

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING  
LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA

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Rc TO: Jct

November 9, 1959

Dr. J. Lederberg  
Genetics Department  
Stanford University  
Stanford, California

Dear Lederberg:

I have looked through the two papers by Carl Sagan in the Westex report. The first one on the moon seems to me to be very bad indeed. How a young man can possibly waste his time by writing such a paper I do not know, and I certainly do not think that the National Academy of Sciences Space Board should publish it. All the conclusions he puts in the paper could have been condensed into a paragraph, namely living organisms exposed on the surface of the moon would die in a couple of hours and living organisms buried well below the surface might exist for very long periods of time; also, there may be carbon compounds on the moon produced by photochemical decomposition of some early carbonaceous atmosphere.

I do not believe his theory of the origin of the solar system at all. I believe it was based on false arguments, that there never has been the slightest bit of evidence advanced in support of it, but no mention of any theory for the origin of the moon is required in order to reach the many possible conclusions that can be drawn.

The paper on Venus is fairly good. There are a number of points in this that I had overlooked myself and in this case we do have enough evidence to make it worthwhile to discuss it. I still think it could be written in much smaller space.

I knew Carl Sagan at Chicago briefly. He came to my office a couple of times with ideas about the origin of life on the planets. I was not much interested in what he had to say, and I have not been interested much since. I much prefer a young man like Stanley Miller who gets some experiments done instead of talking about them. Sagan's paper on the moon is completely in accord with that impression I had some years ago. His paper on Venus gives me somewhat the contrary view. I am quite sure that the first one would not be accepted for publication in any reasonable, well-run scientific journal. Perhaps the second one would.

Very sincerely,

Harold C. Urey  
Harold C. Urey

cc: Ms. Derbyshire ✓