

## The Omphalos Absurdity

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The Omphalos Absurdity is to explain something which is clearly the result of a formation process as having been created *in that condition*, thus denying that process. It is named for an incident which Edmund Gosse reports as an eyewitness:

This was the great moment in the history of thought when the theory of the mutability of species was preparing to throw a flood of light upon all departments of human speculation and action. It was becoming necessary to stand emphatically in one army or the other. Lyell was surrounding himself with disciples, who were making strides in the direction of discovery. Darwin had long been collecting facts with regard to the variation of animals and plants. Hooker and Wallace, Asa Gray and even Agassiz, each in his own sphere, were coming closer and closer to a perception of that secret which was first to reveal itself clearly to the patient and humble genius of Darwin . . . On the other side, the reactionaries . . . had not been idle. In 1857 the astounding question had for the first time been propounded with contumely, "What, then, did we come from an orang-outang?" The famous "Vestiges of Creation" had been supplying a sugar-and-water panacea for those who could not escape from the trend of evidence, and who yet clung to revelation . . .

In this period of intellectual ferment . . . many possible adherents were confidentially tested with hints and encouraged to reveal their bias in a whisper . . . Among those who were thus initiated or approached with a view toward possible illumination, was my Father. He was spoken to by Hooker, and later on by Darwin, after meetings of the Royal Society in the summer of 1857 . . .

Let it be admitted at once, mournful as the admission is, that every instinct in his intelligence went out at first to greet the new light. It had hardly done so, when a recollection of the opening chapter of "Genesis" checked it at the outset. He consulted with Carpenter, a great investigator, but one who was fully as incapable as himself of remodeling his ideas with regard to the old, accepted hypotheses. They both determined, on various grounds, to have nothing to do with the terrible theory, but to hold steadily to the law of the fixity of species.

My Father had never admired Sir Charles Lyell . . . For Darwin and Hooker, on the other hand, he had a profound esteem, and I know not whether this had anything to do with the fact that he chose, for his impetuous experiment in reaction, the field of geology, rather than that of zoology or botany. Lyell had been threatening to publish a book on the geological history of Man, which was to be a bombshell flung into the camp of the catastrophists. My Father, after long reflection, prepared a theory of his own, which, as he fondly hoped, would take the wind out of Lyell's sails, and justify geology to godly readers of "Genesis."

It was, very briefly, that there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, of slow development of organic forms, but that when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed. The theory, coarsely enough, and to my Father's great indignation, was defined by a hasty press as being this – that God had hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity. In truth, it was the logical and inevitable conclusion of accepting, literally, the doctrine of a sudden act of creation; it emphasized the fact that any breach in the circular course of nature could be conceived only on the supposition that the object created bore false witness to past processes, which had never taken place. For instance, Adam would certainly possess hair and teeth and bones in a condition which it must have taken many years to accomplish, yet he was created full-grown yesterday. He would certainly – though Thomas Browne denied it – display an omphalos, yet no umbilical cord had ever attached him to a mother.



Never was a book cast upon the waters with greater anticipations of success than was this curious, this obstinate, this fanatical volume. My Father lived in a fever of suspense, waiting for the tremendous issue. This “Omphalos” of his, he thought was to bring all the turmoil of scientific speculation to a close, fling geology into the arms of Scripture, and make the lion eat grass with the lamb. It was not surprising, he admitted, that there had been experienced an ever-increasing discord between the facts which geology brings to light and the direct statements of the early chapters of “Genesis.” Nobody was to blame for that. My Father, and my Father alone, possessed the secret of the enigma; he along held the key which could smoothly open the lock of geological mystery. He offered it, with a glowing gesture, to atheists and Christians alike. This was to be the universal panacea; this the system of intellectual therapeutics which could not but heal all the maladies of the age. But alas! atheists and Christians alike looked at it, and laughed, and threw it away.

In the course of that dismal winter, as the post began to bring in private letters, few and chilly, and public reviews, many and scornful, my Father looked in vain for the approval of the churches, and in vain for the acquiescence of the scientific societies, and in vain for the gratitude of those “thousands of thinking persons,” which he had rashly assured himself of receiving.

As his reconciliation of Scripture statements and geological deductions was welcomed nowhere; as Darwin continued silent, and the youthful Huxley was scornful, and even Charles Kingsley, from whom my Father had expected the most instant appreciation, wrote that he could not “give up the painful and slow conclusion of five and twenty years’ study of geology, and believe that God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie,” – as all this happened or failed to happen, a gloom, cold and dismal, descended upon our morning teacups . . .

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It might seem that the absurdity of this is too obvious for examples of it to recur in later and more scientifically accustomed centuries. On the contrary, it proliferates, and perhaps most vigorously in the area of what might otherwise be called philology. Texts that are manifestly the result of growth processes are attributed to single composition, often at a different date than the contents of those texts would imply. The chronicle of Confucius’s state of Lǚ, the Spring and Autumn (Chūn/Chyōu 春秋), which begins in the year 0722, and which in the 03rd century was extant as far as the year 0464, has been attributed to the authorship of Confucius (0500-0479). The Analects of the said Confucius (Lún Yǔ 論語), with its internal changes and reversals of basic doctrine, its intricate pattern of paired sayings sometimes interrupted by later interpolations which smooth out that doctrinal history, has been assigned to single composition or invention in the Hàn dynasty (0206-24). The Gospel of Mark, with its interpolations marking strata, and reflecting the evolution of Jesus sect doctrine beginning shortly after the Crucifixion (30) and extending to the execution of the Jerusalem leader Jacob Zebedee (45), has been located in the latter half of that century (after the destruction of the Temple in 70), or even in the first half of the following century. The Gospel of Luke, with its two beginnings, one (Lk 3:1f) a set of synchronisms proper to any account of the Historical Jesus, the other (Lk 1-2) acknowledging a late idea, the divine birth of Jesus, has been assigned<sup>1</sup> to single composition and been consigned to the same chronological dustbin: the years after, and sometimes long after, 70.

The teaching of evolution is illegal, or inadvisable, in many localities at present. To answer, then, the old Question of 1857: Yes, we do come from an orang-outang. And some of us are not very far removed from that origin.

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<sup>1</sup>With the honorable exception of Fitzmyer **Luke** 1/304-311.