

JURASSIC PARK—THE NEW ORTHODOXY?

Trevor Major, M.Sc., M.A.

Dinosaurs roam a private island off the coast of Costa Rica. Moats and high voltage fences keep the vicious *Tyrannosaurus* away from its natural prey and their human keepers. A giant *Apatosaurus* strolls gracefully across the fields, while an ostrich-like *Gallimimus* pauses to drink from a lake. This is Jurassic Park—a dinosaur zoo positioned in the theme-park market.

Yet before it has opened to the public, things begin to go awry. There are the usual budget overruns, but there also are accidents among the workers. The investors get nervous, and send a delegation of scientists to inspect the park. They are joined by two of the owner's grandchildren, and so begins an exciting adventure packed with teeth and claws.

The movie *Jurassic Park* broke box-office records. Promotion and merchandising reached heights all their own. Once again, Steven Spielberg delivered thrilling, wonder-filled entertainment.

Few people have missed the educational impact of this movie. Kids love dinosaurs, right? Of course, many of them will not see the movie because it gets very intense and graphic. But parents and teachers still can use the deluge of *Jurassic Park* paraphernalia to teach children all about dinosaurs. With such an intense interest, even little ones can master basic paleontology, nomenclature, and dinosaur biology.

Jurassic Park rode on the crest of a dinosaur craze that has been going on for many years now. The movie, and countless books on the subject, teach that dinosaurs were the product of evolution, and that millions of years separated man and dinosaurs. Fortunately, creationists can counter with good materials that teach a proper biblical perspective (see, for example, Taylor, 1987; Bromling, 1991; Gish, 1992). However, the movie warrants attention because it made such special claims.

CAN DINOSAURS BE CLONED?

First, we have to remember that *Jurassic Park* is science fiction. As one reviewer commented, the science “is only stuffing to ease the suspension of disbelief” (Gee,

1993). The fantasy behind the story is that scientists can clone dinosaurs. This was explained quite well in the movie, although the book by Michael Crichton (1990) discussed the process in more detail.

It began millions of years ago with mosquitoes sucking on dinosaur blood. Some of the pesky insects landed on trees, where they were trapped by sticky resin. After many years, the resin hardened into amber, thus preserving the insects and their last meal. It then is up to scientists at *Jurassic Park* to extract the stomach contents, and isolate the dinosaur DNA. However, the DNA was not intact, so they used sophisticated equipment to fill the gaps. Where this did not work, they used DNA from other organisms, such as frogs. Finally, they inserted the completed DNA sequence into crocodile ova, and the dinosaurs were allowed to grow in artificial eggshells.

This whole scheme brings up some important questions. For example, can scientists clone dinosaurs? The answer right now is “No.” The reason is that dinosaurs, like humans, are very complicated organisms. Scientists could clone individual cells or portions of DNA, but they will need a lot more than mummified blood cells. As David Grimaldi quipped, trying to reconstruct the whole dinosaur DNA sequence “would be like trying to reconstruct Tolstoy's *War and Peace* from a gigantic vat of alphabet soup” (1993, 102[6]:61).

Has anyone actually found dinosaur DNA? Not yet, but someone may announce a discovery in the near future. Already, scientists believe they have recovered DNA from insects, plants, pollen, mushrooms, and microscopic creatures entombed in amber. But if this amber is millions of years old, how could something as fragile as DNA survive for so long? Tomas Lindahl (1993) is so skeptical about recovering DNA from ancient amber that he is willing to suggest that labs are analyzing samples contaminated with modern DNA! The other alternative, and the one consistent with a biblical view of the world, is that the amber really is only a few thousand years old. Further, organisms preserved in amber are remarkably

similar to their present-day counterparts (see DeSalle, 1992; Cano, et al., 1993; H.N. Poinar, et al., 1993; G.O. Poinar, et al., 1993). This suggests that general stability, not large-scale change, is the dominating feature of life on Earth.

One last point needs to be mentioned while we are on the issue of cloning. As stated earlier, *Jurassic Park* scientists “patched” dinosaur genes with DNA from frogs. This was a reasonable thing to do, we are told, because all animals have a common ancestry, and so their DNA is very similar (Crichton, 1990, p. 209). However, similarity also can mean common design. Most cells carry out basic tasks that have to do with perpetuating life. Also, we would expect to find similarities in cells that perform the same function in different animals. Evolutionists frequently are quick to point out that our DNA is 99% the same as chimpanzee DNA. But this does not explain why we are flying space shuttles, while they have climbed little higher than the tree tops.

DID BIRDS EVOLVE FROM DINOSAURS?

One recurrent theme in the movie, and certainly one emphasized in the book, is that birds evolved from dinosaurs. This theory, developed by John Ostrom, is especially favored among paleontologists (Norman, 1991, p. 137). Ornithologists, however, are not convinced by this theory. They count all the differences between birds and dinosaurs, while Ostrom counts all the similarities.

The point is that evolutionists cannot agree on the origin of birds, and neither paleontologists nor ornithologists can account for something as fundamental as the feather.

CONCLUSION

Jurassic Park exerted great influence because it was such a juggernaut of a movie. Overnight, speculation became conventional wisdom. However, the idea of finding and cloning dinosaur DNA raises many questions that challenge evolution. The story also suggests that birds are modern dinosaurs, and yet there are many problems with this theory.

Dinosaurs, although extinct, are here to stay. They do indeed possess the power to spur the imagination of young minds. There is no need, however, for us to discourage this fascination. Yes, evolutionists use dinosaurs to promote their theory, but that should not deter us from discussing these amazing creatures with our children. We can use dinosaurs to teach about God’s creation. Let us give our children the tools to recognize good science, and to interpret it correctly.

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