Geoscience Canada

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Volume 2, numéro 2, may 1975

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/geocan2_2con05

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Éditeur(s)

The Geological Association of Canada

ISSN

0315-0941 (imprimé)
1911-4850 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Grinnell, G. (1975). Velikovsky, Freud and Geology. *Geoscience Canada*, *2*(2), 109–110.

Velikovsky, Freud and Geology

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"Thus from the Geological evidence," Velikovsky writes in the back of *Earth in Upheaval*, "we came to the conclusion to which we had also arrived travelling the road of the historical and literary traditions of the peoples of the world - that the earth repeatedly went through cataclysmic events on a global scale, that the cause of these events was an extraterrestrial agent, and that some of these cosmic catastrophes took place only a few thousand years ago, in historical times."

Velikovsky, like Darwin and Galileo and other great scientists seems to feel it incumbent upon him to misrepresent the manner by which he came to his theories. Actually, Velikovsky's catastrophic hypothesis emerged out of a disagreement he had had with Sigmund Freud. Later he went searching through old geological papers to see if he could not find some evidence to support his ideas. His statement: "Thus from the Geological evidence we came to the conclusion . . . that the earth repeatedly went through cataclysmic events," is not an accurate description of his method, but then that is not really the issue. The issue is: is Velikovsky correct?

Immanuel Velikovsky in 1939 was the only practicing psychoanalyst in Palestine, but he disagreed violently with Sigmund Freud's assertion that monotheism has arisen out of an incestuous event, in the early years of history, between Akhnaton and his mother. Velikovsky claimed that the real traumatic experience underlying monotheism had been a natural one when a comet had passed close to the earth within historical times sending ancient civilizations into ruins and allowing nomadic tribes, like the Jews, to settle in Palestine.

"I came upon the idea that traditions and legends and memories of generic origin can be treated in the same way in which we treat in psychoanalysis the early memories of a single individual," he writes, "I spent ten years on this work. I found that the collective memory of humankind spoke of a series of global catastrophes that occurred in historical times."

Velikovsky received independent corroboration from the French archaeologist, Claude Schaeffer, who in 1924 had dug in the ruins of Ugarit and Enkommi to discover that these ancient cities had been destroyed by a natural catastrophe rather than by a man-made one. Schaeffer's later researches led him to believe that in fact a world-wide catastrophe of unknown origins had befallen the earth and that there was a correlation between civilized ruins around the world.

The mechanism for this universal terrestrial catastrophe was provided by the Russian astronomer, Sergei Vseksviatskii, director of the Kiev observatory, who believes that comets are erupted out of Venus and that some of them could have passed near the earth within historical times.

Velikovsky noted the traditional fear of comets in ancient legends; he also noted that, according to the Greeks, Venus had originally been blown out of Jupiter. Velikovsky took these ancient legends seriously; in fact, literally, and argued that Venus had once separated from Jupiter, had followed an eccentric orbit, and had caused widespread destruction on earth before settling in its present position around the sun.

The combination of astronomical data and archaeological data along with his interpretation of legends provided Velikovsky with a powerful frame of reference by which to reinterpret geology. In as much as he had been trained as a psychoanalyst rather than as a field geologist, Velikvosky was forced to resort to the New York Public Library for his geological resources. Here he ran through a huge pile of sources ranging from Buckland's 1822 treatise *Reliquiae diluvianae*, to Liakhov's 18th century accounts of massive animal graveyards in the arctic. To a modern geologist, his sources seem dated. Instead of approaching the subject from within the well-established uniformitarian paradigm of Charles Lyell (equally dated), he insisted on going back to pre-Lyellian Geology when the catastrophic theory had been more respectable. Yet evidence is evidence. Velikovsky's footnotes are in order. Mounds of bones and broken tree trunks had been found on Arctic Islands. Buckland had found bones of a hyena, a tiger and an hippopotamus in the Kirkdale caves. The real problem was one of correlation. No geologist would deny that the earth provided evidence of catastrophe, they would only deny that there was any necessary correlation between the individual local catastrophes, and the great big, universal catastrophe demanded by Velikovsky.

In a fit of frustration, members of the AAAS attempted to repress Velikovsky's work. "The book is worse than an attack on science," Dean McLaughlin wrote to the president of Macmillan, Velikovsky's publisher. "The book is a serious threat to education and, I believe to the democratic principle itself. It raises very serious questions that go far beyond the domain of science."

The pressure on Macmillan was so great that it finally had to drop the book, fire the editor and to apologize to the AAAS for having published the book in the first place. Atwater, curator of the Hayden Planatarium in New York was fired the day before he attempted to put on a show illustrating Velikovsky's ideas.

Velikovsky was somewhat surprised at the violent reaction his books had engendered. As a psychoanalyst, however, he explained it away as being a product of this traumatic experience through which man had suffered. So great was the experience, he claims, that we do not wish to remember it, and if anyone brings it to the surface, the only defence is suppression. Nonetheless, Velikovsky believes that this suppression is dangerous and that we must face the fact that Nature is not

nearly so much under scientific control as we would like to believe.

On the 16th through 19th of June, 1974, a Velikovsky Symposium was held at McMaster in order to evaluate his ideas as objectively as possible. The work of Claude Schaeffer was given a very favourable review at the hands of Dr. Beatty from North Carolina, and the American Indian, Vine Deloria, was happy that at least one white man (Velikovsky) had taken Indian legends seriously, legends which had long since spoken of early catastrophes. But the American space experts, Drs. Morrison and Zeller were effective in tearing apart Dr. Vseksviatskii's paper, although Dr. Vseksviatskii had already been successful in tearing apart the American hypothesis on comets. There was a standoff in the heavens. Everyone agrees that there are some very peculiar things about the planet Venus, particularly its slow retrograde motion and hot temperature, but while Venus is an embarrassment to the nebula hypothesis of the uniformitarians, there were some major difficulties in the Velikovsky explanation as well; namely, how did Venus manage to break from Jupiter without first exploding, and how did it manage to go from a highly eccentric orbit to a nearly circular orbit within the prescribed time?

By the end of the symposium, it was clear that we needed to hear from geologists on the question of catastrophe, but all the geologists, or nearly all, who had been invited refused to come. At the moment, the issue is not really whether Velikvosky is correct or not, the issue is whether Velikovsky's hypothesis is worth taking seriously enough for professional geologists to spend their time on. It would not hurt geologists or geology to go back to fundamentals once in a while. At the root of Velikovsky's theory is a serious philosophical question about Man's relationship to Nature. Is the earth in the grip of forces far more powerful than anything we can conceivably contend with? This is the uncomfortable proposition Velikovsky asks us to live with. The details of his theory may well need revision, but it is no longer so clear that technological man is as capable of controlling his destiny as we had once believed. It seems possible that, in the last analysis, we may be forced to use our science as a vehicle by which we may come to stand in awe of nature after we have despaired of taming her.

MS received December 11, 1974.