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From Reading to Revering the Good Book, Or How the Word Became Fossil at the Creation Museum

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THE
MARYVILLE
SYMPOSIUM:

*Conversations on Faith
& the Liberal Arts*

**The Book, Texts and
the Liberal Arts**

*Volume 4
2011*

THE MARYVILLE SYMPOSIUM
Conversations on Faith & the Liberal Arts

The Proceedings

*The Book, Texts, and
The Liberal Arts*

*Volume 4
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From Reading to Revering the Good Book: How the Bible Became Fossil at the Creation Museum

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Writing in the second quarter of the fourth century BCE, just about a half century after papyrus arrived in Greece, Plato has Socrates comment in the *Phaedrus* on the dangers of this new technology of writing that was transforming his world from an oral to a written culture. Socrates says of written words,

You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.¹

For Plato's Socrates, writing is a kind of sham speech. It resembles oral speech—it seems to have understanding, to be able to communicate, to defend itself—but because the author is absent it can do none of these. Worse yet, unlike words spoken to an intended listener, written words may go anywhere and address anyone with no regard for whether the reader will get their meaning or completely misunderstand it.² The chief problem with writing, in other words, is that as a technology of

dissemination, it invites unintended readers and, thus, enables mistaken readings. In short, the problem with writing is reading.

Matters only got worse with the arrival of another technology of communication: the book. And once words were separated by spaces and conventions of word order, punctuation, and the like were established, both writing and reading became easier. More books were written and more people wanted to read them. According to Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows*, this technological change effected a profound transformation in human culture:

For centuries, the technology of writing had reflected, and reinforced, the intellectual ethic of the oral culture in which it arose. The writing and reading of tablets, scrolls, and early codices had stressed the communal development and propagation of knowledge. Individual creativity had remained subordinate to the needs of the group. . . . Now, writing began to take on, and to disseminate, a new intellectual ethic: the ethic of the book. The development of knowledge became an increasingly private act, with each reader creating, in his own mind, a personal synthesis of the ideas and information passed down through the writings of other thinkers.³

In the presence of the book and the privacy of her own thoughts, the reader had final say over the meaning of the text. With no one present to control another's reading, many different interpretations were possible.

The dissemination of written texts (along with the potential for multiplying meanings) accelerated exponentially in 1440, of course, with the invention of the printing press. And the stakes regarding the proliferation of interpretations went through the roof when, in 1455, Gutenberg saw fit to print and, thereby, disseminate more widely than ever before the very word of God. But it was not until Martin Luther called forth "the priesthood of all believers" and then armed them with a Bible they could actually read, that all hell broke loose. We know it as the Reformation.

In his history of “the Protestant revolution,” as he calls it, Alister McGrath captures not only the ecclesial but also the political significance of Luther’s “dangerous idea”:

Following through on his democratizing agenda, Luther insisted that all believers have the right to read the Bible in a language they can understand and to interpret its meaning for themselves. The church is thus held accountable to its members for its interpretation of its sacred text and is open to challenge at every point.⁴

Whereas once the Medieval church “had declared itself to be above criticism on biblical grounds,” Luther’s translation of the Bible into German empowered all believers to develop their own interpretations and, if they wanted to, to challenge the doctrines and practices of the church on the basis of those alternate interpretations.⁵ And challenge them they did. In the course of the Reformation and through the centuries that followed, earnest Christians have come up with all manner of Biblical interpretations.

Given the complexity of this sacred text and the intensity with which Protestants have sought to glean its truths from it, it is not surprising that Luther’s “dangerous idea” yielded countless splits, schisms, and sects. Whereas once there was the Church, Protestants dedication to reading the Scripture for themselves has brought an endless variety of theologies, practices, and fellowships with no end in sight. While every one of these groups claims (whether explicitly or implicitly) that they alone have the true word of God, none has been able to arrest the flow of interpretations. With everyone free to read the Bible as they wish, and read it differently they do, no one has been able to control its reading or the proliferation of its meaning. That is, until now.

The Word at the Creation Museum

Built on forty-nine acres of land just thirty minutes south of Cincinnati at the cost of twenty-seven million dollars, the state-of-the-art Creation Museum opened on May 28, 2007. In its first year, four hundred thousand visitors passed through its doors. Just three years later, it welcomed its one-millionth guest.

The Creation Museum is dedicated to discrediting thoroughly the science of evolution and the notion of an old Earth on behalf of the claim the God of Christianity created not only the Earth but the whole universe (including the Earth) just six thousand years ago in six twenty-four-hour days. With a very young Earth at the core of its claim, explanations are offered throughout the Museum for how things that seem old (like fossils, dinosaur bones, and layers of sediment on mountains and canyons) are really young. At the heart of all of these explanations is “flood geology” or the theory that 4,350 years ago a global and catastrophic flood in very short order wiped out all living things (excepting those on Noah’s ark) and then redistributed them as the waters receded in such a manner that fossils and sediment layers and the like were created.

Here, then, is the Creation Museum’s *raison d’être*. This is what the Museum is known for. But when we look more closely, we see that the Museum is up to much more than promoting young Earth Creationism. To get that closer look, we need to take a virtual tour.⁶

As we approach the Creation Museum, passing the K-9 unit in the parking lot and the concrete barriers that protect its entrance, we see a large structure that looks a lot like a natural history museum complete with dinosaur statues on display out front. We enter, pay the \$24.95 entrance fee, and then are invited to strike a pose of fear in front of a green screen and to purchase (for another ten dollars or so) a 5x7 image of ourselves being attacked by a hungry T-Rex.⁷

From there we enter the Main Hall where we find the Stargazer’s Planetarium and the Dragon Hall Book Store to our

left and the Noah's Ark Café and the Special Effects Theater to our right. As we move through the Main Hall, we walk beneath a snacking Brontosaurus (that actually moves its head and neck as well as chews on leaves) and pass two small children playing fearlessly near another, albeit smaller, pair of dinosaurs. At the end of the Main Hall we reach the main attraction of the Creation Museum, a two-to-three-hour "walk-through museum experience" that begins at "Grand Canyon National Park" where two figures appear to be digging up fossils. A real man dressed just like them appears on a flat screen overhead and tells us that these men are both paleontologists. Both look at the same kind of evidence but they come to different conclusions because one looks at his discoveries with a science textbook by his side whereas the other does so with the Bible by his side. Different starting points, we are told, bring different conclusions.

In the next room we encounter a powerful elaboration of this point. The whole room is dedicated to the notion that the perspective through which we view the world is determined by our "starting point." And there are only two possibilities: human reason or God's Word. And in case we thought that the playing field was even, we are instructed on the very first placard that this is not the case. Yes, we have to make a choice as to which of these will be our starting point. But the choice is clear:

Broadly speaking, "human reason" refers to "autonomous reasoning—the idea that the human mind can determine truth independently from God's revealed truth, the Bible. Reasoning is God's gift to humankind, but He has instructed us to use the Bible as our ultimate starting point (Proverbs 1:7) and also to reject speculations that contradict God's knowledge (2 Corinthians 10:5). Philosophies and world religions that use human guesses rather than God's Word as a starting point are prone to misinterpret the facts around them because their starting point is arbitrary. Every person must make a choice. Individuals must choose God's Word as the starting point for all their reasoning, or start with their own arbitrary philosophy as the starting point for evaluating everything around them, including how they view the Bible.

It behooves us to pause here before we leave the second room of the walk-through to notice that so far we have learned that there are only two ways to view the world: through reason or through God's Word. Moreover, we have been instructed that reason is acceptable, but only if it knows its place, i.e., it must never contest God's Word. Importantly, at this point in the Museum we do not yet know what God's Word is. But we do know that whatever it is we are not to apply critical thinking—"Autonomous reasoning"—to it. We are not to question God's Word. We are to accept it as given.

As we turn the corner into the next room, we see to our left prophets (like Isaiah and Moses) who knew God's word and delivered it to God's people as well as apostles who accurately recorded God's Word in what would become the New Testament. On the adjacent wall we get a history of humanity's various efforts over the millennia to "Question," "Destroy," "Discredit," "Criticize," "Poison," and "Replace" God's Word. The history ends with "The Latest Attack" which is to "Question Biblical Time." A placard with a close-up of biblical text focuses on the phrase "in six days the Lord made" with "days" crossed out in red and with "millions of years" added in.

At the center of the room and surrounded by the prophets and apostles who have given us the Word and humanity's foolish attempts to challenge it is a flat screen mounted on a wall. On that flat screen plays a continuous video loop that perhaps more than any other element in the Museum, visual or otherwise, tells us how to be proper Christians. In the course of the video, individuals (both male and female and of various ages and skin colors) appear by themselves against a dark backdrop. Lit by a very bright and glowing light, each individual speaks a single verse or portion of a verse. They articulate the verse slowly, deliberately, and calmly. They look directly and intently at the camera. After they have spoken the verse, it appears below their image and then both the individual and the text fade to black.

It is important to notice that no context is given for these Biblical excerpts except the identification of chapter and verse.

The viewer has no idea what is going on in the surrounding text. In this way, the verses seem to be held in suspension beyond the Biblical text. That said, the verses are grouped into nine categories: one, perfect, righteous, eternal, unchanging, true, good, beautiful, and powerful. No explicit connection is made between the verses and the categories. We simply see the name of the category on the screen and then see one individual after another speak a particular verse. Thus, for instance, in the category of “Power” a young boy says, “Great is our Lord, and of great power.” Or for “True” an adult Caucasian man says, “Your word is truth.” Or for “Unchanging” a young white woman says, “I am the Lord, I change not.” Excerpted from the Biblical context, the verses seem to reiterate the nine abstract characteristics attributed here to the Christian God. Thus the verses appear to require no analysis, no interpretation, no critical thinking. Presented this way, words taken from the Bible appear merely to reflect in the most straight-forward way the seemingly obvious meaning given to them.

Standing before this flat screen, the visitor is invited to observe and mimic the proper relationship that the Christian ought to have with the Word.⁸ Like the individuals in the video, our task is to receive the Word—to take it in just as it was given to us by the prophets and apostles. We are not to cogitate on it, or endeavor to figure out what it means given its biblical context (never mind its historical context), or discuss it. On the contrary, when it comes to encountering the Word, we need nothing (neither other text nor other people) to understand it. Because the Word is transparent to meaning, we need not think on it. As Christians, then, we are not asked to engage it but, instead, we are called to hear and speak it worshipfully. Rather than read it, we are to revere it in all its awesome power and simplicity.

Properly instructed that the Christian should approach the Word not through engagement but with reverence, we pass through a small room in which appear Martin Luther, the printing press, and the Scopes trial. We will return to this room later. For now, let’s continue into the next main area of the walk-through, Graffiti Alley.

As soon as we turn the corner into the Alley, we know we are in a very different space. It is dark, and we hear gunshots and sirens all around us. Unlike the pristine walls of the previous rooms, these brick walls are covered with graffiti, decaying vines, cobwebs, and newspaper and magazine clippings that announce what the Creation Museum takes to be the many forms of social disintegration in our culture: abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, gay marriage, Columbine, marijuana, no prayer in school, the ACLU's attack on the ten commandments, and, of course, evolution. As we continue through the Alley, we discover that these problems are not limited to back alleys. They can be found in our very homes. As we peek into the bedroom and kitchen windows of what looks like a suburban home, we get an intimate view of the white American family: the sons are playing violent video games, looking at Internet porn, and rolling joints; the daughter is talking on the phone about getting an abortion; the father is drinking beer and watching TV; and the mother is gossiping with her friend. Across the way is their mainline Protestant church, wherein another window reveals a pastor preaching that we must trust science over the Bible while the family whose windows we were just peeking into are fidgeting in their pew.

The message here could not be clearer: across America, ministers are instructing their congregants to ignore the plain and simple truth of the Bible and, taking this to heart, church-going families are disintegrating right along with the rest of American culture. Everywhere one looks, according to the Creation Museum, God's Word is being ignored and, as a result, our whole culture is in crisis.

Fortunately, there is an answer. To access it we need only pass through the "Time Tunnel" and return to the very "Dawn of Creation" where the truth of God's Word is revealed. Indeed, transported to the origin of the universe, we will then embark on a journey through God's Word (or, more accurately, the first 11 chapters of Genesis) and discover all that we need to know to set things right.

At the end of the tunnel, we find ourselves at the back of a theater. The opposite wall is curved and upon the length and height of it appears a short animation that depicts, presumably scene-by-scene, exactly how the Creation unfolded according to Genesis 1. The animation is punctuated with text announcing each day: “The First Day,” “The Second Day,” and so forth. Behind these words appears what looks like Hebrew script. As the animation unfolds, a voice speaks fragments from Genesis. Here, of course, the same logic obtains between the Word and meaning that we saw in the room of the prophets and apostles. There, a verse was presented as directly reflecting a characteristic of God. Here, the verse appears to mirror physical phenomena as they are “re-created” through the technologies of video animation.

When the film ends and the screen fades to black, we exit the dark theater and enter a large brightly lit room with white walls and a brown ceramic tile floor. At the center of the room are large (nearly floor to ceiling) placards (with embedded flat screens) as well as fat columns. On both the placards and the columns there is a great deal of text, text that is in both English and Hebrew, looks as if it is written on papyrus, and is often difficult to read. Much of the text consists primarily of biblical excerpts (although not always identified as such.) Some of the text serves as a background for other text.

The perimeter of the room consists of white walls and columns. At eye level on the walls are various framed, illuminated, and unlabeled photographs and digital renderings of plants, animals, Earth, other planets, the solar system, and the double helix. Above these large images are smaller flat screens upon which videos constantly play. These videos include images of all sorts of things like fish, birds, wishbones, plants, and airplanes. For each video there is a male voiceover (reproduced as text below the image) that speaks Bible verses and talks about what the Bible does and does not say about natural phenomena. Backless benches, such as you would expect to see in an art gallery, are positioned at various points inside the perimeter so visitors can sit as they take it all in. And as we move to the far side of the room and turn a corner we are confronted with a very

large flat screen upon which plays an animation of the creation of Adam. He appears to rise above us, blessed with a perfect body, stylish hair, and a nicely trimmed beard.

We are now entering the crowning achievement of the Creation Museum: the “Walk Through Biblical History,” a life-sized and three-dimensional re-creation of scenes from the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We begin our walk in the Garden of Eden, where we are surrounded by synthetic replicas of just the sorts of things we would expect to find there including lots of beautiful trees and countless thriving plants, rocks (with moss growing on them), full-size animals (including the kind we would see at the zoo as well as dinosaurs), pristine ponds (complete with lily pads), and even cascading waterfalls. Adam and Eve are here too. Both are beautiful by today’s standards and seem quite smitten with each other.

Alas, all does not remain perfect. Indeed, once we pass through the Fall, here construed as humanity’s first act of not holding true to God’s Word, we encounter a pregnant Eve, Cain’s murder of Abel, and the introduction of animal sacrifice.⁹ Things just get worse and worse, we learn, until God sets upon the idea of destroying every living thing with a worldwide catastrophic flood, sparing only Noah’s family and “two of every kind.” As we move through this section of the walk-through we witness the construction of the ark, meet an animatronic Noah, and even pass through the bowels of the ark, seeing how animals were stored and fed and their waste managed. Notably, the Museum does not spare us God’s wrath. Indeed, we see dioramas depicting the intense suffering of those left to drown atop mountain peaks, as well as film animations of happy families sharing a meal moments before the global tidal wave arrives to drown them.

We should pause to reflect upon this remarkable multisensory experience. We have been prepared for this experience by a huge wall-sized animation of the Creation followed by a room filled with text on placards, text on columns, about twenty large illuminated images, almost as many flat screens, and a constant voiceover talking about double helixes

and all manner of flora and fauna. Then comes the state-of-the-art re-creation of Biblical scenes on a grand scale. Many visitors are clearly “wowed”: they look all around, trying to take it all in—the branches above, the flowers below, the scenes before them. They marvel at an animatronic T-Rex that seems to want to munch on their heads. They pause and gaze intently upon the scene of Adam and Eve as the two figures look longingly at one another while standing naked in a pond filled with lily pads.

This three dimensional environment presents a lot to take in, but there is more, much more. Again there is the male voiceover unceasingly speaking excerpts from the first few chapters of Genesis, excerpts that are spoken without introduction or context or commentary. Moreover, in front of each scene from the Bible is a series of three or more placards. The placard in the center of them repeats a portion of the scripture that we hear from overhead; the placards on either side of that excerpted text give us the Creation Museum’s instructions for understanding these biblical fragments.

My husband and I (with whom I wrote another essay with on the Creation Museum¹⁰) have visited the Creation Museum five times. Every time we have had the same experience. We come out of it feeling as though someone had hooked our brains up to a blender and hit the frappe button. I hope the foregoing virtual tour provides a clear sense as to why this is the case. To make one’s way through the walk-through is to be subject to textual, visual, aural overload. Text is everywhere—on placards, walls, columns, flat screens. It is excerpted and fragmented. Some text is in the background but you can sort of read it. Other text is put in giant sized font. Your attention is drawn here then there. You try to read this and are interrupted by that. All the while images are moving and changing. Videos are looping. A voice is talking to you. An animatronic dinosaur lunges for your head.

New Technologies and Reading Practices

Writing about the Internet and its impact on our brains, Nicholas Carr argues on the basis of numerous scientific studies

that the new technologies associated with the Internet are reconfiguring our brains. For centuries our brains learned from the technology of print how to read line after line and page after page of text. We learned how to read in the quiet of our own thoughts, to think about what we were reading, even to get lost in it. We would imagine the people talking in the texts, the scenes within which they appeared and acted. We would anticipate the line of argument being developed over many pages. We might argue with it in our own heads. In short, we inhabited those lines and lines of text and the spaces they described and the arguments that they made. This kind of reading Carr calls deep reading.¹¹ According to Carr, deep reading has been crucial for the development of human society because it encourages logical, critical, and creative thinking. And the Internet, Carr argues, is bringing deep reading to an end.

The structure of the Internet and its pages, a structure whose logic is permeating our culture, is not linear. It is a web that is all about making as many connections as possible. Thus, within the space of the Internet our minds are invited to hop, skip, and jump around. Even when we stay in one place, embedded videos, moving banners, and pop-up windows demand our attention and interrupt or disrupt our engagement with any text. Unfortunately, Carr argues, our brains are adapting to the logic of the web with all its fragmentation and interruption. As a result we are being transformed from readers to skimmers. On average we spend only twenty seconds on a web page and rather than read it, we skim the first few lines and glance to the bottom of the page. We are easily distracted by hyperlinks and, before we know it, we are pages away from what we were reading. Not surprisingly, when we are done, we have great difficulty remembering where we were or what we read.

Although the Internet may be the technology that best deals in the logics of fragmentation and interruption, other technologies are quickly following suit. Cell phones, televisions, Kindles, and even the printed page (in, for instance, the form of magazine layout) are being reconfigured to mirror the logic of the Internet. Everywhere we turn we are invited to glance here,

notice that, skip to this, jump to that. Rarely anymore are we invited to slow down, consider, deliberate.

Importantly, the speed and volume of information coming at us is, Carr argues, a real problem. While our brains have great capacity to retain long-term memories and develop connections among them, it takes time for our brains to move new information to long-term memory. Fortunately, Carr reports, the rate at which we are able to read printed text on a page is perfectly suited to this somewhat slow process through which our brains move information from short-term to long-term memory. That is why we have the ability to remember well what we have read in a book. By contrast, when our brains are bombarded with too much information too fast, and especially when that information comes to us in bits and fragments, our brains cannot make sense of it. And we cannot remember what we have read.

Obviously, the Creation Museum is not the Internet. Yet, I would argue it deploys technologies of communication organized according to the same logic as the Internet. It consists of too much text—text on placards, murals, columns, and screens. Moreover, throughout the Museum text appears in great variety of font and size. Text appears as background; text appears in the foreground. Certain words are emphasized—made larger to stand out. Thus, we are encouraged to skim—just read the big words, never mind the context. Look at that big word here and that big word there. Not just put before our eyes, text also fills our ears by way of the constant voice over. Everywhere we go in the Museum we hear words. Sometimes the words come from the Bible; often they provide a constant flow of information about birds, and frogs, and plants, and rising flood waters, and geological transformations, and on and on it goes. And as our brains try to take all of this in, they are further distracted by flat screens playing endless video loops. Like pop-up windows, the screens show up all over the place. Sometimes as many as twenty of them demand our attention in just one room.

I do not think it is a stretch to say that the walk-through at the Creation Museum is organized like a web page. And just

like a web page, the space within the Creation Museum demands that our brains flit about the space in a futile attempt to take in more information than they can. No wonder that when we finally emerge from the walk-through our brains feel as though they have been put through a blender.

Why is it important to notice this about the Creation Museum? To get at the answer to that question, recall the second room that we entered in the walk-through. It was the one that presented two starting points: God's Word or human reason. And it said that what the Christian must do is choose God's Word and forever subordinate reason to it. What I am arguing here is that the technologies deployed in the walk-through do much to make that so. As we move through these spaces (much the same way we move through a web site), as we encounter all these technologies, as our brains are overloaded, and as we are obliged to skim, reason is indeed subordinated to a word. The strategic deployment of technology and information has made it so.

Whether reason has been subordinated at the Creation Museum to the Word of God or the word of someone else is a question that remains to be answered. But whosever word it is, the point is that by passing through this cacophony of texts, sounds, and images we are little able to engage it thoughtfully never mind critically. Our brains are rendered incapable of critically engaging this word because they have been numbed by this overwhelming, web-site-like experience. This is not an accident. On the contrary. The Creation Museum is strategically deploying the logic and dynamics of the Internet to disable our God-given capacity for critical thinking by making us all but incapable of reading.

All that said, it is not the case that we exit the Museum with no idea of what we should think. That is because along the way, we are given short and simple statements that tell us what we ought to think. Amidst the cacophony of ancient script and biblical fragments and double helixes, we get brief and clear instructions on what we need to remember. Examples of such instructions appear throughout the Museum.

Here is just one example. In front of the scene depicting the creation of Eve (from Adam's rib, not surprisingly), the center placard provides excerpts from verses 18 and 22 in chapter 2 of Genesis telling bits of that story. To the left of that placard is another that instructs on how to understand gender from this story: "Eve (like Adam) was specially fashioned by God and did not come from an animal. Eve was not made from dust but from the side of Adam. God made male and female fit for different roles from the beginning." On the other side of the center placard, we get more instruction. Below a text attributed to Jesus Christ that speaks of "one flesh" we learn that "The special creation of Adam and Eve is the foundation for marriage: one man and one woman. The fact that they were one flesh is the basis for the oneness of marriage." Here we see what is repeated throughout the walk-through—amidst the cacophony we are given a simple instruction to remember.

Notably, the verses that these simple instructions are meant to make clear appear superimposed over a background of Hebrew text. Thus, the suggestion is made that these interpretive instructions are, like the Word itself, transparent to God's intention since they are based in the first efforts to put God's Word into human language. Although Hebrew text sometimes appears upside down in the Creation Museum thereby raising questions about whether anyone at the Creation Museum has ever actually read the Bible in its original languages, the appearance is given that these simple instructions are based in the authoritative text. Thus, for those of us who cannot decipher Hebrew and therefore have no hope of ever reading God's Word in its original languages, we can take comfort that when it comes to God's creation of woman, all that we need to know is that Eve was created from Adam's rib and therefore marriage must be between a man and a woman. Simple indeed.

This strategy of simplification amidst confusion can be seen at this level of individual verses. It can also be seen on a larger scale. That is, amidst all of this confusion, the Creation Museum tells a very simple and much-reduced story about what God's Word is. At the Creation Museum, the Bible is not a collection of several books written by many hands that tells the

incredibly strange and complex story of the people of God over many ages. The Word is very simple here. It is, put briefly, that all of human history may be understood as a series of willful efforts to ignore the obvious and powerful truth of God's Word. According to the Creation Museum, God has always been clear in His¹² intentions for human kind: we are not to eat of that one tree, we are not to murder another human being, we are to marry only members of the opposite sex, and so forth. Still, human kind insists on doing just the opposite. We therefore should not be surprised that, like any responsible parent, God has from time to time seen fit to punish our disobedience to his simple Word, sometimes nearly wiping us out completely. Fortunately, though, God loves us and so He has given us a second chance in the form of Jesus Christ. If we will just decide once and for all to obey His Word, then we can be saved. But if we refuse this chance, then we will be eternally damned and rightfully so.

Putting an End to That Dangerous Idea

Before bringing this paper to a close, I want to return to a room we passed through almost without remark on our virtual tour. It is to my mind the most disconcerting and revealing room in the whole Museum. It appears just after the prophets and apostles room and just before Graffiti Alley. Thus, it is sandwiched between two starkly contrasting moments in a narrative. In the first moment, God makes His Word available to His people by means of specially designated agents—prophets and apostles. In the second moment, society is in a state of thoroughgoing decay (even white suburban Protestants are lost to all manner of sin). The room that I want to describe now stands between these two moments. It is the pivot that turns the one moment into the other. As such, it reveals the Creation Museum's rather astonishing view of what lies at the heart of our current depraved state.

As we turn the corner from the room of the prophets and apostles, we see a series of placards (which I mentioned earlier) that recounts some of the especially foolish and sometimes fatal efforts by human beings to "Question," "Destroy," "Criticize," and so forth, God's Word, including the "Latest Attack," which

is to “Question Biblical time.” To our immediate right, we see the figure of Luther standing at the door to the All Saints Church in Wittenberg and wielding his mallet as he hangs his ninety-five theses. In the adjacent corner, we see a model of Guttenberg’s printing press, which is credited with making the Bible “the biggest seller of all time.” And we also have a couple of Bibles here—more about that in a moment.

So, what is disconcerting here? So far, the room sounds like a celebration of Luther, the Reformation, and the broad dissemination of the Bible. Perhaps. But if that is so, why is it positioned between the prophets and apostles, on the one hand, who knew God’s Word well and Graffiti Alley, on the other, where ignoring God’s Word is the order of the day?

The answer, I submit, can be found on a strange mural that appears on the wall next to the printing press. Much can be said about this mural (and, indeed, it is a focus of the essay that Bill Trollinger and I wrote together on the Museum). For my purposes here, I want to focus on just four features of it. First, this mural purports to tell the story of the church’s (rather than individuals’) turn from God’s Word. Second, it does so by way of a timeline shaped into an arc that is descending. Third, below the arc are positioned the usual suspects, like Rene Descartes and Charles Darwin, who promulgated the ideas that tempted the church to turn from God’s Word. Above the line of the arc appear church figures who were so tempted. Some of them are also ones we would expect, like Galileo and Francis Bacon, who, according to the captions put with them, put science before God’s Word. Fourth, also appearing on that arc are surprising figures like Thomas Chalmers (who developed the gap theory of Creation) and Hugh Miller (who developed the day-age theory of Creation). Their appearance here is surprising because these were stalwart defenders of Creationism, just not of the 6 24-hour day sort. Perhaps even more surprising is the appearance of the Scofield Reference Bible, long taken by Fundamentalists to be so authoritative that even its footnotes were seen as inspired. It appears near the very bottom of the arc because it too supported the gap theory and, in so doing, ignored “Biblical time.”

I have said that this room is disconcerting, and we are starting to see why. As Bill and I argue in our essay one big reason this room causes concern is that it blames earnest Christians, even Fundamentalist Creationists, for the church's supposed fall away from the Word. By making this claim, the Creation Museum states its position clearly—anyone, even a Fundamentalist Creationist, who does not hold to a 6 24-hour day Creation does not belong in the fold.

That said, I want to bring to draw attention to another disconcerting, though much more subtle, feature of this mural: Luther's location on it. Looked at quickly, we might say he is positioned at the top of the arc, prior to the decline. But if we look again, we see that he is actually positioned after the Gutenberg Press and on the beginning of the downward arc. Can this be so? If it is, what does it mean?

I opened this presentation with Socrates' lament of writing. I then went on to talk about how all of his fears seemed to be realized in the course of the Protestant Reformation as Luther called the priesthood of all believers to read his translated Bible and make sense of it themselves. Ever since, the meaning of the Bible has proliferated, sometimes beyond recognition. As I survey the scene of this room—Luther at the door, the printing press, and Luther at the top (with the printing press) of that downward arc—I cannot help but infer that the reason this room is sandwiched between the prophets and apostles, on the one hand, and the thoroughgoing corruption of our culture even among white Protestants, on the other, is that at the root of the problem is the dissemination of a Bible that believers can actually read. Indeed, as I survey this room and its place in the narrative of the Creation Museum, I cannot help but wonder if the Creation Museum is much more in sympathy with Socrates' desire to control Truth than with Luther's determination to democratize it.

Almost as if to say this is so, there is one more feature of this strange room to which I want to draw attention. In the center of the room, with Luther on one side and the printing press on the other, we see the only Bible that appears in the entire two-to-

three-hour walk-through experience. And it is under lock and key. Though laid open, most of us cannot make out its meaning for the text is in Greek. Thus the Bible appears in the Creation Museum not only beyond our grasp but also inaccessible to our minds.

I should mention that the Bible appears just two more times in the Museum proper.¹³ In both instances, the Bible is also under lock and key. Near the end of the walk-through we come to a glass case built into a wall that houses the Bible that belonged to the father of Ken Hamm (the man behind the Creation Museum). Thus, the presentation of this Bible serves as a memorial to Hamm's father's love of the Word. A Bible also appears in one other Museum space—a floor-to-ceiling glass case that is home to many fossils. Here, we find it in the hands of a full-size human skeleton. Dangerous idea indeed!

Whatever the creators of the Creation Museum intended to say about the Protestant Reformation, one thing is clear: this is not what Luther had in mind. He did not argue for the priesthood of all believers and translate the Bible into the vernacular so that centuries later a museum purportedly committed to *sola scriptura* would deploy a wide array of new technologies of confusion along side a grossly oversimplified and ideologically coded interpretation of the Bible. When the Bible is not under lock and key, the Creation Museum means to fix it once and for all, to stop the flow of interpretations and make it speak only one word, and a simple and politically charged word at that.

From the perspective of the liberal arts and, specifically, of reading, the Creation Museum means to arrest deep reading on behalf of indoctrination. And as parents bring their home-schooled children in droves to the Creation Museum, this is cause for deep concern. From the perspective of faith, I wish to remind the reader of the parable of the sower. According to this parable, in which Jesus called for the scattering of God's Word to all people without concern for their ability or lack thereof to come up with the "right" reading,¹⁴ Jesus had faith in the ability of God's Word to speak truth despite the limits of readers and the perils of reading. And Luther had faith that people of God,

despite their intellectual and other limits, when gathered together in the presence of the Holy Spirit, could be trusted to find God's Word amidst his many, complicated, and often strange words. Unlike Jesus and Luther, we should note, the Creation Museum seems to have very little faith in either God's Word or God's people.

¹ Plato, "Phaedrus," in *Plato on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. Jean Nienkamp, trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (New York: Routledge, 1999), 210 (275e).

² Plato has Socrates contrast the problem of writing with the noble aims and process of philosophical dialectic whereby "The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be." Ibid 211 (277a). For an insightful reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* that contrasts Plato's "dream of communication" (wherein only the proper vessel ever receives the word) with Jesus' broadcast word (wherein all are invited to hear it), see John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) 67.

⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 53.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The forthcoming reading of the Creation Museum is based in the growing body of literature emerging in the disciplines of English Studies and Communication Studies known as visual rhetoric. Briefly put, visual rhetoric is interested in discerning the strategies and impacts of visual communication, broadly conceived. Whereas historically rhetoric has been understood in primarily linguistic terms, increasing numbers of scholars recognize that human beings are persuaded by the visual culture that surrounds them. For a sample of some especially important work in this field, see Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Dianne S. Hope, eds. *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008).

⁷ As of summer 2011, the fees were as follows: adult at \$24.95, senior at \$19.95, and \$14.95 per child.

⁸ Perhaps it is worthwhile to note a slippage in the Creation Museum between God's Word and the words that appear in the Bible, read literally. The assumption here, a founding assumption of Protestant Fundamentalism, is that the meaning of God's Word can be read right off the surface of the text. That is to say, a literal (whatever that means exactly) interpretation reflects simply and directly the meaning of God's Word.

⁹ I should note that just after we pass through Adam and Eve's sin, we move through a short section in which we witness the pain and suffering that is the consequence of the Fall—the pain of childbirth, starvation, drug abuse, mushroom clouds, and so forth. These images appear either as large black-and-white photographs mounted on poured concrete walls or as black-and-white images projected directly onto poured concrete walls. In this way, the import of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's word is made vivid for our time.

¹⁰ That essay, "The Creation Museum: Hegemonic Rhetoric in the Service of the Religious Right" is currently under review at *Religion and American Culture*.

¹¹ Others have written on the topic of deep reading and on the way that the Internet and other technologies are making it very difficult for human beings to read deeply anymore. Carr's book is a great resource for the many scientific studies that have been published on the topic. Also see Maryanne Wolf, "Our 'Deep Reading' Brain: Its Digital Evolution Poses Questions," *Nieman Reports*, 64 (2): 7-8.

¹² At the Creation Museum, the Christian God is undoubtedly a male figure.

¹³ Bibles do appear on the shelves of the Dragon Hall Book Store, which is located in the Museum building but is not part of the walk-through experience. Amidst many bookcases filled with books on such topics as flood geology, the Christian "heritage" of the founding fathers, and how Obama is responsible for the "Erosion of Christian America," there are four shelves in one bookcase that holds English Standard Version Bibles, Gift & Award Bibles, and the *New Defender's Study Bible: Understanding Critical Issues of Faith from a Literal Creationist Viewpoint* by Henry M. Morris, who developed the theory of flood geology.

¹⁴ For more on the parable of the sower and how its message seems to contrast sharply with Plato's "dream of human communication" see, John Duram Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

Founded by leaders of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, Maryville College is related to the Presbyterian Church USA in a voluntary covenant. In an atmosphere of freedom and sensitivity, Maryville College bears witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ who challenges all human beings to search for truth, to work for justice, to develop wisdom, and to become loving persons. Continuing in this vital faith, the College believes that it must listen attentively and humbly to all human voices so that it may hear the call of God no matter how God may speak.

—from the College's Statement of Purpose

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