

The 12th Planet
Zecharia Sitchin.
Stein and Day, New York, 1976.
384 pp., \$12.95.
Reviewed by James E. Oberg
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This book is supposed to be a man's life's work which tells "where, when, how, and why astronauts from another planet settled the earth and created Homo Sapiens" (book dust jacket). A careful reading of the evidence leads one to the temptation to snigger, if not laugh out loud. But the image of an old man stooped over dusty manuscripts every moment of his spare time, for decade after decade, while wars rage outside his doors, and finally, triumphantly, producing this book, transforms any thought of graceless humor into pathos and tragedy.

If this is a life's work, what a terribly wasted life!

It would hardly have been worth even a book review, and I felt the effort would have been better placed elsewhere. Then "noted UFO historian" Lucius Farish endorsed the book warmly, so I felt like examining Farish's standards as well as Sitchin's logic.

Lucius Farish does have standards for UFO books. Admittedly, they are about as high as those the draft board would have if the Russians were advancing through Missouri, but they do exist. And Sitchin's book passes, with flying saucers—oops, I mean, flying colors.

Realistically, 12th **Planet** is an astronomical flop. The author attempted to combine planetary astronomy with Sumerian archaeology to prove the existence of the Nefilim, the inhabitants of a distant alien planet in our solar system who founded earth's civilizations. Mysteries and uncertainties in archaeology and anthropology are milked for all they are worth.

It is an old story, and we've seen dozens of such explanations over the past few years, each one based on exhaustive (and for the careful reader, exhausting) research, and obviously at least all but one of the conflicting "ancient astronauts" theories are completely wrong. Those are not good odds to wager a lifetime on.

Sitchin's grasp of Near Eastern archaeology is excellent, and his introductory chapters are written in a clear, readable, pleasant style. I would recommend them to anybody interested in a survey of that field, and in testimony to the debt civilization owes to ancient

Sumerian culture. The first third of the book tests to the fact that Sitchin **could** do his homework, and present it to readers creditably.

But halfway through the book, Sitchin unveils his master plan. Slowly and subtly he assigns modern space and rocket terminology to obscure and ambiguous Sumerian words and glyphs, and he makes juxtapositions of modern space images with mysterious and symbolic Sumerian artwork. And then, lo and behold! He has “discovered” some ancient astronauts.

“Can there be any doubt that the ancient people, in calling their deities ‘Gods of heaven and earth,’ meant quite literally that they were people from elsewhere who had come to earth from the heavens?” Sitchin asks enthusiastically. But who today, their own enthusiasms and credulities intellectually brutalized by the past decade’s “ancient astronaut” showmanship, charlatanism, and downright silliness, who of us can answer “No, no doubt” without at least a twinge of uneasiness?

At this point Sitchin launches himself into astronomy—and here his mission is aborted. Gone is the expertise and familiarity, replaced by scientific gaffes and trivial errors. The Sitchin theory must rest on two legs, archaeology and astronomy—the archaeology leg is dubious, and the astronomical one is nonexistent. Tim-ber-r-r-r, as the lumberjacks used to say in similar situations.

Sitchin grossly overestimates the entirely admirable astronomy of the Sumerians, in order to require the action of a superhuman intelligence. On page 171 he insists that the knowledge of the retrograde motions of planets requires advanced technology and “very long periods of observation.” In actual fact, it is one of the most obvious phenomena of the sky and can be detected in a matter of months. Or on page 175, he marvels that the Sumerians knew of “all the constellations in the northern sky,” including many not discovered and recognized until the twentieth century. In actual fact, there is nothing surprising in any culture “recognizing” as many or as few constellations as they have patience to plot out.

That is Sitchin’s thrust: “It is evident that the Sumerian astronomers possessed knowledge that they could not possibly have acquired on their own.”

We have seen this trick before, sadly. Omohundro called it the “our-ancestors-the-dummies” gambit. It is a trick, perhaps not a conscious one, but a phony one all- the same.

The Sumerians needed no help to know the astronomy they possessed. All they needed was curiosity, accurate records, and normal human intelligence. They didn’t need a cosmic crib sheet, sneaked to them by some interplanetary Cliff’s Notes, Inc.

And Sitchin doesn’t know modern astronomy, either. The key to his solar system shenanigans is “Phaeton,” the planet that “exploded” between Mars and Jupiter. “Astronomers are certain that such a planet existed,” Sitchin says, and he is pitifully wrong. “Beyond any

doubt, this is the debris of a planet that had shattered to pieces,” Sitchin pontificates, and he is so wrong that I refuse to waste any further pity on his “life’s work” as he makes a fool out of himself on every page. (The “exploded planet” hypothesis used to be one of many possibilities for the asteroid belt, but In recent years it has been abandoned by most Astronomers.)

Sitchin takes a Sumerian sketch of a group of circles, and turns it into a map of the solar system (well, it will work, if you pick the one drawing out of dozens of available sketches, just so long as it fits what you intend to make it fit). Sitchin takes a Sumerian creation myth, replaces gods and goddesses with planets, and recreates a cosmic cataclysm to warm a Velikovskian heart (that’s right—the gods and goddesses are astronauts when it will fit, and also are planets, elsewhere, if it will fit there, too). “The puzzles of our solar system. . . all are perfectly answered by the Mesopotamian creation epic, as deciphered by us,” he claims, solving the mysteries of the ages in one swoop.

Okay, so he’s careless, too. He doesn’t know an apogee from an aphelion (if you claim to be an expert, you’d better know the difference). He doesn’t know how a “hothouse effect” (he probably means “greenhouse effect”) works, even as he must conjure it up to explain how he can have the habitable warm planet of the mythological Nefilim astronaut gods circling the sun way out beyond Pluto. By page 231 he switches his soaring blunders to biochemistry and the origin of life—and pounds the nails into the coffin containing the dead remains of his credibility.

Sitchin returns to ancient mythology again, and spins a tale of extraterrestrial treachery and defeat. But it is too late for fables. A reader who refuses to be bludgeoned into agreement by the monotonous recitation of “fitting” mythological passages, already dizzy from Sitchin’s counterfeit “twelfth planet,” just will not stand for the sleight of hand required to make the amorphous Sumerian myths “fit” the tale Sitchin strives to tell.

There is no “twelfth planet” a la Sitchin, whatever stony or frozen methane objects may lie hiding in the transplutonian darkness. Sitchin’s planet is a figment of a lifetime poring over the ancient myths, and perhaps an afternoon or two skimming astronomical textbooks. I am sorry Sitchin spent so much of his life that way, and I’m sorry if anybody else is tempted into following the same wasteful dead-ended detour. Wading through the book seemed to take me a lifetime, too, and it was just as fruitless.