

Dinosaurs in the Garden: A visit to the Creation Museum

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

Fundamentalists are often justly lampooned for being uncritical about matters of history and science. I have heard young-earth creationists haplessly respond to questions about dinosaur bones by suggesting that they were planted by the devil to test believers' faith or fabricated by scientists with an axe to grind against God. Sooner or later creationists' kids are likely to take a science class or sneak off to a natural history museum to see those reassembled dinosaur bones—and begin to wonder.

To provide “biblical” answers to the children’s questions, a group called Answers in Genesis constructed the \$27 million Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky (just west of the Cincinnati airport), to present its version of the unfolding of creation. Creationists can now bring their kids to their own state-of-the-art museum—with computer-generated effects and life-size displays—where they can gawk at dinosaur bones and hear about how the Tyrannosaurus fits into a literalistic biblical worldview.

These are some serious fundamentalists—“young earth” creationists who insist that creation took place in six 24-hour days about 6,000 years ago. To them, “old earth” creationists, who also reject Darwin but argue that a “day” in Genesis could be a symbol for millions of years, are theological wimps. As for advocates of “intelligent design”—the media-savvy group that has brought its ideas to school boards and courtrooms—they aren’t even worth a mention by AiG, which makes abundant references to Darwin himself at the museum in the course of doling out ammunition with which to attack him.

The first exhibit that one sees at the Creation Museum takes on Darwin on his home field: the Galapagos Islands. The variety of species of finches Darwin discovered in the islands was a key piece in his argument for natural selection. “Scientists are puzzled that there is such a variety of finches,” the exhibit notes, and “the Bible

provides an explanation.” God (in Genesis) commands creatures to “multiply upon the earth.” An exquisite collection of colorful birds flits and chirps about the exhibit, confirming the truth of God’s word. Fossils of dragonflies, wasps and mushrooms are also displayed to show that they haven’t changed at all over the years—they look like what’s in your backyard. The display on the chameleon takes a page (unattributed) from the advocates of ID, arguing that the animal’s eyes are irreducibly complex and couldn’t have evolved, since multiple parts would have to be fully functioning for them to work at all.

The makers of the Creation Museum have cleverly integrated staples of evolutionary theory into their own narrative. Dinosaurs are not only acknowledged but shown frolicking with Adam and Eve and the other animals in the Garden of Eden. One dinosaur is shown in remarkably lifelike form eating a pineapple (according to this narrative, there was no carnivorism until the Fall). You may have heard that dinosaurs died out some 65 million years ago, but really they were created with the rest of the animals in 4004 BC. Where did they go? The answer (in Genesis, of course) is: they died in the Flood.

Not all of them died, however. Noah took two of “each kind” of animal into the ark, so there were dinosaurs aboard. But the enormous geographical change brought on by the flood destroyed most of their habitat, so most died off soon afterward.

The museum is liberally peppered with signs challenging skeptics’ views of the Bible. If Cain and Abel were Adam and Eve’s only sons, whom did they marry? Their sisters, we are told—and that was OK, because genetic mutations had not had time to emerge. Occasionally the museum takes an impressive midrashic approach to the text, as when Adam and Eve’s slaying of animals to make skins to cover themselves is seen as a hint of the sacrifices to come to repair their sin. That could preach.

AiG cites the Flood to try to refute multiple elements of evolutionary theory. The Ice Age, for example, happened because of the enormous evaporation after the Flood. The movement of the continents likewise took place because the geological tumult of the Flood allowed land masses to move with relative ease. The evidence? Check out the terrain around Mount St. Helens. That volcano’s eruption moved seven cubic miles of sand within minutes, and cut canyons in soft rock within years. Couldn’t a worldwide flood do that and more—such as move continents and cut the Grand Canyon? The Flood also explains geographical oddities—why there is sand from the Appalachian Mountains in the Grand Canyon, for example.

But how did all those animals fit inside the ark? The museum answers this question with an enormous display of a ship built to biblical specifications (the display is purported to be a fraction of the size of the actual ship). It's still not clear how a Tyrannosaurus would fit inside and leave room for the rhinos, but never mind. A computer re-creation shows the ark bobbing about above mountains. The exhibit is agnostic, however, about where the ark landed—it may or may not have been on Mount Ararat in what today is Turkey.

The Creation Museum does not merely offer grand-scale models. There is also a nod to astronomy in the form of the Stargazer's Planetarium, outside of which is displayed the planetarium projector that reportedly was used to train the Mercury astronauts in 1956. A crackly, mission-control voice reads the opening lines of Genesis, and the dome above flashes with simulated starlight.

The geocentric universe against which Galileo fought has been replaced with a gloriously vast one with no center. Our own solar system is some 6 billion cubic miles in size, with space for 4,000 more such cubes between us and the nearest star system, Alpha Centauri. There are billions of these in our galaxy, and billions more galaxies. The presentation acknowledges that it has some explaining to do here: how could light from these faraway stars travel to us if the universe is only 6,000 years old? The answer has something to do with gravitational fields.

On to the Special Effects Theater, where a film titled *Men in White* features two angels speaking to a forlorn girl gazing at the stars. She fears she'll be thought stupid if she disagrees with the theory of evolution. One problem for her is evidence for the age of the earth. "But radio isotope dating comes with a host of unproven assumptions!" the angels tell her. The girl's other problem? Dinosaurs. The Flood is again invoked, and seats rumble and water sprays as the ark bobs on the screen up front (I took two or three squirts to the face before I was able to block the spray nozzle in front of me).

The angels are shown sitting in a public school classroom presided over by a nerdy, arrogant teacher who mindlessly chants phrases like "separation of church and state." The angels respond with wisecracks and not-so-innocent questions, such as, "Well, if all agree the sea is getting somewhat saltier every year, why, after billions of years, isn't the sea all salt?" The teacher is flummoxed, and returns to her formulae. "There is no God in the universe!" she exclaims. Creationists are presented as open-minded questioners and public school teachers as doctrinaire

fools.

The school being mocked in this scene is named Enlightenment High School—which is ironic, since the museum manifests great trust in the Enlightenment. It is, after all, creation *science* that is presented as superior to Darwinian theory. The scientists in the videos bandy their academic credentials: “Ph.D. in astrophysics,” or “Ph.D. in molecular biology.” (Sometimes the credentials are a bit loose, as in “former trainer for Microsoft” or “former air traffic controller.”) An astronomy expert explains that he draws on the same data as his secular colleagues, but arrives at different conclusions because “I start from the assumption of biblical truth and they do not.”

One video, running alongside the display of a particular animal, intones, “The origin of such complexity is a mystery to scientists. But it makes perfect sense in a biblical worldview.” Note that the word *mystery* is a bad word—something a foolish Darwinian would fall for—whereas the mystery is readily solved in this biblio-scientific world.

The entire enterprise is very American, calling to mind other “scientific” revolts against elitist views—on global warming, say, or the dangers of tobacco. The battle is presented as a case of free inquiry against tyrannical opponents.

As interesting as the exhibits are, its visitors are almost more so. I arrive late in the morning on a weekday expecting the museum to be relatively empty. But it’s packed. A bumper sticker on an enormous passenger van in the parking lot gives me a clue: “Warning: Unsocialized Homeschoolers Aboard.”

These homeschooling families tend to be large: eight children here, nine there, a dozen over there, each set of siblings accompanied by their parents. A few curious visitors walk in unawares. One asks the ticket-seller whether the museum “integrates the Bible and Darwin.” The clerk replies, “It’s more like the Bible *versus* Darwin” and then leads the visitor inside.

This museum must have the world’s nicest volunteers. They all beam at you, eager to be helpful, trained for the occasional visitor who wants to argue about paleontology. Apparently there are church ladies by the boatload who are eager to work at the museum.

Every section of the museum ends with a presentation of the gospel and an invitation to pray the “sinner’s prayer” and commit oneself to the faith. The

planetarium concludes its exposition with a description of God's coming to earth and dying for us. Ditto the special-effects theater. A video midway through the tour consists only of a reading of biblical verses, set to a starry background that swooshes from the screen into the viewer's face like the opening credits of *Superman*.

The final stop is the Last Adam Theater, which tells the story of Jesus' sacrifice and concludes with another altar call. The theater is adjacent to a small chapel, where more volunteers are eager to pray with you. You may have thought you were going to get more anti-Darwinist propaganda, but actually you're getting the opportunity to be saved.

One has to admire the consistent logic of the AiG worldview. The museum takes the visitor from the dawn of time, past the pineapple-eating Velociraptor and a tastfully concealed Eve to a truly terrifying serpent. The next room comes at you with images of genocide, pain in childbearing, African children with swollen bellies, a mushroom cloud, a cemetery and a black slave with a scarred back. "This room is very depressing," one woman whispered behind me. "And very honest," her friend replied. The Fall changed everything, and it explains why there is such suffering in the world.

The Tower of Babel explains the world's many religions and even explains Darwin: "All religions have followed their example, inventing myths to replace God's account of creation and Noah's flood."

The lily pads of history on which this narrative leaps are far apart. It moves from Genesis 1-11 to Jesus and then to the Reformers. Israel's calling and the first 15 centuries of the church are hardly mentioned.

Liberal Christians turn out to play an important role in the creationists' worldview. A timeline describes the declension from the biblicism of Martin Luther and John Calvin to the thought of Descartes, Francis Bacon, Galileo, Darwin and Charles Hodge (he may be an archconservative to most Presbyterians, but his acceptance of Darwinism lands him in the hall of shame here) to a certain Charles Templeton, who once traveled with Billy Graham but unfortunately accepted evolution and ended up writing the atheist tract *Farewell to God*.

Later we see the exterior of a church with shattered stained glass and a wrecking ball out front. The preacher inside is spouting liberal platitudes: "We know more than

the Bible did about science,” “We can’t make an idol of scripture,” and “We have to see beyond the letter to the meaning!” The parishioners squirm with boredom. A sign beside the wrecking ball quotes an official of the Church of England as saying that at current rates of membership loss, the church in the United Kingdom will be dead and buried within a generation. The message could not be clearer: if you accept anything less than the young-earth creationist view, sooner or later your church will die and you will no doubt become an atheist.

On the other hand, if you accept the biblical worldview, things might improve. Insistence on biblical science is just a first step toward renewing the church generally: “This will have a ripple effect as the church wakes up to biblical authority on any number of other issues.”

Like any good museum, the Creation Museum has a gift shop near the exit. One item for sale was an enormous sculpture of St. George and the dragon. Why, I wondered, is a fundamentalist museum paying homage to a medieval Catholic legend?

I decided to head back to a part of the museum I’d skipped: the Dragon Theater. It tackles—again—the question of dinosaurs. (Someone at AiG must have listened to the pedagogues who say that no one learns except through repetition.) Why doesn’t the Bible mention dinosaurs if they coexisted with humans in the time of Genesis? Well, it does. Read Job 40. The behemoth mentioned there is not an elephant or a hippo; verse 17 says “his tail sways like a cedar.” Obviously, Job is describing dinosaurs here. And though their habitat was damaged by the Flood, the sauropods that made it onto the ark managed to live, and they show up in medieval tales of battles with dragons (Job 41:21 says of the Leviathan that “flames dart from his mouth”). One expert opines that the few dinosaurs remaining after the Flood were hunted by knights seeking to prove their valor and save their damsels. Once again, the biblical worldview is confirmed, human reasoning is dethroned, and the altar call is repeated.

Clearly, the museum’s creationists are not unintelligent people. They take knowledge that their fundy forebears mocked—about dinosaurs, the Ice Age and so on—and weave it into their biblical worldview. Their intellectual gymnastics are impressive to watch. And these are fundies with funds: \$27 million buys some nice limestone, pyrotechnics, and a botanical garden with a Loch Ness Monster look-alike protruding from the lake.

How does young-earth creationism make sense to intelligent, well-meaning people? Well, much of any religion appears counterfactual. After all, preachers in liberal churches proclaim that a Jewish peasant executed by an empire is the God who rules the cosmos, and that we should love our enemies and that the poor are blessed. If you can believe that stuff, you can believe a lot.

But AiG's worldview is impossible to sustain. The *Men in White* angels lampoon the science class's view of evolution, calling it the "goo to you" approach because they want to speak of humans as souls made in the image of God. They ignore the fact that—as the process of human reproduction suggests—humans do begin as goo and in a sense remain goo. That is, they remain part of the animal world even as they reflect the image of God. In its horror at the evolutionists' claim that humans are animals, AiG forgets that for much of Christian history, theologians heartily agreed that humans are animals—"dependent rational animals" is how Aquinas described us.

A further theological problem for AiG is that it seems to think that the move away from its "biblical worldview" explains all wars and suffering—as if the Fall has to do with the loss of a worldview, not the human condition of sin.

Reconciling Christian claims about God, creation and humanity with the findings of Darwin and his successors is an important and daunting task, one that mainline theology has still not satisfactorily accomplished. AiG can hardly be faulted for attempting the task, though its effort is a spectacular failure.