

A BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF *THE UB*
by Dale E. Essary

PART I: Let's Get Started

“In the minds of the mortals of Urantia—that being the name of your world—there exists great confusion respecting the meaning of such terms as God, divinity, and deity.”
(*The Urantia Book*, 0:0.1)

“Test all things; hold fast what is good.”
(1Thessalonians 5:21)

An investigation requires that we pursue some basic facts. Some simple questions have been outlined below, the answers to which attempt to provide a rudimentary introduction to *The UB*. It is only fair that we allow the authors of *The UB* an opportunity to speak on their own behalf, with no predilections as to whether their claims are trustworthy. The questions below are therefore answered using direct quotes when feasible that, in the opinion of this author, best represent the *UB* authors' purpose at face value. The pursuit of these questions, of course, will require a much deeper probing of the pertinent issues than the testimony provided below, for which purpose the remainder of this series will hopefully provide.

What is *The UB*?¹

The UB can be most succinctly described as a self-ascribed divine revelation supposedly produced by numerous celestial beings. First published by the Urantia Foundation of Chicago, Illinois in 1955, it presents a view of the nature of God, the purpose of the universe, and the fate of the human inhabitants of planet Earth, which the authors designate as “Urantia.” A massive tome weighing in at 2,097 pages (not counting the front pages, the copyright page, and the tables of contents pages), it comprises 196 chapters, called “Papers,” plus a foreword. Opening the book and turning past the title and copyright pages, the first table of contents lists the titles of the four parts into which the book is divided: Part I, entitled “The Central and Superuniverses;” Part II, “The Local Universe;” Part III, “The History of Urantia;” and Part IV, “The Life and Teachings of Jesus.” The second table of contents, comprising six pages, lists the titles of each Paper and the supposed celestial author of each (including the foreword), indexed to the page number on which each paper begins. The papers are listed in chronological order under subheadings that correspond with the title of the part to which each paper belongs. Papers 1 through 31 comprise Part I of *The UB*; Papers 32 through 56 belong to Part II; Part III includes Papers 57 through 119; and Papers 120 through 196 make up Part IV. The third table of contents lists (again, under subheadings according to part titles) the papers (and the foreword) in expanded form. Under each paper title are listed the various sections of the paper, including their section number and title, each indexed to the page number on which the section begins. This expanded table of contents takes up 54 pages alone, as it occasionally lists other subdivisions of a particular section (sometimes numbered, sometimes not) when deemed warranted. All in all, including the three book title pages, the copyright

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page, and the three tables of contents, one must leaf through 66 pages (pages i through lxvi) to begin reading the actual text of the book, which begins with the foreword on page 1.

Under the publishing leadership of the Urantia Foundation in Chicago, the book has gone through 11 printings in the United States. Although originally written in English, the book is available in Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Korean, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, and Spanish, with the first translations (Spanish and Finnish) appearing in 1993. Work is being done in several other translations, including Bulgarian, Chinese, Estonian, Farsi, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Swedish.² An audio version of *The UB* is also available in MP3 format.

In 2001, the Urantia Foundation lost a court decision concerning *The UB*'s U.S. copyright, and the text of the original English version is now in the public domain. A search of the Internet will yield several home pages dedicated to disseminating the teachings of *The UB*.

Who Wrote *The UB*?

As was stated previously, the second table of contents lists the supposed celestial authors of each paper (and foreword) that comprises *The UB*. The listed authors are referred to here as “supposed” for several reasons. First of all, as previously mentioned, the authors apparently claim to be “supermortal” beings, most of them claiming extraterrestrial origin, and all claiming to belong to one or another classification of spiritual and/or “semi-spiritual” entities representing a vast celestial bureaucracy governing the universe. These beings are described in *The UB* as being invisible to humans, although some are supposedly capable of appearing in physical form at will. The concept of angels may immediately come to the reader’s mind, and indeed some of the supposed authors are categorized as such. However, many other classifications of celestial beings are delineated in *The UB*, most of which are technically deemed “superior” to angels in the vast hierarchy (so far as functional authority and capabilities are concerned), and some that are even “a little lower than the angels” by a level or two. As it turns out, the vast majority of supposed *UB* authors are not classified as angels, but belong to these “other” classifications.

The second reason for alluding to the “supposed” authorship of *The UB* is because the list of authors, with a few exceptions, are not proper names as we would normally associate with a specific person being the author of a book or other original work. For the majority of cases, the name listed is more of a gloriously generic title designating a certain classification or order of being to which the listed author supposedly belongs. If one were to use the same convention used by the list of authors given in the second table of contents on oneself, instead of listing the proper name “Joe Smith” as an author, one would use instead the more generic classification “a Human Being from Planet Urantia.” As an example, the glorious name listed in the second table of contents as the author of the foreword and the first nine papers is “Divine Counselor.” We discover, upon reading the foreword and Papers 1 through 9 that the author is actually “a Divine Counselor” and not a specific individual whose name is “Divine Counselor.” Of course, we might assume that the “Divine Counselor” listed for the foreword and the first nine papers is the one and same individual who authored all ten treatises. And given the descriptions provided at the end of each of these papers, it seems reasonable to assume so, at least in the case of the “Divine Counselor.” Indeed, it appears that the same individual is also claiming authorship of Papers 17, 18, 19, and 24, and had co-authored Paper 31.

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If we therefore presume that an author classification listed for more than one paper is the same individual who authored all the papers listed under his or her classification, then I count 34 different authors of *The UB*. (A group of twelve unnamed individuals, all claiming to be of the same specific classification of being, claims sole authorship of Part IV, leaving 22 other classifications as authors of Parts I through III.) On the other hand, it is possible that in certain cases some individuals are associated with more than one title classification, such that the same individual is responsible for authoring two or more papers with different author listings. For example, “an Archangel” is said to have authored Paper 41, while “the Chief of Archangels” claims authorship of Paper 33. It could be that these two classifications belong to the same individual, and that the same individual authored both papers. If such is the case, then we have less than 34 authors. Conversely, the same classification given for multiple papers could be designating more than one individual. For instance, it is quite conceivable that the “Divine Counselor” listed as the author of Paper 5 is not the same “Divine Counselor” listed for Paper 9, and so on. If this is so, we have more than 34 authors. Whatever the case may be, we cannot say with absolute certainty just who the supposed authors of *The UB* are. Instead, we are given a vague description of an unspecified number of supposedly superhuman authors whose proper names (for the most part) are not given.

To declare celestial authorship is a bold claim, to say the least. Such an assertion ought to be backed up with appropriate credentials if the authors’ intentions are to be taken seriously. To be sure, the book gives a fantastically convoluted and obscure account of cosmology, anthropology, theology, and history, presented as the “best” attempt by higher minds to “explain” reality on a level sufficiently superficial for us mere mortals to grasp. And with this opacity belies much of *The UB*’s fascination. Students of *The UB* claim that they have received an esoteric dispensation that eludes the masses, one that could not possibly have been penned by mere mortals. Because of its sheer bulk, the book supplies endless details regarding many subjects on a scale heretofore unparalleled by other religious tomes. Herein lies its reputed superiority. But to weigh the merits of a literary work on the basis of its length and degree of comprehensibility is not grounds enough for upholding a claim of celestial writ. Many a bombastic tome has been penned by human hands, the purpose of which was to baffle the layman with the author’s obscure brilliance (see early paragraphs of *Introduction*).

When was *The UB* Written?

We are told, according to the final paragraphs of each of the first three Parts, that the Papers therein were “presented” in the mid-1930’s: Part I, “in the year A.D. 1934” (31:10.15); Part II, “in the year 1934 of Urantia time” (56:10.23); and Part III, “in the year A.D. 1935 of Urantia time” (119:8.9). No specific date of authorship is given for Part IV. Indeed, much of the scientific information provided in *The UB*, particularly in Parts II and III, reflects material that was readily available from other texts written in English during the mid-1930’s or earlier. However, despite these claims, *The UB* was not published until 1955, according to its own copyright page. This apparent discrepancy leaves the issue of exactly when *The UB* was written wide open to speculation, a topic that will be picked up another time, for the sake of brevity. Suffice it to say that much forensic and anecdotal evidence exists that suggests *The UB* was still being written (or revised) well into at least the early-to-mid 1940’s.

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Where was *The UB* Written?

The text of *The UB* does not indicate where it was written. However, according to the copyright page, a group of (human) individuals calling themselves the Urantia Foundation own the copyrights to *The UB* issued by the International Copyright Union, the Pan-American Copyright Convention, and the Universal Copyright Convention. (Special note: The Urantia Foundation recently lost their copyright to *The UB* that was at one time held at the U.S. Library of Congress.) The Urantia Foundation, also publishers of *The UB*, is headquartered at 533 Diversey Parkway in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Although not specifically stated in *The UB* itself, it can be reasonably inferred that this address is the very place where *The UB* was written.

How was *The UB* Written?

This question regarding *The UB*, by virtue of its supposed authorship, may be one of the more intriguing, if not pivotal, to answer. If it was indeed authored by celestial beings as it claims, then how is it that such beings, who presumably do not normally inhabit physical bodies as we do, manage to co-author a book? Did the Papers just mysteriously appear out of thin air to be later discovered by a human or group of humans selected to share the new revelation? Did the authors visibly appear to a specific human or group of humans and instruct the human witness(es) to write down the words that the authors were themselves uttering to the human contact(s)? Could it be that the authors utilized some form of mental telepathy to transfer thoughts into a human mind, through which the thoughts were interpreted and put in writing? Were the authors capable of physically manipulating the writing instruments of the day, despite their other-worldly status? Or did the celestial authors, making use of a human host having been placed in an altered state of consciousness, usher the words of revelation through the lips and/or pen of the human conduit, all the time unaware of his or her somnolent activities?

All the above theories have been suggested, by proponents and scoffers alike, at one time or another as the method of communication deployed by the supposed celestial authors. *The UB* text itself provides a few vague, if not perplexing, hints as to the supposed method of transmission. We must at this point refer to the method of communication as “supposed” just as has been done for the identity of the authors themselves, for if the supposed authors are not who they claim to be, then their supposed method of communication becomes unnecessary and therefore a false claim as well.

Be that as it may, *The UB* does suggest that a certain unnamed human contact was somehow used to convey the communications. One passage casually alludes to contacts that are routinely made with humans by celestial creatures, “such as with the subject through whom these communications were transmitted . . .” (77:8.8). Another passage corroborates the use of a specific “human being through whom this communication is being made . . .” (110:5.7). And yet one other passage, referring specifically to Part III (which includes Papers 77 and 110, cited above), indicates that the authors of the papers therein had “indited these narratives and put them in the English language, by a technique authorized by our superiors . . .” (119:8.9).

The Urantia Foundation itself offers a specific, albeit brief, explanation as to the book’s origin on their website.³ During the early part of the 20th century, a physician practicing in Chicago (whose name the Urantia Foundation does not mention) became the leader of a small group that became known as the “Contact Commission.” This group was the driving force behind the production of, and the primary

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custodian for, the finished text of *The UB*. Members of the “Contact Commission” were committed not to reveal details regarding the means by which *The UB* was transmitted to them, nor the identity of the participants thereof, supposedly in order to preclude them from being venerated by future generations. As the story goes, it was considered imperative that no humans be identified through their involvement with the inspiration of *The UB*, leaving its revelatory nature instead to stand on its own merit. While the papers were in the process of being transcribed, they were read to, and questions were requested from, a larger group known as “The Forum” that had been meeting regularly for discussions at the (unnamed) doctor’s house. Answers to these questions were subsequently incorporated into the papers. It was these early readers that formed the original core group of believers in *The UB* and became committed to the mission of bringing its teachings to the world.

Thanks to the sleuthing efforts made by skeptic Martin Gardner in the 1990’s, we now know the identity of the Chicago physician (whom the Urantia Foundation is still reluctant to reveal) and of the other members of the Contact Commission. It was William S. Sadler (1875-1969), noted physician, psychiatrist, teacher, and prolific author, who headed the “Contact Commission” and in whose residence at 533 Diversey Parkway *The UB* was written. Other members of the Contact Commission included Sadler’s wife, Lena Celestia (Kellogg) Sadler; Lena’s sister Anna Bell Kellogg, and her husband, Wilfred Custer Kellogg; the Sadlers’ son, Bill Sadler; and the Sadlers’ adopted daughter, Emma Louise (“Christy”) Christensen. Of these Contact Commission members, the four eldest (William and Lena Sadler, Anna and Wilfred Kellogg) were former members of the Seventh-Day Adventist church, but were either excommunicated or resigned from the church sometime around the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ This biographical information regarding those who were in complete control of the dissemination of the information that for years had been exchanged between the Forum and the “celestial” authors is key to an understanding of the true motivation behind the penning of *The UB*.

Although *The UB* does not explicitly state that the human conduit was unconscious while the alleged celestial authors were communicating through him, it was Dr. Sadler himself who referred to this “contact personality” as the “sleeping subject.”⁵ In a manner similar to that of Edgar Cayce, the so-called “sleeping prophet,” the “sleeping subject” of *The UB* was the vehicle through whom the celestial visitors supposedly communicated their revelations to Dr. Sadler and the Contact Commission. Despite that the members of the Contact Commission were sworn to secrecy regarding the identity of the “contact personality,” Gardner makes a strong case that the evidence points to Contact Commission member Wilfred Kellogg, Sadler’s brother-in-law and a relative of the famous Kellogg family. But not everyone agrees with Gardner’s conclusions. Ernest Moyer, a Urantian researcher, while acknowledging his inability to determine the identity of the “sleeping subject,” is nonetheless convinced that it was not Wilfred Kellogg.⁶ And yet another Urantian research team has attempted to make the case that the “sleeping subject” was none other than the famed “sleeping prophet” Edgar Cayce.⁷

Why was *The UB* Written?

The authors of *The UB* forthrightly provide many answers to this question. The foreword describes *The UB* as an “endeavor to expand cosmic consciousness and enhance spiritual perception” (0:0.2). Paper 2 indicates that *The UB* poses a “religious challenge of this age” to those readers who identify themselves as “farseeing and forward-looking men and women of spiritual insight who will dare to construct a new and appealing philosophy of living out of the enlarged and exquisitely integrated modern concepts of

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cosmic truth, universe beauty, and divine goodness” (2:7.10). The last two Papers of *The UB* indicate more specifically what this religious challenge should be all about:

“The great hope of Urantia lies in the possibility of a new revelation of Jesus with a new and enlarged presentation of his saving message which would spiritually unite in loving service the numerous families of his present-day professed followers.” (195:10.16)

“What a transcendent service if, through this revelation, the Son of Man should be recovered from the tomb of traditional theology and be presented as the living Jesus to the church that bears his name, and to all other religions!” (196:1.2)

With these entries now revealed as to the stated purpose for *The UB* having been written, a few observations are in order. The supposed celestial authors apparently hold to the opinion that something is amiss with the religious ideologies as currently practiced on planet Urantia. Note that in particular the religious expression known as Christianity is targeted as that which, due to an egregious “misunderstanding” regarding the message and purpose of its founder, Jesus, is in most need of a cosmic overhaul, one that by necessity must supplant the traditions that have been observed and practiced for nearly two millennia. One might wonder why the celestials waited so long to report our gross misgivings, in light of the exuberance with which they presently announce the arrival of their new and appealing philosophy. But forgive my cynicism at such an early juncture in our discourse. Let us continue to give the celestials audience, and see what they have to say for themselves.

Literary Comparison

The Bible contains many different forms of writing, including historical, didactic, prophetic, poetic, and apocalyptic forms. If we take the Bible at face value, a large number of authors wrote the Bible over a period of approximately 1,500 years. The biblical authors wrote in different languages and in different parts of the world, and they lived in strikingly different times in world history. Yet with all its diverseness of origins, it displays an intricate, multilayered unity of the highest order. It is *one book* that tells *one story*, about *one God*, who sends *one Savior* (Jesus Christ) into the world, who is attested to by *one body of signs*, and who is worshiped by *one people*, according to *one worldview*. The more you study it, the more you see Christ—not just in the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. The Christ-centered unity of the Bible is so intricate and so beautiful that no mere mortal could possibly have produced it. It has to be the product of a single divine Mind working through the different human authors Whose purpose it was to provide a progressive revelation to mankind. It is this amazing unity that persuades Christians that the Bible is indeed the Word of God. As such, Christians have confessed for two millennia that the entire accepted canon of Scripture is “God-breathed,” the very Word of God, just as it claims (Matthew 22:31; 2Timothy 3:16-17; 2Peter 1:20-21).

Christians have also always desired to see their Scriptures spread far and wide and in as many languages as possible, believing the message of the Gospel remains the Word of God even when translated into languages that did not exist when the Bible was written. Christians also believe the original manuscripts of the Bible were inspired, but they do not claim inspiration for subsequent copies. They see God’s providential protection of the biblical text in the wealth and consistency of the manuscripts produced over the early centuries of the faith rather than in any single manuscript or “inspired version.” This level of confidence in God’s protection of the text over time has led to a willingness among Christian scholars

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to engage in detailed examination of the earliest manuscripts of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament alike. Christian scholarship thus looks forward to more findings of ancient biblical manuscripts while remaining increasingly confident in the accuracy of the Bible text.

In contrast to the biblical text, *The UB* apparently maintains a similar literary style throughout (that of early twentieth-century American modernism), in spite of the many subjects covered, from anthropology to zoology, from history to current events, from eschatology (the study of the last or final things, esp. following death) to soteriology (the study of the means of salvation). *The UB* makes no attempts at uttering prophetic decrees whatsoever, although it does make predictions of a generic and vapid nature. All the more unimpressive is its claim of authorship by several allegedly superhuman entities holding to varying levels of intellectual capacity and authority within the celestial hierarchy, despite the text's rather monotone diction.

Moreover, unlike the Bible's bold claim to divine inspiration, *The UB* distances itself from the claim of inspiration (101:4), despite the fact that it calls itself an "epochal revelation" (92:4.4,9; 101:4.3). *The UB* instead admonishes its would-be followers not to "venerate" itself, as this leads to the error of worshipping "relics." However, *The UB*'s inference that Christianity's "infatuation" with the Bible is an example of relic worship turns out to be a straw man argument. Christians do not worship the Bible itself; they merely worship He of Whom the Bible speaks as worthy of worship.

Finally, *The UB* had apparently undergone several changes to the text over the course of just a few years in editions subsequent to its first printing in 1955. While most of these changes are considered insignificant and include such things as corrections in punctuation, many are sufficient enough to significantly altar the meaning of the text. So far, nobody (not even the Urantia Foundation) has come forth to explain the reasons why these various revisions were made, and who decided to make the changes. While it is easy enough to trace these changes in the English editions of *The UB*, those who rely solely on translations of *The UB* from the original English to other languages may not be aware of these changes and their problematic implications.

What is the Central Theme of *The UB*?

The biblical similes woven into *The UB* are quite obvious on the surface. Even a casual glance at the Table of Contents will reveal paper titles such as "The Paradise Trinity," "The Lucifer Rebellion," "The Garden of Eden," "Adam and Eve," and, of course, the title of Part IV, "The Life and Teachings of Jesus." These similarities, however, are only superficial. Any attempt to fathom *The UB* requires one to descend into an exhausting labyrinth of quirky terminology, neologisms, pseudoscientific pronouncements, metaphysical ruminations, and revisionist ideas about Jesus. But once a deeper comparison of central themes between the Bible and *The UB* is made, the stark contrasts become abundantly clear. The Bible tells us that we humans are separated from God because of our sin nature, and that redemption comes only by repentance and faith in Jesus that He provided the means of salvation by dying on the cross as an atonement for our sins. In *The UB*, the condition from which humans need to be freed is not slavery to one's personal moral depravity; rather, it is ignorance of one's real identity. Redemption does not lie in being freed from captivity to one's sinful nature; rather, it is in "waking up" from imposed unawareness of reality, enlightenment rather than regeneration. In this sense, *The UB* is not so much a Christian theme as it is a Gnostic gospel.

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If one were to summarize the overall theme of *The UB*, it is a kind of space-age Gnosticism claiming to update orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism is a religious tradition with many different schools, from the ancient Manicheans and Hermetic schools to the modern Mandeans and the New Age movement. It is a worldview with roots in the first century A.D. and a more organized following and body of manuscripts emerging around the second century.

One of Gnosticism's central tenets is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. Its name derives from the Greek *gnosis*, which means "knowledge" or "understanding." This knowledge is not intellectual or abstract; rather, it is liberating or "redeeming." This gnosis usually refers to an esoteric revelation to "chosen" individuals of humanity's "inner spark of divinity." Humankind's problem is ignorance, lack of awareness of its true identity. (In the case of *The UB*, the "chosen" are those who have taken it upon themselves, at the private invitation of a friend or relative, to read and accept the tenets of *The UB*.)

The UB, then, is a modern fable that brings together elements of the Christian narrative with pagan Gnosticism. The essence of Gnosticism is *syncretism*, which is the attempted blending of irreconcilable principles, a synthesis of diverse sources without regard for rational consistency. In the case of *The UB*, the mixture is a parasitic revisionism of historic Christianity by melding it with pagan mystical musings and throwing in a few dollops of twentieth-century liberal Christian theology to spice things up. *The UB* draws copious amounts of material from the Bible, but attaches them to various non-biblical themes and sets them in a new framework by which the biblical material takes on a different flavor and a completely new meaning.

Is The UB Movement a Cult? Is it Occultic?

The relatively small (but steadily growing) numbers of Urantia devotees, despite their idiosyncratic beliefs, are for the most part not to be considered cultists in a pejorative sociological sense. Unlike other groups with similar teachings, the Urantia movement does not have an authoritarian structure of leadership, nor do its followers typically engage in high-pressure proselytizing. The main appeal of *The UB* is intellectual, and the preferred method of spreading the teachings contained therein is by way of "quiet person-to-person dissemination."⁸ Religious activities are largely limited to studying the book, either individually or in small meeting groups. Despite these qualifications, the book itself leaves much to be desired as a suitable object of religious instruction and veneration for Christians. A theological comparison of *The UB* with the Bible leaves little room for doubt that the former must be considered cultic as well as occultic in both essence and purpose.

ENDNOTES

1. Note: The physical description provided below is of a typical edition from the Urantia Foundation printing. The pagination of the Uversa Press editions may differ.
2. "Translations of The Urantia Book," Urantia Foundation website (<http://www.urantia.org/about.html>); accessed 19 January 2006.
3. "Where Did The Urantia Book Come From?" (<http://www.urantia.org/about.html#Where>).

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4. Martin Gardner, "The Great Urantia Mystery," *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 14 (Winter 1990); Martin Gardner, *Urantia: The Great Mystery Cult*; Amhurst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995.
5. William S. Sadler, "A History of the Urantia Movement" (<http://www.urantiabook.org/archive/history/histumov.htm>; <http://www.urantiafoundation.org/pub/ahotum.html>).
6. Ernest Moyer, *The Birth of a Divine Revelation* (Hanover, PA: Moyer Publishing, 2000), chapters 13-14.
7. John M. Bunker and Karen L. Pressler, *Edgar Cayce and The Urantia Book*; Fort Wayne, IN: Craftline Printing, 1996.
8. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, (3rd ed.), pp. 714-715.