How it all began

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

We'd have supposed there were already enough mind-boggling questions bouncing around, what with the surge in Iraq, a crisis of global warming and what to do about all those uninvited immigrants in our midst.

But no. Go back a few millenninia. Adam and Eve are the headliners in a huge new Disneyland-type museum across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, reviving questions that have challenged us, on and off, for most of the past century: Were Earth and life as we know it fashioned in just six days, as related in the Book of Genesis? Or does reason tell us to accept an overwhelming judgment of science that our planet, and we who occupy it, stem from an evolving process that began millions, maybe billions, of years ago?

The Supreme Court thought it had resolved any legal aspects of that conundrum a quarter-century ago when it ruled that religious fundamentalists, while free to believe what they please, may not compel public schools to teach "creationism" as science. Yet a surprising number of school districts, and even certain state boards of education (inspired, possibly, by what they deem a higher authority than our earthly courts), continue to press for a literal acceptance of Genesis.

They would require that school curricula validate such Old Testament highlights as a troublemaking serpent in the Garden of Eden, the timely parting of Red Sea waters as a convenience to fleeing Israelites - even Joshua's seemingly incredible feat of causing the sun to stand still for "about a whole day." (With no intent to seem contentious, we now know this would have meant Earth itself stopped revolving upon Joshua's command.)

Many creationists have tempered their claims in recent years to allow for what they choose to call "intelligent design" - hoping, some suspect, to acquire scientific status for their side of the argument. They'll concede that Earth's origins probably go back more than the 6,000 years roughly accounted for in the biblical version. But they steadfastly reject the idea that mankind has evolved from a lesser form of life.

As for the true believers - the kind whose 60,000-square-foot, $27 million Creation Museum opened in Petersburg, Ky., on Memorial Day - they aren't giving an inch. On a par with "Pirates of the Caribbean" for excitement, their display accepts the biblical version of creation as a six-day project capped by a seventh day of rest still honored as the Sabbath. No detail is thought open to challenge - not even Adam's subsequent forfeiture of a spare rib to create the first woman. And all of this supposedly happened not much earlier than around 4000 B.C.

Their spectacular new showplace down Kentucky way seems certain to become the epicenter of a renewed campaign to bury nearly 150 years of evolutionary scholarship spawned by the writings of Charles Darwin. The museum (adult admission, $19.95) offers an Old Testament version of creation as a spectacle said to match all but a handful of America's high-tech theme parks. Gigantic dioramas imagine a time when Earth's

earliest human occupants shared what seems to have been a frightening venue with dinosaurs. Forty feet long, the museum's dinosaurs move menacingly in or near the Garden of Eden - a depiction that ignores scientific conclusions that dinosaurs were rendered extinct perhaps 65 million years earlier.

Strolling on, visitors come to a representation of Arizona's Grand Canyon. "Have you ever wondered where canyons come from?" asks the video on a flat-screen TV. The Grand Canyon, viewers are asked to believe, was not carved through countless ages by the Colorado River, but by a momentary rush of water during the great flood described in the sixth chapter of Genesis. (With Noah's Ark, remember?)

Having advertised for workers in recent weeks, museum management reportedly required that applicants sign a "statement of faith" attesting to their belief in biblical history precisely as written. This, we may be sure, presented no great problem. Newsweek polling not long ago found creationism "closest to the beliefs" held by fully 48 percent of Americans.

As literature, the familiar cadence in the Book of Genesis stands alone:

In the beginning God created the heaven and earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light ....

Clearly, this work belongs in every school curriculum. But in the English Department, nowhere near biological sciences.

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