



Did Adam and Eve Have Navels?

What did Adam and Eve never have, yet they gave two of them to each of their children?

Answer: Parents.

—Old children's riddle

If you ever find yourself in the company of a fundamentalist, much pleasant argumentation can result if you ask him or her a simple question: Did Adam and Eve have bellybuttons?

For those who believe the Bible to be historically accurate, this is not a trivial question. If Adam and Eve did *not* have navels, then they were not perfect human beings. On the other hand, if they *had* navels, then the navels would imply a birth they never experienced.

Bruce Felton and Mark Fowler are the authors of *The Best, Worst, and Most Unusual* (Galahad Books, 1994). In this entertaining reference work, they devote several paragraphs (pp. 146–147) to what they call “the worst theological dispute.” They take this to be the acrimonious debate, which has been going on ever since the book of Genesis was written, over whether the first human pair had what Sir Thomas Browne, in 1646, called “that tortuosity or complicated

nodosity we usually call the Navell.”

Brown's opinion was that Adam and Eve, because they had no parents, must have had perfectly smooth abdomens. In 1752, according to Felton and Fowler, the definitive treatise on the topic was published in Germany. It was titled *Untersuchung der Frage: Ob unsere ersten Uraltern, Adam und Eve, einen Nabel gehabt* (*Examination on the Question: Whether Our First Ancestors, Adam and Eve, Possessed a Navel*). After discussing all sides of this difficult question, the author, Dr. Christian Tobias Ephraim Reinhard, finally concluded that the famous pair were navelless.

As Felton and Fowler tell us, during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance some paintings of Adam and Eve show navels; others do not. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting of Adam being created by God's finger shows Adam with a navel. Most artists of later periods followed Michelangelo's lead.¹

In 1944 the old conundrum had a hilarious revival in the United States Congress. A Public Affairs booklet titled “The Races of Mankind,” by Columbia University anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, was amusingly illustrated by Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt later became notorious as an abstract expressionist who painted canvases that were solid black, or blue, or some other single color. One of his cartoons in the Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 85 had, as here shown, a little black dot on the

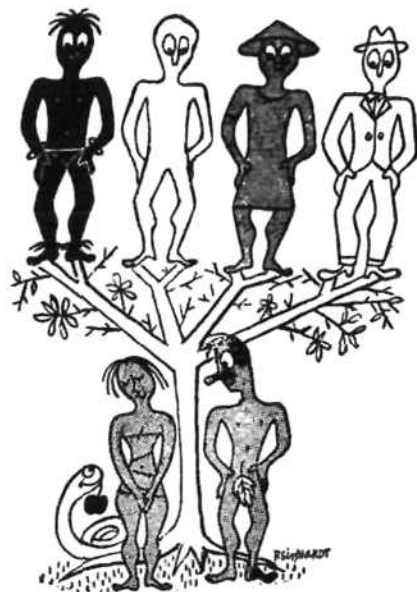


Illustration by Ad Reinhardt from the 1944 Public Affairs pamphlet “The Races of Mankind.”

abdomens of Adam and Eve.

Congressman Carl T. Durham of North Carolina and his House Military Affairs Committee were not amused. They believed that distribution of the government pamphlet to American servicemen would be an insult to those who were fundamentalists. As Felton and Fowler point out, some cynics suspected that the congressmen really objected to a table in the booklet showing that northern blacks scored higher on Army Air Force intelligence tests than southern whites. I suspect that another basis for their opposition to the

Martin Gardner's latest book is The Last Recreations (Springer-Verlag, Copernicus, 1997), a collection of twenty-three of his Scientific American columns from the last seven years before his retirement from the magazine in 1981.

booklet was their belief that Weltfish was a Communist, based on her refusal to testify whether she was or was not a member of the Communist Party. Years later, in 1953, she was much in the news when she charged the United States with using germ warfare in Korea.

The old question about the navels of Adam and Eve figured prominently in one of the strangest books ever written. The book, written by an eminent scientist who wished to defend the accuracy of Genesis, was titled *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*, and it was published in England in 1857, two years before Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Omphalos is the Greek word for navel. A wonderful ancient myth tells how Zeus, in an effort to determine the exact center of a circular flat Earth, had two eagles fly at the same speed from opposite ends of one of the circle's diameters. They met at Delphi. To mark the spot, a piece of white marble, called the Omphalos Stone, was placed in Apollo's temple at Delphi with a gold eagle on each side of the stone. The stone was often depicted on Greek coins and vases, usually in the shape of half an egg. (See William J. Woodhouse's detailed article "Omphalos" in James Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.)

The author of *Omphalos* was British zoologist Philip Henry Gosse (1810–1888), father of Sir William Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), a noted English poet and critic.² A fundamentalist in the Plymouth Brethren sect, the elder Gosse realized that fossils of plants and animals strongly implied life that predated Adam and Eve. At the same time, he was certain that the entire universe was created in six literal days about four thousand years before Christ.

Was there any way to harmonize this stark contradiction between Genesis and the fossil record? Gosse was struck by what Jorge Luis Borges would later call an idea of "monstrous elegance." If God created Adam and Eve with navels, implying a birth they never had, could not God just as easily have created a record of a past history of the Earth that never existed except in the Divine Mind?

As Gosse realized, it is not just a question of bellybuttons. Adam and Eve

had bones, teeth, hair, fingernails, and all sorts of other features that contained evidence of previous growth. Allow me to quote at length from my 1952 book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*:

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, trees bear the annual rings of growth produced by seasonal variations. "Every argument," he writes, "by which the physiologist can prove . . . that yonder cow was once a foetus . . . will apply with exactly the same power to show that the newly created cow was an embryo some years before creation." All this is developed by the author in learned detail, for several hundred pages, and illustrated with dozens of wood engravings.

In short—if God created the earth as described in the Bible, he must have created it a "going concern." Once this is seen as inevitable, there is little difficulty in extending the concept to the earth's geologic history. Evidence of the slow erosion of land by rivers, of the twisting and tilting of strata, mountains of limestone formed by remains of marine life, lava which flowed from long-extinct volcanoes, glacier scratchings upon rock, footprints of prehistoric animals, teeth marks on buried bones, and millions of fossils sprinkled through the earth—all these and many other features testify to past geological events which *never actually took place*.

"It may be objected," writes Gosse, "that to assume the world to have been created with fossil skeletons in its crust—skeletons of animals that never really existed—is to charge the Creator with forming objects whose sole purpose was to deceive us. The reply is obvious. Were the concentric timber-rings of a created tree formed merely to deceive? Were the growth lines of a created shell intended to deceive? Was the navel of the created Man intended to deceive him into the persuasion that he had a parent?"

So thorough is Gosse in covering every aspect of this question that he even discusses the finding of coprolites, fossil excrement. Up until now, he writes, this "has been considered a more than ordinarily triumphant proof of real pre-existence." Yet, he points out, it offers no more difficulty than the fact that waste matter would certainly exist in the intestines of the newly-formed Adam. Blood must



Henri Rousseau, Eve, 1905–07

have flowed through his arteries, and blood presupposes chyle and chyme, which in turn presupposes an indigestible residuum in the intestines. "It may seem at first sight ridiculous," he confesses, ". . . but truth is truth."

Gosse's argument is, in fact, quite flawless. Not a single truth of geology need be abandoned, yet the harmony with *Genesis* is complete. As Gosse pointed out, we might even suppose that God created the earth a few minutes ago, complete with all its cities and records, and memories in the minds of men, and there is no logical way to refute this as a possible theory.

Nevertheless, *Omphalos* was not well received. "Never was a book cast upon the waters with greater anticipation of success than was this curious, this obstinate, this fanatical volume," writes the younger Gosse in his book *Father and Son*. ". . . He offered it, with a glowing gesture, to atheists and Christians alike. . . . But, alas! atheists and Christians alike looked at it and laughed, and threw it away . . . even Charles Kingsley, from whom my father had expected the most instant appreciation, wrote that he could not . . . 'believe that God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie.' . . . a gloom, cold and dismal, descended upon our morning tea cups" (pp. 125–127).

As Harold Morowitz points out in his article "Navels of Eden" (*Science* 82, March 1982), Philip Gosse was acquainted with Thomas Huxley and elected to the Royal Society for his work on animals called rotifers. He had met Charles Darwin, and over a period of

many years exchanged friendly letters with Darwin about matters concerning plants and animals. "Not a word passes about evolution or creation," Morowitz writes, "or the enormous ideological gulf that separated the two great naturalists. The letters are quaint and polite and very British."

One of Edmund Gosse's best-known poems, "Ballad of Dead Cities," ends with the following stanza:

ENVOY

Prince, with a dolorous, ceaseless knell,
Above their wasted toil and crime
The waters of oblivion swell:
Where are the cities of old time?

Gosse could have written a poem about how the waters of oblivion dissolve even more rapidly such crank works as his father's effort to explain the fossil record.

I would have supposed that no creationist today could take *Omphalos* seriously. Not so! The Des Moines *Sunday Register* (March 22, 1987) published a letter from reader John Patterson arguing that the existence of a million-year-old supernova contradicted the notion that God created the entire universe about 4000 B.C. In its April issue, the newspaper ran the following response from a Donna Lowers:

In regard to John Patterson's letter . . . on the supernova as a well-documented fact of science—of course it is! However, he cannot prove evolution except by circumstantial evidence, and creationists cannot prove creation except by God's word.

To be a Christian requires one important element called faith. . . .

Yes, I believe in creation by God in six days! I also believe in one day He created full-grown trees that contained rings that any scientist would declare had been there for years. He created pockets of oil deep in the Earth that nature would take millions of years to process. He placed aquatic fossils far inland, and He created exploding stars for us to marvel about in the 20th century. . . .

Although few creationists today accept the thesis of *Omphalos*, a form of Gosse's argument is frequently invoked by young-Earthers to explain why the speed of light seems to prove the existence of galaxies so far from Earth that it has taken the light millions of years to reach us. God created the universe, they insist, with light from these distant galaxies *already on the way*! Gosse would have been delighted with this argument had he known about galaxies. Indeed, I myself like it better than the alternate conjecture that in the past light traveled millions of times faster than it does now.

As for the problem of navels, today's

young-Earth creationists, who believe God fabricated Adam from the dust of the Earth and Eve from Adam's rib, are strangely silent about the pair's navels. Silent, too, about other aspects of life that imply past histories. Would the trees in the Garden of Eden, for example, show rings if their trunks had been sliced? How would Jerry Falwell and other televangelists answer such questions?

Many liberal Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, now accept the evolution of the bodies of the first humans. However, as the present pope emphasized in his recent declaration that evolution is a legitimate theory (see *SI*, January/February 1997), one must insist that God infused immortal souls into Adam and Eve—souls not possessed by their apelike ancestors. This is now the opinion of almost all leading Catholic thinkers. It forces the belief that the first humans, whether one pair or more than two, were reared and suckled by mothers who were soulless beasts. I once wrote a story about this titled "The Horrible Horns"—the horns are the horns of a dilemma—that you will find in my collection *The No-Sided Professor* (Prometheus Books, 1987).

Bellybuttons are the topic of many old jokes, so let me end this column on a lighter note. It has been suggested that navels are most useful as a spot to put salt when lying on your back in bed and eating celery. And, an officer tells a civilian he's a naval surgeon. "Goodness me," the man replies, "how you surgeons specialize!"

Notes

1. How British artists handled the navel problem is discussed along with many reproductions of paintings in Horace Walpole's four-volume *Anecdotes of Paintings*, vol. 1, ch. 3. This monumental work, published in England during the years 1762 to 1771, was later expanded and revised by other authors. It may still be in print as an Ayer reprint.

2. Philip Gosse's many books include *Canadian Naturalist*; *Introduction to Zoology*; *The Ocean*; *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast*; *Aquarium*; *Birds of Jamaica*; *Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica*; *A Manual of Marine Zoology* (two volumes); *Life*; *Actinologia Britannica*; *The Romance of Natural History*; and other popular books. The eleventh edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says that for a time he taught zoology in Alabama. □

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