A road trip to Noah’s Ark

My in-laws took the whole family to a monument to young earth creationism. What could go wrong?

by Liz Charlotte Grant
May 20, 2025

The Ark Encounter, in Williamstown, Kentucky (Photo: Answers in Genesis)

As the bus rounds the corner, the world’s largest freestanding timber-frame structure comes into view: Kentucky’s architectural claim-to-fame, a replica of a mythic Ancient Near Eastern structure, Noah’s Ark. “I never get sick of this view,

praise God," says our shuttle driver.

The replica is the centerpiece of a museum called the Ark Encounter, a non-profit "outreach" of the conservative Christian apologetics ministry Answers in Genesis, founded by Ken Ham. This monument to Young Earth Creationism is 45 minutes from the Creation Museum in northern Kentucky, also founded by Ham. To conservative evangelicals, Young Earth Creationism is the belief that the God of the Hebrew and Christian Bible made the entire cosmos, including our conscious selves and any bit of matter from here to the backside of the furthest universe, in six 24-hour days less than 10,000 years ago.

Since its opening in 2016, they've trekked by the busload to this niche religious museum complex, paying steep entrance fees ($64.99 per adult, $31.99 for kids aged 11 and 17, free for kids 10 and under; plus, an additional $15 to park in the museum lot) to stand elbow to elbow, poring over dense plaques and animatronic scenes depicting the literalist histories of Genesis.

Over the years, the museum has added related exhibits, the most notable being the one my family and I are touring today. My in-laws have visited the museum, but they want to take the grandchildren—whose religious training from their parents (me and my husband) is suspect. Guessing (correctly) that my husband and I will object if we have to hand over any of our own money to Ham's ministries, my in-laws graciously foot the substantial bill for our family of four, ensuring our grudging agreement to accompany them. So we pack picnic lunches, drive an hour in a rented SUV, board the shuttle bus, and spend four hours wandering inside the Ark.

The construction matches the exact dimensions given in the Bible, according to the builders, although some necessary creative liberties had to be taken to make such a space meet contemporary building codes (electricity, plumbing, and spray foam insulation instead of pitch for waterproofing, for example). The museum is massive: 510 feet long, 85 feet wide, and 51 feet high. Visitors traverse three "decks," beginning on deck 1 with a recreation of the Ark's possible storage rooms. Deck 2 focuses on the evils of the "pre-flood world," according to a creative reading of Genesis, explaining exactly how Noah may have built the Ark and featuring animatronic animals in bamboo cages. Deck 3 reconstructs the family living areas. All the decks reflect the contentious fundamentalist worldview, setting science, geology, and the biblical flood narrative in conflict.

I try to engage in good faith, out of respect for my in-laws, and I find the first deck compelling. Designers have outfitted this floor for immersion: clay electrical “oil” lamps provide dim lighting; a soundtrack plays animal noises, rain, waves, the chirping of caged creatures, and the creaking of a ship’s hull; large clay jars stacked end to end represent how the Ark would have provided stored fresh water and other supplies for a year-long stint at sea.

But as I journey further up the ark, the tone of the plaques becomes stringent, as if the story of Noah and God’s horrific judgment might motivate a museum-goer to consider how the judgment of God might, likewise, fall on her.

The mother of a friend once asked me—all of ten years old, pumping my legs on the swings—“Why doesn’t the Bible mention dinosaurs?” I suppose she and I had been debating the merits of Christianity and my family’s religious beliefs, of which she did not approve. When I didn’t answer right away, she supposed her question had stumped me, but she hadn’t, not really. The presence or absence of dinosaurs in the Bible changed nothing for me, and I told her so. I had unshakeable confidence in the historicity of a text that predated my oldest grandparent by millennia.

I went to a private Christian school that emphasized *private* over *Christian,* but I can’t remember learning a single thing about dinosaurs or evolution. Not even when I enrolled in Geology 101 at my moderate private evangelical college. You may rightly wonder, what does one study in geology class, if not the origins of what lies in the ground? The answer is: rocks. Rocks only. Never fossils. I remember holding the rough bodies of stones between my fingers, noting their names and characteristics (igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic), their strength or weakness. We didn’t stray into the questions geologists ask of epochs and shifting climates and the extinction of creatures, the place of *homo sapiens* in our planet’s history, the mystery of time as revealed in the strata of cliffs. Rocks were safe; fossils, not so much.

Though the Bible never mentions dinosaurs as we know them through the fossil record, there are dozens represented at the Ark Encounter. The museum depicts dinosaurs existing peacefully alongside early humanity. One plaque asks, *Did Noah bring any now-extinct animals onto the ark?* Of course, say the curators: “Up to 85 kinds of dinosaurs were on the ark, including 2 Tyrannosaurids, 2 Stegosaurids, 2 Ceratopsids, and 2 Brachiosaruids.” Statues of dinosaurs appear in nearly every cage on the second deck—there’s Dimetrodon, Cotylorhynchus, Scutosaurus, Specimen Snmk Pal 1136, Quetzalcoatlus, and a Tyrannosaurus Rex, among others.

When tallied, these young earth theologians count over 6,500 animals who would have journeyed with Noah for an entire year, several hundred of which were tame or juvenile dinosaurs. (Taming, shrinking, or making the dinosaurs young is one way of dealing with the complexity of traveling with these carnivores.)

I did not expect this doubling down. My husband, on the other hand, who grew up hearing tales of vegetarian T-Rexes who existed peacefully alongside Adam and Eve, tells me that he understands the question of fossils to be Young Earth Creationism's greatest conundrum. How do these theologians refute the hard evidence—literally, the bones of creatures who lived and died millions of years before humanity existed on our planet? The entire museum is an attempt at answering this single question.

When I return home, I read Susan L. Trollinger and Willam Vance Trollinger Jr.'s scholarly examination of the museum, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*. All museums are rhetorical, they say. Each museum asserts a narrative of history, highlighting what curators deem important and then creating a story from those relics. Even the display of artifacts—for example, on a plinth behind glass or within a curated collection of other objects from its region or time—applies meaning. The Creation Museum is an "alternative facts" natural history museum making a rhetorical argument for the historicity of the Bible.

The curators' argument is that the Bible is entirely trustworthy because God is entirely trustworthy; therefore, any cosmology that differs from the Bible is wrong. The early records known as Genesis should be taken as historical fact, and if the words of Genesis do not square with the natural sciences—do not even square with observable reality—well then, trust first and the answer will come to you later. Theirs is the "God of the gaps," who fills the holes in our knowledge like caulk. The key to knowledge is trust.

Yet total belief in the Bible above human perception, above evidence, insinuates that humanity prefers deception to truth. We sinners cannot trust ourselves, and we should especially distrust those who doubt the inerrancy of scripture. Those who lack faith betray the same arrogance and self-belief that led Adam and Eve to sin.

In other words, the Creation Museum is the most sophisticated and expensive presuppositional apologetic on the globe today. No wonder my in-laws wanted to bring their doubting family members to the Ark.

As our museum time concludes, I feel curious to gauge my children's reactions. Have they been convinced? On the ride home, my youngest says he enjoyed the dinosaurs. My oldest says she could have spent hours studying the examples of toy arks from around the world. And they both wish they could have gotten a closer look at the architectural model of the Ark Encounter behind glass. Neither of them seems to care whether the events depicted were real or true. I feel a pang of pride.

That's when I feel something else: a strong urge to tell my children what to think, to explain the impossibility of everything they just saw, to refute the absurd apologetics. But I catch myself. To my curious and playful ten- and twelve-year-old, doctrine had never been the point of our museum trip. They just spent the day with people they loved and people who loved them, and that matters more to them than the plaques on the wall.

I have a hunch that my in-laws were disappointed by my kids' lack of interest in the questions raised by the Ark. Sometimes I feel the same way; I want them to care about what I care about. I want to lecture. Of course I've told my kids about Darwin, evolution, fossils, and dinosaurs. They've already visited the evolution wing in Denver's Natural History Museum (the grandparents tagged along for that trip too). But I also want to teach them to trust their own minds, senses, and intuition. I will not demand they believe as I do or lose their sense of belonging in the family.

For now, our trip to the ark seems like a goofy side quest to my kids. But as we drive away, I wonder: how will it look to them ten years from now? How will they interpret the faith of their parents and grandparents?

One thing is for certain: We'll decline the next invitation to the ark.