

# Flood is in the air, or when metaphor becomes reality

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines three historical constellations in which natural history museums engaged—either by avoiding or by literally constructing—the metaphorical link to Noah's Ark. First, it explores Richard Owen's (1804–1892) mid-nineteenth-century plans for a metropolitan natural history museum in London. Second, it analyzes the post–World War II use of the ark as a metaphor for the natural history museum. Third, it considers creationist museums that abandon metaphor altogether, presenting the Biblical Flood as a historical reality and a foundational principle of Earth's history. In particular, the essay compares creationist museums recently established in South America by the Seventh-day Adventist Church with two contemporary American venues: the Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum, both founded in the early twenty-first century in Kentucky, USA. Promoted by Young Earth creationists, these projects transform the ark-museum metaphor into a literal display affirming the historicity of the Book of Genesis.

Key words:

creationist museums in the Americas, ark-museum metaphor, Biblical Flood, Richard Owen.

## RIASSUNTO

*Il Diluvio è nell'aria, ovvero quando la metafora diventa realtà*

*Questo saggio presenta tre casi nella storia dei musei di storia naturale in cui i legami con l'arca di Noè sono stati o evitati o letteralmente costruiti: i progetti di Richard Owen (1804-1892) per un museo metropolitano di storia naturale nella Londra della metà del XIX secolo, l'uso, nel secondo dopoguerra, dell'arca come metafora per il museo di storia naturale, e, infine, i musei creazionisti dedicati all'arca (in cui la metafora viene abbandonata) e la realtà storica del Diluvio biblico come principio fondante della storia della Terra. In particolare, il saggio mette a confronto i musei creazionisti recentemente istituiti in Sud America dalla Chiesa Adventista del Settimo Giorno con due sedi statunitensi contemporanee: l'Ark Encounter e il Creation Museum, fondati all'inizio del XXI secolo nel Kentucky (USA), e promossi dai creazionisti della Terra Giovane, nei quali la metafora arca-museo diventa una rappresentazione letterale della storicità del Libro della Genesi.*

Parole chiave:

*musei creazionisti nelle Americhe, metafora arca-museo, Diluvio biblico, Richard Owen.*

## INTRODUCTION: NOAH'S ARK AND CONTEMPORARY MUSEOGRAPHY

Historiography tends to portray museums as solid and powerful structures characterized by permanence, stability, continuity, and progress such as in the definition coined by the International Council of Museums, which considers the museum a permanent institution (see website 1). Furthermore, museums are seen as safe carriers of biological diversity into the future, an image that shapes new museum narratives and could be understood as a by-product of the so-called endangerment sensibility (Vidal & Dias, 2015). In a world menaced by destruction, the museum became an ark with a transcendental goal, the repository of natural samples of the past and the guarantors of the future of life, in the same way that seed and cryo-banks facilities provide a mechanism for the long-term survival of currently endangered plants. However, this metaphor not only fails to rec-

ognize the actual perishability of museums but also neglects the nineteenth-century tradition that avoided all references to the Ark and the Flood.

This essay does not track the genealogy of the comparison between the museum and the biblical Ark (see Breidbach & Ghiselin, 2006, and the Exhibition Catalogue “The Garden, The Ark, The Tower, The Temple: biblical metaphors of knowledge in early modern Europe” at website 2): it rather evokes three constellations in the history of modern natural history museums where these links were either avoided or literally constructed. First, the plans of Richard Owen (1804-1892) for a metropolitan museum of natural history in mid-nineteenth century London, where there is no single mention of the Ark; second, the post-World War II use of the Ark as metaphor; and third, the contemporary creationist facilities, where the Ark “metaphor” was abandoned in favour of using the museum to argue for the historical reality of the Biblical Flood and Noah's Ark. This essay—which is

based on the literature on natural history museums, museum visits and the information provided by the media and creationist museums' webpages—argues that either as an artefact which originated in a historical/geological event or as a metaphoric tool to face the menaces challenging the future of our planet, the Ark seems to play misleading and challenging roles in museum narratives.

## NEGLECTED AND REFLOATED ARKS

In 1881, the National Museum of Natural History opened in South Kensington, London following the long endeavors of Richard Owen who was in charge of the department of the British Museum devoted to this field. Two decades earlier, Owen had started the campaign for a new building (Owen, 1861; Rupke, 1994), presenting an architectural concept that not only could host the three kingdoms of nature but also set forth the extent and variety of God's "creative power" (Owen, 1861: 11). In 1860, Owen, instigated by *The Times*, published "On the Extent and Aims of a National Museum of Natural History", where once again he displayed his taste for English prose and poetry. In this piece, he alluded to John Milton's "Paradise Lost" to evoke mightiness in nature (on this, see Dawson, 2010; Holmes, 2012), such as in this passage of the sixth day of Creation that Owen quoted to refer to the elephants, hippopotamus and crocodiles: "From his mould, Behemoth, biggest born of earth, upheaves his vastness [...] Ambiguous between sea and land, the river-horse, and the scaly-crocodile [...] Not all minims of Nature, some of serpent-kind, wondrous in length and corpulence, involve their snaky folds" (Owen, 1861: 23).

Owen quoted Milton's poetic re-write of Biblical narrative for supporting his main argument: the need of a monumental building that could hold all mammal and bird species existing on Earth. A metropolitan museum in London had to have the capacity to contain and display everything from whales, elephants, giraffes, and rhinoceroses to insects. Furthermore, given the nature of the practice of zoology, as well as age and sex variability in nature, a museum of this magnitude demanded male, female and juvenile specimens of each kind in order to display God's creative power in all its majesty. When Owen requested—as Noah did for the Ark—a pair of animals of each species, again, he invoked Milton and Adam in Paradise in the verses where he surveys his environment and meets the animals of Earth in pairs of two.

Owen, who never fully adhered to Darwin's evolutionary mechanisms, was, however, aware of the different interests held by the potential visitors of the museum (see Rupke, 2024). For that reason, the collections—conceived as a scientific instrument—had to be useful even for the transmutationists. Objects, duly prepared, named and arranged to facilitate

inspection and comparison, were the indispensable instruments in the acquisition and advance of knowledge (Owen, 1861: 2). Variety had to be displayed in all her forms, including the fossil ones, assuring that the Department of Palaeontology was to be located in halls well connected to those assigned to Zoology. Owen, designing the museum, calculated the volume that a metropolitan institution would need to house its collections, taking into consideration the still unknown species, and exhibition space for them (Owen, 1861: 12). To approximate the number of unknown species he took the number of known species in each animal class and calculated the rate at which the number of known species had changed. For instance, in 1855, the number of known and well-described species of mammals was estimated at 2000, but by 1860 the figure had increased to 3500, what would have meant that a museum would have needed several thousands of specimens for having a female, a male and a juvenile of each species. That year, the British Museum possessed 3000 stuffed mammal specimens exemplifying 2000 species, packed very closely and crowding the floor like a herd of cattle: they were useless for the student. In Owen's view if a national natural history museum was going to display the largest specimens of the highest class of animals it demanded appropriate exhibition-space. Moreover, the metropolitan museum had to contain specimens of nineteenth-century endangered species, such as the largest whales. However, in his plea for a new building, where the power of God is mentioned very often, there is no a single comparison of the museum to Noah's Ark, or a direct reference to the Biblical Flood, a topic that his and the previous generation of professional geologists—secular and religious alike—had abandoned but which was still alive in certain circles (Gillispie, 1951; Corsi, 1988; Numbers, 1992, 2006). They were concepts in decline and/or subject to argument, unhelpful or injurious to the new museum's cause.

Owen opted instead for the metaphor of lost paradise, an image, which at the same time conveyed the power of Creation, English poetry and a space with no limits. Neither the Flood nor Noah's Ark belonged to the history of the Earth or the museum. The Ark, after all, was a human construction with limited carrying capacity as well as with a temporary function during a very specific (non-historical) event. The lost paradise metaphor, indeed, is a much stronger metaphor given that it encompasses all non-living species and the currently at-risk species.

In fact, none of the late nineteenth-century museological projects such as the Galleries of Zoology and Paleontology in the Natural History National Museum in Paris, the Museum of Comparative Anatomy at Harvard, the La Plata Museum in Argentina, Rio de Janeiro's National Museum or the National Museum in Washington DC, were designed in reference

to the Ark or to mimic its organizational principles (Winsor, 1991; Blanckaert et al., 1997; Lopes, 1997; Lopes & Podgorny, 2000; Podgorny & Lopes 2008). Even when God was invoked, museums were always an instrument of knowledge and a scientific repository of nature's variation. As Mary Winsor (1991: 145) recalls: Noah's Ark was an image that was rather used by natural history dealers but not by professional scientists.

Avoided in the late 19th century, the image of the natural history museum as an Ark re-emerged in the context of what Vidal and Dias (2015) have described as the endangerment sensibility. In that context, natural history facilities were transformed metaphorically into the space where the samples of current and past biodiversity could be saved for the future, an argument—as we said—was used by Owen but just for some overexploited species and for comparative purposes.

Owen and his fellow geologists, as analyzed by Rupke (1994, 1998), considered their age as the peak of history. They conceived that geological event happened at a slow pace and the landscape was modelled by everyday life circumstances. They did not envision any potential global catastrophic event either in the past or the future and therefore there was no rhetorical need for an Ark. Owen could not have foreseen that WWII air bombing would destroy part of "his" collections and several entire museum buildings all over Europe.

In today's new context of menace pending over human heads, some museums' administrations have adopted the Ark as a conceptual model to present their displays of specimens inherited from the past. For instance, for the reorganization of the Turin Regional Museum of Natural History Italian architect Andrea Bruno (1931-2025), decided to relocate the collection of stuffed animals into a hall designed as a ship named the "Arca biblica" (the Bible Ark). However, just before its re-opening in 2023, Bruno's structure was re-labelled as a nineteenth-century secular cargo ship associated with naturalists' voyages to display how collections were created.

The idea of the Ark inspired also the refurbishment of other natural history museums, such as the Museo di Storia Naturale of the University of Pisa, where a wooden reconstruction of Noah's Ark is presented in an exhibition entitled "The Earth: myth and science". Similarly, the Erfurt's Naturkundemuseum in Germany has displayed since 1995 a collection of stuffed animals in a basement room called "Noah's Ark". A complete catalogue of contemporary Natural History museums referring to the Ark is, however, still lacking let alone a study of why and who decided to use this metaphor as part of their interpretive strategy.

Except for Turin, where the Ark's metaphor was widely debated and finally rejected, the setting of the Ark seems to have been accepted without conflict

even when its depiction as a ship is quite new in the European tradition. Rarely depicted in medieval and early modern buildings, it was an allegory of spiritual salvation. In the twentieth century, the Ark as a ship became a literal transportation device for earthly salvation, a common topic in science fiction, where intergalactic spaceships transport humankind to a safer planet. This re-emergence of the Ark is connected to the post-war/post-Hiroshima/cold war imaginary, such as depicted in the tapestry "La Grande Menace" (1957) by the French artist Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) (see website 3). He had affinities to the Soviet Union, where, despite the atheistic context, references taken from the Jewish-Christian traditions—such as the dove of peace with an olive branch announcing the end of God's wrath—were used as a plea for peace (on the peace dove in the soviet and GDR culture, see website 4; the peace dove was created by Pablo Picasso for a congress of the World Peace Movement—controlled by the Soviet Union—held in Paris in 1949). The Old Testament metaphors fluttered through the imagery of the atheist Soviet block for decades, which can explain the Ark from Erfurt, an intellectual center of the former GDR. Thus, the Ark, either as a call for peace or as a metaphorical medium, entered into the late twentieth-century leftist intellectual and scientific culture, creating a transcendental mission for contemporary museums. Does it mean that the nineteenth-century "danger" of referring to the Ark and the Flood as geological event does not matter anymore? Did the Ark become a secular concept deprived of its religious connotations? It does not seem so: as the next section will show, the literal interpretation of the Bible and the creationist movements—a branch of the evangelical protestant iconoclast tradition with no visual allegories—took this metaphor to build their arks, not as a symbol of intergenerational transmission but as a depiction of a historical artifact and the veracity of the Book of Genesis.

## THE BIBLICAL ARK AS A MUSEUM

In "The Creationists", originally published early in the 1990s, American historian of science Ronald Numbers (1942-2023) presented the history of anti-evolutionism among protestant groups from the US and other anglophone countries. This seminal work insisted on the fact that attempts to fit twentieth-century scientific Biblical Flood geology to the fossil record and create a model reorganizing earth history around the catastrophic event of the Biblical Flood was a complete novelty. In 2006 Numbers revised and expanded this book, changing its subtitle from "The Evolution of Scientific Creationism" to "From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design", emphasizing the growing importance of this topic in the years since first publication.

Since then, much has been written about creationist geology but our century is witnessing something which was almost absent in Number's years: facilities that use the natural history museum format to promote creationists' ideas regarding the rhythm, pace and mechanisms ruling the history of the Earth and life. According to Barone (2015), they are conceived as new pulpits of the creationist dogma and, as most museums today, are inserted in the language and techniques of politics and the industry of tourism and entertainment. Whereas cultural scholars such as Bielo (2018), Jennings (2011), Lynch (2013), and Watkins (2014) have analyzed this phenomenon from a more nuanced point of view, several members of the scientific community disqualified these premises as "infamous", and "mere promotions of pseudoscientific biblical literalist creationism against evolutionary science" (Oberlin, 2020).

An extensive list of this kind of museum includes premises in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Some of those venues include the Ark in the name or in their exhibitions, such as the Noah's Ark Zoo farm, which in 2015 was adopted by the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP), which oversees management and conservation of protected species. In the Old World, there are two "full scale" Ark replicas: Noah's Ark in Hong Kong (2009) and the Johan's Ark barge in Dordrecht, Holland (2012) (see websites 5, 6, 7, 8). In terms of geographical distribution, most of the creationist exhibits are located in the United States, where the list includes the Cabazon Dinosaurs situated out of Palm Springs (2006) (figs. 1, 2), and the Museum of Creation and Earth History, Santee (1992), both in California. The Cabazon *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Bron-*



Fig. 1. The Cabazon Dinosaurs in April 2019. The tyrannosaurus with the signpost of the eatery (photos by Adela Schäffner/Irina Podgorny).

*tosaurus* were designed by Claude Bell in 1964 with the goal of attracting more customers to his nearby restaurant, the Wheel Inn (open from 1958 to 2013). They were completed from 1975 to 1986. When Bell died in 1988, his family sold the property and the new ownership turned the attraction into a roadside creationist museum in 2005. The author visited the site in 2019 and by then the creationist material had been removed.

Idaho hosts the Northwest Science Museum (2014), where the director plans to create a 350,000 square foot facility including a full-scale replica of Noah's Ark. Akron Fossils & Science Center is in Ohio (2005), where a Noah's Ark model is on display.



Fig. 2. The Cabazon Dinosaurs in April 2019. Notice the air conditioning installation in the belly of Benny, the brontosaurus (photos by Adela Schäffner/Irina Podgorny).

Tennessee has the Wyatt Museum, in Cornersville, centered on Ron Wyatt's search for Noah's ark. Ronald Eldon Wyatt (1933-1999) was an American Seventh-day Adventist, former nurse anaesthetist and amateur archaeologist that advocated the Durupinar site in Turkey as the location of Noah's Ark's landing place. Scientists, historians, biblical scholars, and even leaders in his own Seventh-day Adventist Church consider Wyatt's research as fraudulent.

A good number of these American creationist museums are located in small venues and are family owned. They are placed in a domestic setting, with simple resources, mimicking the most traditional museum displays in showcases, shelves, and vitrines. They offer field excursions as well as activities for schools, attached to the mission of the owner or founder of the collection and containing—in their words—a collection of fossils provided by the Lord as evidence of the Flood and the coexistence of dinosaurs and humans. These exhibits focus on the historicity of the Biblical Flood and even when they represent different branches of creationism, they are far from being disconnected or isolated; on the contrary, a rapid analysis of these venues show not only their connectedness but also that they are a recent phenomenon. Their number has increased in the last 20 years, one result of the establishment of national and transnational networks of evangelical churches and creationist enterprises. Some of them are endeavors of isolated "believers" or entertainment entrepreneurs, some others are integrated into some of the branches of creationist science (for instance, the Creation Research network, with facilities in Australia, UK and the US), and, as we will see the South American premises are all connected to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

## PREPARE TO BELIEVE!

The data presented in this section were taken from Answers in Genesis web page (see website 9). Creationist museums are marketed as venues where believers have the opportunity "to see for themselves", in a single space and in a short segment of time what they had hitherto only read about. Among the most successful creationist facilities are those erected in Kentucky by Australian entrepreneur Kenneth Ham (1951-), the CEO of Answers in Genesis, to whom Numbers (1992: 332) devoted originally no more than a couple of lines, presented as "a charismatic public speaker and former biology teacher".

Ham had moved to the US in 1987, having left a position as a public-school science teacher in Queensland, Australia, and after being engaged in part-time Creation speaking for three years. Calling himself a "missionary from Australia to America", with his wife he was involved in the establishment of Creation Science Foundation. After conducting

a few teaching tours in the United States, the Hams moved to Arizona for six months to work with Films for Christ, a partnership that resulted in about 100 speaking and radio/TV engagements, as well as the production of *The Genesis Solution* film.

In the second edition of Numbers's book—fourteen years later—Ham's actions in America merited more than 5 pages (Numbers, 2006: 401-406). By then, Ham had founded Answers in Genesis Inc (AiG), a Young Earth creationist group, marginal among creationists and biblical literalists but with strong ties to the local Republican Party. It was conceived as a ministry dedicated "to train others to develop a biblical worldview and seek to expose the bankruptcy of evolutionary ideas". Pursuing these ideas, Ham gives numerous talks to tens of thousands of children and adults each year and his books are sent to almost every church in America and other English-speaking countries. Ham hosts the daily radio program Answers, founded the Answers magazine and in 2020, launched Answers TV.

Today, the pages devoted to Ham are uncountable, as reflected in the abundant bibliography on the two AiG American venues: the Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum. These were established early this century as a "reconstruction" of Noah's Ark and the display of the veracity of Genesis and the Biblical Flood through exhibitions of fossil skeletons, fossil invertebrates, dinosaur replicas and robots (Trollinger & Trollinger, 2016; Roberts & Eyl, 2018; Nash, 2019; Huskison, 2020; Oberlin, 2020; Podgorny & Achim, 2023; Trollinger & Trollinger, 2025). Far from the metaphoric use of the Flood and the Ark, the AiG premises defend that these events happened 4,300 years ago, proposing that rapid geological processes shaped the Earth and that fossilization happened at a rapid pace.

The Creation Museum was established in 2007, as a high-tech museum offering "biblical history, stunning exhibits, botanical gardens, planetarium, zoo, zip line adventure course, and much more". Nearly 150 exhibits feature fearsome animatronic dinosaurs. It is a 75,000-square-foot facility that has welcomed millions of guests since opening in Petersburg. At the heart of the Creation Museum is a chronological retelling of biblical history in seven parts. It is marketed as possessing a "\$1 million allosaur fossil", namely a specimen of *Allosaurus fragilis*, a theropod dinosaur from the upper Morrison Formation in Colorado. Presented as "Ebenezer" and a tangible reminder of the Lord's power, it is used as evidence of the Flood since the skull was found with 53 teeth still in place and with its bones arranged in their anatomical positions rather than scattered, a fact that is interpreted as the result of the animal rapid burial as a result of the global Flood. Ebenezer was donated to the Creation Museums in 2014 as a gift of the Elizabeth Streb Peroutka Foundation, established by his sons

Stephen and Michael Peroutka, the far-right politician, chairman of the Constitution Party, presidential candidate in the American elections of 2004.

The Creation Museum raised the funds to have the skeleton restored and also to create the new dinosaur exhibition with Ebenezer as its “wow factor”. In a press release, Ham said that the specimen fulfilled a dream he had for quite some time: “For decades I’ve walked through many leading secular museums, like the Smithsonian in Washington DC, and have seen their impressive dinosaur skeletons, but they were used for evolution. Now we have one of that class for our museum” (see website 10).

Ebenezer has thus become the stone of help to show that dinosaurs lived with humans and were alive when the Flood happened 4,300 years ago.

The Ark Encounter opened in Williamstown, Kentucky, in July 2016. In 2019 the Ark was voted by USA Today readers as the number one religious attraction in America; it averages over one million visitors each year. It is located about 40 miles south of the museum, halfway between Cincinnati and Lexington, and very close to the International Airport of Cincinnati/North Kentucky, putting it no more than an hour’s flight away for 69% of Americans. It features a life-size 510-foot-long “replica” of the Ark as its centerpiece, “a full-size Noah’s Ark, built according to the dimensions given in the Bible. Spanning 510 feet long, 85 feet wide, and 51 feet high”, enough to locate the several thousands of animals that God gave to Noah, dinosaurs included. As the visitors enter the building, they tour three decks filled with scores of exhibits that allow them to experience “what Noah’s life may have been like”. According to the web site, “Deck 1 immerses guests in the size and scope of the biblical ark as visitors walk through a storage area and learn about animal kinds. Deck 2 focuses on the pre-flood world, animal concerns, and an exploration of Noah and how God could have prepared him for his monumental task. Deck 3 covers plausible living quarters for Noah and his family, flood geology, post-flood events, and a special Museum of the Bible exhibit” (see website 11). In phase one of the attraction, a zoo was built behind the Ark as well as a 1,500-seat restaurant. In 2019, a 2,500-seat Answers Centre opened near the Ark for daily lectures, conferences, and concerts; in 2020, a Virtual Reality Experience was added at the attraction. In a kind of reminiscence of Owen’s calculus and Athanasius Kircher’s seventeenth-century Ark (see website 2), they estimated the total number of living and extinct kinds of land animals and flying creatures Noah cared for, estimating a maximum of around 7,000 animals. Internet advertisements depict pair of animals approaching the Ark: males and females with their progeny, in this case not for comparative anatomy but to insist on the family as the central unit of everything.

Answers in Genesis Inc is staffed by church members from various denominations (e.g., Baptist, Christian, Lutheran, Reformed) and professions, including historians, theologians, and scientists in the fields of biology, geology, genetics, astronomy, paleontology, and anthropology. In 2017, Kentucky’s tourism office announced that the Creation Museum had added ca. 500,000,000 USD to the State finances since 2007 and that the Ark’s economic impact in 2017 alone was about 200,000,000 dollars. Creationists or not, the inhabitants of Kentucky profit from living with an ark in the neighborhood.

## BRAZILIAN ORIGINS

The expansion of creationist museums in Latin America is silently happening without causing any controversy, even when Brazilian scholarship has denounced attempts at introducing creationism in public education (Numbers, 2006). However, most Latin American secular scientists are unaware of the existence of creationist museums that are being established in the region as the result of decades of regional and international alliances.

For example, in February 2020, American and Brazilian Adventist leaders attending the third Faith and Science Encounter on Galápagos Islands, inaugurated “Origins - Museum of Nature”, a new center located on Charles Darwin Avenue, Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz, a 230 square meter complex that includes a school and a church, also inaugurated on the occasion (see website 12). It was the result of a decision taken in 2016 to promote creationism among the tourists arriving to an archipelago marketed as “the cradle of evolutionism”. Its goal was to counterpoint the displays of the Darwin Foundation, located approximately two kilometers away at the other end of Darwin Avenue. For the Adventist Church, “Origins” is intended to be one of their top influencer projects. The Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) was established in 1959 by a group of researchers and conservationists as an international non-profit organization. Since 1964, it endorsed an agreement with the Ecuadorian State, renewed in 2016 for an additional 25 years. Its impact, however, is difficult to assess as the installations opened just before the Covid-19 pandemic started. At the time of writing (2024), reviews on Google remark that the entrance of “Origins” has no clear indication about its creationist point of view. The reviews, in fact, reflect the cleavage that this kind of establishment creates: for creationists and members of the Adventist Church it is faith-affirming evidence; for others it is just nonsense.

The center in the Galápagos is not the only one in South America: quite the contrary, “Origins” is only a part of the expansion of the partnership forged between the Seventh-day Adventist Church—es-

established in South America in the late nineteenth century (Flores, 2018)—and the Brazilian creationist circles that emerged in the 1970s (Santos Silva, 2017, 2021; Podgorny, 2025). While having the same theological basis as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Brazilian creationists adopted an interdenominational character. In November 2004, they inaugurated its Cultural Center in Brasilia, a two-floor, 220 square meter building that includes a library, the Expedition Room, the archives, the Isaac Newton Science Center, the Multimedia Center, an Auditorium, the Information and Documentation Center, a model of Foucault's Pendulum, a sector called "Architects of Nature", with different types of bird nests and insects, and a mural that illustrates the geological strata. The SCB (Brazilian Creationist Society) sponsored the construction of "a 1:100 scale model of Noah's Ark" in the Lab of the Architecture College based on the model built by Rod Walsh, an Australian from Creation Ministries International, with whom the Society cooperated. On Rod Walsh, see his web page (see website 13).

The SCB is backed by the Geoscience Research Institute (GRI) founded in 1958 in the USA in response to "the concerns of Adventist science teachers about the absence of qualified earth scientists in the denomination" (Numbers 1992, 2006). GRI from California promotes Creation-related activities and contributes to the development of research projects in relevant areas. On their webpage, for instance, they provide instructions for setting up a Creation and Origins Resource Center. Even when Numbers (1992, 2006) had remarked on the growing influence of GRI in Latin America, in particular training scholars/geologists from the subcontinent and promoting new creationist institutions, no further research seems to have been done about geological creationism in Latin America.

As part of this network several centers were inaugurated: the above-mentioned "Origins" in Galápagos, Cooksonia at the Adventist University of Cochabamba in Bolivia (2017); the Brazilian Centro de Estudo da natureza Prof. Wellington Silva at the Adventist School of Cachoeira, Bahia (2023), and another on the campus of Ingeniero Coelho (Sao Paulo State, 2025); the Creation Center of the Adventist University in Libertador San Martín, province of Entre Ríos, Argentina (March 2023); and that of Chillán in Chile (2025). In all cases they are located in provincial and semi-rural settings, in cities where there were no museums and, in the case of Entre Ríos, in an old Adventist colony (Ceriani Cernadas, 1998; Flores, 2018), playing a key role in their environment in training young people.

On the campus of the Adventist University in Libertador San Martín, there are two museums that the author visited in July 2025: the Creationist Resource Center David Rhys and a museum dedicated to the

history of the colony and Adventist work in the country. Both, with impeccable museography, are housed in the former homes that hosted the professors who had come from the United States to teach at the agricultural and religious school, which was transformed into a university in 1990 and officially recognized as such during the Argentine crisis of 2001/2.

The museum was named after David Rhys (1915-2014), who was born into a Baptist family in Gaiman, Patagonia, which converted to adventism and sent David to study in Entre Ríos. In the 1940s, Rhys became interested in the geology of this area, which has been one of the country's fossil meccas since the travels of Charles Darwin and the French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny. Rhys began collecting extinct mammals while earning his degrees at the National Teachers' School, followed by degrees in theology and near eastern archaeology at the Adventist Seminary in Washington, and a doctorate in geosciences at Riverside. The Rhys Museum houses his collection, as well as those of other vocational and professional scientists from the region, such as Carlos Federico Steger (1925-2018) from Tucumán, a theology graduate from the Colegio Adventista del Plata, professor at the Instituto Nacional del Profesorado, museologist, rector of the South American headquarters of GRI, and a member of the Argentine Paleontological and the local Natural Sciences Societies. Until his death, Steger traveled throughout Argentina and abroad giving lectures on the confrontation between evolutionism and creationism, geology and the Flood.

The current director of the Center—which has free admission—is the Brazilian geologist Samuel Abdala, who collaborates with researchers from the National Council for Science based in a nearby city. He studied geology at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) and earned his doctorate at GRI Loma Linda. Author of a popular saga of geological-creationist adventures, he moved to Argentina to direct the Rhys Center, which displays in the museum and its gardens skeletal remains and models of the great mammals of the Pampas: glyptodonts, saber-toothed tigers, and a mastodon (fig. 3). Everything, with the exception of a Patagonian dinosaur egg and Stegers' mineralogical collection, is of local origin. These are pieces that the Center display labeled without religious interpretation and citing Darwin, as in the case of *Toxodon*, described as one of the fossil mammals that most caught Darwin's attention. The *Toxodon* model on display is based on the image published in 1988 in the "Macmillan Illustrated Encyclopedia of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Animals, A Visual Who's who of Prehistoric Life", a work coordinated by Scottish popularizer Dougal Dixon (1947-). Abdala is not responsible for the museum's layout or the models, which were already in place when he arrived and were made in other Argentine cities. The Adven-



Fig. 3. Creationist Museum of Entre Ríos, Argentina (photo by Irina Podgorny).

tist view of evolution is provided separately from the fossils, on panels that explain Creation from the perspective of intelligent design and the Seventh-day chronology. In the museum there is no mention of the Ark or the Flood while intelligent design, as Number remarked in 2006, plays a conspicuous role. GRI-Loma Linda, the Adventists' South American offices and the local Adventist universities support these projects. GRI, an initiative from the late 1950s, was the brainchild of a group of Baptist and Adventist geologists and paleontologists who wanted to explore Earth history from a confessional point of view. Today, GRI Loma Linda—where Rhys worked and Abdala obtained his PhD—has become the most important center for geological creationist research, including laboratories and doctoral programs. From there, Rhys promoted geoscience symposiums in Spanish-speaking countries and the opening of GRI in Entre Ríos, which was directed by Stegers and now by Abdala. GRI indicates the topics that have to be addressed in a "Creation center": design in the universe, on Earth, in living organisms, in fossils, and in the living cell; structure, laws, and beauty in nature, including the display of the chemical periodic table, minerals and crystal systems, ratios and geometry; evidence of catastrophes in fossil mass burials, rapid preservation, mass extinctions, asteroid impacts and large lava flows; thinking of Creation in terms of fossil patterns and trends; ecological sequences and abrupt appearances in human nature and origins;

appreciation of beauty, morality, religious sense; biological diversity in the local region and its connection with design; conservation of natural areas and resources and the divine mandate to care for the Earth. Some of the specific themes for the displays should have direct relationships to natural features of the local area, such as the mega mammals in Entre Ríos. Local in content, global in scope and mission, these rather modest installations are still too young to allow an assessment of their impact on visitors and local population. In these museums, the Ark and the Flood are subsumed under the more neutral frame of geological catastrophic events studies (impact theories, etc.) and, as Number already argued, the focus is more on intelligent design than on the veracity of the Flood.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many Old Testament concepts and metaphors—such as the Ark—are now well-founded in secular life, originated—even when it would appear to be completely paradoxical—in the post WWII Soviet atheistic culture. Emerged in the context of left-wing peace movements, today they survive as a mere fragment of that vanished context. However, they continue to produce realities, changing museum narratives and spaces and equaling museums to an Ark even when they have very limited capacity, if any, to act as the guarantors of future life beyond disaster. Disaster, in fact, has destroyed many collections all over the world producing several shipwrecked arks.

In the evangelical context, creationist museums are being created, turning the concept of the Ark into a historical fact that has to be exhibited as one of the events that shaped our past. The metaphor is abandoned—or not needed—in attempts to prove the historical reality of the Ark and the Flood as a founding principle of earth history. This paper comparing the Adventists with the AiG museums showed how they differ not only in scale, narratives, and dimension but also in their goals and the measurement of their success.

AiG venues are for profit and appeal to the marketing strategies of the entertainment industries, their presence in the media being strong and sound. They generate employment in and out of the religious circles to which they are linked. They are attended by millions of visitors and they generate enormous profit to the cities and locations where they are located. In the same way the more established natural museums are forced to do with less or similar success. In that sense, they are competitors not only in terms of the ideas conveyed in these institutions but also in obtaining public favour. By adopting the format and visual strategies of the nineteenth-century natural history museum (association to a zoo, 3D models,

public lectures, traveling kits), they display the most iconic museum specimens, a tendency also observed in other commercial venues such as the Ripley museums. For instance, London's "Believe it or not", one of the 29 installations in Ripley's successful franchise duplicates specimens that are on display at the British and the Natural History museums. In fact, this kind of museums—namely Ripley's and Answers in Genesis—adopt those strategies developed for the contemporary entertainment park, such as Disney's "Tomorrowland" and Epcot centres. Disney parks, in fact, from the 1970s on, set the parameters for combining amusement with the promotion of science and the newest technologies for mass tourism attractions. Animatronics, since then, is part of the museum experience and secular natural history museum are desperate to find the funds to install a roaring dinosaur, showing that the interaction between entertainment industry and science education goes in both directions.

The narrative of AiG is openly militant, anti-evolutionist and confronts what they call evolutionist museums by showing their vulnerable points and weaknesses. Paradoxically, they appeal to the rhetoric of the relativistic program of social studies of sciences. The AiG, one can say, is a wonderful incarnation of the limits of that programme, claiming that facts do not speak for themselves and must be interpreted through the lens of underlying assumptions. For example, the Creation Museum displays a reconstruction of Lucy, the name given to a collection of several hundred pieces of fossilized bones discovered in 1974 in Ethiopia by paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson (1943-) of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the basis for the new species *Australopithecus afarensis*. In Kentucky it is exhibited as "Lucy the Ape", to explain that secular museums worldwide have created hundreds of life-size models of this female primate, reconstructed according to scientist' preexisting beliefs about whether Lucy was an ape, human, or ape-man: the museum to prove how "subjective" this reconstruction exhibits over a hundred different evolutionist interpretations of Lucy, mixing up the scientific object—which is always unstable and transitory—with a museum depiction, which is more or less fixed, and tends to consolidate itself beyond the life of the scientific object (Wyllie, 2021). At the same time this plays with the idea that science and scientific facts are ideological "social constructions", an argument that is widely accepted beyond creationist institutions.

Based on the field study carried out at the Rhys Center in Entre Ríos, the Adventists museums appear as less confrontational. Sheltered and funded by the Adventist universities and health industries, they do not need to attract visitors for their survival. They offer free admission, are open to the general public and do not antagonize—at least not

in public—with "secular" scientists" as AiG does. Abdala, for instance, cooperates with other national institutions in areas that are uncontroversial such as stratigraphy and taxonomy. They tend to work in a discreet way and apparently without revealing the multiple layers of meanings that the objects can have. These meanings do not appear in the labels but as verbal narrative. As an example, a panel of trilobites is displayed without any kind of written explanation, but when one asks why they are exhibited, the visitor is told that these animals appeared suddenly in the fossil record with no predecessors, implying divine intervention.

Another important difference in creationist interpretations is the role of the Flood and the Ark vs. Intelligent Design. While the Ark is a declaration of religiosity, intelligent design, except for those who are aware of the implications of this concept, can be seen as a mere expression of the wonders of nature. The exhibition of bird nests—which are a very common object of the natural history museums—are gaining new visibility thanks to the development of biomaterials and bio architecture. In a creationist venue, far from mere examples of the natural world, they became the evidence of God the designer.

While the Kentucky venues are addressed to tourists and passing visitors, an Adventist resource center (with the exception of "Origins" in Galápagos) furnishes illustrative material for school and university classes, serving a very specific public: the campus population, and their related virtual or actual activities. This "endogamous use" can explain why the establishment of these museums has been almost invisible in the general press and are largely unknown beyond the Adventist network. Although they are celebrated on the Adventists' web pages, they have a scarce resonance in the national or regional media. One can say that an Adventists' creationist center has two groups of people in mind. First, students, who often arrive at a higher education institution without knowing much about earth origins, and the didactic and educational tools that help to find answers to their questions. The second group is the non-Adventist general public, local educational institutions, and researchers with geological or paleontological knowledge.

The success of the theory of evolution had essentially relied on the exhibition of reconstructed fossil animals to illustrate its proposals, a situation that veiled, perhaps, the variety of questions and interests that were and are connected with their extraction, commerce, study, and display before and after the theory was accepted (Podgorny, 2022). Literature assumes that palaeontology necessarily connects with ideas of progress and development that can be observed in the natural history museums, although it may have been forgotten that, for instance, the most iconic fossil mammals from South America were de-

scribed (by Owen) in the pre-Darwinian era. The Adventists and AiG museums show that that fossils and fossil skeletons are being used for proving the mistakes of the theory of evolution. In the case of the Adventists, they accept the evidence of micro-evolution, which they term as "what Darwin observed", while the controversial point being the mechanisms and contingency-driven evolution, which they confront with intelligent design and divine intervention. Creationist museums show in fact that the exhibition of fossil animals can tell alternative stories and that there are people willing to accept them.

To conclude with, the history of natural history museums (secular and creationists) can help in thinking if we are not facing the problem of trivializing knowledge. Owen saw the museum as a place within which to ask questions of the collections. Owen's Natural History Museum had lost its goal many years ago: in our days, it has to compete in the world of entertainment, renting its facilities for special celebrations, installing simulators of earthquakes and thinking how to prove that it is worth funding their survival as a research institution. And not as an Ark that will bring us into the future. Whatever the future means.

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