

## Introduction

We spoke to Noah about [the Dinosaur] . . . he confessed that in the matter of stocking the Ark the stipulations had not been carried out with absolute strictness—that is, in minor details, unessentials. He said the boys were to blame for this—the boys mainly, his own fatherly indulgence partly. They were in the giddy heyday of their youth at the time, the happy springtime of life, their hundred years sat upon them lightly, and—well, he had been a boy himself, and he had not the heart to be too exacting with them.<sup>1</sup>

—Mark Twain, “Adam’s Soliloquy”

Even Mark Twain, in signature style, grappled with the Genesis story of Noah, the Flood, the ark, and the animals. Is this a story of righteous faith or sinful judgment, revelation or delusion? What is at stake in reading Genesis 6 through 9 as allegorical myth or literal history? Whatever your answer, there is no mistaking that this biblical story captivates the modern imagination.

Artistic renderings of Noah’s ark date to as early as the fourth century on the walls of Saint Peter’s tomb in Italy, instigating a long tradition “in paintings and sculpture.”<sup>2</sup> These images have thrived alongside imaginings of plausibility. As early as the fifteenth century, a Spanish bishop sought to explain how Noah and family accomplished the unenviable task of disposing with all the animal waste.<sup>3</sup> German polymath Athanasius Kircher elaborated on this inquiry in the seventeenth century, calculating “in exhaustive detail” the number of stalls, beasts, snakes, and birds and “the logistics of stabling, feeding, and cleaning the animals.”<sup>4</sup> Such exercises in scriptural historicity helped birth modern geologic science in the eighteenth century, as some defended and others refuted why a universal flood explains everything, anything, or nothing about the empirical realities of our natural world.<sup>5</sup>

The details and imagery of the Genesis story are equally pervasive in popular culture. They are fodder for lyricists, from John Prine (“I got kicked off Noah’s ark / I turn my cheek to unkind remarks / There was two of everything but one of me”) to Talib Kweli (“Without the smoke in my lungs I started dreaming again / I dreamed of candy-coated cars and panties that go with bras / Hurricanes named Sandy, I’m floating on Noah’s ark”).<sup>6</sup> It is the basis for narrative films, from the romantic melodrama *Noah’s Ark* (1928) to the comedy *Evan Almighty* (2007) and the dramatic blockbuster *Noah* (2014). It is the namesake for “America’s largest water park” in the Wisconsin Dells and for countless animal shelters and hospitals, as well as a staple inspiration for school and churchyard play sets. Since at least the 1700s, ark-themed toy sets for children have been popular both in commercial contexts and in Sunday school classrooms.

Historians and archaeologists regularly revisit debates about local and global flood legends.<sup>7</sup> Compelled by the quest for historical evidence, pious and curious adventurers launch expeditions to discover physical remains of the ark in Turkey’s Mount Ararat region. This activity was sparked in the 1940s, when a Seventh-Day Adventist periodical published the first story reporting an ark sighting.<sup>8</sup> *In Search of Noah’s Ark*, a fundamentalist Christian documentary claiming to track the ark’s discovery, was among the highest-grossing films of 1976. Other discoveries were claimed in subsequent years. The Wyatt Archaeological Museum—a three-room exhibit hall located sixty miles south of Nashville, Tennessee—details an expedition and displays replicas of ark artifacts. No actual ark discovery has been widely accepted (even among fundamentalists), but the search continues. In 2012 former *Baywatch* star Donna D’Errico launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund her own Ararat expedition.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to Kircher, Twain, D’Errico, and countless others, the Genesis account of Noah’s ark is among the most recognizable scriptural stories in our cultural repertoire. The historicity of Noah’s ark has been especially important in the development of modern creationism. In 1902 a Seventh-Day Adventist teacher, George McReady Price, began popularizing the idea that only a literal reading of Genesis could explain the world’s geologic facts and mysteries.<sup>10</sup> *The Genesis Flood* (1961), a book that launched the creationist movement that continues today, fused

Price's arguments with fundamentalist Protestant theology. Creationists seized on Noah's ark as a key symbol for their biblical literalism and the key event for their hermeneutic of "flood geology." In doing so, they invoked not an obscure tale with no public resonance but a story that has enchanted for millennia.

This book is an anthropological study of a dramatic new addition to the lore of Noah's ark, with its centerpiece the to-scale re-creation of the ark as a creationist theme park in the U.S. state of Kentucky. The primary concern is how this form of religious publicity mobilizes the strategies and imperatives of modern entertainment to claim cultural legitimacy and authority.

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On May 28, 2007, the Creation Museum opened in northern Kentucky, about twenty miles southwest of downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. It was created by Answers in Genesis, a fundamentalist Christian ministry that teaches a literalist view of scripture and a wholesale rejection of evolutionary science. Kentucky's Creation Museum is not the first of its kind. There are dozens of others in the United States and other nations, but most—like the Wyatt Archaeology Museum—have been small, low-budget attractions that generate little public attention. At a cost of \$30 million, the Creation Museum has sought to play in a different league. By mid-2015 more than 2 million visitors had been to the museum, establishing it as the public face of contemporary creationism.<sup>11</sup>

Fundamentalists have been vying for cultural authority in American public life for more than a century. They have done so in part by charging evolutionary science as incongruent with a biblical literalist worldview, and therefore morally and spiritually destructive. By 1899, mainstream science was celebrating Darwinian evolution, and a few years later, in 1904, William Jennings Bryan made his first public anti-evolution speech.<sup>12</sup> In 1925, the famous revivalist preacher Billy Sunday equated evolution with Nazism during a Memphis, Tennessee campaign that attracted more than 200,000 people. Later that year, the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, generated a record-setting 2 million telegraph words of media chatter.<sup>13</sup> Six decades later, in 1981, twenty state legislatures introduced education bills requiring "equal time" for evolutionary

science and creationism in public school science classrooms. In 2005, split state decisions marked a continuing social and ideological division. The Kansas school board voted that teaching evolution in public schools required an “only a theory” disclaimer, while a U.S. district court in Pennsylvania ruled that teaching “intelligent design” in public schools was unconstitutional.

From state and federal court rulings to national magazine covers, presidential stump speeches, prime-time cable news debates, documentary films, and best-selling books, fundamentalist controversies occupy a fixed place in our public sphere. Kentucky’s Creation Museum is a fundamentalist victory, a brick-and-mortar claim to public legitimacy, and a refusal to be dismissed as a religious sideshow.

On December 1, 2010, Answers in Genesis announced its next major project—more expensive, more ambitious. Ark Encounter was announced as a “full-scale Noah’s Ark tourist attraction,” a creationist theme park with a price tag exceeding \$150 million.<sup>14</sup> Set on 800 acres of Kentucky rolling hills—directly off Interstate 75 halfway between Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lexington, Kentucky—Ark Encounter opened to the public on July 7, 2016. The centerpiece of the park is a re-creation of Noah’s ark, built to creationist specification from the text of Genesis 6 through 9. The ark stands 51 feet tall, 85 feet wide, and 510 feet long, contains nearly 4 million board feet of timber, and features more than 100,000 square feet of themed exhibit space. Ark Encounter expands the cultural and political work of the Creation Museum: to edify and embolden committed creationists, to convert non-Christians to Christianity and noncreationists to creationism, and to advance fundamentalism’s legitimacy in the public sphere.

This book examines Ark Encounter as a form of fundamentalist Christian public culture. In the chapters to come, I will explore how a creationist theme park exemplifies the global phenomenon of materializing the Bible (i.e., transforming written scripture into an experiential, choreographed environment), the creative labor that produced the park, and the experiential possibilities afforded on board the re-created ark. The organizing argument is that Ark Encounter’s ambitions of religious education, conversion, and publicity are structured by the strategies and imperatives of modern entertainment. This book is not a study of creationism per se; excellent histories and ethnographies already do that work.<sup>15</sup> But, espe-

cially for uninitiated readers, a brief primer will help contextualize the analysis of Ark Encounter as fundamentalist public culture.

## Creationism: A Primer

### *Defining*

The term “creationist” is used by and for an assortment of cultural identities, from intelligent design advocates who have no stake in biblical literalism to liberal Protestants who believe in a divinely orchestrated evolutionary process.<sup>16</sup> This book uses “creationist” and “creationism” more narrowly, referencing a Protestant fundamentalist movement defined by four commitments:<sup>17</sup>

1. The Bible is the perfect, inerrant “Word of God,” wholly authoritative over any other source on all matters—moral, cosmological, historical, scientific, and theological. Creationists promote “biblical literalism,” a textual ideology and interpretive style that prizes the historicity of scripture.<sup>18</sup>
2. A literal reading of Genesis is theologically pivotal for the veracity of Christianity. Read literally, Genesis teaches that human beings are a special creation “made in God’s image,” foreclosing any possibility that humans evolved from a primate ancestor. God created the universe in its current form roughly 6,000 years ago, including the Earth, human beings, and the basic skeleton of earth’s biodiversity. In turn, humans must have coexisted with every animal for which there is fossil evidence, including dinosaurs.
3. A universal flood killing all but eight people, detailed in Genesis 6 through 9, was a real historical event with geologic and biological implications. This literal Flood explains natural formations throughout the world (e.g., Arizona’s Grand Canyon formed rapidly as a result of floodwaters receding in the days of Noah, not gradually over time) and archaeological discoveries (e.g., the global distribution of fossils). Biologically, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of our global human population can be traced to the ark’s eight passengers: Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives.
4. Darwinian evolution instigated a total attack on the Bible’s absolute authority. Evolutionary theory is inherently corrupting to

individuals and society, the root cause of numerous civic, spiritual, and moral problems. The destructive agenda of evolution operates conspiratorially, and creationists are especially equipped to discern the real truth.<sup>19</sup> While waiting for the Second Coming of Christ, fundamentalists must heal the world by defeating evolution and teaching creationism.

These commitments make clear that creationism exceeds a set of doctrinal beliefs. Like all religious systems, creationism must be lived: “embedded in wider conceptions and social relations of the believing subject—a subject whose commitment to the faith is an ongoing process.”<sup>20</sup> Public projects like the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter enliven and bolster this ongoing process. They do so by mobilizing the power of the material and mediated nature of believing. As the religion scholar David Morgan writes, belief “is not simply assent to dogmatic principles or creedal positions, but also the embodied or material practices that enact belonging to the group.”<sup>21</sup> One aim of this book is to rescue categories such as *literalism* from a purely textual understanding and to explore how ideologies of scripture are re-created through material processes, such as the choreography of religious space and the testimony of the senses.

### *Counting Creationists*

How many Americans adhere to creationism?<sup>22</sup> This is an empirical question, but its asking is politically charged. Communities with opposing ideologies (both pro-creationist and anticreationist) seize on whatever answer emerges as baffling or promising, dangerous or hopeful, proof of scientific illiteracy or proof of God moving in the world.

National Gallup polls are a widely cited source for answering this question. On eleven occasions between 1982 and 2012, Gallup collected survey data from a representative sample of Americans regarding their beliefs about human origins.<sup>23</sup> The question reads as follows:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings? 1) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God

guided this process; 2) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process; 3) God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.

In 1982, 44 percent of respondents chose the third option. This option peaked at 47 percent twice, in 1993 and 1999, and reached as low as 40 percent in 2011, rising back to 46 percent in 2012. These results are often treated as a measure for Answers in Genesis–style creationism, but this association is misleading. Gallup’s question focuses only on the human species as a special creation of God, which is only one of creationism’s interlaced commitments.

A far more accurate measure was detailed by the National Study of Religion and Human Origins (2014). Using a more sophisticated survey instrument, this study found that roughly 8 percent of Americans definitively identify themselves as Answers in Genesis–style creationists.<sup>24</sup> This number grows to 22 percent if we count respondents who affirm with certainty a literal Genesis but are uncertain about the timeline of creation.<sup>25</sup> Put differently, roughly 26 million Americans might visit the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter as committed adherents looking to be educated and edified, while an additional 45 million might visit to earnestly examine their commitments.

### *History*

The biblical chronology that anchors creationism dates to 1650 and James Ussher, a bishop in the Anglican Church of Ireland. But the modern creationist movement’s more direct roots trace to Seventh-Day Adventism.<sup>26</sup> In 1864, Ellen White, the denomination’s founding prophetess, published a literalist account of the six days of creation and Noah’s Flood, claiming her account was directly revealed from God. George McCready Price, one of White’s disciples, popularized her literal revelation in several books beginning in 1902. In the 1930s and 1940s, several national organizations formed to debate the scientific and theological bases of creationist claims, but a public creation–evolution controversy “had lapsed into near silence.”<sup>27</sup> Still, the public ambitions of creationists were not completely lost during this time. For example, the Moody

Institute of Science, a project of Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, was founded in 1945. Based in Los Angeles, the Institute of Science produced science education films from a "biblical" standpoint. Perhaps the institute's crowning achievement was when the U.S. Air Force required mandatory viewing of several of its films in 1949.<sup>28</sup>

The space race and America's structural investment in scientific progress helped to galvanize the creationist movement that thrives today. After the Sputnik launch in 1957, the U.S. Congress authorized "millions of federal dollars to support scientific research and training," including a \$100 million National Science Foundation program in 1958 to reform the public school science curriculum.<sup>29</sup> This sharpened a double-edged sword in American public life. It "marked a high point in the prestige of science considered as a social model and a delivery system of social betterment" but also a peak in populist "suspicion, mistrust, and misunderstanding" of scientific authority.<sup>30</sup>

In this milieu of populist suspicion two men—John Whitcomb (a conservative Protestant theologian) and Henry Morris (a hydraulic engineer with a doctorate from the University of Minnesota)—published *The Genesis Flood* in 1961. This book launched the modern creationist movement and the moniker of "creation science." A series of landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s (e.g., outlawing prayer in public schools; barring compulsory Bible reading in public school classrooms; authorizing the teaching of evolutionary science in public schools) further galvanized creationists. They viewed these decisions as evidence of a "secular" conspiracy to spread the moral and spiritual plague of evolution.

In 1972, Henry Morris founded the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) in a northeast suburb of San Diego. ICR was a creation science epicenter, designed to employ researchers, produce publications, host conferences, and build a creation museum.<sup>31</sup> Answers in Genesis (AiG) was founded in 1994, the vision of three former ICR employees. One of the founders explained to me at the outset of my research that AiG began as "a populist ministry," designed to complement ICR's more "technical" character.<sup>32</sup> The founders chose Kentucky with a populist, pragmatic logic of proximity: "almost 2/3 of America's population lives within 650 miles" of the Creation Museum.<sup>33</sup> This same explanation was marshaled at the December 2010 press conference announcing Ark En-

counter. Reprising the spirit of the Moody science films, AiG's ambition is to reach the broadest possible public with its religious publicity.

## Controversy

Ark Encounter sparked immediate controversy upon its announcement. The debate began with the project's application for a tax incentive program under the Kentucky Board of Tourism. The program is a performance-based rebate of the park's sales tax. If the park generates a state-declared minimum of revenue in its opening years, it will receive a state-declared percentage of already-paid taxes. This amount was initially estimated to be \$18 million over the first ten years.

The application for the tax rebate was given preliminary approval, resulting in charges that this approval was unconstitutional. Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom from Religion Foundation both outlined plans to prosecute the State of Kentucky for violating the First Amendment establishment clause if the application received final approval. Their reasoning was that any for-profit entity that successfully applies for this tax incentive program is subject to all state regulations, including legal prohibitions on discriminatory employment. In June 2015, the State of Kentucky denied Ark Encounter's application because the park was using an Answers in Genesis–authored hiring statement that required employees to sign a fundamentalist statement of faith. In response, Ark Encounter officials sued the state for violating their First Amendment rights of free exercise. By January 2016, the court had ruled that AiG's hiring policy was constitutional, and Ark Encounter was once again approved for the rebate. Following its first year of operation, Ark Encounter received \$1.8 million in tax rebates.

Eighteen million dollars over ten years is a substantial amount of money to gain or lose, but it was never the financial mechanism that would enable Ark Encounter to open or prevent it from doing so. Grant County, the location of the park, helped by approving subsidies and incentives. The capital to purchase the 800 acres, secure the necessary building permits, and construct the park was privately generated by Ark Encounter and Answers in Genesis. When the project was announced in December 2010, the advertised opening date was “spring 2014.”<sup>34</sup> But fund-raising proceeded much slower than the ministry anticipated.

By early 2012, the ministry had stopped advertising an opening date and had decided to open the park in multiple phases, scaling back the planned exhibits for the initial phase.

On February 27, 2014, Ark Encounter announced that it had secured the necessary funding to proceed with construction. Two years of uncertainty about when (and sometimes *if*) this creationist theme park would successfully open finally ended. The fund-raising mechanism that moved the project forward was a bond program in which individuals and organizations could purchase Ark Encounter investment shares. If the project does well financially, then investors will increase their money; if not, they will lose whatever they purchased. Newspaper and magazine articles, op-ed columns, and popular blogs speculated about whether a highly publicized and widely viewed debate in early February 2014 between Ken Ham (Answers in Genesis cofounder and Bill Nye (evolutionary science celebrity and public educator) jump-started creationists to assume the financial risk of investment.<sup>35</sup>

The official groundbreaking for Ark Encounter occurred six months later, in August 2014. The timing of construction was always closely managed by the ministry due to building permit regulations. Once ground was officially broken, Ark Encounter was on a two-year clock. If not completed in this time, construction would be legally halted until all permits could be renewed (an expensive and lengthy process). Starting construction without all the finances in order would be bad business, but the decision to wait also made sense in terms of religious publicity. An indefinite delay midconstruction would not just be embarrassing; it would delegitimize AiG's ongoing effort to bolster the reputation of creationism. Once Ark Encounter's future became more certain, the debates about tax incentives were revived. With every legal challenge, Answers in Genesis fed its publicity machine, voicing established fundamentalist narratives about "biblical authority" being under siege by "secular evolutionists."

## Conclusion

From state tourism incentives to legal challenges, widely circulated debates, and international media coverage, Ark Encounter emboldens and enlivens creationism. This book approaches the creationist theme

park as a form of public culture seeking to bolster fundamentalism's cultural legitimacy. Throughout this book, I explore how Ark Encounter engages this process of vying for public trust.

Scholarly treatments of creationism range from sympathetic to polemical, but almost without exception they keep creationism fixed within one analytical frame: religion-science. No doubt, this is an important frame. There are significant consequences of cultivating an ever-refined anthropological understanding of how fundamentalist Christians appropriate the symbolic and material infrastructures of science. But it is not the only frame available to us and not the only kind of work we can do.

The chapters to come recalibrate the analytical focus by placing creationism within a different frame: religion-entertainment. For some this approach will be revealing; for others it will be frustrating. To non-creationist readers: consider who else creationists might be other than people who fail to reckon with the authoritative facts of modern science. Participate in what anthropology does best: rip a hole in the fabric of what you know, or suppose you know, about this religious movement. What can we learn from the figure of the creative creationist that we cannot learn from the creation scientist? To creationist readers: be reflexive. Consider how your theology and your use of scripture are wedded to other cultural systems. How do these ties bind you to other Christians and to the power of modern entertainment? To all readers: my wager as an anthropologist is that creationism and fundamentalist public culture will become more legible if we can nurture multiple frames of analysis.