

Aliens Among Us

By Jeff Stauffer

Aliens have been getting considerable airtime lately. Scientists speculate about their existence, large satellite programs search the airwaves for their messages, and Hollywood is enamored with their scaly exoskeletons. Once thought to be at the center of the universe, the Earth has slowly been relegated to junior status: a small blue-green ball in a not-so-special corner of our local Milky Way galaxy, one among billions of other galaxies. This has led us to think about others who might be out there, for if we're alone in such a vast field of stars then it "seems like an awful waste of space," as Jodie Foster's character proclaimed in the 1997 film *Contact*. What I find interesting is that by studying how we characterize aliens in popular culture, one can glean much about humanity.

For example, in movies aliens seem to be a popular strategy to resolve issues that have grown too big to be realistically wrapped up by humans alone. I've never liked when movies play "the alien card" to answer any question that needs answered. The last Indiana Jones movie (*Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*) played the alien card near the end of the movie (after several over-the-top fight scenes) by explaining the mysterious crystal skull as the long-lost artifact that helped the aliens leave Earth. How many films have you seen like this? It reminds me of dream-sequence movies, where again the storyline is too vast to neatly wrap up so the main character simply wakes up from a dream...The End. And as an avid watcher of ABC's *LOST* series, I'm fully expecting this final season to introduce us to alien overlords to explain all of the supernatural elements of the show.

I would argue that these examples highlight a few things about humanity: We acknowledge the existence of inexplicable occurrences in the world, yet we don't want to grant them truly supernatural status, choosing the lesser "evil" (from a modern viewpoint) of mysterious alien ways.

This also allows us to avoid explaining some of the great mysteries of the Earth as well. The Egyptian pyramids? Made by aliens. Stonehenge? Aliens. The Nazca lines in Peru? Aliens! It's not just Hollywood that has gone alien, science is going there as well. The origin of life on Earth? Alien-seedings is becoming a mainstream option as biochemical explanations for the origin of life on Earth fall short. Some physicists are even suggesting that the entire universe is one giant hologram!

I am not suggesting that we are alone in the universe; there may in fact be life out there somewhere. But what I am suggesting is that the alien-card portrays a limited creativity and stubborn refusal to accept either the supernatural realm, or plain old human ingenuity/creativity as in the above ancient artifacts. Not that this is completely our fault. We are after all finite creatures unable to fully grasp the ways of God and His creation. I think this is precisely the way God wanted his creatures to experience life: just a touch of the supernatural, leaving its sweet flavor on the tongue for fleeting moments. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."¹ I think we have a natural bent for things

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:11

beyond this world, and because they are difficult to fully understand, we end up grasping at poor substitutes when we were never meant to be given a complete explanation. C.S. Lewis used a similar line of thinking in his essay entitled *The Weight of Glory*. Here, Lewis presents what some call an "argument from natural desire." Lewis says that, for example, it would be odd to live in a world where we experience hunger but there was no such thing as food. So, because we all hunger, there must be some object to satisfy this craving, i.e. food. One may still starve in the desert, but food must surely exist at the very least. Or, it would be odd if "falling in love" occurred in a sexless world. Lewis concludes then, that because we all have a longing for, and sometimes a brief experience of, a supernatural world and of heaven, that such a thing must exist. Granted, we may never be allowed to fully experience it, but because the longing for it is there tells us there exists some way for this desire to be fulfilled.

Now, what does this have to do with aliens? My point is this: We were all made to experience heaven, to experience God in a supernatural way that is far beyond anything we have come across so far in this life. And instead of granting this as part of our everyday experience, we instead grasp at the lesser options more immediately acceptable to our earthly ways, regardless of how far-fetched they may be. We would rather grasp at an unknown alien race to explain our existence than entertain the possibility that a supernatural being created us right here on Earth. We would rather describe our longings for heaven and all that it entails (love, beauty, perfection, etc.) with some evolutionary origin in religion's benefit for survival than the possibility that heaven actually exists. We reduce humanity to what science can fully explain versus what the spirit yearns for.

Last year Nicolas Cage starred in a movie called "Knowing," where his son came across a numeric code written by a former student at his school. Cage is able to interpret the code and discover that it has been predicting all the major catastrophes over the past 50 years, and the final section of numbers is coming up soon, foretelling the destruction of Earth. The movie sets you up with an obvious biblical theme of end times, including angels and biblical passages. But at the end, it turns out the "New Heaven and Earth" is simply aliens starting humanity over on another planet by taking Cage's son and another girl away to be the new Adam and Eve on this far-off planet. Everyone I discussed this movie with was left disappointed in the obvious "cop-out" of aliens in the end. That's when it struck me: The obvious answer to everyone watching the movie was to believe in supernatural forces at work, an intelligence behind the secret code. Yet, we all felt slighted by the way the movie used aliens as the "man behind the curtain." The aliens in the movie didn't really explain anything, like how they could predict the future; they simply push out the problem to a catch-all alien race that can be used in any situation. Yet, the same questions remain, such as life's origins in the universe or how the aliens seem to be able to perform "miraculous" events. I think this says something about the nature of this world. We grasp for physical explanations at times when a spiritual solution is more appropriate and often simpler as well. It turns out, as the apostle Paul points out, *we* are the aliens ("aliens and strangers in this world..." 1 Pet 3:11) not made for this world, but something beyond. We yearn not for some distant alien relative, but for our true Father in spirit.