

# The Battle of Beginnings: Why Neither Side is Winning the Creation-Evolution Debate

*by Del Ratzsch*  
*InterVarsity Press,*  
*Downers Grove, Illinois*

**Reviewed by Carl Wieland**

This is an important book, despite being significantly flawed. The author is a professional philosopher of science, and it is precisely this arena that is so important in this battle. The origins issue is not just a matter of 'the evidence'. The nature of your presuppositions — how you see science, and a host of other factors combine to influence not only how you deal with the evidence, but even what you see as evidence in the first place.

Some anti-evolutionists in the 'intelligent design' camp<sup>1</sup> have hailed Ratzsch's contribution as being that of an independent umpire, as it were; one who is prepared to adjudicate without fear or favour, pointing out the flaws on both sides, showing how each side is using unfair, below-the-belt blows. Certainly that is the picture which Dr Ratzsch seeks to consistently paint — one which would appeal to everyone's sense of fair play. In the left corner — the over-enthusiastic young-Earth creationists; in the right corner — the extreme, materialist, hardline atheistic evolutionists.

The framework of the book is consistent with this 'referee' picture. He seeks to outline both Darwinism and current creationist theory. He then devotes a chapter each to detailing 'popular misunderstandings' by both sides — that is, ways in which creationists misunderstand and/or

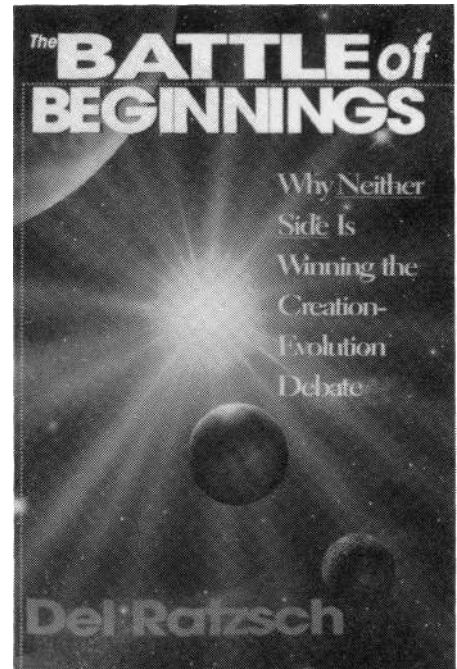
misrepresent evolution, and ways in which evolutionists do the same to creationists. So far, so good — we can all do with some constructive criticism, and at least this is trying to be fair to all sides.

But after a while the suspicion becomes impossible to resist that all is not as it is meant to appear. I found myself asking whether this was not just another theistic evolutionary attempt to have 'the best of both worlds', to portray both sides as extremists, with the cool rational moderates standing in the middle. I think this may very well be so, although it is much more subtle than most such attempts.

If this is in fact his strategy, Ratzsch would no doubt be aware of the danger of being too easily written off by allowing himself to be labelled as an apologist for theistic evolution. He goes to great pains, both at the beginning and end of his book, to point out that he has come to no conclusion concerning the proper resolution between evolution and the Genesis account.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid the impression that, overall, he has very little sympathy for the Genesis creationists, and that the purpose of this book, clearly aimed at Christians, is not as benign or 'neutral' as the impression it seeks to convey.

For instance, Ratzsch's selection



criteria for the creationist side. All his allegations of wrong-headed tactics concern statements by what are often called the 'young-Earth creationists' (or by anti-evolutionists whose writings are used liberally by young-Earth creationists, such as Michael Denton and Phillip Johnson). There is no hint of any criticism of a 'progressive creationist' critique of evolution, such as put forward by Hugh Ross, for example. Anyone who, like Ross, actively attacks the young-Earth creationists seems to be immune from methodological failures or philosophical misunderstandings in their own attacks on evolution (which is actually hardly the case).

The same weighting is there when addressing the misunderstandings by the evolutionist side. When critiquing evolutionists for their misrepresentations of creationist arguments, his chosen villains are always the rabidly materialistic, atheistic naturalistic variety. These could be seen as 'soft targets', expendable in the cause of winning the heart of the uncommitted reader by showing apparent 'even-handedness'. We never hear a whisper of how

creationists have been misrepresented by their progressive creationist or theistic evolutionist opponents. Especially not his own colleagues at Calvin College, a hotbed of theistic evolutionary apologetics, from whence have come a number of polemical anti-Genesis-creationist books and articles.

It also comes across to me as if, in trying to find as many examples of apparent philosophical 'misrepresentation' or 'misunderstandings' by creationists as he can, he seems to have been scraping the bottom of the barrel. From the extensive bibliography, it is clear that he has done an enormous amount of homework. With such a huge resource of creationist material, you would think that he could find sufficient representative examples to make his case from the mainstream publications, materials which were intended to provide sufficient explanatory context to enable Ratzsch to state, without misrepresentation, where there are such flaws.

Instead, he feels compelled to list sources ranging from verbal comments to lay audiences by creationist popularisers, through pamphlets to something as encyclopaedic and in-depth as Walter ReMine's **The Biotic Message**. Curiously, he does not cover anywhere near the same ground in his evolutionist sources. Not one single lecture statement, no pamphlet quotes for the evolutionists, just a few major and carefully written works — which is as it should have been for both sides if the 'neutrality' stance were to have been defensible.

It is all too easy to misrepresent something in a brief work or a popular lecture, as is seen when, for instance, (in the chapter on 'popular creationist misunderstandings') Ratzsch attempts to use something from my own pamphlet-style booklet, **Stones and Bones**, to demonstrate his point. The context is as follows. First, he claims that many creationists do not understand the difference between Lyellian uniformitarianism and what Ratzsch calls 'classical' uniformitarianism, and says that they get

confused with the distinction between these and 'methodological' uniformitarianism. Then he says that creationists often unfairly attack uniformitarianism by merely

*'citing evidence for some particular geologic event being rapid or catastrophic',*

whereas uniformitarianism has always allowed for isolated catastrophes. At this point, one of his examples is that

*Wieland notes that fossils "show signs of rapid burial", shows a picture of a mother ichthyosaur "trapped in the process of giving birth" and seems to take the case as thereby closed!*

But what in fact did Wieland's booklet claim (I actually happen to know the author rather well)? First, the word 'uniformitarianism' is not even mentioned. Second, the entire context is not one of proving or disproving anything, but rather showing that the demonstrable catastrophic formation of these fossils is **consistent with** the Bible. My actual words, referring to evidence of rapid burial, were

*'Isn't that the sort of thing you would expect if the Bible is right about the destruction of the whole earth with water?'*

Anyone reading **Stones and Bones** and comparing it with Ratzsch's comments will see that the idea I was attacking was the common belief that fossils necessarily speak of long time-spans. I say on page 8 that fossils actually

*'show signs of rapid burial, not slow and gradual processes as most people believe'.*

To highlight still further the misleading nature of the critique, I actually mention on page 12 that many experts accept catastrophic formation of the Grand Canyon, for example, without abandoning their belief in millions of years. How much clearer could it be that I am not claiming that rapid formation 'closes the case' *per se* on modern geological views? Readers may understand why I penned onto my review copy of the Ratzsch book at this section *'either*

*exceptionally slippery or obtuse'.*

Before leaving the issue of uniformitarianism, I would take strong issue here with Ratzsch's comment that all demonstrations of rapid fossil/strata formation are *'beside the point'* when seeking to defend Genesis. His reason for dismissing such evidence as *'irrelevant'* is simply because in classic uniformitarianism, there **is** room for regional catastrophism, landslides, etc.

I am reminded of a lunchtime talk I gave at a Queensland university. Having shown examples of rapid burial, one front-row audience member challenged me by saying,

*'So what does that prove? Of course fossils can form quickly in a local catastrophe — so what!'*

I pointed out that I had been careful not to claim **proof** from this alone for global catastrophe.

However, I went on to say, for many people the very existence of fossils (because of the common belief that, by definition, they speak of slow processes) was proof that the Bible's account of recent creation was wrong. Therefore, I said, it is very important to demonstrate the wrongness of that belief, to show that those who accept the Bible by faith are not butting against the evidence, and that there is much evidence consistent with Noah's Flood. He then shot back,

*'But it's not true that most people believe fossils form slowly — I was taught that fossils always form quickly'.*

I asked the audience, who were from many different faculties, to raise their hands if they had **not** been given the impression that fossils were the result of slow and gradual processes — when my questioner turned around, the only hand raised was his own.

How then can Ratzsch, as a Christian trying to give the impression that he is not intrinsically prejudiced against Genesis creation, claim that it is *'beside the point'* to demonstrate that observations long believed to be a stumbling block to belief in Genesis are actually consistent with it?

Interestingly, in the same breath as all this, Ratzsch comments on a

reference by Wysong to '*polystrate trees that could not have been buried slowly*' and thus were alleged to cause a problem for the '*evolutionary - uniformitarian interpretation*'

Ratzsch lumps this into the same basket as the other examples of rapid burial, but misses (or deliberately overlooks) a crucial difference. Creationists do not cite polystrate trees as a problem merely because they show rapid burial.

'Polystrate' means 'many layers'. Let's say the bottom part of a fossil tree is encased in geological layer A, the middle part surrounded by layer B, and the upper part by layer C (see Figure 1). Assume that layers A and C are supposed, by standard evolutionary assignments of age based on index fossil dating, to be separated by millions of years. The issue is not one of whether layers A, B or C may each have formed in separate catastrophes (which is of course logically possible), but the real point is that the top of the tree could not have remained both unfossilised and intact for millions of years before being buried (and then preserved) by layer C.

In other words, this is a problem for the whole 'geological ages' concept, whether one is a classical uniformitarianist, or a neo-catastrophist who believes that every layer was formed in a separate catastrophe. The multiple, though subtle, misrepresentations on this one page of **Battle** sit oddly indeed with the image of the caped crusader of philosophical righteousness.

Actually, speaking of Wysong, I was puzzled by Ratzsch's repeated citing of this author, whom he regards as a leading creationist. Yet none of us in the Answers in Genesis ministries group (collectively perhaps the largest creation ministry in the world) have, to my knowledge, ever met Wysong or communicated with him. Nor do I know anything of him apart from a single poorly typeset book, purporting to give both sides of the argument.

Ratzsch himself notes in the small print that Wysong claims not to be a creationist, but that does not prevent

him from putting Wysong forward as a leading example of the genre!

This further reinforces the impression that Ratzsch, while trying to appear as an honest broker between sparring camps, is really keen to marginalise the creationist case within Christendom, yet win 'brownie points' from Christians by attacking the common enemy, the hardline atheist evolutionist. With the net result that the 'good guy', by default, will be the poor, misunderstood theistic evolutionist, who, according to the heading (and content) of one of Ratzsch's chapters, is 'catching it from both sides' from these two sparring camps as they blunder on with all their philosophical foul play.

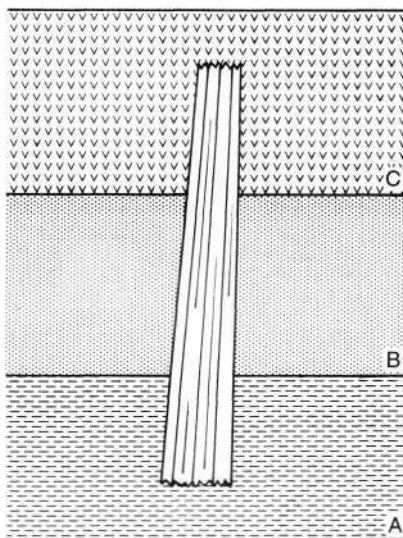


Figure 1. A polystrate fossilised tree here buried upright in strata A, B and C.

Having made my scepticism about the author's own philosophical biases and motives fairly clear, let me hasten to add that there is value and fairness in a significant amount of what he says. And creationists can always benefit from any work which updates their understanding of the latest in the philosophy of science.

Ratzsch, not at all unreasonably, critiques people on both sides for using outdated concepts of what science is (whether Baconian inductivism, logical positivism, Popperian falsificationism, or whatever) to

demolish their opposition. The reality is that the more people have tried to define the 'scientific method' and 'science', the more elusive the task appears to be. The waters are by now so muddy, however, that the argument almost threatens to bounce back on Ratzsch, in that without a clear definition of what science is, how can we confidently say that anyone's chosen definition is clearly ruled out of court?

The sorts of things which Ratzsch takes issue with are when creationists major on the fact that the past cannot be observed. For instance, when Ken Ham, in public talks made deliberately understandable for the layman, paraphrases the Lord's classic question in Job 38:4 as *Were you there?*. Ratzsch regards this as illegitimate, because it can be shown that the historical sciences can in fact 'do science' — of sorts. For example, palaeontologists can test hypotheses concerning the fossil record, etc. without actually having been there to observe the fossils being laid down.

However, it should be obvious that all such hypothesising is only as good as the assumptions underpinning the framework within which the theorising takes place. Surely Ratzsch is not suggesting that it is inappropriate for Ham to point out that conclusions reached in this way cannot be regarded in the same category as the conclusions of 'operation science', with its real-time observations on objects and events existing and occurring in the present?

**Stones and Bones**<sup>2</sup> is again taken to task, for example, for claiming that turning a reptile into a bird today would not prove, in a truly scientific sense, that the same happened millions of years ago. Also, for stating that events allegedly happening millions of years ago could never be stated to be scientific fact in the same sense as things which were directly and repeatedly observable. In the hairsplitting world of philosophical academia, Ratzsch may have a valid point to make concerning the difficulty of putting a clear demarcation point

between the historical and the 'operation' sciences. But the reality is that in a brief layman's publication, it is unreasonable to expect all the subtleties to be covered.

Should one therefore withdraw from making any comment about the nature of scientific method in relation to the past in such brief lay publications? Doubtless Ratzsch would say 'yes', but this would mean leaving people continuing to experience barriers to Christian faith because they see science as having 'proved' evolution in the same way as it has proved that the Moon can be reached with rockets, which is simply not true. Simplistic, misleading impressions need to be met with simplified statements, so long as these statements are not themselves intrinsically misleading in the context.

I would stand by the overall thrust of the statements made, namely that there is a profound difference between what I have called 'real science' involving checking, measurement and repetition of events in real-time, and the conclusions of 'historical' sciences such as palaeontology, no matter whether done by creationist or evolutionist.

Going through the list of 'popular creationist misunderstandings', there were many concerning which I agreed with Ratzsch — except that it seemed potentially very misleading to lump these in as if they were held by mainstream leaders of creationist thought, which mostly was not the case. I will give here just a few of those where I think he misrepresents the position.

(1) **Resistance to evolutionary change.** Since Darwinian theory does not insist on any change necessarily occurring at any particular point of time, Ratzsch regards it as illegitimate for Duane Gish, for example, to state that creatures allegedly staying the same for hundreds of millions of years is

*'notoriously contradictory to what is expected on the basis of evolutionary theory'.*

Ratzsch says that this is only true if

Lamarck was right, and living things had within them an inherent drive to improve. If one assumes that an organism is successfully adapted, that the environment is stable, and that '*no significant selected mutations occur*' — why should an organism not stay the same?

However, the argument is flawed. Firstly, an environment is defined not only by such things as climate, but the other species in it capable of interacting with the species in question. The very notion of climate, geography, chemical surroundings, etc. remaining stable for hundreds of millions of years beggars the imagination already, let alone the fact that in all this time, many other species in that same ocean, for example, are supposed to have been evolving dramatically — hence by this criterion alone, the environment could not have been stable.

Secondly, even creationists would find it hard to imagine a creature staying much the same, even given a perfectly stable environment, if there were hundreds of millions of years available. This is because of the fact that this would allow for a huge number of generations for the accumulation of inherited copying mistakes (which in sexually reproducing creatures are only eliminated by selection if harmful in the heterozygous condition, by the way). We would expect devolution, but not staying the same, and that has nothing to do with any innate Lamarckian drive. The fact that not just one or two freak cases, but many, many such instances exist of fossils spanning hundreds of millions of alleged evolutionary years is far more consistent with the young-Earth Genesis creation position than with evolutionary notions of long time-spans.

(2) **Living fossils.** Ratzsch also seems to miss a major point, in his next paragraph, about living fossils like the coelacanth. If it were only the fact that this fish survived unchanged, then why deal with it separately to point (1), unless it is just to have one more 'shot'

at creationists? The point he fails to cover is that this creature's fossils are not found in intervening rocks, which is why it was declared 'extinct'.

It is thus not just a living fossil, but a special example of this genre, of much greater interest to the creationist than just another 'living fossil' — something unchanged from its 'fossil representatives'. Furthermore, the other special feature about this creature was that such lobe-finned fish were believed to be our direct ancestors — until the internal anatomy of the living specimen showed that this was not feasible. The special fins of these fossil fish were believed to be used for walking on the sea floor in a pre-adaptation for use on land — until observations of the living fish showed that this was untrue.

(3) **Natural selection as creative.** Ratzsch indicates that it is unfair to use the limits observed in artificial selection experiments as evidence against evolution, because Darwinism does not depend only on selection, but on the arising of new variation (for example, via mutation). Therefore, he says, evolutionary theory would also predict limits to variation — in the absence of any such favourable mutations. But is this latter phrase not begging the question? The bottom line is that evolution theory predicts **no ultimate limit to variation**. If no limits were observed, let us say because the required uphill mutations arose in due course during such breeding experiments, this would be seen as a powerful, positive result for the theory. Yet the presence of limits, we are told, may not be seen as a negative result for the theory.

Ratzsch says that the objection creationists use is that

*'if evolution were true. . . it should be possible to cross those boundaries, producing change indefinitely.'*

Whereas in fact, the way I and my colleagues have used this argument is not to say that evolution is thereby falsified, but that it highlights the fact that natural selection alone is not creative, and that the onus is thereby

on the evolutionist to do more than show us examples of adaptation by natural selection in order to 'demonstrate evolution'. Evolutionists have spent decades misleading the public about so-called 'examples of evolution happening', when in fact such adaptation by natural selection is not only limited, but is part of an overall downhill change in information. To state that there are observations of 'evolution happening', evolutionists need to be able to show us something other than information-losing processes. Rather they should show examples of information-adding mutations to enable the crossing of the theoretical — and experimentally verified — boundaries of selection. These have not yet been demonstrated.

Thus, the reader of the Ratzsch book gets the impression that the limits to variation are irrelevant to the creation/evolution argument, when in fact nothing could be further from the case. Comments can be technically correct, but still mislead in the big picture. This also causes me to query why the above misrepresentations by evolutionists, claiming evolution is 'happening before our eyes', are not cited by this 'neutral referee'. But then, to do so would be to indict theistic evolutionists as well as atheistic, something Ratzsch does not seem to want to do.

You don't have to be a creationist to be 'hit' by this referee — all you have to do is to attack evolution as such, while not being in the 'harmonising the Bible with evolution' brigade. Thus (then) agnostic Michael Denton comes in for criticism for certain examples of circular reasoning given in his book **Evolution: A Theory in Crisis**.

Denton says that Darwin noted that the fossil record did not support his theory, so appealed to its imperfection to explain the gaps. However, says Denton, the only evidence he could provide for its imperfection was the absence of the very intermediates which his theory sought to explain, which he not surprisingly labels as a '*largely*

*circular argument*'. Ratzsch defends Darwin as being within his 'rational rights' to shore up his theory in this way, and that this is not at all illegitimate. We may grant Ratzsch's defence as it stands, but it is also within Denton's 'rational rights' to point out the element of circularity in an attempt to shore up Denton's own proposition concerning the absence of real evidence for evolution.<sup>3</sup>

Denton was not simplistically claiming that therefore, *voila*, evolution was wrong. However, he appropriately and successfully gets across an important fact. Namely, that the evidence was not there in the fossils, and that Darwin's theory-saving exercise, regardless of whether rational or not, introduced a circularity which Ratzsch does not deny, and which is mostly missed in the 'big picture'. The evidence for this is that most people have the mistaken impression that fossils provide powerful and independent (non-circular) support for Darwin's theory.

Ratzsch slams creationists for inaccurate statements about how the geological column was constructed, and for attacking the validity of its actuality as a sequence, yet is curiously silent about the fact that mainstream creationist geologists (and popularisers like Ken Ham) have for many years been accurately representing the true position concerning these things.

There is much more room that could be taken up crying 'foul' at many of this 'umpire's' decisions. However, I think the point is already clear. There are also other errors and misrepresentations. For example, on page 212 he references Ken Ham and Paul Taylor's book **The Genesis Solution** as claiming that '*animals were vegetarian until after the flood*'.

Therefore, Ratzsch is implying that the authors claim there was no meat-eating by animals between creation and the Flood. Is this in fact a true representation of their position? On pages 36 and 57 of **The Genesis Solution**, there are references to meat-eating only being permitted after the Flood, but it refers to **man**, not to

animals. On page 60 we read that '*the first land animals and birds were plant-eaters. They did not become meat-eaters until sometime after the Flood or the Fall*' (emphasis added.)

It is perfectly clear that Ham and Taylor allow for meat-eating in a proportion of the creatures occurring between creation and the Flood (post-Fall, of course). Ratzsch is therefore either incredibly careless or culpably misleading.

Towards the end of the book, the author appeals somewhat patronisingly to the two sides to talk to each other. In fact, the creationists I know have never been unwilling to talk calmly and rationally with evolutionists of whatever persuasion. I myself have often fantasised how dearly I would love to have several hours of calm intellectual engagement (trapped in an elevator?) with this or that leading evolutionist.

Readers who wish to get good insights into the philosophy of science can learn much from this book, but would learn more (without the subtle propaganda against the Genesis creationists) from J. P. Moreland's classic **Christianity and the Nature of Science**.

Ratzsch's closing comments riveted my attention:

*'in this entire area we see through a glass darkly, and. . . it is almost impossible to see well enough to remove a mote from someone else's eye.'*

How ironic that these words should appear at the end of a book devoted to mote-removing from almost everyone else's eyes — except they be theistic evolutionists and their ilk.

## REFERENCES

1. See, for example, the review by Stephen Meyer and Paul Nelson titled 'Getting rid of the unfair rules' in **Origins & Design**, Spring 1996, pp. 32-34. 'Intelligent design theorists' are generally not predisposed to defending a literal Biblical creation; almost all accept (and certainly none actively oppose) the billions of years claimed for the Universe, for instance. Even though some (for example, Michael Bene)

accept the whole common descent hypothesis, they differ from the standard theistic evolutionist in that they do not see this happening by the unassisted processes prevalent in nature. Most would probably lean towards some type of 'progressive creation'. They do, however, form an important front of opposition to evolutionary naturalism, and in one sense a significant set of allies for Genesis creationists, if their

work is kept in the appropriate perspective by these.

2. Naturally, I will be more motivated to track down the details of attacks on my work (and that of my immediate colleagues) than for every single critique by Ratzsch of creationists, but whenever I did do that, it did not inspire confidence in the 'honest broker' facade.
3. Circular arguments (tautologies) are gener-

ally weak, because they provide no independent evidence for the proposition. For example, 'The sky is blue. Why? Because blue is the colour of the sky.' This is blatantly circular, because the second part assumes the very point its trying to explain. But circular arguments are formally valid. The fact that circular reasoning is involved doesn't change the fact that the sky really is blue.

## Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds

by Phillip E. Johnson  
InterVarsity Press,  
Downers Grove, Illinois

Reviewed by Michael J. Oard

Both laymen and scientists are often confused over the creation/evolution issue. Scientists

*'... may know a lot of details, but they don't understand the basics' of evolutionary theory, (p. 11)*

This has been Phillip Johnson's experience ever since he entered the debate in 1991 with his first book, **Darwin on Trial**, which dealt with the scientific data disputing evolution. His second book, **Reason in the Balance**, discusses the philosophical, moral, and educational consequences of naturalism. His latest book is intended to prepare laymen to think critically on the origins issue.

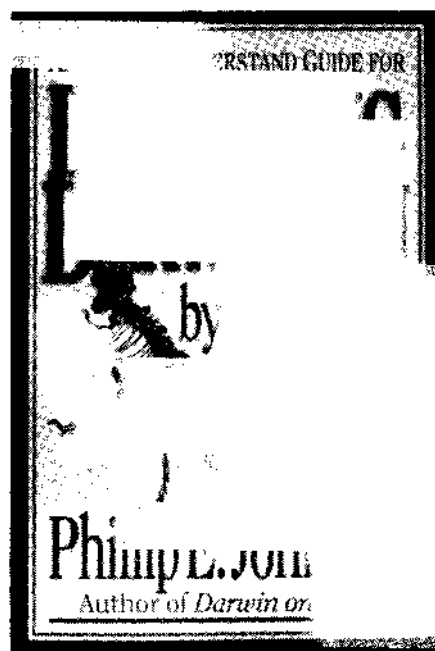
Dr Johnson's first four chapters demonstrate that evolution survives in the intellectual world not so much because of scientific evidence but by propaganda and censorship. Johnson believes that the movie **Inherit the Wind** is an example of the unfair depiction that creationists receive in the hands of the media and the public school system. William Jennings Bryan and other Christians were cast as ignorant, bigoted 'fundamentalists'. The movie was largely responsible for

a closing of the public mind toward creation.

The mindset that the movie carefully developed continues to be promoted by what Johnson calls 'Microphone Man'. The news media and Hollywood carefully filter information so it always reinforces evolutionary ideology and omits any reference to creation as having any scientific validity. Few people seem to realise that the cast of characters in the movie have reversed roles in modern society. The evolutionist is now the one who is shutting other views out of the debate. As a result of this propaganda, many Christians have unknowingly accepted agnostic arguments and ways of thinking, as typified in a letter from a college student named Emilio (the subject of chapter 1).

In defence, Johnson states that we need to tune up our 'baloney detectors' to help discern when an evolutionist is using propaganda to avoid confronting the scientific weaknesses of evolution. Some of the baloney we should keep on the look out for are:

- (1) selective use of evidence,



- (2) appeals to authority,
- (3) *ad hominem* arguments,
- (4) straw men arguments,
- (5) begging the question,
- (6) lack of testability, and
- (7) vague terms and shifting definitions (equivocation).

I was recently made aware of this last rhetorical device in Jack Horner's latest book on dinosaurs and evolution:

*'Consider again what we mean by evolution — change through time. It's that simple!'*

With this simple definition, creationists would all be evolutionists. However, throughout the book, he speaks of dinosaurs within the framework of macroevolution. This is a typical example of 'bait and switch' that our baloney detectors should blast away.

Johnson's first four chapters focus on opening the mind, his last four give