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*Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* by  
James S. Bielo (review)

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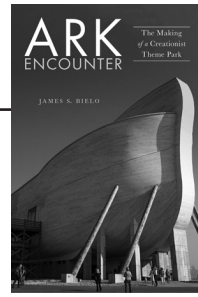
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## BOOK REVIEW

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**Kathryn Lofton**, *Yale University*



James S. Bielo, *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*. New York: New York University Press, 2018. 225 pp.

This work offers simultaneously an anthropology of Christianity, religious tourism, and project management. In *Ark Encounter*, James Bielo serves as a decidedly moderate observer of a \$150 million USD “to-scale” re-creation of the vessel described in Genesis 6–9, the inaugural book in the Hebrew Bible. The result of this re-creation is Ark Encounter, a creationist theme park in Kentucky that opened in 2016, featuring the 510-foot-long ark as the centerpiece of a multifaceted immersive experience of religion-entertainment. Much of the book’s originality derives from Bielo’s 43 months spent observing the design studio where the four members of the Answers in Genesis core creative team did their work planning Ark Encounter.

Bielo locates Ark Encounter in the global effort to materialize the Bible through tourist attractions such as biblical gardens, creation museums, biblical history museums, and re-creations. For their designers, developers, and investors, these tourist stops demonstrate the historic and scientific plausibility of Genesis and prove the logic of immersive entertainment as a form of religious evangelism.

Answers in Genesis is not the only organization that supports the development of such recreation, but it is the one with an especially American knack for eager branding. A self-described apologetic ministry, Answers in Genesis points to Deuteronomy 6:7 in its promotion of “Creation Vacations”: “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away.” As the Answers in Genesis website explains, “Opportunities to see and explore God’s amazing creation abound, whether at a national park, a Christian-themed venue, or a natural history

museum.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to offering creationist guides to natural formations like Devil’s Tower, Carlsbad, and the Badlands, Answers in Genesis also opened the Creation Museum in Kentucky in 2007. The development of such Christian-themed venues allows families to—in their idiom—*enjoy purpose-filled vacations*. As Bielo discovers, Answers in Genesis is unambiguously seeking to reach all tourists, Christian and not, in their effort to encourage a better appreciation for the Creator and correct the secular propaganda of natural history. Surveys about biblical understanding are rarely precision instruments, but most sociologists of religion agree that fewer than ten percent of Americans adhere to a strict creationist outlook in which the words of Genesis are interpreted literally. Ark Encounter is not only for that ten percent. Indeed, among the more revelatory findings of Bielo’s research is the realization that the audience that consumed most of the design team’s attention was “the *bête noire* of creationists: skeptics, dogmatic evolutionists, and self-identified atheists” (88).

If you have read anything addressing the secular in the last 20 years of scholarly writings on religion, this finding won’t exactly surprise you. Studies on the secular, secularism, and secularity repeatedly note that there is no idea of the “religious” that is not engaged with a formation of the secular. It is nonetheless striking to see and hear through Bielo’s reporting how overtly obsessed Christian designers are with non-Christian tourists. This is, as Bielo understands, a historic shift. Once upon a time, Christian tourism like Chautauqua or pilgrimages sought to revive a presumptively Christian world; now Christian tourism seeks to compel non-Christians to attend to Christian argumentative suppositions. Bielo’s work focuses on this as a missionary tactic bent ultimately upon conversion. Yet, I remain unconvinced that Answers in Genesis measures its success by recruiting new parishioners for off-site churches. Bielo’s research findings lead me to think that Answers in Genesis is more interested in gaining a place on the tourist map for itself than expanding the rolls in any given church. Bielo sees Ark Encounter (and other materializations of the Bible) as a “form of public culture seeking to bolster fundamentalism’s cultural legitimacy” (11). But the design team he follows, as well as the resultant theme park and museum, evince little theological or congregational interest. Instead, they show—as Bielo documents well—a successful attempt to make an immersive entertainment that stands sovereign relative to other religious contingencies.

I do not resist Bielo's convincing portrait of the design team and their effort to create coherent creationist affective attachments. I do contest Bielo's repeated deployment of "fundamentalist public culture" as the conceptual idiom uniting these efforts. Let me delve a bit further into Bielo's research to explain this distinction. Bielo begins the book by explaining why, for *Answers in Genesis*, spending \$150 million on a theme park makes more sense than spending that amount of money for other Christian efforts—humanitarian outreach, for example, or an alternative educational institution like a seminary. His contacts are consistent in their view: spreading their message through the park will do more good than any other use of funds. Why? It seems that the designers' programmatic hope is to generate affective attachments to the past and, specifically, to the biblical past. By transforming the written words of Genesis into a physical environment, *Answers in Genesis* allows contemporary visitors to establish a relationship with something chronologically and experientially distant. Bielo emphasizes the critical role authenticity plays here—how many Christians are "separated from the origins of their faith" and going to places like Ark Encounter bolsters their bond "with a part that is long gone and mediated many times over" (36). The global creationist movement therefore seeks to borrow from strategies of modern entertainment in order to authenticate Christian epistemology in the contemporary moment.

This explanation makes sense for some of the Christian attendees to the park, but it doesn't explain the designers' consuming interest in skeptics, evolutionists, and atheists. Through his ethnographic work, Bielo exposes how diligently *Answers in Genesis* designers worked to "perform authenticity" in their specific decisions about the architecture and gardens of Ark Encounter. In particular, by observing their debates about detailed design features, Bielo shows how "the cultural reproduction of biblical commitments is intimately tied to creativity and imagination," and is, therefore, quite similar to the work done by Disney imagineers or Pixar engineers (58). Bielo draws these analogies himself, mentioning how the work of *Answers in Genesis* has significant similarities with visual projects like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. But he wants there to be a difference between the works of secular commerce and *Answers in Genesis*, arguing that Ark Encounter "fosters a different attachment to the past" (177). Ark Encounter is, for Bielo, "a walking poetics of faith, through which a fundamentalist gaze is constructed" (168). Disney World is an escapist fantasy, Bielo explains; Ark Encounter immerses visitors in order to

connect to a past that makes them embattled in the cultural present. And being embattled with contemporary life is what defines fundamentalist public culture.

The majority of the book does not convey any information about religion as much as it conveys information about how an entertainment group designed a theme park. *Ark Encounter* focuses specifically on the production team creating this experience; notably this team never describes their work in religious terms. Chapter 1 focuses on Bielo's thematic concepts (devotional consumption, entertainment as play, and religious publicity); Chapter 2 describes the global genre of Bible tourist sites; Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe different aspects of the production team's creative labor, including examinations of their dynamics, as well as their concepts of conversion and history. Finally, Chapter 6 is a brief chapter observing closely the resultant experience of walking through Ark Encounter. Here, Bielo does not demonstrate that the defining feature of the park is an immersion in "sensory annotations that work to embody the fundamentalist gaze" (168). This would require a much stronger oppositional discursive regime within the park, such as the argumentative extremes depicted in the Hell Houses observed brilliantly by Ann Pellegrini in her 2007 *American Quarterly* article. With only Chapter 6 of *Ark Encounter* as our guide, it seems this materialization of the Bible is not about creating conflict in the contemporary moment as much as it is seeking to bring people personally into the past. In its publications and web materials, *Answers in Genesis* is more didactic and conflictual; in the physical world of Ark Encounter, the design intention seems to be more about attaching you to Noah's ancient world than contemporary anti-evolution crusades. Maybe subsequent scholarly readings of the park and its sensory landscape will exhume more polemical subtext within the theme park. For now, as Bielo reviews the result of his informants' creative work, he appraises the result positively: "they had created an affectively rich environment that affords multiple immersive possibilities" (140). As a sympathetic ethnographer, I wondered if Bielo's positive assessment of Ark Encounter derived more from his generous relationship with its creators than from what he saw at the park.

I say this because Bielo suggests a darker potential to this immersive experience. At one point, he observes: "To be immersed in the creationist past is to be immersed in a past where a universal flood killed everyone on earth except eight people" (90). Later in *Ark Encounter*, Bielo relates to an *Answers in Genesis* designer some excitement he had heard about the

theme park, noting that potential park visitors saw it as especially appealing for children. In an unusually divulging moment, the designer resisted this *Disneyfication*. “It’s actually a terrible story,” the Answers in Genesis-employed designer said. “Billions of people dying. It was a genocide. That’s the hard part, to tell the full truth” (139).

The “hard part” of this profound theological and cosmological violence does indeed seem to be what the designers evaded in their resulting designs. Instead, they focused on the labor of historical, anthropological, and botanical authentication—of getting right, and making fresh, a sensorial vision of the Biblical world without depicting the actual divine tyranny and absolutism Genesis also conveys. Team members told Bielo that they understood their work as a religious vocation. Bielo writes that their “faith is never *not* at work while they are at work” (79, emphasis added). But this faith, however articulated by the designers, was nowhere to be found in their discussion of their work, as Bielo explains:

They assessed their work as “fun” or “boring,” “inviting” or “distracting,” “appealing” or “confusing,” “interesting” or “simple,” “engaging” or “blah,” or, their most frequently used term of praise, “cool.” This art talk, this discourse of cool, never ran out of steam. Moreover, work was never assessed as “inspiring” or “edifying,” never promising to “bless” park visitors or bring them “closer to God.” The artists were never overly pleased with their own productions; they were all perfectionists, but not once did I hear them say of any piece of work that it was “inspired by the Spirit.” (78)

It is hard to assess *Ark Encounter* without assessing Ark Encounter. As a reader of the former, this reviewer is struck by the 43 months of non-theistic discourse witnessed by Bielo in the latter’s design studio. As much as Answers in Genesis may imagine itself a creationist warrior, what if its designers specifically had to drop the biggest bang in the creationist quiver in order to keep it, well, (in their most frequently used term of praise) cool? A true fundamentalist public culture is one in which you never would forget that what God giveth, God can also taketh away. In *Ark Encounter*, such condemnatory truth is smothered by the wildly secular commercial hope that next summer the whole family will still be together, still be alive in God’s bright sensorial dominion, and will enjoy again the immersive power of a Creation Vacation. ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>See <https://answersingenesis.org/creation-vacations/>.

**References:**

Pellegrini, Ann. 2007. "‘Signaling Through the Flames’: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling." *American Quarterly* 59(3):911-935.