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Velikovsky and the Hebrew Bible

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SOME time ago Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision** created quite a stir in some circles. It is not the purpose of this article to examine this book in all its aspects. The author has limited himself to an examination of Velikovsky's use and application of the Hebrew Old Testament, to which he so frequently appeals as illustrating his theories and supporting his contentions.

Before going into particulars, it may be well to state the author's general theory of the physical universe. He assumes that during the endless ages of its history the world has undergone a succession of convulsions, catastrophes, and cataclysms followed by periods of reconstruction and restoration, one world perishing and another rising, as it were, from its ashes. Similar views have been and are held by many thinkers whose philosophy does not admit of a beginning of the world in time, such as Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Nietzsche (*die ewige Wiederkunft*), some of the early Greek philosophers, the whole Stoical school, and Brahmanism in India, to say nothing of many untutored savage tribes.

Throughout his book the author draws his evidence from the almost limitless store of the world's legends, myths, and folklore, as well as from the records of the Old Testament. And this brings us to our proper subject, namely, Velikovsky's use and application of the Hebrew Bible.

The author tells us that in the middle of the second millennium before our era the earth underwent one of the greatest catastrophes in its history. "It came into collision with a comet, with the result that its surface was reddened by a fine dust of rusty pigment," which gave seas, lakes, and rivers throughout the whole world the appear-

* Immanuel Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision*. The Macmillan Co., N. Y., 1950. Though the stir caused by this book in certain circles has subsided, Dr. Gaenssle's "scientific postscript" to a not so scientific "prescript" will prove stimulating and helpful. — F. E. M.

ance of blood and all the fish in the waters perished. According to the author, this happened not only in Egypt, but in the whole wide world. And this cosmic disaster is said to "correspond with the Book of Exodus" ("there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt," 7:21). If Velikovsky were a little more exact and precise in the choice of language, he would say that the Biblical account represents a popular and naive misconception of the shower of red dust that accompanied the collision and settled upon the earth. As a minor item it might be mentioned that the Red Sea is supposed to have received its name at this period, as also the Haemus range of mountains in Europe, because Haemus suggests the Greek word *haima* (p. 49).

Still more interesting as well as more arbitrary is the author's explanation of the "very grievous hail" that fell on the land of Egypt, Ex. 9:22ff. He says that the phrase stone of *barad* (hail) is, as in most cases where mentioned in the Scriptures, the term for *meteorites*! And what is more, these meteorites were glowing hot, for, behold, according to Velikovsky, it is thus written in the Midrash and the Talmud (p. 51). Now a "torrent" of meteorites as having some natural affinity with a comet might cause no surprise if found in its train. But this is beside the primary question. We are now examining Velikovsky's use of the Old Testament Hebrew texts. Is his categorical assertion that the Hebrew *barad* means a meteorite tenable and defensible? Has this translation any basis in Old Testament usage? It is worthy of note, to begin with, that the writer himself leaves room for exceptions, for he says that *barad* means meteorite in "most places where it occurs." What it means in the passages that form the exceptions he does not tell us. This creates a little suspicion as to the correctness of his unusual translation. Are the hailstones in these passages of the common variety, cold and icy, while they are redhot meteorites "in most passages"? If the Hebrew *barad* means a meteorite anywhere in the Old Testament, Velikovsky has the distinction of being the first translator to discover the astonishing fact. None of the leading translations, ancient or modern, lends the slightest sanction to such an unheard-of notion. But in spite of this general unanimity I have taken the trouble to examine personally every passage where the word *barad* occurs. It is found twenty-nine times,

and to state my candid conclusion after a careful study, there is not a single passage where one might feel tempted to depart from the traditional rendering of *baradhb*. No one, unless he has an ax to grind, would think of giving the term a different meaning. Here are some illustrative passages — and one need not be familiar with the Hebrew original to form an intelligent judgment. Ex. 10:5: "locusts shall devour that which was left by the hail." Locusts and hail, the two great destructive agents that work havoc to the crops, are here naturally associated. How preposterous to substitute meteorites for *hail*! Hag. 2:17: "I smote you with blight and mildew and all the products . . . with *hail*." Is. 28:2: "like a storm of hail, like a storm of mighty waters." Ps. 105:32: "He gave them hail for rain." Hail and rain as two kindred natural phenomena are properly placed side by side. How absurd again to substitute meteorites! In Job 38:22 we read of the treasures of snow and the treasures of hail, while in Ps. 148:8 hail, snow, and vapor are invited to praise the Lord. And, of course, the hailstones mentioned Joshua 10:11, which Jehovah cast down from the sky and from which more of the enemy perished than the Israelites slew with the sword, are just plain hailstones, not glowing pieces of metal shooting through space. On what basis, one involuntarily asks, can any serious student and investigator transmute the Old Testament hailstones into falling meteorites? If these meteorites are only a product of the creative imagination, is it not a fair conclusion that the comet itself and its collision with our planet are also of such stuff as dreams are made of?

The torrent of meteorites, says our author, was mingled with fire "which ran along upon the ground," Ex. 9:23 (A. V.). Smith's rendering is simply: "Fire descended on the earth." Kautzsch: *Feuer fuhr hernieder*. So also Luther and Menge. There is nothing in the Hebrew text to correspond with "along upon." There is in fact no preposition of any kind. Instead, there is the so-called locative ending *ab* attached to the word earth. This ending expresses the meaning of to, toward. An exact translation would therefore be "fire went [darted] earthward or toward the earth." In a word, the thought is that lightning flashes shot to the earth, of course from the sky. But in conformity with his theory of a cosmic catastrophe Velikovsky has his fire issue from the clefts of the earth,

and then it naturally "runs along the ground." A most arbitrary manipulation of the Biblical text! This certainly is not scholarship.

Velikovsky resorts to a similar perversion in discussing Num. 3:4, which tells of the death of the sons of Aaron, because they had offered a *strange fire* before the Lord. Velikovsky tells us "that the fire is called strange" because it had not been known before and because it was of foreign origin (p. 56). How wooden! Velikovsky glibly ignores the simple explanation, Lev. 10:1, that it was offered contrary to the divine command. The preconceived theory demanded that this fire burst forth from "a cleft in the rock," and such it must be despite the Hebrew text.

Velikovsky does not shrink from actually altering and mutilating his Hebrew text if it suits his purpose. By an oracular decree he pronounces as incorrect the A. V. version of Ex. 12:23: "The Lord will not suffer the destroyer to come and smite your houses." The author boldly dropped the little Hebrew word *'el*, into, so that the destroyer no longer enters into the houses in order to smite, but smites the houses without entering. But why? The author of *Worlds in Collision* thinks that the tenth Egyptian plague was really a violent earthquake. Since it would be a little absurd to describe an earthquake as going into the houses to smite, he canceled the intrusive little word *'el* and had the earthquake strike the houses. To this we can only say that the Hebrew text is absolutely sound and will tolerate no change or emendation. Velikovsky stands convicted of wanton and willful falsification to which no candid and honest scholar will ever stoop, simply to bolster up a pet theory. Incidentally, it is rather amusing to read in this connection that the Israelites were spared by the earthquake, "because they lived in huts made of clay and reeds which were more resilient than brick or stone." Instead of demolishing these fragile huts, the seismic impacts apparently rebounded harmlessly from them as from so many rubber drums or inflated balloons. Finally, "the strong hand and the outstretched arm" (Deut. 4:34) by which the Israelites were led out from the land of bondage turns out to be a "portent in the heavens" which looked like a "stretched arm." By the same method of interpretation one might explain the "outstretched hand" which occurs like a warning refrain in the ninth chapter of Isaiah also as a portent seen

in the heavens! Thus does Velikovsky apply the thumbscrew to his Biblical texts and tortures them into conformity with his personal ideas.

The author lays himself open to the same charge in his comment on the meaning of the Hebrew word *tebbel*, which occurs some thirty times in the poetical sections of the Old Testament. On the words of the Psalmist: "The voice of thy thunder was in the whirlwind, the lightnings lightened the world [*tebbel*]," Ps. 77:18, he remarks in a footnote that *tebbel* means universe, whereas the King James Version translates "world," though the word for world is "*olam*.*" (P. 87, footnote 6.) This contention is again based on the assumption that the passage contains a reminiscence of a cosmic catastrophe, and it is this that has directed the author's thought and his pen when he declares that *tebbel* does not mean world, but universe. World is too limited and circumscribed to fit into his hypothesis. But the fact is that neither the word *tebbel*, nor any other single Hebrew word for that matter, ever means universe. In fact the Old Testament has no single term for universe at all, unless it be *kol*, or, with the article, *hakkol*, the all, as in Jer. 10:16, Is. 44:24, and a few other passages. The word *tebbel* always means earth or world. In particular it denotes the earth as the habitation of man excluding watery and desert waste, as the place of cities, of fields, and vegetation. In his great *Thesaurus*, Gesenius defines *tebbel* as *terra fertilis et habitata*, the LXX has *oikoumene*, the inhabited world (twenty-six times), the Vulgate *orbis terrae*, in a single passage *orbis terrarum*, lit. the circle of the land, lands, like the German *Erdkreis*. A few passages will make this matter so plain that even he who runs may read and understand. Psalm 24:6, "The earth (*'erets*) is the Lord's, the world (*tebbel*) and they that dwell therein." Cp. Is. 18:3. In Isaiah's satirical ode on the downfall of the king of Babylon (ch. 14) the shades in Sheol ask in amazement: "Is this the man . . . who made the world (*tebbel*) a wilderness and broke down the cities thereof?" According to Prov. 8:26, Wisdom existed before God "made the earth (*'erets*) and the fields and the clods of the world (*tebbel*)." According to Ps. 9:9, the Lord will judge the

* " = the consonant *ayin*.

world (*tebbel*) with righteousness. Thus we see that this word, so far from meaning the entire universe, keeps its feet, so to speak, right on *terra firma*. Let the reader substitute universe for world in the above passages and observe the ludicrous result. One can only marvel at the boldness or the ignorance of the author's categorical assertions!

And now we proceed to examine the word "*olam*." Velikovsky states categorically that "*olam* means world. However, with possibly a single doubtful exception (to be discussed presently), "*olam* never means world in the entire Hebrew Bible. This meaning occurs only in the later post-Biblical Hebrew (cf. the development in the meaning of the Latin *saeculum*). The term "*olam* is always a designation of time, not of space or place. It means age, perpetuity, permanence, eternity. It may refer to the past, the remote or the more immediate past, or to the future, definite or indeterminate, sometimes to a past and future eternity, as in Ps. 90:1. But to state that "*olam* means world betrays either ignorance or presumptuous arrogance.

Now we turn our attention to the "doubtful exception," Eccl. 3:11 — "he has also put "*olam* in their heart." That these words present a vexing problem is evident from the wide diversity among the translations that have been offered. I shall add a number by way of illustration. The A. V. has: "He has set [put] the world [margin: eternity]." A. S. R.: "He has put *eternity* [margin: world] into their heart." Smith, following Grätz: "He has also implanted *ignorance* in their mind." Hitzig: "Auch den Verstand hat er in ihr Herz gelegt." Kautzsch and Delitzsch: "Auch die Ewigkeit." Luther: "Er lässt ihr Herz sich ängsten, wie es gehen solle in der Welt." Gesenius (*Thes.*): *Studium mundanarum rerum*. Septuagint: *Sympanta ton aiona* — eternity. Vulgate: *mundum tradidit disputationi eorum*. Frankenberg (Nowack, *Handkommentar*): "die Zukunft."

Both expressions, "to put the world" and "to put eternity" into their heart, appear as highly improbable. Both require an additional thought to make them meaningful. Thus Rashi, the Jewish commentator, suggests that "*olam* means *chokhmah ba'olam* the urge or impulse to understand the world. Those who favor "eternity," i. e., a desire or longing for eternity, must remember that

Ecclesiastes lays particular stress on enjoying the present. In any case no one can point to the passage we are discussing in favor of the meaning world for "*olam*."

I have come to the conclusion that we have in "*olam*" a scribal error.* Instead of "*olam*," we should read "*amal*," which means trouble. The change in the vowels causes no difficulty, of course, since they are not a part of the original consonantal text. With this easy change our verse would read: "he has put *trouble* in their heart, because man cannot find out the work that God has done from the beginning to the end." This yields excellent sense and is thoroughly consistent with the tenor of the book.†

The author makes so much of the expression "the shadow of death" as supporting the hypothesis that a pall of darkness covered the earth for decades after its collision with the comet (pp. 126 to 133) that we cannot ignore it. Velikovsky states that this phenomenon is mentioned in many passages of the Bible (p. 129). Actually the expression occurs only eighteen times: ten times in the book of Job, four times each in the prophetic books and the Psalms, but nowhere in the Pentateuch nor in any of the historical books. There is no evidence whatsoever for the consciousness of a world-enshrouding gloom. What does the phrase actually mean? In Amos 5:8 Jahve is said to be he who made Orion and the

* Textual criticism is a very legitimate, at times a necessary, part of an interpreter's task. Luther himself abandoned the traditional Massoretic text in more cases than most readers of his Bible are aware of. A very instructive instance of this kind is his rendering of Hab. 2:16: "so saufe du nun auch, dass du taumelst." The American Standard Version has: "drink thou also, and be as one uncircumcised." Strictly, it should be "and be uncircumcised," which of course, is sheer nonsense. To maintain that the expression means disgraceful exposure is to give it a meaning which it will not bear, aside from the fact that this idea is always expressed otherwise. The verb, derived from the Hebrew noun "*orlah*," foreskin, occurs only once elsewhere, namely, Lev. 19:23, where it is used of the fruits of the land in a figurative sense and throws no light on our passage. All attempts to defend the English rendering are quite futile. Obviously the two renderings cannot be based on the same original. Luther, rightly assuming a scribal error, follows the Septuagint which has to reel and stagger, and has *taumeln*. But what Hebrew word underlies the Septuagint? It is the imperative *hera'el*, from *ra'al*. In a word, two consonants have been transposed through the inadvertence of a copyist.

† After the above was written I happened to discover a strikingly similar expression in Ps. 107:12: He humbled *their heart with trouble* ("*amal*"). Luther's "Er lässt ihr Herz sich ängsten" looks very much as if it sprang from the textual emendation.

Pleiades and to turn the "shadow of death" into dawn. The idea of "death," it appears to me, comes in somewhat unexpectedly in this connection. The words simply mean that Jahve as the sovereign ruler controls the heavenly bodies and the alternation between darkness and light on the earth. In Is. 9:2, the people who dwell in the land of "the shadow of death" — upon them the light shines. The light here is plainly not physical, but spiritual light, hence "the shadow of death" is likewise spiritual and not physical. The same phrase is used to denote the underground darkness in which miners work, Job. 28:3, or the darkness of night, in which the workers of iniquity endeavor to hide, Job 34:22. Then there are a few more Job passages which plainly refer to the darkness of the underworld (*she'ol*). No unprejudiced inquirer could ever find in any of the passages in question the reminiscence of a world wrapped in gloom for decades. But this is Velikovsky's method of dealing with the Hebrew text.

It is more than probable that the expression does not mean "shadow of death" at all. The translation is based on the form *tsalmaveth* (*tsal*, shadow, *maveth*, death), according to the present Massoretic text. With very few exceptions the leading Hebrew scholars (Ewald, Philippi, Olshausen, Gesenius-Kautzsch, König, Green, Davidson) have abandoned the reading *tsalmaveth* — probably a popular etymology — in favor of *tsalmuth*, a form which naturally falls into one category with the many Hebrew nouns ending in *uth*, such as "*abhduth*, service, bondage, *marduth*, rebellion, *malkuth*, kingdom, *sikhluth*, folly, and many others. *Tsalmuth* simply means deep darkness, gloom, synonymous with *chosbekh*, with which it is often associated. The reason for this preference is twofold. First, the formation of compounds such as *tsalmaveth* is extremely rare in Old Testament Hebrew. In fact there is none to correspond with the one under discussion. Second — and this carries much weight — shadow in the Old Testament never denotes anything gloomy or sinister, but always something cheerful, pleasant, and beneficent, as for example, "under the shadow of the Almighty," Ps. 91:1: "as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land," Is. 32:2, etc. Again it is interesting to observe that Luther never translates the expression with *Schatten des Todes* (not even in Psalm 23, *im finstern Tal*), but always with *Finsternis*, *Dun-*

kelheit, or something similar. Is this accidental? In any case, Velikovsky's theory of a prolonged darkness beginning at the time of the Exodus is seen to rest on a very tottering foundation so far as the phrase "shadow of death" is concerned.

So much for Velikovsky's linguistic misuse of the Hebrew Bible. An even more serious fallacy, perhaps the basic fallacy, is his *prosaic* misinterpretation and misapplication of numerous highly *poetical* texts of the Hebrew Bible. The author has little or no understanding and appreciation of one of the features of Hebrew poetic diction — its bold imagery and figures of speech, which at times affect our Western minds as extravagant, even grotesque. We refer only to a few examples: Ps. 80:8-11; Is. 2:2; Ezek. 47:1-12; Job 5:23; Hos. 2:18; Is. 55:12-13; Ps. 98:8; Is. 14:8.

Now everyone — and I think Velikovsky himself — will agree that we have in these and numerous similar passages nothing but beautiful creations of inspired prophetic-poetic imagery. But when Velikovsky reads "the earth quaked and trembled, the foundation of the mountains moved and were shaken" (Ps. 18:7), or "the hills melt like wax at the presence of the Lord" (Ps. 97:5), or "He touches the mountains, and they smoke" (Ps. 104:32), or "the mountains skip like rams" (Ps. 114:4), in short, wherever the Biblical text, literally interpreted, speaks of some physical terrestrial disturbance, he would have us believe that we are no longer dealing with poetry pure and simple, but that all these passages contain a substratum of concrete fact, commemorating the cosmic disturbances at the time of the exodus. This is extremely arbitrary and factitious and shows the author's failure to understand an important feature of Hebrew poetry. If the mountains can "burst into song" — figuratively and poetically — there is no reason to deny that in the same elevated style they can "skip like rams" — figuratively and poetically. If "Mount Zion is exalted above all the hills," the mountains in another setting may very well be said to "fall into the heart of the sea." And so it is with the quaking and smoking mountains, with the trembling and melting earth, and many similar expressions — all bold figures of speech characteristic of Hebrew poetic style.

In conclusion I shall add one more striking example of Velikovsky's method of interpreting and his use of the Old Testament.

In the last chapter of his prophecy, Habakkuk describes a sublime theophany in which the Holy One of Israel, majestic, terrible, invincible, advances from Teman in the South for the redemption of his people and the destruction of their enemies. The pestilence goes before him and the plague follows at his heels. Rays of light stream from his hands. Armed with shining arrows and a flashing spear, he rides victoriously on the chariot of salvation. The nations tremble at his approach, the ancient mountains are cleft asunder and writhe in agony, the everlasting hills bow down, and even the sun and moon stand still in their habitation, etc., etc. At the end the Prophet exults and rejoices in Jahve's victory.

Now what does Velikovsky make of this matchless prophetic song? It turns out to be in substance nothing more than the embellished recollection of a mighty convulsion of nature in the days of Joshua and the "hot hailstones which had remained suspended in the sky since the day of Moses' intercession." "A comet must have been seen," he tells us, "the sun and moon were stopped in their paths." The portent in the sky "had the form of a chariot drawn by horses and was regarded as God's angel" (pp. 141 f.). To this I shall add just a few marginal glosses, so to speak: "God's angel" is nowhere mentioned in the text; as for the sun and moon stopping in their paths, this may very well mean in plain prose that the light of the heavenly bodies was eclipsed by the surpassing splendor of the theophany. Besides, the verb "*amad*, translated to "stand still," may also mean to *take one's place* (involving motion), and this seems to be required in Hab. 3:10-11 because the Hebrew word for *dwelling* is supplied with the locative *ab*. This would result in the meaning that the sun and the moon entered into their habitation (figuratively), retreating, as it were, before the dazzling radiance enveloping Jahve, as He marched through the earth in His indignation. In any case there is nothing in the entire chapter that points to a cosmic upheaval.

To sum up briefly, if there is any truth in *Worlds in Collision*, the proof is not furnished by the Hebrew Bible.

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