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Ghosts, mysteries and creationists

by John Blanton

Early in April NTS advisor Joe Barnhart and I received an invite to debate creationist Ralph Muncaster on TV. The venue was the Joni Lamb show on the Daystar Television Network.¹ Daystar is devoted completely to religious programming, and you can catch Joni and the rest of the crew on Channel 2 in the DFW area.

Ralph Muncaster is a young Earth creationist (YEC) who's been running a crusade against evolution for several years. His Web site explains it:

Is there evidence of God's existence? Is the Bible really true? A former atheist and hardcore Bible skeptic, Ralph Muncaster spent 15 years conducting research to dispute the Bible. To Ralph, it seemed that the Bible could not possibly be consistent with such sciences as anthropology, molecular biology and physics. Armed with an engineering education and a critical, questioning mind, to his surprise the more he searched, the more evidence he found—evidence that supports the Bible's claims. In 1986, Ralph became aware of the prophetic accuracy of the Bible. He recognized that such precision is "statistically impossible". Investigating the scientific and historical documentation and its consistency with the Bible, he was startled by his findings: manuscripts written thousands of years ago contain information that could not possibly have been known at that time . . . without divine intervention.²

Muncaster is a prolific writer of books that explain his beliefs on religion in general and evolution/creationism in particular. Some of his books are:

- 101 Reasons You Can Believe
- Does the Bible Predict the Future?
- Why Are Scientists Turning to God?
- Creation Vs. Evolution

EVENTS CALENDAR

May Program

Saturday, May 8, at 2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas,
(Center for Non-Profit
Management)

Unlocking the Mystery of Life

A presentation of a hot, new creationist video. Here's what the producers have to say:

"*Unlocking the Mystery of Life* is the story of contemporary scientists who are advancing a powerful, but controversial, idea—the theory of 'intelligent design.'"

We shall see!

This meeting is free and open to the public.

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- Science: Was the Bible Ahead of It's Time?
- Are There Contradictions in the Bible?
- What Really Happened Christmas Morning?
- Is the Bible Really a Message from God?
- Why Does God Allow Suffering?
- What Really Happens When You Die?

You can get these books from Amazon.com through the NTS Web site. Just go to this item in the May newsletter and click on the titles above.³

The Joni Lamb show runs thirty minutes, and part of that time is given over to requests for donations. That gave Joe and me only a few minutes each with Ralph, and I spent my flash in the spotlight answering his claims about abiogenesis. Even the simplest living cell, Ralph said, is way too complex to have developed by accident in one fell swoop. Being the engineer he is, he then laid out the probability calculations.

I couldn't check his calculations on the spot, but I was ready to agree his conclusions were probably close to the mark. It would be just about impossible for a single cell to pop into existence by accident. Of course, science doesn't claim that anything even nearly like that happened, so such computations are just a pointless exercise with a calculator. Which pointlessness is lost on those who buy Ralph's kind of argument.

Joe and I had grouched about going to a lot of trouble to show up and only getting to debate for less than half an hour, so the producers decided to use the opportunity and make hay while the sun shines, so to speak. After the scheduled program was in the can the producers had us all three on the set, then turned on the mikes, and let the tape roll. They figured they could get as many as two more shows at the expense of the extended session.

Joni Lamb talks the language of her audience, and her audience is dead sure that evolution is the antichrist. For myself, I am sure her audience is immune to any attempts to educate them about the science behind evolution. When I got a chance to speak to Joni's audience I reported that in the real world, the world that exists in that rarified spectrum above Channel 2, a great number of very serious Christians find mainstream science to be no challenge to their faith. "Being a Christian doesn't mean you have to be stupid," I emphasized.

Joe Barnhart teaches about philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas, and he argued very skillfully that Joni's audience is driving Christian belief off on a tangent from its original course. Joe's arguments relied on historical research and the work of numerous biblical scholars. Unfortunately, Joni's audience doesn't cotton to any contrary facts.

Daystar promised us a tape of the show, and a recent e-mail indicates we will have the tape shortly. Watch for a showing at a future Skeptics meeting.

In the mean time:

The crew doing the tape for the *Mystery Hunters* program on the Discovery Channel came by my house to show their thermal imagery. They had been to San Antonio, where they collected thermal video in a supposedly haunted hotel.

NTS board member Prasad Golla and I viewed the video and tried to unravel the mystery that was on the screen. There were scenes with vertical stripes and bars, a strange geometric shape with a white orb where a head ought to be, and a dark ellipse that seemed to float in space. The dark ellipse was the most intriguing.

Most thermal imaging systems render cold regions as dark, so we asked the crew if there was anything cold in the room when they made the video. Turns out there was. An ice bucket, full of ice and with the lid off was the likely suspect. We even surmised the sides of the bucket were insulated (indicating one of your better class hotels), because the rest of the bucket blended in with the background, being at room temperature, literally.

Then they sprang their surprise—their never before seen video. “What was that?” we were asked. We will keep that a secret until the show airs later this year.

Readers will recall the perilous adventure of Danny and Ginny Barnett when they went down to the Alamo city to work with the *ghost children* video crew.⁴ Their encounter with the “ghost children” of San Antonio—also on the *Mystery Hunters* show—was aired on April 28. The interviews with Danny and the local paranormal society didn’t make it past the cutting room, but Danny made a tape, which you will be able to come by and see at a future NTS meeting.



References

- 1 <http://www.daystar.com/>
- 2 <http://www.evidencesofgod.com/>
- 3 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2004/2004may/may2004.htm#ghosts>
- 4 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2003/2003november/november2003.htm#ghost>

Web News

Family hopes psychic can provide answers about teen’s death

[from WRAL.com]

<http://www.wral.com/news/2876433/detail.html>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-03-30.htm#psychic>

A Garner, North Carolina, family has consulted a psychic to solve the mystery of their son’s death. Joshua Davis’ body was found along a road, and the psychic has told the family “that a car came by with something sticking out of the window and hit Joshua on the head. That same theory is something the Garner Police Department seriously considered.”

“Davis admitted that he is skeptical about the psychic’s visions, but there is one prediction he hopes comes true. The psychic said police will make an arrest next week.”

Evolution education down to a science on Web

[from the *San Francisco Chronicle*]

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/03/29/MNGQV5SIDC1.DTL>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-03-30.htm#evolution>

UC Berkeley’s Museum of Paleontology has created a Web site offering information on the teaching of evolution in general and natural selection in particular. It’s at , and it came from a conference four years ago dealing with resistance to evolution curricula in the schools.

“We realized we really needed to put new resources into teachers’ hands, and that’s how the idea of using the Internet emerged,” said David Lindberg, chairman of Berkeley’s Department of Integrative Biology and former director of the paleontology museum.

Grants from the National Science Foundation and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute were used to set up the site and “to develop a version for the general public and another for students.

"The new site offers a basic course in the methods of science and, in particular, the mechanics of evolution. It provides a history of evolutionary thought and discusses "misconceptions" and "pitfalls" that teachers may confront in explaining evolutionary concepts.

"Evolution, simply put, is descent with modification," the Web site states in its introduction. "Through the process of descent with modification, the common ancestor of life on Earth gave rise to the fantastic

The view from 2025: How Design beat Darwin

http://www.worldmag.com/world/issue/04-03-04/cover_1.asp

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-03-30.htm#darwin>

[The following is reproduced in its entirety from the Web site.]

Cover story: *WORLD* ASKED FOUR leaders of the Intelligent Design Movement to have some fun: Imagine writing in 2025, on the 100th anniversary of the famous Scopes "monkey" trial, and explain how Darwinism has bit the dust, unable to rebut the evidence that what we see around us could not have arisen merely by time plus chance.

By The Editors

WORLD ASKED FOUR leaders of the Intelligent Design Movement to have some fun: Imagine writing in 2025, on the 100th anniversary of the famous Scopes "monkey" trial, and explain how Darwinism has bit the dust, unable to rebut the evidence that what we see around us could not have arisen merely by time plus chance. Our fanciful historians are:

Phillip Johnson, *WORLD*'s Daniel of the Year for 2003, is a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of *Darwin on Trial* (1991) and many other books, including *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*, *Reason in the Balance*, *The Wedge of Truth*, and *The Right Questions*.

Jonathan Wells, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute and the author of *Icons of Evolution* (2000), received both a Ph.D. in biology from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in theology from Yale University.

Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz, research professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, is the author of more than 100 scientific publications in the fields of neuroscience and psychia-

try. His latest book is *The Mind and the Brain* (released in paperback last year).

William Dembski, associate research professor at Baylor and a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute, received a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Chicago and is the author of, among other books, *The Design Inference* (1998) and *The Design Revolution* (2004).

Herbal industry fending off FDA

[from *The Boston Globe*]

http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/03/26/herbal_industry_fending_off_fda?mode=PF

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-03-30.htm#herbal>

The feds have banned two harmful dietary supplements, but the herbal industry is not taking it lying down. For example, kava, which is linked to liver failure, is banned in several European nations, but it remains for sale here. Congress excluded DHEA "from a pending bill that would restrict steroid-like substances." DHEA is a hormone selling at an annual volume of \$47.

Supplement makers and sellers are also mobilizing the estimated 65 percent of Americans who use these products to oppose a separate bill that would give the US Food and Drug Administration more authority over the industry. The millions of dollars the industry has contributed to members of Congress over the last decade ensures that the companies' views are heard.

Utah Republican Orrin Hatch has been backing the cause of dietary supplements for years and has most recently received \$41,750 in campaign contributions from the industry.

"The dietary supplement industry is very powerful politically," said Senator Richard J. Durbin, an Illinois Democrat who has introduced a bill that would impose more safety rules on supplement makers.

"There's a reluctance with this administration to take on the industry."

The industry claims its products are safer than "most drugs," and they "deserve to remain free of the requirements for safety testing that cover drugs.

"For years, the FDA has had authority to regulate dietary supplements, but the balance of power shifted dramatically in 1994. Pressed by a massive grass-roots

campaign orchestrated by the industry, Congress voted to allow most supplements on the market without tests for safety or efficacy and to require the FDA to prove that supplements are unsafe before halting sales.

Sales of supplements have shot up since then (and so have reports of deaths related to their use).

Divine intervention: Man in search party prays, then hears child crying

[from the *San Francisco Chronicle*]

sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/03/26/MISSING.TMP

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-03-30.htm#divine>

A man helping in the search for a missing child stopped to pray—and heard 3-year-old Aidan Burke crying.

"It was like divine intervention," said Dave Churchill, 45, a San Jose fire captain who lives in Boulder Creek and decided to help search for the missing neighbor boy on his day off.

After being found, Aidan chowed down on a granola bar before going downhill to be reunited with his mother. □

What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the *What's New* column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Dietary supplements: Consumer Reports lists the "dirty dozen."

A cover story in the May issue of *Consumer Reports* identifies 12 supplements that should be banned, increasing pressure to amend or repeal the obscene 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (WN 02 Jan 04).

Creation science: is it science or religion, or just business?

When they're demanding equal time in public science education, creationists usually insist that their position is arrived at

by rigorous application of scientific principles. Kent Hovind, a creation-science evangelist, operates Dino Land, a creationist theme park in Pensacola, FL. But now the IRS has charged Hovind with trying to evade taxes on more than \$1 million in income. Hovind, who also sells creationist books and videos, argues that the IRS is targeting him because of his religious beliefs.

Dietary supplements: aren't hormones natural substances too?

Among the worst pieces of legislation ever enacted, the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act exempted natural supplements from proof of safety, efficacy or purity, creating a huge uncontrolled industry. The framers had in mind such natural substances as herbs. But before long the industry began testing the definition of "natural." Dehydroepiandrosterone, or DHEA, is a hormone that humans and other primates manufacture in the adrenal gland. Closely related to "andro," the steroid taken by home run record holder Mark McGwire, it is wildly popular among wannabes. When Congress moved to ban steroids, DHEA was exempted from the bill due to pressure from the supplement industry.

Hafnium-178: just when you think life can't get any sillier.

The cover of *Popular Mechanics* for May proclaims the dawn of the age of atomic airplanes powered by miniature nuclear reactors. These are not old-fashioned fission reactors. These are the new "quantum nucleonic reactors," a.k.a. hafnium-178 isomer reactors. The problem with fission reactors was that they required too much shielding. The problem with the hafnium-178 reactor is that it doesn't exist. Carl Collins at U. of Texas, Dallas, claimed to be able to trigger decay of the hafnium-178 nuclear isomer with x-rays. That would be a miracle, but several other groups found it just doesn't happen. That detail was left out of the *Popular Mechanics* story, which contains nothing beyond the *New Scientist* story a year ago (WN 15 Aug 03). The hafnium-178 isomer avalanche now seems destined to join hydrinos, zero-point energy, gravity shields, cold fusion and all the other free-energy fantasies that only work for believers. In the paranormal world this is known as "the investigator effect."

Peer review: "improved" OMB guidelines are merely outrageous.

Faced with challenges from science on everything from missile defense to the environment, the White House Office of Management and Budget wants to control the flow of scientific information within the federal system. OMB proposed "peer review" guidelines to prevent release of "junk science." How can scientists object to peer review? Or to blocking junk science? In the name of conflict of interest, however, academic experts who received federal grant money were excluded from peer-review

panels, with no similar restrictions on industry experts. Industry loved it; scientists declared war. So OMB modified the guidelines to eliminate a few of the bad parts. Everyone agreed it was “much improved.” It’s the oldest ploy in Washington.

Dietary supplements: IOM calls for changes in the 1994 DSHEA.

Among the worst pieces of legislation ever enacted, the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act exempted suppliers of natural supplements from the need to prove safety, efficacy, or purity (WN 16 Aug 02). The FDA can take a supplement off the market if it’s found to be harmful, but has succeeded in doing so only one time, after a celebrity died (WN 2 Jan 04). In a new report, the Institute of Medicine urges that the law be changed to improve the process. But the supplement industry wields enormous power; a bill to expand the FDA’s authority is stalled in conference.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

Stephen Jay Gould

The unofficial Stephen Jay Gould Web site is at <http://www.stephenjaygould.org/>

Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) was among the best known and widely read scientists of the late 20th century. A paleontologist and educator at Harvard University, Gould made his largest contributions to science as the leading spokes-person for evolutionary theory. His monthly columns in *Natural History* magazine and his popular works on evolution have earned him numerous awards and one of the largest readerships in the popular-science genre — penning altogether over twenty successful books throughout his career.

For more than 30 years Gould served on the faculty at Harvard, where he was Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology, Professor of Geology, Biology, and the History of Science, as well as curator for Invertebrate Paleontology at the institution’s Museum of Comparative Zoology. On this Web site you will find articles by Gould and his colleagues focusing on the finer points of his work, the nature of life’s evolution, and the general ontogeny of evolutionary theory.

“Objectivity cannot be equated with mental blankness; rather, objectivity resides in recognizing your preferences and then subjecting them to especially harsh scrutiny — and also in a willingness to revise or abandon your theories when the tests fail (as they usually do).”

— Stephen Jay Gould

Creationists admit radioactive decay

Kevin R. Henke, Ph.D.

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For decades, young-Earth creationists (YECs) have vainly searched the geology and geochemistry literature to find ways of discrediting radiometric dating and protecting their antiquated biblical interpretations. YEC John Woodmorappe (a pseudonym), for example, has been at the forefront in misquoting and misrepresenting radiometric dating results from the geology and geochemistry literature (e.g., Woodmorappe, 1979, 1999). Woodmorappe’s shotgun attacks against radiometric dating even include the ridiculous accusation that concordant radiometric dates may be nothing more than products of “chance”; that is, random numbers (Woodmorappe, 1999, Figure 20, p. 51; p. 52, 87-92). Woodmorappe (1999, p. 85) even endorses YEC Robert Witter’s outrageous charge that geochronologists could obtain just as good radiometric results by throwing darts at a concordia diagram. I often refer to this groundless attack as “Woodmorappe’s Crapshoot”.

A small group of YECs with legitimate Ph.D.s (including D. Russell Humphreys and John R. Baumgardner) have formed the RATE (Radioisotopes and the Age of The Earth) committee to attack the validity of radiometric dating. Rather than embracing the embarrassing distortions and nonsensical accusations of Woodmorappe or John and Henry Morris, Humphreys and Baumgardner have finally realized that geology and geochemistry are not going to give them the answers that they want. In an *Answers in Genesis* (AiG) article Carl Wieland had this to say:

When physicist Dr Russell Humphreys was still at Sandia National Laboratories (he now works full-time for ICR), he and Dr John Baumgardner (still with Los Alamos National Laboratory) were both convinced that they knew the direction in which to look for the definitive answer to the radiometric dating puzzle. [new paragraph] Others had tried—and for some, the search went on for a while in the early RATE days—to find the answer in geological processes. But Drs Humphreys and Baumgardner realized that there were too many independent lines of evidence (the variety of elements used in “standard” radioisotope dating, mature uranium radiohalos, fission track dating and more) that indicated that huge amounts of radioactive decay had actually taken place. It would be hard to imagine that geologic processes could explain all these. Rather, there was likely to be a single, unifying answer that concerned the nuclear decay processes themselves.

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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In other words, after decades of YEC failures to undermine radiometric dating with geology and geochemistry, these YEC leaders now recognize that enormous amounts of radioactive decay have occurred. They are now relying on nuclear physics, e.g., Chaffin, 2003 (Adobe Acrobat file) and probably an ample supply of groundless miracles to speed up the decay rates without frying Adam or Noah. Humphreys et al. (2003) (Adobe Acrobat file), although full of errors and bad assumptions, also makes the following candid admission (p. 3), which is a veiled attack on Woodmorappe’s “crapshoot” and similar YEC schemes that involve bogus accusations against radiometric dating methods and equipment:

Samples 1 through 3 had helium retentions of 58, 27 and 17 percent. The fact that these percentages are high confirms that a large amount of nuclear decay did indeed occur in the zircons. Other evidence strongly supports much nuclear decay having occurred in the past [Humphreys, 2000, p. 335-337]. **We emphasize this point because many creationists have assumed that “old” radioisotopic ages are merely an artifact of anal-**

ysis, not really indicating the occurrence of large amounts of nuclear decay. But according to the measured amount of lead physically present in the zircons, approximately 1.5 billion years worth — at today’s rates — of nuclear decay occurred.

[my emphasis]

CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, YECs have invoked a large array of imaginative and fruitless excuses to defame radiometric dating. These attacks include: magma mixing, Woodmorappe’s crapshoot, excess argon, neutron fluxes, neutrinos, and just plain creationist magic. Humphreys, Baumgardner, and other YECs in the ICR-AIG alliance have finally realized that they can’t use geology and geochemistry to undermine radiometric dating. They are now relying on physics and probably a liberal dose of untenable miracles to save their dogma. YECs must realize that they’re rapidly running out of “scientific excuses” for confusing and deluding the public about the true nature of radiometric dating.

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