One Night in the Dorm

The five of us were really supposed to be studying. “Study Hour,” was a scheduled time every evening after chapel to work on assignments. Be quiet and get to studying were the rules until break time at 9:15 pm. The Dean of Students and the Tutors would “make the rounds” as enforcers on occasion. One never knew when one of them might open the door with a clipboard in hand. Nevertheless, while we sat at our desks facing the walls, we were always tempted to get off task. Sooner or later someone might say or do something that would set off a conversation. At the time I was a college freshman. My roommates were a college senior, who functioned as the “Room Buck” or person in charge, along with three high school students. The five of us who were preparing for the teaching or preaching ministries had been placed in the same set of rooms for the duration of the year. I could not have asked for a better Room Buck; the conversations were filled with both insight and wit.

One evening we somehow got to speculating on the question of whether Adam and Eve had navels. Our navels, of course, are artifacts of our one time attachment to the placenta during development inside our mothers. In the case of Adam and Eve, of course, this attachment did not occur. So the question was raised.

Two viewpoints quickly developed in the room. One school of thought was that Adam and Eve might be embarrassed by their lack of navels and would constantly be called on to explain this basic difference. Not having a navel would call into question their membership as humans. For support I even shared a science fiction story I had read where a dangerous space alien who had carefully taken the form of an attractive human female was detected because she forgot to replicate the belly button. This error of omission gave her away to the hero of the story who then dispatched her with his ray gun. So perhaps God would just give Adam and Eve navels to save them from undue attention and speculation about their membership in the human species.

The other school of thought was that God would not create evidences for something that had never happened. The belly button would imply a nonexistent connection in a former time that never was. Furthermore, someone added that perhaps the lack of navels could function as conversation pieces and provide opportunities for evangelism in the early days after the Fall. Lack of a navel would testify to Creation.

The arguments continued for some time. The volume increased. Our high school freshman listened until he could stand the exchange no longer. Perhaps he wanted firm answers in life or perhaps he needed to get back to his books and wanted us to be quiet. At any rate he became upset and just broke in with, “Adam DID TOO have a belly button.” And as his dogmatic words were spoken, the Dean of Men swung open the door. All the air in the room seemed to have been withdrawn. Absolute silence occurred.
Now Dean Delmar Brick, who was also a pastor and a serious scholar of Latin who had studied in Rome, suffered no nonsense. I fully expected that he would surely severely discipline us and call us to repent. The respect that students had for the authority of teachers and pastors in the 1950s is more rare today. Back then our parents would support whatever would be declared by a teacher or person in authority (in loco parentis) and often even add more punishment. In what seemed an unending silence, we waited for a deserved scolding that would cut to the heart of our very reasons for our being at this school that prepared church workers. The clock on my desk seemed to be running slower and ticking very loudly.

The Dean cleared his voice, we turned, and he looked seriously at each of us, one by one. He was not smiling. We slowly turned back to our books and stared at them, pretending to study.

Then suddenly, he merely said with firmness, “Carry on, gentlemen,” and spun around, closing the door behind him. We glanced at each other, waited until we thought that the Dean must be far down the hall, and then burst into a nervous laughter that relieved the tension. The timing could not have been more perfect to get us into trouble, but Dean Brick chose to ignore it. While we thanked God for the undeserved pardon, we could only wonder what the Dean must have thought at the silly sentence that greeted his entrance.

**A More Serious Consideration**

At first, the issue of the existence of Adam and Eve’s navels may seem silly, but theologians and scientists have given the problem very serious thought. In the 19th Century geologists were compiling evidences that they felt indicated that the world was older than the Scriptures seem to allow. Charles Darwin was greatly influenced by this. The layers of rock and the fossils found in them stirred thought in both scientists and theologians.

An English contemporary of Darwin was Philip Henry Gosse (1810-1888). Gosse was the outstanding British naturalist of the time. His fame rested on his popular books and lectures on plants and animals. He visited Jamaica and wrote extensively on the birds. He has been credited with discovering ten new species and is considered to be the father of ornithology for the island. He was also a lay preacher and took a turn at Sunday sermons while in Jamaica.

Having been blessed in being able to visit Jamaica several times to teach and study, I felt that no Christian could experience the place, see all the creatures, and fail to give glory to God. Finding that Gosse had written about Jamaica, I looked for expression of his faith and was not disappointed. We both saw everything as God’s work, and he honored the Creator several times as he wrote. At the end of A Naturalist’s Sojourn in Jamaica he closed with, “Great are Thy works, Jehovah! Infinite Thy power! What thought can measure Thee, or tongue relate Thee?”

Gosse decided to take on the problem of the growing geological evidences for an older earth. Furthermore, Darwin is likely to have shared his pre-publication thoughts about natural selection with Gosse. While Darwin favored this older earth with gradual change to explain our biological origins, Gosse decided to accept both the Scriptural and the geological chronologies.

In combining science and Scripture, Gosse proposed that the processes of nature were circular. For example, chickens come from eggs and eggs come from chickens without end. The act of creation by God, Gosse submitted, required breaking into such natural cycles. Gosse did not claim to know where God would begin, but in wisdom He would choose a given point. So when God made the first chicken, it would be implied that it had come from an egg. The egg was, of course, nonexistent. Nevertheless, all evidences and reason would point backwards to this non-egg by virtue of the nature of things. Today, we could add that some of the calcium in the bones of the chicken would have
come from the nonexistent shell. When one begins a circle at any point and draws in a given direction, say clockwise, one cannot escape the implication of implied points that precede the starting point even if they have not been drawn. Gosse called such appearances of preexistence, “prochronological.” He presented many illustrations. For example, an adult hippopotamus needs to have teeth that become beveled by wear and tear. Good function of the teeth requires this. Accordingly, Gosse reasoned that when God made a hippo, He would make it with teeth that are already “aged” and beveled so that the creature could eat. The observed virtual wear and tear, however, would again imply a history that did not exist.

Gosse decided that God must have treated the entire creation this way. The layers of rock and all the fossils were necessary evidences of events and creatures that never were. They are there because they are part of natural cycles, necessary for the present to be as it is. All evidences before Creation had no real existence in time...they were part of a prochronological past that never was. Gosse said that God could not break into a circle without implying the natural history before that entry. God was not only creating a creature but the entire natural concept of the creature and all that was necessary for it to be. Hence, all of nature, according to Gosse, was filled with evidences of a preexistence that had never happened.

So, the problem of Adam’s belly button is resolved for Gosse. He said yes to navels for Adam and Eve as part of breaking into the circle of life. Furthermore, if you were in the Garden of Eden and took a saw to a just created tree, it would have rings that indicated a past that never happened. Moreover, if God were to neglect such appearances of age, the “just created” would be different from the latecomers in both form and function. We would not be able to recognize many of the creatures as members of their species.

So Gosse launched his thesis with a publisher: Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot. Omphalos is Greek for navel. Gosse had very high hopes for the book with a silly title; in it both Scripture and geology would be preserved.

A Negative Reception

This was not to be. Gosse’s hopes were dashed. Theologians and scientists both rejected the Omphalos argument. The theologians claimed that the prochronological evidences made God tell falsehoods in nature. Furthermore, there were other ideas in the air at the time. Some held that the Creation story was only local to the Garden and the rest of the earth was older. Others argued the language of Scripture allowed a gap for a huge amount of time between the first verse of Genesis and the account of the Six Days. On the other hand, some thought that the Genesis “Days” must be eras. Further yet, some imagined that millions of years might have past before Adam sinned. They added the idea that Adam would not have aged before sin and that his final age of 930 years was only counted from his Fall. To add to the mix, apparently many others thought that things would just work out with more investigation and that there was no real problem. They did not need Gosse to panic and remind them of the problem.

Moreover, scientists did not like the idea of studying things that had no existence even though Gosse claimed that this was as valuable as studying things in real time. He held that all investigations of nature, whether real or virtual, would teach about the glory and wonder of God’s Creation. However, uniformitarianism and gradualism had been firmly established by Charles Lyell, another contemporary of Darwin’s, as the prevailing assumptions in geology. This approach required that 1) present day geological understandings should be used to explain the phenomena in the past, 2) changes in nature are slow and relatively steady, and 3) natural laws are constant and eternal. Assumptions are everything in reasoning, and these assumptions drove explanations that fit into a longer real time. While Gosse wanted a literal reading of Scripture, scientists wanted a literal
“reading” of geology. Rejected by both the theological and scientific camps, Gosse was embarrassed and devastated.

Ron Roizen has an interesting insight into the times in which Gosse lived. Roizen believes that Omphalos, which was available only two years before the Origin of the Species, was generally rejected because society was becoming increasingly secularized. The rejection of Omphalos, in essence, acted as a measure of how much English society had shifted toward a worldview without theological underpinnings. Gosse was still trying to make science serve theology. Many in society were not of that mind. Both theologians and scientists held empirical science high in their system of understanding. Shortly, Darwin would push the shift in thinking harder.

The Modern Rejection of Omphalos

Philip Gosse fairs no better today. Stephen Jay Gould, a strong defender of evolution, wrote one of his many essays on Gosse. One difficulty with the Omphalos, writes Gould, is that not all of nature’s processes are cyclical. Gould maintained that natural selection drives nature in a linear direction. It is interesting to note that Lyell and many others in the 19th Century had no problem with Gosse’s cycles. Lyell also believed in cycles. It is not so today. Current science believes in a “Big Bang” beginning and an ultra-violet death. No matter, the cycles, though dear to Gosse, are not required for a Creation with age.

Gould followed with a second and more important reason to scientifically reject Gosse. He pointed out that Omphalos theory isn’t testable. It cannot be falsified and therefore is not scientific. Gould stated:

But what is so desperately wrong with Omphalos? Only this really (and perhaps paradoxically): that we can devise no way to find out whether it is wrong – or for that matter, right. Omphalos is the classic example of an utterly untestable notion, for the world will look exactly the same in all its intricate detail whether fossils and strata are prochronic or products of an extended history. When we realize that Omphalos must be rejected for this methodological absurdity, not for any demonstrated factual inaccuracy, then we will understand science as a way of knowing….

Science is a procedure for testing and rejection hypotheses, not a compendium of certain knowledge. Claims that can be proved incorrect lie within its domain (as false statements to be sure, but as proposals that meet the primary methodological criterion of testability). But theories that cannot be tested in principle are not part of science. Science is doing, not clever cogitation; we [scientists] reject Omphalos as useless, not wrong.

Gould, of course, had all theology and Creation science in mind as also being outside of the realm of science. Note well that science alone is judging what is acceptable. To be fair, many feel that macroevolutionary theory suffers the same fate. It too cannot be tested. There is no way to disprove evolution.

Conclusion

Lutherans assume that the Bible has plain meanings within the grasp of the layperson who faithfully studies it, considers the context, knows the historical/social setting, and understands the problems being addressed. This is a hallmark of the Reformation to put the Scriptures in the hands of the people. Gosse’s Creation with age idea remains attractive because he is defending a very straightforward understanding of the Genesis account. He does not have to argue for changing of meanings of words or to propose possible additions to the time frame. He is also rightly putting Scripture above science. Clearly, Scripture does indicate a Creation with age. For examples, Adam and Eve appear at a virtual age at which they are self-sufficient. Shall we guess that their virtual ages
were eighteen when their real ages were zero? Adam and Eve are also told to eat mature fruit from mature trees in the Garden. We also know from current biology that Eve’s just created ovaries needed to contain eggs that had virtually aged to the prophase I stage to begin the populating of the world. It would be implied that these eggs had been set aside and matured to that state when she was still inside her non-existent mother as is the case with other human females. In summary, appearances of built-in age would abound in the fresh Creation.

The credit we have to grant to Gosse’s *Omphalos* is that in any discussion of instantaneous creation or any miracle, one cannot escape some degree of an appearance of time-events that never were. Martin Gardner, a well-known skeptic and no friend of arguments for Creation, wrote about Gosse’s proposal:

> This is not as ridiculous as it may seem at first. Consider, for example, the difficulties which face any believer in a six-day creation. Although it is possible to imagine Adam without a navel, it is difficult to imagine him without bones, hair, teeth, and fingernails. Yet all these features bear in them the evidence of past accretions of growth. In fact there is not an organ or tissue of the body which does not presuppose a previous growth history… The same is true of every plant and animal. As Gosse points out, the tusks of an elephant exhibit past stages, the nautilus keeps adding chambers to its shell, the turtle adds laminae to its plates… In short – if God created the earth as described in the Bible, he must have created it a “going concern.”

Gardner concludes that Gosse’s argument, while not well received, was flawless. It preserves both theology and geology. He rates Gosse as making other Creationist arguments pale by comparison.10

Accordingly, what happens when science is applied to the Creation? The ruling assumptions will profoundly influence the conclusions. If the assumptions include uniformitarianism and also exclude anything supernatural, God will not be recognized. Virtual histories in a Creation with age could cause scientific dating methods to go astray. Even in other miracles in Scripture, when Jesus calms a storm, from a scientific viewpoint this implies going back into time and changing all the previous weather conditions to produce the calm. These would be conditions that never existed in real time. Similarly, changing water into wine implies a grapevine, making a mash, allowing fermentation by microbes to occur in time that never was. Extra loaves and fish would also have a nonexistent history that the reader can imagine.11 One simply cannot apply science to miracles without puzzlement over time-events.

Would God be guilty of lying to us and misleading us if virtual evidences existed in nature and implied an older earth or virtual processes? Some feel that this is a very important question. First, recognize that it is the elevation of human reason over Scripture that drives the question. Its source is a different spirit. There also would be present an extreme confidence in our ability to read the book of nature correctly to conclude that God is misleading us. Scripture must guide reason. Scripture tells us plainly that God created, and that needs to guide our thinking. We have to accept that everything we experience does somehow fit into what Scripture declares even if we fail to understand it in this life.

Does Gosse’s Creation with age argument solve everything? No, it is an interesting idea and shows us a possibility, but questions will still remain. One might wonder why there are fossils in the geological record that seem to “dead end” and have no required connection to the present species. Why would they be required in virtual time? Furthermore, we should never tie our faith to any human reasoning. August Pieper stated, “… the laws of finite reason are not applicable to the infinite. We know in one way; God knows in all ways. We know mediately; God knows immediately. We know partially; God knows completely. We know very little, God knows all. We know one thing after the other; God knows all things at the same time.”12
Scripture is not a science book. The function of Scripture is to tell us how we can get to Heaven through faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. As we are reminded in the Book of Job, we were not present at the Creation to observe it, and we cannot apply our reason and our science to this or any other miracle (Job 38: 4). Our science will not work when God uses unnatural means. We need to remind ourselves that Creation was a miracle. When we try to get beyond what Scripture states, we have to admit with Job that there are things “that are too wonderful” for us. If we make inferences from Scripture, we must be careful to recognize them as just that and never put them on the same level as God’s word. Gosse knew that and reminded his readers of the differences between God’s Word and the reasoning we do. We need to be humble in these things and trust what God has told us. We can apply what Gosse said about his Omphalos theory to our general lack of knowledge about God’s ways of doing things: This may be a tough truth, but the truth is the truth.

1 The location for the event was Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. At the time a preparatory high school was on the campus with the college of education. Five students of mixed ages would share two rooms in the Men’s Dorm (now called Summit Hall): a bedroom and a study room.


3 Wisconsin Lutheran College, Martin Luther College, and Bethany College participate in a biennial Marine Ecology Course that is led by Dr. Robert Anderson of WLC during the Christmas break.


6 Lyell influenced Darwin profoundly. Darwin took the Bible and Lyell’s Geology text with him on the voyage of the Beagle.


8 Stephen Jay Gould. “Adam’s Navel” The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History. New York: Norton, 1985, 99-113. Gould may have been attracted to Gosse’s fate because of his own experiences. Gould who was one of the founders of punctuated equilibrium theory (where evolution varies its rate) is also guilty of violating the assumptions of uniformitarianism and gradualism. Hence, Gould, too, had also suffered much negative reception from other scientists and could appreciate Gosse’s situation.

9 Birch L.C. & Ehrlich P.R., “Evolutionary History and Population Biology,” Nature Vol. 214, 22 April 1967, 352. The authors state, “Our theory of evolution has become, as (Karl) Popper described, one which cannot be refuted by any possible observations. Every conceivable observation can be fitted into it. It is thus “outside of empirical science” but not necessarily false. No one can think of ways in which to test it. Ideas, either without basis or based on a few laboratory experiments carried out in extremely simplified systems, have attained currency far beyond their validity. They have become part of an evolutionary dogma accepted by most of us as part of our training.” Note that philosopher Popper later changed his mind about this, but many still believe this is true.
Navels

10 Martin Gardner. *Fads and Fallacies In the Name of Science*. New York: Dover, 1957, 125. Gardner entered the University of Chicago as a Christian. He rejected the theory of evolution following the arguments of George McCready Price, a Seventh-day Adventist creationist. A single course at Chicago in geology convinced him that Price was wrong. As a result he says that he quickly lost all faith in Christianity. The Flight of Peter Fromm by Gardner is a semi-autobiographical novel that is based on this experience.


13 Philip H. Gosse. Ibid., 372. Gosse states, “The conclusions hitherto received have been but inferences deduced from certain premises: the witness who reveals the premises does not testify to the inference.

14 Philip H. Gosse. Ibid., 354.

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**SESQUITERPENE***

That we may know what God has done
The Father, Spirit, and the Son
He writes his name among His works -
A set of five, and three in one.

Sesquiterpene, farnesol
Branch of carbons, simple, small
When lily of the valley blooms
Its scent will help us to recall

That though the universe is grand -
A testament to God’s command -
The wonder lies in not just size,
But in the details that He planned.

--- Heidi Dahlmann

*Heidi Dahlmann is a sophomore and a chemistry major at Wisconsin Lutheran College. The occasion for Heidi’s fine poetic effort was her reflection on a lecture in organic chemistry on terpenes given by Dr. Kevin Glaeske. Terpenes are the basis for many natural molecules that we sense as odors and are found as resins and essential oils (Glaeske). Farnesol is the scent found in the lily of the valley. Heidi’s reference to a “A set of five” is the five carbon unit called an isoprene unit. Three of these bond to form farnesol. A terpene molecule uses two of these units. Hence, farnesol is a sesquiterpene (SESS-queh-TER-peen) because it uses one and a half terpenes. At all levels of Creation, the Christian sees, reflects, and is reminded of the glory of God. - Paul Boehlke

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