

Alien Nation: Is Intelligent Extraterrestrial Life Compatible with the Torah?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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The Associated Press reports:

Supposed aliens landed in Mexico's Congress...Mexican journalist José Jaime Maussan presented two boxes with supposed mummies found in Peru, which he and others consider "non-human beings..." The shriveled bodies with shrunken, warped heads left those in the chamber aghast and quickly kicked up a social media fervor...In 2017, Maussan made similar claims in Peru, and a report by the country's prosecutor's office found that the bodies were actually "recently manufactured dolls, which have been covered with a mixture of paper and synthetic glue to simulate the presence of skin."

The report added that the figures were almost certainly human-made and that "they are not the remains of ancestral aliens that they have tried to present."...On Wednesday, Julieta Fierro, researcher at the Institute of Astronomy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, was among those to express skepticism, saying that many details about the figures "made no sense."

Fierro added that the researchers' claims that her university endorsed their supposed discovery were false, and noted that scientists would need more advanced technology than the X-rays they claimed to use to determine if the allegedly calcified bodies were "non-human"...[1]

R' Chasdai Crescas (the Or Hashem)

The first detailed consideration of the question of the existence of extraterrestrial life in Torah sources appears in Or Hashem, the magnum opus of R' Chasdai Crescas, a *talmid* of the Ran. The author considers various theological and philosophical arguments for and against the existence of other inhabited worlds, and he concludes that while there are no compelling arguments for their *certain* existence or nonexistence, the *possibility* of their existence is clear. He cites the view in the Gemara that Hashem "flies in eighteen thousand worlds,"[2] i.e., "His Providence wanders in all those worlds." [3]

R' Yosef Albo (the Sefer Ha'ikarim)

R' Aryeh Kaplan, after citing and discussing the position of the Or Hashem, writes:

The exact opposite opinion is that of R' Yosef Albo, author of the Ikarim. He states that since the universe was created for the sake of man, no other creature can exist possessing free will. Since any extraterrestrial life would neither have free will nor be able to serve a creature having free will (as terrestrial animals and plants serve a terrestrial man), they would have no reason for existing and therefore

be totally superfluous.[4]

I have been unable to locate this citation in the Sefer Ha'ikarim.[5]

R' Pinchas Eliyahu Hurwitz (the Sefer Habris)

R' Pinchas Eliyahu Hurwitz of Vilna (1765-1821), in his very popular work Sefer Habris, argues vehemently against the idea that other worlds "are exactly like ours, without any difference in their nature, and contain people possessing free will, and animals and plants," calling it false and nonsense, and calling anyone who believes this "a fool (who) believes anything." [6] He subsequently concedes, however, that other worlds may indeed contain intelligent and sentient life forms, and his adamant opposition is only to the possibility of their containing *humanoid* life, "in Our image, as Our likeness," [7] possessing free will, since it is known that free will can only exist in the composition of man upon this world, and not in that which is above it or that which is below it in the nature of Creation. [8].^[9]

R' Meir Mazuz

R' Meir Mazuz, on the other hand, is cited as emphatically rejecting the possibility of any extraterrestrial life:

The Torah's word is above everything, above all the professors, above all the scientists. All their words are null and void against one word of Torah.

For example: "In the beginning, Hashem created the heavens and the earth." The deniers came along and said: "This is false. The earth is part of the heaven." ... Thus they said: What is this, "the heavens and the earth"? They asked themselves, "Just like there are human beings on the earth, so, too, there must be on other planets. They must exist also on the moon, on Mars, on Venus, Mercury, etc."

In truth, there were some Torah sages who thought like this. In the days of the Chacham Tzvi, there was a *rav, talmid chacham, tzadik, yerei shamayim*, by the name of R' Dovid Nieto, author of the work *Mateh Dan*. They asked him: "What do you think of what the scientists say that there are human beings on the moon?" He answered: "Why not? If they tell you there are human beings in India, will you say they walk upside down or they have three eyes? Of course not. All are the same. So, too, here, all the planets are the same."

Eventually, this matter was proven false. When? About fifty years ago, when they went up on the moon and saw no men, no horses, etc. There's no air and no water. It's all a desolate wasteland. (At that time, R' Nissan Pinson told me: "Slowly, slowly, they will realize that there is no place fit for life like planet Earth.")

For Heaven is a vast sphere that has nothing, while Earth has so many interesting things. There are human beings, animals, trees, grasses; and there are people who recognize their Creator, pray to Him, and thank Him. This is what is written: "In the beginning, Hashem created the heavens and

the earth.” It has already been fifty years since the scientists searched against this. But in truth, there is nothing. Period.
One word of Torah is worth more than all the scientists’ words together. They are all as dust and ashes against it. So, too, for everything else written in the Torah.[10]

[1]Megan Janetsky. Scientists call fraud on supposed extraterrestrials presented to Mexican Congress.

<https://apnews.com/article/extraterrestrials-ufo-mexico-congress-af7d54fabf3278ef83c39d899c457c76>.

Cf. Aleksandra Wrona. ‘Alien Corpses’ Revealed in Hearing Before Mexican Congress. Snopes.com.

[2]Avodah Zarah 3b.

[3]Or Hashem (Yerushalayim 5750) *ma’amar 4 drush* 2 pp. 388-91.

[4]R’ Aryeh Kaplan, On Extraterrestrial Life.

[5]Rav Kaplan does not provide a direct citation, but he asserts that this position of the Sefer Ha’ikarim is “quoted in Sefer Habris 1:3:4.” While the Sefer Habris does cite a comment of the Sefer Ha’ikarim on our topic, it is not at all clear that this comment means what Rav Kaplan seems to think it means. The Sefer Habris quotes the Sefer Ha’ikarim as saying “*Yarei anochi shelo yomru sheyeish olamos acheirim*” (I am afraid that they shouldn’t say there are other worlds), to which he responds that according to his own view (cited below in the main text of this article), “the fear that gripped the author of the Sefer Ha’ikarim is alleviated...because since they contain no entities possessing free will...they are totally irrelevant to us...”

The Sefer Habris does not provide a more specific citation to the Sefer Ha’ikarim, and I have not been able to find the exact wording that he cites, but he is probably referring to a passage in *ma’amar 4 perek* 2 of that work, which reads (to the extent that I understand the rather technical passage correctly): “Unless we say that there exists in the center of an (orbital) circumference a stationary mass like the earth, such that the revolution of the circumference is around that mass...and it follows from this that at the centers of the circumferences that are associated with the lost stars (i.e., the planets) there are other earths around which they revolve, and according to this, other earths will be found in the heavens.”

I am not sure that this is indeed the passage to which the Sefer Habris (and thus, Rav Kaplan) refers, but if it is, it is certainly far from clear that the position of the Sefer Ha’ikarim is as described by Rav Kaplan.

Additionally, Rav Albo was a *talmid* of Rav Crescas, and it would certainly be noteworthy for the student to diverge so sharply from the position of his teacher without any acknowledgment of this, but I am not sufficiently well versed in their works to opine on how common this actually is.

[6]Mishlei 14:15.

[7]Bereishis 1:26.

[8]Sefer Habris, *cheilek* 1: Ksav Yosher, *ma’amar* 3: *Kochvei Hashamayim*, *perek* 4. An analysis of Rav Hurwitz’s assumptions about the distinction between intelligence and free will, and the uniqueness of the latter to human beings, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

[9]For a number of additional sources on our topic, see Eliezer Brodt. R' David Nieto's Mateh Dan, Life on Other Planets and Jewish Reactions to Copernicus. The Seforim Blog. Mar. 22, 2009.

[10]R' Meir Mazuz. Parashas Tzav 5778.