan.

The reason most mainline church theologians do not accept the virgin birth story is that only two of the four gospels record it and no where else in the New Testament is it referred to. The earliest gospel, Mark, and the latest gospel, John, do not mention it. Such an important event one would expect all

of the gospel writers to highlight. Secondly, there are many instances of supernatural conception and virgin birth recorded in the annals of religious history. It was the characteristic method by which ancient peoples designated the divine origin of their prophets and leaders. Paradoxically, the Biblical account traces the lineage of Jesus back to David through the ancestry of Joseph, not Mary. Finally, modern Christian scholars reject the virgin birth story because it is observed that God usually uses the natural laws of his creation to work his purposes in the world.

The spiritual truth regarding the nature of Jesus is that he was both human and divine. This The URANTIA Book strongly affirms. The book does not even mention the immaculate conception and virgin birth doctrines. It is assumed that the Father could incarnate his son as a mortal on our world through the natural process of conception and birth. The ancient legend is quietly ignored while the spiritual truths regarding the nature of Jesus are substantiated and enhanced.

An Enlarged Spiritual Universe

The writers of the various books of the Bible had a comparatively simplistic universe cosmology. They visualized a flat earth in the center of creation encompassed by the vault or "firmament" of heaven. This limited astronomical knowledge naturally conditioned their interpretation of spiritual realities and personalities. Basic spiritual truth, therefore, had to be revealed to the Biblical authors in prescientific frames of reference.

The revelators of The URANTIA Book present a cosmology which, while in essential agreement with our present astronomical knowledge, goes far beyond our contemporary science. ~~The total inhabited cosmos, we are told, is made of local universes and superuniverses (galaxies) along with the central universe (Havona) and the Isle of Paradise.~~ They also clarify our knowledge of the Paradise Trinity, the prebestowal personality and universe status of Jesus, and the functional relationships of spiritual beings in general. Although the Bible does not speak of the Trinity per se, Christian thinkers have developed the doctrine of the Trinity and naturally assumed, without specific Biblical confirmation, that the preincarnate Christ was the second person of the Trinity. The fact that the prologue of John speaks of him as the actual creator of our universe was more or less regarded as a poetic "Logos" doctrine since theologians regarded God the Father as the creator. The authors of The URANTIA Book, however, tell us this Biblical description (also stated in Col. 1:16 and Heb. 1:2) of the pre-existent Christ is literally true. He is both the creator and saviour of our universe.

Each Creator Son of a local universe is a unique creation of the Universal Father and the Eternal Son and is known as "the only begotten son" in his universe and all who go to the Father in this universe go through the ministry and means established by this Creator-Savior Son. Even though Jesus is not the second person of the Paradise Trinity, his presence and power are exactly the same as that of the Eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, if he were acting in the place of Christ in our universe. After Jesus' bestowal on our confused planet the Father, as recorded in Matthew, placed "all authority in heaven and earth" in his hands; and he has promised one day to return to this world of his crucifixion experience. Here, again, we see The URANTIA Book, while correcting assumptions made due to our very limited universe knowledge, confirms and reinforces the basic spiritual truths of the Bible.

Saviour of Mankind

All Christians look to Jesus as the mediator between man and God and regard him as the saviour of mankind. It is in the explanation of this salvation that they differ. Theologians of mainline Christian churches see salvation as the gift of God through faith in Jesus emphasizing God's love for humanity and full acceptance of them as his mortal sons and daughters. The theologians of Christian fundamentalism regard salvation as the gift of God through faith in Jesus because he offered himself as a blood sacrifice demanded by God the Father as the price for forgiving the sins of mankind. This is known as the blood atonement doctrine in which Jesus is seen as the redeemer of humanity from the condemnation of a just and holy God.

The only Christian belief which the author's of The URANTIA Book vigorously criticize is the blood atonement theory. They do so because this doctrine distorts and slanders the great love which the Universal Father has for his mortal sons and daughters. It is completely incompatible with Jesus' teachings about the nature of God the Father. God's love is not subordinate to his righteousness or holiness. Love is the Universal Father's primary attitude toward all persons. Jesus is, indeed, the saviour of mankind but not a redeemer.

The blood atonement theory has its origin in the conceptual language of Paul. Coming out of the Jewish tradition and writing with Jewish people in mind, Paul used the symbolic idea of Jesus as the "final sacrifice" in their sacrificial system as a missionary approach which made sense to those with a Jewish background. New Testament scholars today recognize that Paul did not hold a God concept which would be compatible with a literal blood atonement doctrine. He used this sacrificial language because it was the only frame of reference which would be acceptable to the Jews of his day. It was a missionary attempt to relate to the thought patterns of the Jews.

Most ministers in mainline Christian churches have long since abandoned this retributive concept of God. The Bible commentary most widely used in America today is The Interpreter's Bible published by Abingdon Press. In volume VIII, p. 510-11, the writer in commenting on John 3:16 says, "Some of the past explanations of the gospel are not overhelpful to us now. Most of us are not at home in the Jewish sacrificial system; and metaphors drawn from it can be confusing rather than illuminating. And some of the interpretations, popular in the Middle Ages, are to us incredible, and even monstrous.... So do many, with the Gospels in their hands, appear to see in them a lesser God giving himself to save us from the implacable fury and resentment of the great God, slow and hard to be appeased, and demanding his pound of flesh from someone. That is hideous heresy; and the blasphemy of blasphemies. It was in the eternal plan of God the Father that Jesus Christ lived out in fact: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (II Cor. 5:19), not standing sullenly aside, and needing himself to be reconciled."

We should recognize that most of those who still accept a literal blood atonement theory in our day probably do so out of misunderstanding and with no intent to deny the loving nature of God. To believe that God the Father cannot or will not love man until his innocent son is brutally executed is a cruel distortion of the loving nature of the Heavenly Father Jesus revealed to man. But The URANTIA Book does affirm the positive spiritual values associated with the crucifixion and man's salvation which are important to fundamentalists as well as other Christians.

It was the Father's will that Jesus allow the Jewish leaders to dispose of him as they desired. God does not arbitrarily interfere with the premeditated intentions of man. Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates the profound love he and the Father have for man even when they were torturing and executing him. He refused to use divine power to save himself or punish these misguided evil doers. This great love is the most powerful saving act the Father and the Son could bestow on self-willed man in this situation to eventually deliver him from his ignorance, evil, and sin and cause man to recognize God's transcendent love and accept sonship. Salvation is something which God in Christ makes possible for man. Finite man cannot save himself but through faith he may accept this gift of eternal life. Christ is the way by which all mortals in our universe go to the Father.

On Approaching New Truth

New truth is always challenging and often threatening to traditionalists. This is both natural and good. The tried and true values of historical experience cannot and should not be easily replaced by the new and untested. But these historic truths are periodically upstepped by prophetic vision. Such growth is usually a traumatic experience for individuals, the church, and society.

Every prophet in the history of the Old and New Testaments has met with unbelief and opposition. The priests of society have regularly stoned its prophets. Then their sons of another century build monuments to honor the prophets persecuted by their fathers. It is good to be cautious and critical; it is helpful to doubt and carefully evaluate. But we need to be open and objective enough to allow the spirit to lead us to larger truth. Jesus told his apostles that he would send the Spirit of Truth through which he would lead them to greater truths in the future. We must be sensitive to this Spirit of Truth. We need to learn to recognize truth in its many forms and varying appearances.

You will find that The URANTIA Book will stand the test of critical examination. It is rooted solidly in the traditional spiritual verities of the Christian faith which have endured for centuries. Reading and studying The URANTIA Book will give you a deeper and larger vision of this saving faith and help you become a part of a spiritual renaissance which is dawning on our world.

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