

Noah's Ark Theme Park Wants to Show the Flood Was 'Plausible'

The biblical account of Noah and his ark poses a lot of questions, even for believers like the creators of the controversial Creation Museum in Kentucky.

What is "gopher wood"? How did Noah fit all those animals on the boat? And how did he stand the smell?

In an office park in Hebron, Ky., the designers of the proposed "Ark Encounter" theme park are trying to answer questions like these in order to build faith in the Bible's literal accuracy. The project has run into delays because of lack of financing, which could cost it millions in potential tax breaks. Despite the uncertainty, a recent Reuters preview of the project showed that plans for the ark are continuing.

"We're basically presenting what the Bible has to say and showing how plausible it was," said Patrick Marsh, design director for the park, which will feature a 500-foot-long wooden ark and other Old Testament attractions, including a Tower of Babel and a "Ten Plagues" ride. "This was a real piece of history—not just a story, not just a legend."

The project is currently in the design phase. Not enough private donations have come in to start construction, and building permits will not be ready until November, according to Ark Encounter co-founder and Senior Vice President Michael Zovath.

The project has \$12.3 million in hand and \$12.7 million more in committed donations; it needs \$23 million more to start building the ark alone. Zovath does not know when that will happen.

Like Noah before the flood, the builders are in a bit of a time crunch, since Kentucky tourism tax incentives for the project are set to expire in May 2014.

The longer it takes to start building the \$150 million park, originally planned to open in spring 2014, the less the project stands to gain from the rebates, which allow it to receive up to 25 percent of project costs over 10 years from sales taxes generated by the business.

Zovath said the project may refile for the incentives, which critics argue are a violation of the constitutional divide between church and state. If the rebates applied to the full project cost, they could amount to \$37.5 million.

Speculating on the Ark Specs

Ark Encounter is a project of Answers in Genesis, the ministry founded by creationism proponent Ken Ham. The ministry built the Creation Museum in nearby Petersburg.

The museum, which has been harshly criticized by educators and scientists, argues that the earth is around 6,000 years old and was created by God in six 24-hour days with dinosaurs existing at the same time as humans. It rejects the theory of evolution and explains phenomena like the Grand Canyon as a consequence of the Flood.

Attendance at the Creation Museum has declined since it attracted 400,000 visitors in the first year after its 2007 opening, said Zovath. He attributes this to the poor economy and believes some visitors may be delaying their visits until the ark exhibit opens.

The Biblical account of the ark does not provide much detail on how it was made, so the designers have had to speculate.

The Bible calls for gopher wood, for instance, although it is unclear if this is a now-extinct type of wood or if the term refers to the way the wood was cut, said Marsh, who has done

work for Universal Studios. Ark Encounter will go with a mix of woods.

Another big question is how Noah got mating pairs of all the animals of the earth, including dinosaurs, onto a boat half the length of a cruise ship.

Scientists have cataloged 1.3 million species of animals, but Ark Encounter protagonists figure Noah could have brought on just 1,000 to 2,000 pairs to represent every animal “kind,” as the Bible puts it.

“If you start with a wolf, you can basically generate all of these dog-like kinds,” said Marsh. As for large animals like dinosaurs, Marsh said Noah could have brought them on as eggs or juveniles, to save room.

Though the park is meant to teach that the Noah story is true, it is also for profit, and Marsh takes inspiration from secular theme parks. In the exhibit depicting the wicked pre-Flood society that God wanted to destroy, for example, Marsh plans a pagan temple with pagan ceremonies done in a “Disneyesque” way.

“You want everyone to have fun and buy souvenirs and have a good time, but you also want to tell everybody how terrible everything (was),” Marsh said.

He also plans exhibits within the three-level ark on how animal waste could have been taken away by mechanical devices and how fresh air could have been brought in.

Constitutional Violation?

Explanations about the origins of the earth from Answers in Genesis are contrary to scientific consensus, which says that the planet formed about 4.5 billion years ago.

The Creation Museum was condemned by the National Center for Science Education, which said that students who accept

material presented at the museum as valid are “unlikely to succeed in science courses at the college level.”

Many Biblical scholars interpret the Creation and Flood stories as poetic myths and not history.

About one out of three Americans accepts the Bible literally, a percentage that has declined over time, according to a 2011 Gallup poll. Nevertheless, creationism has in recent years re-entered public debate over how to teach science in schools.

Marsh said that while you can be a Christian without believing in creationism, you are on a “slippery slope.”

“So many people have gotten hooked with the concept of evolution that it really makes their faith very delicate,” he said.

Barry Lynn, a United Church of Christ minister who heads Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the planned park promotes “junk science.”

“You don’t pay for the ministry of people out of the taxpayer’s collected dollars,” said Lynn, who said his group will consider a lawsuit if the tax breaks for the ark ever kick in.

Zovath argues that the tax breaks do not violate the Constitution, since the state is not giving the park money upfront, but is only returning some of the tourism money the park will bring to the state.

“If somebody wants to come into Kentucky and build a Harry Potter park and teach all the fun things about witchcraft, nobody would say a word about it—they’d just think it was so cool,” Zovath said. “But if we want to come in ... and build a biblical theme park, everybody goes crazy.”

Editing by Arlene Getz and Prudence Crowther

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