

**Michael Gordin's *The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky
and the Birth of the Modern Fringe***

by Ev Cochrane

“From the moment of publication of *Worlds in Collision* in April 1950, Velikovsky was branded a crackpot. There was no careful consideration, no engaged debates about the book’s status within the scientific community. Velikovskianism was, so to speak, born pseudoscientific.”¹ Michael Gordin

“I have again read in *Worlds in Collision*. It is a book of immeasurable importance, and scientists should read it.”² Albert Einstein

The furor attending Macmillan’s publication of Immanuel Velikovsky’s *Worlds in Collision* in 1950 was as memorable and vitriolic as any in the history of American publishing. A runaway bestseller at the time, Macmillan was eventually forced to withdraw the book under threat of boycott after being deluged by criticism from outraged scientists across the land, many of whom had yet to read the book. All but forgotten nowadays, the so-called “Velikovsky Affair” is recounted in great detail and with much care and evenhandedness in Michael Gordin’s engrossing *The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe*.

Gordin would appear to be ideally suited to tackle the controversy sparked by the publication of *Worlds in Collision*. In addition to being a historian of science at Princeton University—one who is fluent in Russian, Velikovsky’s native language—Gordin had ample opportunity to take advantage of the fact that that University’s Firestone Library serves as the final resting place for Velikovsky’s voluminous archives, which he mined for countless anecdotes and behind-the-scenes commentaries on the dramatic events in question. Included among the scientists quoted by Gordin on this or that aspect of the Velikovsky Affair are some of the greatest figures of the 20th century, including Albert Einstein, Harlow Shapley, Otto Neugebauer, Polykarp Kusch, and Harold Urey.

Gordin’s research into the Princeton archives enables him to provide an enlightening glimpse into Velikovsky’s background as a psychoanalyst, Zionist, and heretical historian. As Gordin documents, Velikovsky’s “Jewishness” is absolutely central to understanding both the man himself and his attempt to revise and reconstruct ancient history.³ Indeed, Velikovsky’s fateful foray into ancient history was originally inspired by the desire to rebut Sigmund Freud’s thesis in *Moses and Monotheism*, which Velikovsky viewed as an egregious insult to the Hebrew religion and its traditional history (Freud had argued that

Moses was an Egyptian and that the idea of monotheism itself was an Egyptian invention).

At the outset of his inquiry Gordin makes it clear that his intention is not to analyze or debate the pros and cons of Velikovsky's particular historical reconstruction or the many rejoinders offered by the leading lights of the scientific community. Rather, his primary purpose is to employ the Velikovsky Affair as a focal point and divining rod for investigating the very important question of how to distinguish pseudoscience from mainstream science. With this in mind, Gordin seeks to delineate a number of parallels between the Velikovsky Affair and similar controversies associated with Lysenkoism in Russia, Henry Morris and Creationism in the United States, and eugenics. Yet unlike these other controversies, the Velikovsky Affair seems to have exposed an especially raw nerve in the scientific community:

“There remain, of course, fundamental questions about this opening volley in the pseudoscience wars. What, precisely, was it about Velikovsky's vision of the universe that so enraged the astronomers (and their non-astronomical colleagues, such as physicists, who joined with them)? Why were they so certain he was wrong? And, perhaps more directly, why did the scientists react so vehemently to this publication, in language and behavior that asymptotically approached hysteria, when the typical response to ‘pseudoscience’ to date had been to ignore it altogether—why, that is, respond to Velikovsky's border incursion with full-scale warfare?”⁴

There is no simple answer to this question. Part of the reason for the scientists' outrage, no doubt, were the sensationalist claims made on behalf of *Worlds In Collision* by various popular periodicals prior to its publication, some of which hinted that the book vindicated certain Biblical traditions such as the report that the Sun “stood still” at some point in the mid-second century BCE. Although Velikovsky himself was embarrassed by these popular attempts to publicize his book, it is also true that his entire research program was originally launched in an attempt to provide a natural *and* scientific explanation for traditional Hebrew history.

Equally important in rousing the scientists' ire—that of astronomers in particular—was Velikovsky's claim that a near flyby of the planet Venus in the mid-second millennium BCE inspired the famous account of the Exodus in the Old Testament. As Einstein and others pointed out very early on, this idea stretches credulity to its very limits and is seemingly incompatible with the central tenets of modern astronomy and physics.

Velikovsky's attempt to use myth and sacred traditions to help elucidate ancient historical events was also anathema to numerous scientists, as contemporary records testify in no uncertain terms. The comments of astronomer Walter S.

Adams of Caltech are representative in this regard:

“I cannot help feeling that you have overestimated the value of this [mythological] material as evidence. Primitive peoples in small countries, with little or no means of outside communication, are, like children, prone to exaggeration.”⁵

Gordin’s book is primarily concerned with the events between 1950 and 1979, the period beginning with the publication of *Worlds in Collision* and culminating in the author’s death at age 84. Yet Velikovsky’s ideas did not go to the grave with him in 1979—far from it, in fact. In the meantime a number of independent researchers and scholars, both within America and abroad, have sought to further clarify and expand upon Velikovsky’s work of historical reconstruction. Alas, as is the case with any field of study, it is fair to say that some of these endeavors have proven more fruitful and scientifically credible than others.

Gordin’s chronicling of the events surrounding scientists’ threat to boycott Macmillan for publishing *Worlds in Collision* is endlessly fascinating and should be required reading for all students pondering a career in science. Yet as Velikovsky himself mused, the more important question, surely, is whether or not there is any substance or validity to his central claims: “Who cares, besides the defenders of civil liberties, if a wrong idea is suppressed?”⁶

If it is conceded that Velikovsky’s thesis identifying Venus as the extraterrestrial cause of the Exodus events is impossible to square with the physical sciences and that his attempt to radically reconstruct ancient history is thus flawed from the outset, what if anything remains of his revolutionary thesis? In the first few pages of the book Gordin offers a very precise summary of Velikovsky’s fundamental challenge to modern science: “Velikovsky presented his argument as three nested claims, each more specific than the last: ‘(1) that there were physical upheavals of a global character in historical times; (2) that these catastrophes were caused by extraterrestrial agents; and (3) that these agents can be identified.’”⁷ In the final analysis, Velikovsky will be remembered—or not—by the factual nature and continuing import of these three simple hypotheses, hypotheses that were deeply unsettling in 1950 and remain revolutionary today.⁸

What, then, have been the principal findings to come to light in the thirty-three years since Velikovsky’s death? To take but one of numerous issues—that regarding Venus’s possible comet-like past, arguably the most controversial claim in Velikovsky’s entire *oeuvre*. Here the evidence is simply overwhelming that the planet Venus only recently presented a comet-like appearance to terrestrial skywatchers around the globe. Although the evidence in question was barely touched upon by Velikovsky himself and remains virtually unknown to the scientific community to this very day, it is sufficiently compelling to

vindicate Velikovsky's general thesis of planetary catastrophe—i.e., that the solar system was radically different in appearance and order in very recent historical times.⁹ In fact, to return to the three central tenets in *Worlds in Collision*, enumerated above, there is a wealth of evidence in favor of each provided you add the prefix “pre” before historical in hypothesis one (i.e., recent research has confirmed that the planetary dislocations deduced by Velikovsky occurred in the relatively recent *prehistoric* period and not during the middle of the second millennium BCE, as he believed).

Far from offering the final nail in Velikovsky's coffin, Gordin's book might actually inspire modern readers to revisit the greatest scientific controversy of the last century. This would be a most welcome development and could prove to have unforeseen and far-reaching ramifications on any number of fronts. Velikovsky's star, I suspect, will never fade away quietly into the night for just when you think he's been discredited and has nothing left to say of any relevance, he surprises you and rises to the occasion once again like a Phoenix appearing from the ash heap of history. Not unlike Bill Clinton, Velikovsky is never going to disappear entirely from the public scene for the simple reason that his unique insights into the Earth's history and the human condition command attention and reward further study. Velikovsky's theory of recent planetary catastrophism continues to resonate with modern readers because it is based on an insightful reading of the abundant ancient testimony—testimony that modern science continues to ignore to its own detriment and peril.

1. *The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* (Chicago, 2012), p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

3. Here Gordin was presumably influenced by the massively comprehensive doctoral dissertation of Duane Vorhees, “The ‘Jewish Science’ of Immanuel Velikovsky...” (Bowling Green University, 1990), which devoted hundreds of pages to Velikovsky's Jewish heritage.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8. As Gordin, *op. cit.*, p. 51 writes: “Velikovsky appeared in 1950 like a comet from nowhere, bearing a message so foreign to contemporary scholars that it was almost as though they could not understand it.”

9. For a sampling of the manifold evidence on the matter, see E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 113-151 and *On Fossil Gods and Forgotten Worlds* (Ames, 2010), pp. 77-123. See also D. Talbott, “The Great Comet Venus,” *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 5-51; A. Peratt, “Characteristics for the Occurrence of a High-Current, Z-Pinch Aurora as Recorded in Antiquity,” *IEEE Transactions on Plasma Science* 31:6 (2003), pp. 1192-1214; and C. J. Ransom, “High Level Velikovsky,” in R. Sharon, *Immanuel Velikovsky: The Truth Behind the Torment* (2010), pp. 123ff.