

CHELYABINSK, TUNGUSKA, ZOND IV, AND THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS. William K. Hartmann, hartmann@psi.edu

Modern knowledge of natural phenomena can clarify understanding of historic reports of observed events. For example, when a witness to the 1908 Tunguska event described how “I saw the sky...open to the ground and fire pour out,” [1], we can use entry models and videos of the Chelyabinsk event to reconstruct what actually happened.

Applying this approach, I note that three first-century accounts [2] describe a famous event near Damascus, suggesting a fireball in an energy range between the Chelyabinsk and Tunguska events. Synthesizing the accounts, we have these aspects of the phenomenon:

- I. At midday, a bright light illuminated the scene from the heavens.
- II. One account says it was brighter than the sun.
- III. Most, or all, witnesses fell to the ground.
- IV. As, and/or after, they fell to the ground, they heard noise.
- V. The leader of the party interpreted the noise as a divine voice, telling his to change his ways.
- VI. The leader was temporarily blinded by looking at the light source.
- VII. The others heard the noise but did not perceive a voice.
- VIII. No one saw a human or divine figure during the event.
- IX. The leader of the party, noted for persecuting Christians, conceived the event as a divine message, and became “Saint Paul,” famous for spreading the then-new Christian religion around the Mediterranean.

An analysis of the evening entry of a Russian rocket over the eastern U.S. in 1968 [3] shed light on *perception, conception, and reporting* of unusual events — in particular the role of current cultural imagery in conceiving what was seen. The event involved a string of glowing fragments traveling across the sky. Twelve out of 30 detailed reports correctly interpreted the event as the entry of a fireball or satellite. However, 5 out of 30 witnesses *conceived* that if the lights were traveling together, they must be attached to a non-luminous object, and so they *reported* a cigar-shaped or rocket-shaped object. Three witnesses reported it as an object with illuminated windows. This incident gives an example of how the *conception* may be radically different from what was actually *perceived*, depending on the background of the observer.

If we are right, the history-changing conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus may have been initiated by a fireball in the energy range of Chelyabinsk to Tunguska. Such cases raise larger questions about how stochastic, dramatic natural events outside normal experience, may have shaped broader human conceptions of our species relates to the universe.

References: [1]. Krinov, E. L. 1966 *Giant Meteorites*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press). [2]. Anonymous, possibly Luke the Physician, ca. 65. *Acts of the Apostles*. 9:1-9; 22:6-13; 26:12-20. [3]. Hartmann, W. K. 1968. Processes of Perception, Conception, and Reporting. In *Final Report of the Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (New York: Bantam Books).