

CREATIONISM AT THE GRASS ROOTS: A STUDY OF A LOCAL CREATIONIST INSTITUTION (380 pp.)

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Relying on the book of Genesis as a source text, young-earth creationists or “creation scientists” claim to find physical evidence that the earth was created in six 24-hour periods less than ten thousand years ago and that most of the geologic column was laid down in a year-long worldwide flood. Unsurprisingly, these claims lead to a boundary dispute over the definition of science, in which mainstream scientists impugn the validity of creation science and creation scientists respond in kind. Although young-earth creationism is a growing movement, little is known about it. In particular, little is known about how creationists view the relationship between creationism and science or how the rhetoric of moral, cultural, environmental, and/or biological decline informs creationist practice. In order to investigate these issues, I studied the Fossil Museum (pseudonym), a local young-earth creationist institution, through a combination of naturalistic inquiry and visitor interviews.

With respect to the rhetoric of decline, I found that cultural, environmental, and biological decline appear to function independently of one another in Fossil Museum rhetoric. With respect to views of the relationship between creationism and science, I found that despite having limited training or experience in science and despite committing numerous scientific errors, Fossil Museum associates respect and emulate

science. Believing that physical evidence mediated by honest science will vindicate young-earth creationism, Fossil Museum associates speak of science in highly Baconian terms, invoking the ideal of assumption-free data and privileging observation over inference. They also accept the notion that science should be falsifiable and they suggest that on this criterion, mainstream science is not scientific. Yet because of their belief that physical evidence can vindicate their position, they openly discuss counterevidence to young-earth creationism, regarding such counterevidence as anomalies for future resolution rather than occasions for crisis. I conclude that because of Fossil Museum associates' honest approach to physical data and their belief that science can resolve disputes, productive dialogue is possible and desirable between mainstream scientists and some young-earth creationists, but such dialogue will be useful only if it is aimed at mutual understanding rather than mutual conversion.