



## Readings II in Faith & Science

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### Seeming Discovery On Mars

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## Seeming Discovery On Mars

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Early in 1994 I received (unsolicited) a copy of *The McDaniel Report on the Failure of Executive, Congressional, and Scientific Responsibility in Investigating Possible Evidence of Artificial Structures on the Surface of Mars and Setting Mission Priorities for NASA's Mars Exploration Program*. This report was published in 1993 by the North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.

I do not intend to discuss the merits or demerits of the Report or the arguments about whether or not there is an artifact on Mars. I will simply mention enough background to locate this present essay. Let me quote from the "Executive Summary" (p. xix) of the Report:

Since 1979, a number of highly qualified independent investigators have engaged in an extensive analysis of photographs taken by the 1976 Viking Mars mission. These photographs appear to be evidence that some landforms in the Martian region called Cydonia may be artificial.

The McDaniel Report is concerned with an examination of two photographic frames from the Viking probe and with NASA's plans and methods for further mapping of the Martian surface. It also has a section (Chapter Nine) on "The Ethical Question: Public Responsibility." In that chapter we find the following:

In 1960, a report titled *Proposed Studies on the Implications of Peaceful Space Activities for Human Affairs* was delivered to the Chairman of NASA's Committee on Long-Range Studies. The report, prepared by the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., under contract to NASA, was also delivered to the 87th Congress. In a section on "The Implications of a Discovery of Extraterrestrial Life," the report acknowledges the possibility that "artifacts left at some point in time" by intelligent life forms might be "discovered through our space activities on the Moon, Mars, or Venus." (p. 167)

The Brookings report directly questions the view that the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) would necessarily lead to an all-out space effort. Instead, the report notes the possibility that society might "disintegrate," or survive only to "paying the price of changes of values, attitudes, and behavior."

In particular, the reactions of politically influential religious groups, including "fundamentalists," antiscience sects," and "Buddhists," were a matter for concern. Noting that "Buddhist priests are heavily politically engaged in Ceylon," the report considered the potential reaction of such groups as an unknown factor that should be researched, in order to weigh the possible social consequences of their actions should an ETI discovery be announced.

In April, 1994 I received a call from Dr. McDaniel asking for a comment on the notion that Christians "would panic" in the face of a discovery of artifact on Mars. The following is my response:

### Comments on "Artificial Origin at Cydonia!"

First, let me issue the usual caveats. I cannot speak to religions other than Roman Catholicism. I do not know enough about Islam, Buddhism or the other great religions to comment on how they would react to the discovery

of an artifact on Mars. I cannot even predict how some sections of the Christian community would react. As stated, I am speaking only about Roman Catholicism; I am not, however in a position to speak for Roman Catholicism.

Also, my PhD is in physics, not theology. Nonetheless, I am reasonably well acquainted with the Catholic Faith Tradition. It is out of that context, rather than any theological school, that I write this brief reflection.

I think that the best way to approach the reaction of the Catholic Church to “a possible artifact on Mars” is to look at the Church’s reaction to other events in her history. Within twenty years of the death of Christ, the Church in Jerusalem faced an issue of enormous importance, namely, whether or not to preach the Good News of Christ to the pagans. I doubt that we can begin to understand now what a wrenching question this was. The Church was still young and humanly speaking fragile. Nonetheless, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the leaders decided that the pagans were indeed called to Christ equally with the Jews. That was a critical decision, certainly of the order of the possibility of our now finding evidence that there was a line of “humans” before us “out there.”

Other “paradigm shattering” discoveries (religious, political, scientific, intellectual, and so on) have occurred since the first century. I’d just mention the “Christianization” of the Roman Empire and its later collapse, the non-occurrence of the “end-time” at the beginning of this millennium, the Black Death, the “discovery” of the New World, the Copernican model of the solar system, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, two World Wars, etc. In none of the events was there religious panic. I would not expect any now.

The central truth of Christianity --- that which must be preserved at any and all cost --- is that God in the Second Person of the Trinity became man on earth. That we are “alone in the universe” is not a doctrine of faith. Some individuals might experience spiritual turmoil in the face of “proof” that we are not alone or that there was a race of intelligent beings in the universe before us. Christianity, as a religion, might have to rethink some of its scriptural interpretation to an extent. But the situation, were such a “proof” to be discovered, is certainly analogous to the realization that God was calling the pagans to share in the promises made to the Jews in Abraham. It is not as unique a “paradigm-shatterer” as we moderns might think.

In fact, I find it curious that “the government” would be worried about the effect of the discovery of an “artifact” on Mars on religious people. They certainly don’t seem to be worried about such an effect on any other level. This leads me to conclude that it is a contrived excuse.

I would suggest that the “Establishment” is far more worried about the possibility of our “not being alone” than religious people are. I would think that serious Christians would look on such a discovery as evidence of a far wider evangelical mission than we had yet imagined. Already, there are many theologians who are convinced of the existence of other intelligent beings (more or less like us) in the universe. I am not one of them since I know of no data that suggests such beings ---beyond statistical arguments. Also, I remain quite skeptical about the Mars “artifacts.” That does not mean, however, that I reject the *possibility* of such a thing. Nor does it suggest that I think we ought not research it further. Christianity, contrary to popular mythology, is not an a priori faith.

It is based on what God has done, not on what we think He might (or ought to) do. It is emphatically not a surprise-free religion. God does what God wants to do --- almost always without our advice or consent.

We have to be careful not to extrapolate beyond the evidence. It is essential to remember that all the real data we have is two camera frames. Any talk of a “super-race that made these things” is at best premature and even misleading. As a civilization, we could erect such “monuments” if we had a reason to do so. I strongly urge that we treat the Mars “artifact” in a truly scientific manner, not interpreting the situation beyond the data. I would hope that the “Establishment” would have learned something from the Galileo case --- the truth cannot successfully be suppressed. Let’s try to find what the truth is here, regardless of its immediate effects.

The same is true of the “life in the rocks of Mars” that was hyped in the newspapers in the past year. There may have been at least primitive life on Mars --- and again there may not. In summary, I would simply recall a statement of St. Augustine from the early fifth century: “whatever they [here, scientist, etc.] can really demonstrate to be true

of physical nature, let us show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures.” (*De Genesi ad litteram*, 1b, 1c, 2, 1, no.4.) If scientists *demonstrate* that there are artifacts on Mars, our duty is reconciling our Scriptures, not panicking or rioting. We need not worry about the future of Christianity --- if that was a worry in this case.

The above response sent to Dr. McDaniel stresses the need for Christians to live in the *real world*. This may seem somewhat strange to those who are used to the abstractions of some theologies. Nonetheless, it is true. God became one of us in our world --- the only world there is. He came to lead us to our liberation from sin, not our liberations from the physical, material universe. He came to make possible the transformation of “this world” into his final Kingdom. He did not come to make us angels but to fulfill our destiny as human beings. He did not come as an angel; he came as a human being.

More importantly for us, in his Ascension into heaven Christ remained bodied. His heavenly body is a sign and pledge of our physical resurrection into him. Heaven is a physical reality --- it is not a “spiritual” existence, if by “spiritual” we mean nonmaterial. True, we do not know what form this “physicality” takes in heaven, but we do know that it does not mean that we will be separated from our bodies nor from the physical creation.

Furthermore, we have no reason to fear any real evidence of extra-terrestrial intelligence or any artifacts we might discover “out there.” One thing we can never allow ourselves to forget is that God created the universe and that its destiny lies in him. With that faith we shall never “panic” in the face of any real evidence that is discovered by science or by anything else. We must remember, though, that data always has to be interpreted; the interpretation may or may not be adequate.

Science and technology are presenting us with new data and a better understanding of physical systems, including our bodies. I am amazed at the amount of scientific data as I page through publications like *Science*. All of that information in time is to be incorporated into a Christian understanding of both creation and of God’s will for us and for that creation. We cannot allow ourselves not to know the world we live in. We cannot allow ourselves not to appreciate and love that world, since it is destined for glory in God. The real world is the only one we have; here we encounter Christ; here we serve and worship God.

## Questions

Is there life on other celestial bodies? Statistically? Really?

Will it be like ours?

What does Augustine’s statement mean?

What does it mean to say that heaven is a “physical reality”?

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