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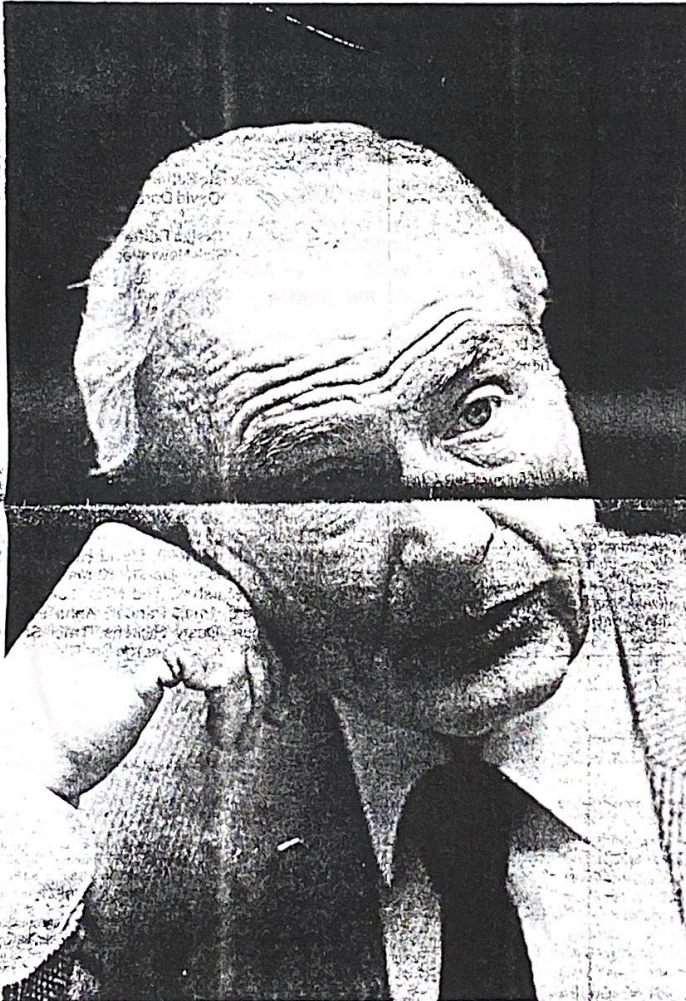
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# La Sierra Criterion

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Jack Provonsha on fundamentalist geology

## *"More needs to be said"*

by Gary Chartier

Jack Provonsha is perhaps Adventism's most distinguished philosopher of religion. Educated at Harvard and Claremont, Dr. Provonsha has taught at Loma Linda University since 1958. Here, he shares with the *Criterion* his perspective on the SDA view of the geological record.

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## Cover story: PROVONSHA Continued

Q. What is the current state of Adventism's view of geology?

A. I can say that it looks like we are facing very difficult problems in Earth history, based upon an attempt to try to correlate the Biblical record with the apparent geological record. They don't seem to be saying the same things, either timewise or in the quality of the record.

As I stood in the courtyard of the museum at Vernal, Utah, which is near the dinosaur deposits, and looked at the huge models they have there, of the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, that huge, carnivorous creature with his big teeth, it was very difficult for me to imagine that God could have created such a creature. And as you look at the geologic record, there's much of that, in which the picture is one of zoological mayhem, rather than Garden of Eden. What went wrong in the past that created that kind of picture? And how to relate that to the Biblical picture?

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wherein God creates everything good? One can imagine the possibility of *Tyrannosaurus Rex* ancestor running around eating apples, rather than chewing up other dinosaurs, but how long does it take to create the creature?

That whole geologic record is a very complicated notion, if you want to try to force it into a Biblical model. And how to work that is where the problem comes. You can't do it, I suppose, by willpower. Somebody wrote a letter to the editor of the *Adventist Review* that said "The Bible says that the whale swallowed Jonah; I believe it. And if the Bible said Jonah swallowed the whale, I'd believe it." Now, that's belief by willpower, not by conviction. That's really not good science; you can't be a scientist and function that way. I don't think you can be an intellectually honest person and function that way. You have to look at the evidence; you have to take it seriously, try to unravel it as much as you can, and recognize that when truth is finally all understood, we won't have conflicts like this.

What we've got to do is reinterpret the evidence in such a way so those two views come together. And what I've tried to do is find a way of taking the Bible seriously, as a literal account of what took place a brief time ago in human history, and still take seriously what the geologic record is saying. One way to do that is to say that the Bible doesn't tell the whole story. It's true, but it's partial history, the history of God's activity. But I'll have to tell you, the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* looks like something more that the Devil would produce than that God would produce. And I think that one could develop a picture of the Great Controversy in which Satan was given plenty of time to demonstrate the principles of his kingdom. And then, in contrast, God demonstrated the principles of his kingdom. The conflict is not between a destroyer, who's simply going around trying to destroy every good thing God made, but rather someone, a satanic person, powerful enough and great enough to attract a third of the angels of Heaven, which means he's a Universe-class contender, presenting an alternative ordering of reality. The devil's ordering of reality is one way, and God's is another. It's the choice between those two that becomes the moral choice between Satan and God in the Great Controversy. The way God solves the problem of evil is by allowing it to work itself out,

and demonstrating that it is bankrupt, that it in fact contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The record of the rocks may show us, not just God's action, but the demonic activity.

Q. Do the "rocks" show a developmental process?

A. They could very well. If Satan were doing it, that may be the way he'd have to work. Ellen White talks about thorns and thistles outside the Garden of Eden, that Adam and Eve ran into as soon as they were expelled. She says that God didn't create them. "God never created the thorn and the thistle," she said. Well then, who did? How long does it take to create thorns and thistles by mutation, selection, and survival of the fittest, and so on—the patterns by which, ordinarily, things work in nature? Well, it might have taken a good deal of time.

So, what kind of working model would I suggest? That the demonic activity is quite different from God's, but that the Bible is primarily concerned with God's activity. So, therefore, the Genesis account could be perfectly true, but a partial picture of the record of Earth's history.

I see the Scriptural record, at both ends of the Great Controversy, are in some way consistent with the Christian picture of God. Whereas the picture of natural history does have the demonic element in it, and it speaks more of the demonic than it does of the divine. And I think we have to take that into account. So, what we're looking for here is a working model that will allow us to take the geologic record pretty much at face value, the way it appears, but give it a different source than the Scriptural record. We can take both of these literally, both of them as pictures, but complementing each other, each one only being a partial part of the story. The geologic record is not a picture of divine creation, it's a picture of something else. The Biblical record is the

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picture of divine creation, but ignores certain other things. So, put the two together, and they make one single truth, but reflecting the conflict between good and evil expressed at these very basic creation levels.

Q. In practical terms, how will this affect the Adventist presentation on geology?

A. Well, we'd have to be a little more open to the evidence than we have been, because in order to try to preserve the traditional position, we have really had to be selective in our evidence. What we've been doing generally is building our notions out of exceptions. But if you take the whole evidence together, and be honest with your evidence, you have to note that those are exceptions; you have to build your case out of what is usually the case. I think that we've always felt we had to do this.

Because we've felt we had to do this, we are, I think, sometimes unwilling to be as honest with the evidence as we might be. I don't know how to solve the problem, but I guess that's the direction we'd better go. That's where I try to suggest the development of some working models that will allow us to recognize the validity of the Bible, that this is a reasonably accurate picture of Earth history, given the restraints that God faced as he tried to reveal it to man, but that, in fact, that's only part of the story, that the rest of the story must be read from the other book, the book of Nature. Those two books together give us the full truth.

Q. How would you react to those who might suggest that yours is a primitive, fundamentalist approach to resolving the problem?

A. Well, I think that would be a statement that I would take exception to. I think that part of our problem in the past is we've had a much too primitive, much too simple understanding of the nature of the Great Controversy. It's high time for us to give it its philosophic depth and its cosmic scope; that will allow us to interpret Earth history in its light. To have the devil only slightly more powerful than we are, with bat wings and all this kind of nonsense, is a primitive myth. But to talk about the Great Controversy seriously could have cosmic implications, when we understand the nature of the universe with which we're now familiar.

When we talk about a conflict between the demonic and the divine in that arena, we're talking about a being who far transcends anything we've said about the demonic up to this point. He's a Universe-class contender. You're dealing with somebody, for example, for whom our genetic engineering experiments would be child's play, who has a grasp of modalities involved in mutation, and controlled mutation, and alteration of forms. I wouldn't grant him the authorship of life, for example, but he could certainly borrow and modify what God has created, and modify it in the direction that his view of reality would suggest. What we're seeing here is a conflict between two ways of looking at reality: the Edenic and Isaiah picture of the New Earth, where the wolf and the lamb lies down together, as over against the struggle for dominance, the zoological mayhem by which evolution supposedly works. But it's two different ways of looking at things, and I think one is demonic and one is divine, and we've got to find some way of separating them, but also combining them into a total truth.

Q. Do you have any difficulty reconciling this model with the text of Genesis 1?

A. I don't have any difficulty, and I said a moment ago, that God faces as he tries to communicate to man, and still allow him freedom. It can't be just a dictation; he has to work within man's frame of reference. But I think one can take the general outlines of Genesis, and say, "That's an accurate picture of the kind of person God is as he creates." Even if all the details are hard to put together, in a general sense, this must be taken seriously as a literal picture of the divine Creator at work. By contrast, what we're finding in the natural record speaks of someone quite different from God. And I can only talk about that as being that which opposes God in the Great Controversy between good and evil. It's demonic.

"... in order to try to preserve the traditional position, we have really had to be selective in our evidence. What we've been doing generally is building our notions out of exceptions."

It seems to me that those forms that I witnessed in the model, there in Vernal, Utah, really were much more appropriately termed demonic than divine. All the characteristics of the demonic were present, including the predatory quality of the creature. That *Tyrannosaurus Rex*—I just couldn't imagine God being responsible for that creature. Ellen White talks about, as a matter of fact, the destruction of forms that God did not create, by the Flood. And again, that has to be gone into in depth. The simple words in which these things are expressed often are not nearly sufficient for a total

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grasp of the issue in terms of our present understanding of the nature of the Universe. But I think the essence of it ought to be taken as serious. I don't think that I'm a simple person, but that the concept, although it can be perceived in simple ways, the concept I'm giving has, I think, potential for really cosmic, philosophic, significance, not just some new kind of mythmaking.

What I am saying is not that the Genesis record is inaccurate. I'm rather saying that it is a dependable record, but that from the evidence, obviously there is more that needs to be said.

[The questions, and Dr. Provonsha's responses, have been edited for reasons of space and clarity.]

## MAKING MAN WHOLE

### Chaperonage

The reason for chaperonage is to protect the reputations of homes, school, and individuals.

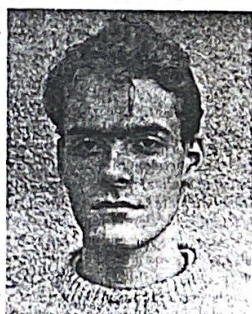
The written request form for an activity submitted to the dean should include complete information about the activity—dates, times of leaving and returning, destination, transportation, the chaperones, those in the group, and the event. Groups not sponsored by the faculty should have an approved chaperone for every 15-20 members for the event.

### Chaperonage Costs

The group being chaperoned is always expected to pay any transportation, admission or other such expenses of the chaperone.

—Student Handbook

(This selection from the *Student Handbook* is brought to you courtesy of the ASLLU and the *Criterion* staff.)



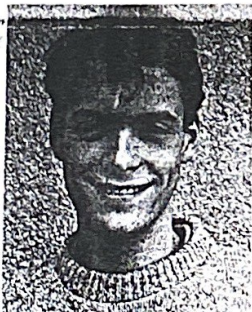
This is the editor of the *Criterion*.



Normally, he leads a pretty boring life.



But Monday night, all that changed.



A mysterious Someone saw to it that he was "lei'd" and "kissed" by Hawaiian Club menehunes at the Festival of Nations.



Naturally, he's curious. Very curious.



If you're responsible, now is no time for silence.



Go ahead. Make his day

Dear Fred,

My mail has slowed down. I'm hurting and so very upset. I guess it's just the woman in me.

Please come back; I'll share you with

Frank.

—ED

Lady McBeth,

Art thou truly looking for a challenge?

Shakespeare

MM—

Ready for another round of haunts, or was once through the "maze", good enough?

MN

Channing,

A lighthouse sits on the sand. In it, a woman waits for you, telescope in hand.

The luminous beam goes out into the night; it's searching, seeking to find you en route.

The morning sun has risen. Your eyes gaze into my soul, unlocking my heart's prison.

Your smile warms my day. We embark the precious boat which carries us, far away.

Your Secret Admirer

E,

I'd have been glad to have provided a sixth one—a real one this time.

AC