

## **Peter Bros**

# **The Sad Story of Velikovsky**

**In writing last weeks column, I went to the Internet to get the name of Mrs. Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin because I found, strangely enough, I had left it out of the Vekikovsky account that starts off Chapter 6 of *Let's Talk Flying Saucers*, a chapter titled The Outrage of Ignorance. I noticed in the articles I read on the subject that, while accurate, they were pretty mild in comparison to what actually happened. What actually happened is so gross, it took Charles Ginenthal, Irving Wolfe, Lynn E. Rose, Dwardu Cardona, David N. Talbott and Ev Cochrane almost 800 pages to cover in their landmark book *Stephen J. Goueld and Immanuel Velikovsky*, Ivy Press Books, 1996. I summarized the best of the worst in LTFS, so I'll plagiarize my own work to get the facts out on the net.**

**Back in the forties, a credentialed scholar named Velikovsky came upon an ancient manuscript that led him to believe that the plagues mentioned in the Bible had actually occurred in history. Buried beneath ancient accounts of reality, he found what he thought might be the source of the biblical plagues, the appearance of a huge comet which, as depicted in ancient Sumerian seals, did battle with the Earth as it passed by in the skies. Velikovsky concluded that the comet was actually Venus, which had entered the solar system late, some thousands of years ago, knocked the Earth and Mars out of their existing orbits as it passed in close misses and eventually took up its position in a near-curricular orbit between Mercury and the Earth.**

**Velikovsky's original research was put in the form of a book, *Worlds in Collision*. He was very much aware that his conclusions contradicted Newton's Celestial Mechanics. If all the planets were in place when the solar system formed, then there was no way that an additional planet could have been added, and certainly not within the last five to ten thousand years. This was not just a supposition, a theory or an idea, it was a concrete fact, more solid than the concrete that built the universities whose professors**

**promulgated this unchallengeable fact.**

**One of those universities was Harvard, located in that elevation of clear skies, Boston. And while Boston didn't have clear skies, even in the forties, really eminent astronomers such as Harlow Shapley, Harvard's own, sometimes blossom when their minds are not clouded by the reality that can only confuse the neat little congeries of facts that provide the foundations for our enduring theories.**

**Velikovsky, excited by his historical finds, sought out Shapley simply because Shapley was by far the most notable astronomer at the time.**

**Shapley, who had an aversion to reading other people's work, agreed to consider Velikovsky's ideas if a third party he respected would bring it to his attention. He agreed that his fellow educator, the eminent Harvard philosopher Horace Kallen, was such a third party.**

**Shapley subsequently saved himself considerable reading when Kallen, in a letter of praise extolling the virtues of Velikovsky's work, let drop his opinion that if Velikovsky should prove correct, then traditional beliefs of astronomy, among other disciplines, would have to be reconsidered.**

**Shapley, becoming acquainted with the cometary hypothesis second-hand, went ballistic.**

**"The sensational claims of Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky fail to interest me," he began, "because his conclusions were pretty obviously based on incompetent data," which was to say because his conclusions opposed theory, the results couldn't be based on fact.**

**But Shapley was just gaining momentum. If Velikovsky was right in his basic cometary hypothesis, "then the laws of Newton are false. In other words, if Dr. Velikovsky is right, the rest of us are crazy."**

**We can see Shapley's mind churning here. With the mind operating by comparing reality with recall, Newton's Celestial Mechanics sat atop Shapley's astronomical brain and provided the visual template against which all realities were compared. Here comes some doctor with nothing but a medical degree to support his designation painting a picture of reality that opposed the picture Shapley, and indeed the whole world, carried foremost in mind.**

**The mind evolved to notify us when there is a changed condition in reality that needs**

our attention and it does this by ceasing to operate, redirecting the electrical flows that operate it into our subsystems, disrupting us, causing us discomfort, even pain. Well, against Shapley's fixed picture of Celestial Mechanics, a neat and orderly solar system that would move the same forever after as it had from before forever, Velikovsky was painting a picture of the solar system that produced in Shapley a world of hurt.

Shapley reacted to pain like we all react to pain.

First he looked around to see who was causing him the pain, and then he launched an all out attack against the miscreant.

We all want to bring our pain to an end, and when our pain is caused by a conflict of reality with our recall, and the reality that is conflicting with our recall is just some recall made up by someone else in reality, removing that person goes a long way in removing our pain.

That's a charitable explanation for Shapley's subsequent behavior. Before contacting Shapley, Velikovsky had gone to considerable trouble to find a publisher. After expressing interest, Macmillan assigned venerable editor James Putnam to explore the book's possibilities. The exploration involved not only conducting market research, which showed *Worlds in Collision* to be a valuable property, but also contacting scientists in the field for their opinions. This too produced favorable results, with the curator of the Hayden Planetarium observing that Velikovsky's book provided a good opportunity to reexamine "the underpinning of modern science."

Based on these reports, Macmillan signed a full publishing contract with Velikovsky and *Worlds in Collision* was typeset. As part of the prepublication promotion, Harper's Magazine had reporter Eric Larrabee prepare a condensation of the book which was published with the title *The Day the Sun Stood Still*. The Reader's Digest, Collier's, even Paris-Match picked up versions, and the publicity even made the cover of Newsweek.

Shapley responded by writing to Macmillan on Harvard College Observatory stationery noting that the rumor that Macmillan was canceling publication was a great relief. With Shapley the source of the rumor, he forged ahead confidently, revealing that "a few scientists with whom I have talked about this matter [are] astonished that the great Macmillan Company . . . would venture into the Black Arts," adding that Velikovsky's output was "the most arrant nonsense of my experience."

The letter was actually an implied threat to boycott Macmillan's lucrative textbook

sales, and Putnam wrote back that he couldn't believe the publication of *Worlds in Collision* would affect long-standing views about the excellence of Macmillan's scientific publications. Shapley replied on the same date that the publication would cut him off from the Macmillan Company, that when he had run into Velikovsky in New York by chance, he had "looked around to see if he had a keeper."

Panicked, George Brett, Macmillan's president wrote Shapley that he would have a panel of independent scholars review the book in advance of publication. The panel endorsed Velikovsky as honest research on a subject of scientific, public and general interest and Brett authorized publication.

This sent Shapley and his group of Harvard defenders into a frenzy. As President of Science Service, Shapley controlled the publication of Science News Letter and he began a prepublication blitz in its pages discrediting Macmillan and Velikovsky, even taking out expensive ads in the New York Times calling attention to his own attack. He cried to all that would listen that Velikovsky was a crank, his book "the most successful fraud that has been perpetrated on leading American publications," comparing it to the perennially popular Flat Earth tractates (a myth created by evolutionists in the 18th century to tar their opponents,) complained about the current scientific "age of decadence" and claimed that while he was "a sympathetic friend of the thwarted and demented," Velikovsky's ideas were "rubbish on the level of astrological hocus pocus." He even compared Velikovsky to Senator McCarthy who spent his time uncovering Soviet spies in the government, a comparison which, with Velikovsky's Russian roots, seemed rather strange.

Shapley's rantings were for naught. *Worlds in Collision* was published in April of 1950 and immediately shot to the top of the best-seller lists.

Shapley didn't have Newton's Ceremonial Mace, and he certainly couldn't pose the threat of sending someone to have his bowels pulled out simply by having a counterfeit coin slipped into his waistcoat, but he was not without resources. Science, which claims to be an open endeavor, hasn't changed since Newton. It is about as dictatorial a project as anyone can find.

Its first volley was at Gordon Atwater, the curator at the Hayden Planetarium and Chairman of the Astronomy Department at the American Museum of Natural History. Asked to declare his allegiances regarding Velikovsky, he replied "that science must investigate unorthodox ideas calmly and with an open mind." The response drew Atwater's boss and a colleague to his museum office. His colleague spit in his face and his boss fired him on the spot, forcing him to clear out his office immediately.

**Shapley, it turned out, was a member of the museum's board of directors.**

**With "sheer terror and panic" reigning at the Hayden, This Week magazine was pressured into forgoing publication of an Atwater article. Failing in this effort, Shapley focused on removing potential book reviewers and replacing them with reviews of his friends, a ploy that worked first at the Herald Tribune, and then extended throughout the country where the few astronomers who could write contributed reviews calling Velikovsky a crackpot, a liar and a general threat to the continuation of civilization as we all know it.**

**After seven weeks of sustained attack, Brett, president at Macmillan, threw in the towel, asking Velikovsky to let Macmillan out of its contract because three-quarters of its business, derived from textbooks, was in danger.**

**Velikovsky graciously agreed, allowing the contract to be transferred to the more publicly oriented Doubleday, which not only wracked up tremendous profits with it, but also published six additional books authored by Velikovsky. Macmillan, which hoped its ordeal would be over, found it just beginning as The New York Times published the facts of the affair in excruciating detail. Undaunted by the negative publicity, Shapley moved in and demanded as part of Macmillan's penitence the head of James Putnam, who was dutifully fired after 25 years of service to the company.**

**Reporters, viewing this attack on the freedom of the written word in America and attempting to question Shapley's motives and actions, found themselves on the scorpion tail of a scientific community that claimed to have saved humanity from a real catastrophe. For instance, the literary critic of the New Yorker claimed, without a hint of humor, that *Worlds in Collision* was "a pathetic, ominous and superstitious piece of work" whose purpose was to establish a new world order.**

**Supporters' presentations were called "a mixture of divination, ignorance, haruspices' palaver, and pseudoscientific half-truths" or more to the point "plain hokum." The adjectives were colorful. "Not since Captain Hasenpfeffer was reported sailing into New York harbor with a cargo of subways and artesian wells has there been a better candidate for P. T. Barnum's Hall of Fame," moaned the Christian Science Monitor. "The most outrageous collection of nonsense since the invention of the printing press," cried the Indianapolis Star. Velikovsky should be criticized for not including "the Ute legend of cottontail tales of Henny-Penny, Humpty-Dumpty, or even Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe," marveled the Toronto Globe and Mail. "A shining example of book and magazine-publishing irresponsibility," asseverated the Saturday Review of Literature (our earnest scientific lackeys frequently call on the creative writing**

abilities of the not-so-scientifically oriented arts community because they are equally impressed by colorful adjectives and meaningless propositions and they can be really, really nasty.)

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Newton's spirit in the New World, organized a panel discussion on publishing responsibility officered of course by Harlow Shapley at which Macmillan representatives appeared to confess the exact nature of their sins and beg absolution. As we shall see, AAAS meetings have little to do with science and much to do with ensuring that Newton's Ceremonial Mace remains very, very visible to the scientific community.

The reaction to Velikovsky is the normal reaction to apostasy of a science where telescope time is denied credentialed practitioners failing to confirm the absurd big bang concept describing an explosion that created matter and peer reviewed journals refuse to print any criticism of consensus reality, and in fact, refuse to publish on entire areas considered to be off-limits.

Our esteemed eschewers of reality regularly doctor evidence, adding false color to photos full of meaningless star blobs or land areas to animate theory, falsify evidence, twisting radiometric dating results when they are devising dating systems which are patently incapable of doing as claimed and disappearing evidence, the millions upon millions of skeletons, flints, ancient relics, coins, tablets, even entire archeological sites that, because they oppose consensus theory, are declared to be out of context and thus of no significance.

Afraid that we, their employers, might ourselves go out and verify evidence that leads to a more accurate picture of reality than their backward looking, ego inducing musings, science sponsors laws making it illegal for us to possess anything of scientific significance, threatening to throw us in jail if we don't immediately summon a credentialed member of the applicable profession to take charge of the evidence, which is immediately seized and, if it disagrees with consensus reality, is never seen or heard of again. The basement rooms of the Smithsonian, into which the entire history of the North American continent disappeared in the 19th century never to be heard of again, has become the template for universities and museums all over the world.

And if we, the people who give up our own pleasures so these minions of delusion can follow theirs, want to examine at first hand some of the evidence that supports their delusions, if we want access to the test results used to prove the Earth is billions of years old or the stars are uncounted billions of light years away, if we want to see the support for the confusing strings of words that, in Newtonian tradition, have been

**jargonized to make their meaning as incomprehensible as possible, if we want to examine the evidence, we are excluded if we don't have the magic handshake, the degrees that make us full fledged academicians and thus safe.**

**Not that the evidence is worth examining. The evidence's only danger to our employees is that it will be exposed for what it is, either evidence that doesn't support the proposition or no evidence at all. To get around the fact that the entire edifice that our retainers have built is insupportable, the latest trend, devised to avoid the appearance of intolerance that arises when the consensus establishment combines to destroy those like Velikovsky, whose thoughts are disagreeable, is to take entire areas giving rise to controversial theories such as evolution, and simply declare them to be settled, closed books, evoking the principle used with parallax measurement, that the distance to the stars has been measured, it's now beyond question so let's move on to more fruitful discussions like measuring what's going on inside that black hole on the other side of Arcturus.**

**The LTFS chapter continues for a while, then gets to the subject matter outlined in column 16-05. In short, Velikovsky shifted gears and started playing the game like an empirical scientist. He made several predictions based on his theory, the most notable being that Jupiter emitted radio signals, subsequently found to be correct, and predicted Venus would not only be hot, but also estimated what turned out to be its actual temperature, all to the hoots and hollers of the empirical community. Sagan was forced to write a preemptive article prior to the Venus probe to cover empirical sciences behind, but it wasn't working, and as the space program was gaining more and more public interest in the 60s, Velikovsky's popularity was soaring. Thus, the AAAS was compelled in the early 70s, to hold one of its periodic inquisitions to exorcise itself of evil, arranging an objective symposium on "Velikovsky's Challenge to Science." The symposium, which Velikovsky, in his naïveté attended, and which was chaired, although not engineered, by Sagan, was a rigged condemnation on everything Velikovsky. It concluded Velikovsky was a hack and nothing he said was scientific, therefore his correct predictions were not scientific. It's the same thing they're trying to do in the face of the challenges to species evolution, claiming that it's a scientific fact, and it's something they're also doing with global warming.**

**We have our heads so far up our butts, our brains will be warm while our butts freeze to death. Empirical science is the religion of can't, and as we follow it, we'll follow the planet as it cools off and turns into the moon, a situation I described in detail in column 42-06.**

**[LIST OF COLUMNS](#)**