

The Stupidest Cult. A coloring-book occult/oriental philosophy in which daydreaming and wishful thinking become "the ancient science of soul travel." Learn to protect your astral body *while driving!*

I cannot recommend this book highly enough, on entertainment value alone. The added bonus is that Stang and his co-conspirators have given us a vivid picture of the range of bizarre and eccentric beliefs in this country. And through every listing (try reading them aloud) is the love Stang has for his sources. For all our efforts to fight irrationalism, it will probably always be around. And there's something truly alive in a lot of it; as much as I detest charlatans and con artists, the crackpots out there are usually wild, and I can't help but admire the energy they put into their projects. Or, as Stang himself puts it:

Unlike the mainstream newsstand magazine publishers . . . hardly any of these little publishers and ranters are in it for the money. They are compelled by a desire to share. (Forget for a second that you don't really *want* what they're begging you to take.) Despite all the compulsions, delusions, bitterness, and fanaticism that mark so many fringe cause groups, the drive to share gives the worst of them a measure of dignity that the popular slick publishers can't seem to comprehend. They may be wrong, insane, simple-minded, or whatever, but, with only a few exceptions, they mean what they say. They're sincere. In that respect, these kooks and weirdos possess truer humanity—faults and follies notwithstanding—than do many of those who gave them that label. Or, I should say, who gave *us* that label. . . . I *love* the kooks and weirdos. •

Ararat and the Ark

The Lost Ship of Noah. By Charles Berlitz. Fawcett Books, New York. 192 pp. Paper, \$3.95.

Al Martin

THE COVER of *The Lost Ship of Noah* promises to "fascinate and charm" its readers and raises expectations that they will discover within its pages "the startling find at Mt. Ararat." For, after decades of organized searching in quest of the biblical Ark of Noah, author Charles Berlitz (inventor of the "Bermuda Triangle," Atlantis explorer, and prophet of "Doomsday 1999 A.D.") "is convinced that definitive proof of the Ark now exists."

However, the text of this decidedly uninteresting book totally fails to produce any "startling find," any proof, or even any convincing evidence whatsoever that the Ark ever actually existed. Much of the argumentation is, in fact, a retelling of the stories of Violet Cummings, Tim LaHaye, John and Henry Morris, and other crea-

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tionist "Arkeologists," whose books constitute major references in the text. The sum total of Berlitz's evidence for the existence of the Ark falls into two categories: reported sightings of its remains and "evidence" that the Flood is a historical fact.

Berlitz does a good job of summarizing the reported sightings of the Ark from medieval times to the present and of describing the finds of major expeditions that have been dispatched to Ararat in recent years by various (mostly creationist) organizations. Fully half the text is devoted to this task, and anyone who wishes to read a short review of the history of Ark-hunting may find this book quite useful. However, none of the reported sightings are, of themselves, satisfactory proof of the Ark's existence, and Berlitz, in occasional moments of surprising candor, admits this. He acknowledges, for instance, that Ark-hunters are "mainly religiously motivated" and that "lack of definitive proof of the Ark's existence has had little effect on the millions who believe in its actuality." He points out that the best photographs of the Ark are "either lost or inconclusive" and that "almost any unusual feature of the mountain is likely to be associated with the Ark by observers from the air, the plain, or the nearby hills." "These observers," he writes, "even if they do not realize it, are psychologically conditioned to believe in its reality." No "startling finds" or anything resembling definitive proof is to be found anywhere in the book. Rather, Berlitz's illogical reasoning seems to be that the reported sightings of the Ark constitute something of a critical mass: If so many apparently sincere people claim to have seen a boat atop the mountain, then there must be *something* there after all. And that something is quite possibly Noah's Ark. In this, Berlitz agrees with pilot and Ark-sighter Colonel Ben Bowthorp, who said, "Most of us felt it could be the Ark since that's where it's supposed to be." Or, as veteran Ark-hunter Fernand Navarra said, "What else could it be?"

In his reporting of the details of the individual sightings, Berlitz does, in fact, inadvertently make a good case for the insufficiency of the evidence of eyewitness accounts, since many of the details of different sightings are contradictory. For instance, the Ark has been sitting on a frozen lake in a valley surrounded by small peaks that prevent it from slipping (Roskovitsky) or, is perched precariously on a ledge (Greene). It has also been reported to be buried under a glacier, which required a perilous descent into a crevice to reach (Navarra), or largely exposed and easily accessible (Hagopian, Resit, and Green). Explorers who have found wood allegedly from the Ark have found it to be so hard that "even musket fire hardly dents it" (Hagopian) or soft enough to cut into pieces (Navarra). The Ark also appears to have been discovered at several different elevations on the mountain. On one of his expeditions, Fernand Navarra, an experienced mountain climber, became dizzy and ill at around 15,000 feet, near a glacier where he reported seeing the Ark buried under the ice. Yet, George Hagopian—who as a child climbed atop the Ark and kissed it—was carried to it on his uncle's shoulders, implying a relatively low elevation. Clearly, rather than substantiating one another, these eyewitness accounts force one to conclude that either there are many Arks on Mt. Ararat or that the accounts are simply unreliable and wish-fulfilling. In fact, what the witnesses have seen are most probably rock formations or dwellings or artifacts left by medieval monks who once resided on Mt. Ararat. Those who believe Ararat to be the resting place of a literal Ark, and who go expecting to find it, *will* find it, whether or not it actually exists.

The second half of the book is not nearly as well written as the first. The arguments and reasoning Berlitz uses would look familiar to anyone who has read

much of the creationist literature. In his attempt to convince the reader of the historicity of a worldwide flood, Berlitz relies on a few selected scientific facts taken out of their proper geological context, and on religious traditions, without adequately exploring either. He points out, for instance, that seashells and pillow lava have been found on Mt. Ararat and that herrings similar to marine forms are found in a certain Turkish lake. His implication is that they must have been carried there by a very large flood, but he makes no mention whatsoever of such widely substantiated geological processes as plate tectonics and orogeny, by which geologists explain such phenomena in purely physical terms. He drives home the fact that Sir Leonard Woolley discovered ancient flood deposits during excavation of the city of Ur, but fails to mention that excavation of Jericho and other ancient sites has revealed no similar deposits. But Berlitz's main line of "evidence" for a worldwide flood is the abundance of flood stories in the traditions and cultures of many diverse populations. He apparently fails to recognize that there are many cultures that *do not* have flood legends in their mythologies and that most flood legends have virtually nothing in common, except for the flood itself, which strongly implies they are not describing the same event or at least renders this line of "evidence" useless.

The author's research for the book was apparently a selective search for evidence that he thought would support the existence of the Ark. It is obvious that he has studied the "definitive" creationist books on the search for Noah's Ark (although he makes a great effort *not* to associate himself with the "creation science" movement). He has traveled to Mt. Ararat in Eastern Turkey and has even interviewed some of those individuals who claim to have seen the Ark. But when I appeared on radio with him to discuss his book, he seemed to have given little thought to the technical problems that render the entire concept of Noah's Ark physically impossible—or else he had decided to play down these problems. These include the fact that an overburdened wooden ship 300 to 400 feet long would probably sink in even fairly calm waters, much less withstand the unprecedented hydrologic forces of worldwide deluge. How were the animals found, gathered, boarded (in a single day), and cared for? How did elephants, tree sloths, and kangaroos climb down off Mt. Ararat (which explorers have characterized as "perilous") and migrate to their present homes across deserts and oceans? Apparently anticipating such questions in the mind of the reader, Berlitz offers only a few brief and unenthusiastic answers. How were all those animals fed? "They went into a state of hibernation and did not need food," says Berlitz. (This is unbiblical as well as physically impossible.) He brushes aside these fatal problems, simply claiming that everything becomes "logical when accompanied by faith."

In the final analysis, the existence of Noah's Ark, like the UFO-abduction stories, is founded upon (at best) circumstantial evidence and numerous eyewitness testimonials but has not one shred of reliable physical evidence to support it. And *The Lost Ship of Noah* provides us with nothing new or convincing. •