

MARK TWAIN AND ORIGINS

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Abstract

Mark Twain wrote many statements on the topics of Biblical history, creation, and evolution. Some of his well known quotations are here compiled and documented. Twain poked fun at both creation and evolution with equal wit. Some of his critiques from a century ago are quite contemporary. Unfortunately, at the close of his life Twain displayed a strong hostility toward the Creator.

Introduction

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910) did not show partiality in his humorous satire. Every topic was fair game for his pen, including creation and evolution. Twain's delightful writing style still brings smiles a century later, even to the targets of his jesting. Twain lived during a time when the influence of the evolutionary worldview was growing rapidly. As a result, he was enamored with the ideas of his contemporary Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Previous studies have reviewed the influence of evolution on popular literature (Bergman, 1992).

Once Twain was told that Darwin often read himself to sleep with *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Twain replied that "If he had helped put that great brain when weary to sleep, he was glad of it" (Smith, 1972, p. 274). Twain briefly met Charles Darwin in August 1879, the same week he also heard Charles Spurgeon preach (Paine, 1935, p. 155). Incidentally, Mark Twain's personal life did not provide evidence for the racial prejudice that some modern critics have claimed. In fact one of Twain's best friends was a black farmer named John T. Lewis (Thomasson, 1985).

The following sections give an overview of Twain's thoughts related to creation and evolution, together with occasional editorial comments. My search was not exhaustive; Twain's writings are voluminous. He was clearly influenced by the Bible more than any other book. Raised in a frontier Presbyterian church, Twain unfortunately became extremely negative toward organized religion as promoted in his day. During his last years, especially in writing *Letters from the Earth*, Twain raged against his misguided concept of God. Much of this contentious material remained unpublished until recent years; in fact some Twain writings still remain unpublished.

This literature survey will serve three purposes. First, it gathers and documents numerous quotes that have occasionally appeared in origins literature, including the *CRS Quarterly*. Second, the quotes demonstrate the healthy skepticism that existed toward science during the lifetimes of Darwin and Twain, a critical view now largely lost. Third,

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Mark Twain's humor brings temporary relief to the serious tensions that exist between creation and evolution. Whether or not one agrees with Mark Twain, all will agree that he wrote with style and imagination. The quotes are listed in several categories, and also in general order of publication date. For this reason some of the given dates are after Twain's lifetime.

Anthropology

As concerns the proud paleontological trophy, the 'flint hatchet' and its companion the 'flint knife,' I am compelled again to differ with the other scientists. I cannot think that the so-called 'flint knife' is a knife at all. I cannot defuse my mind of the impression that it is a file. No knife ever had such a scandalous blade as that.

Our Earliest Ancestors, 1870
Chambers Journal Chapter, Ch. 4

In this essay Twain expresses suspicion about scientific claims to understand the past. This particular satire concerns paleontologists who describe minute details concerning the social life of primitive people on the basis of a single bone or artifact.

Man is the only Animal that blushes. Or needs to.

Following the Equator, 1897
Vol. I. Pudd'nhead Wilson's New
Calendar, Heading of Ch. 27

It obliges me to renounce my allegiance to the Darwinian theory of the Ascent of Man from the Lower Animals; since it now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one . . . the Descent of Man from the Higher Animals.

The Lowest Animals, 1897
Essay

Man was made at the end of the week's work, when God was tired.

Notebook, 1867
(Paine, 1935)

Such is the human race. Often it does seem such a pity that Noah didn't miss the boat.

Christian Science, 1907
Book 2, Chapter 7

Of all the creatures that were made he [man] is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one—the solitary one—that possesses malice. That is the basest of all instincts, passions, vices—the most hateful . . . He is the only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to be pain . . . Also, in all the list he is the only creature that has a nasty mind.

Autobiography, Volume I, 1924
(Paine, 1924)

What a good thing Adam had. When he said a good thing he knew nobody had said it before.

Notebook, 1867
(Paine, 1935)

Let us be grateful to Adam our benefactor. He cut us out of the "blessing" of idleness and won for us the "curse" of labor.

Notebook, 1867 Paine, 1935)

I believe that our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey.

Autobiography, 1924
(Neider, 1959)

In 1879 Mark Twain began a campaign to memorialize Adam and Eve. He seriously planned for a giant statue of our first parents to be erected in the Holy Land. However, fundraising efforts were not encouraging so he eventually dropped the project.

Astronomy

I have been reading some new arguments to prove that the world is very old, and that the six days of creation were six immensely long periods. For instance, according to Genesis, the stars were made when the world was, yet this writer mentions the significant fact that there are stars within reach of our telescopes whose light requires 50,000 years to traverse the wastes of space and come to our earth.

The Love Letters of Mark Twain, 1949
(Wecter, 1949)

It is quite manifest that [God] believed his fresh-made skies were diamond sown with those myriad of twinkling stars the moment his first-day's sun sank below the horizon; whereas, in fact not a single star winked in that black vault until three years and a half after that memorable week's formidable industries had been completed. Then one star appeared, all solitary and

alone, and began to blink. Three years later another one appeared. The two blinked together for more than four years before a third joined them. At the end of the first hundred years there were not yet twenty-five stars twinkling in the wide wastes of those gloomy skies. At the end of a thousand years not enough stars were yet visible to make a show. At the end of a million years only half of the present array had sent their light over the telescopic frontiers, and it took another million for the rest to follow suit, as the vulgar phrase goes. There being at that time no telescope, their advent was not observed.

Letters from the Earth, Letter V, 1866
(DeVoto, 1962)

Twain here discusses the creation of stars. He attempts to reveal the conflict between star creation and observation. Twain's reasoning is that if stars are far distant, then Adam and Eve would not have seen them for years, (The nearest night star, Alpha Centauri, is actually 4.3 light years away instead of 3.5 light years). Twain has made the classic error of confusing large distance with a large time scale. In the big bang theory time and distance are necessarily equivalent because of slow expansion, but not in creation. God can make a vast universe quickly. When Adam and Eve looked at the sky on the sixth night of creation, they saw myriads of freshly-made stars, similar to our current skies.

It is lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could 'a' laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
1884

It was the novel Huckleberry Finn which firmly established Twain's reputation as a writer. The novel is filled with his experiences as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River.

General Science

The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all.

Our Earliest Ancestors, 1870
Chambers Journal

Probable northeast to southwest winds, varying to the southward and westward and eastward, and points between, high and low barometer sweeping around from place to place, probable areas of rain, snow, hail, and drought, succeeded or preceded by earthquakes, with thunder and lightning. But it is possible that the program may be wholly changed in the meantime.

New England Weather, 1876

Twain gave this humorous weather report during a dinner speech for the New England Society. Weather prediction has made considerable progress since then. However, today we realize that long-range weather is ruled by chaos theory. This means that there are too many variables involved for any computer model to be entirely accurate with forecasts. Only the Creator, who controls all the variables, knows future weather exactly.

The Scientist. He will spend thirty years in building up a mountain range of facts with the intent to prove a certain theory; then he is so happy in his achievement that as a rule he overlooks the main chief fact of all—that his accumulation proves an entirely different thing.

The Bee, Essay
(Neider, 1963)

Scientists have odious manners, except when you prop up their theory; then you can borrow money from them.

As Concerns Interpreting the
Deity, Essay
(Neider, 1963)

A scientist will never show any kindness for a theory which he did not start himself.

A Tramp Abroad, 1880

[Alfred Russell] Wallace says the whole universe was made to take care of and keep steady this little floating mote in the center of it, which we call the world. It looks like a good deal of trouble for such a small result, but it's dangerous to dispute with a learned astronomer like Wallace. Still, I don't think we ought to decide too soon about it—not until the returns are all in.

Mark Twain's Letters
(Paine, 1917)

Wallace (1823-1913) was a naturalist and contemporary of Darwin. These two men jointly announced the original idea of natural selection in 1858. Although Wallace was not an astronomer, he wrote and spoke on all aspects of science.

Genesis Flood

. . . everybody is hard at work; the shipyard so crowded that the men hinder each other; everybody hurrying or being hurried; the rush and confusion and

shouting and wrangling are astonishing to people like our family, who have always been used to a quiet country life. Hundreds and hundreds of new men have been put on, this morning, for time is pressing us cruelly. The Ark ought to have been done fully a month ago—oh, yes, two months ago—but first one thing and then another delayed us; mainly the scarcity of gopher wood; and secondarily the strike.

These horrible creatures have come in even greater crowds than usual, today, to look at the Ark, and prowl over it and make fun of it. They ask questions, and when they are told it is a boat, they laugh, and ask where the water is, out here in the dry plain. When we say the Lord is going to send the water from heaven and drown all the world, they mock again, and say, "Tell it to the Marines."

Letters from the Earth, 1866
Passages from Shem's Diary
(Baetzhold, 1995, p. 108)

Regarding Noah's Ark, Twain let his imagination run wild. He also composed humorous diaries from the viewpoints of Adam, Eve, and Methuselah.

If he had known all the requirements in the beginning, he would have been aware that what was needed was a fleet of Arks. But he did not know how many kinds of creatures there were, neither did his Chief. So he had no kangaroo, and no 'possum, and no Gila Monster, and no ornithorhynchus, and lacked a multitude of other indispensable blessings which a loving Creator had provided for man and forgotten about, they having long ago wandered to a side of his world which he had never seen and with whose affairs he was not acquainted.

And so every one of them came within a hair of getting drowned. They only escaped by an accident: there was not water enough to go around. Only enough was provided to flood one small corner of the globe—the rest of the globe was not then known, and was supposed to be non-existent.

Letters from the Earth, Letter V, 1866

Twain here portrays God as absent-minded and unfair to Noah. It is sad to read Twain's sarcasm concerning the great Flood. Most likely, his early Bible teaching had been without any personal application or apologetics evidence. Twain's father was known as a freethinker, one who rejects authority, especially in religion (Wiggins, 1964, p. 86). Thus Twain certainly heard Biblical doctrine questioned as a youth. Note Twain's false assumptions of ark size limitations, absent animals, and a local deluge. Many criticisms of

the Genesis Flood story are fully dealt with in the book by John Woodmorappe (1996).

The ark was a peculiarly fantastic device. A man of reputation who should contrive so inadequate a thing for such a purpose would cease to be admired. There was no way to propel it, no way to steer it, no way to get the leakage water out of it; if there was room for all the necessary animals, there was certainly not room for provender enough for them during so long a voyage.

God of the Bible vs.
God of the Present Day, 1870

Mark Twain voices identical criticisms of Noah's ark to those still heard today. It is typical that critics do not take time to seriously study the Bible passages in question. If they would make the effort, answers would be found to their questions.

Mr. Darwin invented the theory [survival of the fittest] . . . but the Ornithorhynchus [platypus] was the first one to put it to actual experiment and prove that it could be done. Hence it should have as much of the credit as Mr. Darwin. It was never on the Ark; you will find no mention of it there; it nobly stayed out and worked the theory. On the face of the Noachian deluge innumerable forest trees were floating. Upon these the ornithorhynchus voyaged in peace.

Following the Equator, 1897
The Naturalist and the ornithorhynchus

Creationist Steve Austin has popularized the idea of large floating log mats during the Flood. Here we see a similar proposal by Twain a century ago. He imagined a floating island habitat for certain creatures during the year of the Flood.

As for the Dinosaur, Noah's conscience was easy; it was not named in his cargo-list and the boys were not aware that there was such a creature. He said he could not blame himself for not knowing about the Dinosaur, because it was an American animal, and America had not then been discovered.

Adam's Soliloquy, 1905
(Baetzhold, 1995, p. 121)

This dinosaur reference was inspired by a display at the New York American Museum of Natural History which Twain visited. A brontosaurus (actually an apatosaurus) discovered in Wyoming in 1894 had been reconstructed and placed in the fossil hall with great fanfare.

Geology

In the space of one hundred and seventy-six years the Lower Mississippi has shortened itself two hundred

and forty-two miles. That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Therefore, any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the Old Oolitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upward of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing-rod. And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three-quarters long, and Cairo and New Orleans will have joined their streets together, and be plodding comfortable along under a single mayor and a mutual board of aldermen. There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.

Life on the Mississippi, 1883
Cut-offs and Stephen, Ch.17

. . . a causeway, hundreds of miles wide and thousands of miles long, joined Australia to Africa, and the animals of the two countries were alike, and all belonged to that remote geological epoch known to science as the Old Red Grindstone post-pleosaurian.

Following the Equator, 1897
The Naturalist and the ornithorhynchus

Twain had been a practical geologist while working as a silver prospector in Nevada. He respected geology but was skeptical of the inconceivable stretches of time and separate eras which geologists proclaimed. In a short piece, "Some Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls" (1874), Twain also railed against the conclusions of archaeologists, paleontologists, and geologists.

There is the 'advanced' school of thinkers [who] applied natural laws to the interpretation of all miracles, somewhat on the plan of the people who make the six days of creation geological epochs.

The Writings of Mark Twain, 1907

Theology

It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.

A sin takes on new and real terrors when there seems a chance that it is going to be found out.

Unpublished statements
(Ayles, 1987, p. 24)

Who taught those ancient [Bible] writers their simplicity of language, their felicity of expression, their pathos, and, above all, their faculty of sinking themselves entirely out of sight of the reader and making the

narrative stand out alone and seem to tell itself? Shakespeare is always present when one reads his book; Macaulay is present when we follow the march of his stately sentences; but the Old Testament writers are hidden from view.

The Innocents Abroad, 1869

During the last day or two I [Eve] have taken all the work of naming things off his [Adam's] hands, and this has been a great relief to him, for he has no gift in that line . . . When the dodo came along he thought it was a wildcat.

Eve's Diary, 1905.

When this particular passage was published, the London Westminster Gazette took Twain to task for wrongly crediting Eve with naming the animals instead of Adam. Twain responded, "The Westminster man is unaware of the privileges of our profession . . . we are independent of facts; we care nothing of them . . . we would even distort the facts of the multiplication-table, let alone the facts of Genesis... If I had felt it best to turn the whole fable of creation inside out, I would have done it without compunction" (Baetzhold, 1995, p.133).

She engages herself in many foolish things; among others, to study out why the animals called lions and tigers live on grass and flowers, when, as she says, the sort of teeth they wear would indicate that they were intended to eat each other. This is foolish, because to do that would be to kill each other, and that would introduce what, as I understand it, is called "death"; and death, as I have been told, has not yet entered the Park. Which is a pity, on some accounts.

Extracts from Adam's Diary, 1893

Here Twain shows an understanding of the serious problem of requiring death before the curse, as promoted by theistic evolution and old-earth creation.

The Being who to me is the real God is the One who created this majestic universe and rules it. He is the only originator of thoughts; thoughts suggested from within, not from without . . . He is the only creator. He is the perfect artisan, the perfect artist.

Notebook
(Paine, 1935)

At age 63, this quote shows that Twain was not quite the atheist that he is sometimes accused of. His view of God at this time was closely tied to the laws and patterns observed in nature.

The Bible is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched his-

tory; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.

Letters from Earth, 1909 Letter 3

Twain wrote this last statement one year before he died. He increasingly raged against the Bible and God as he neared the close of his life. Twain was strongly influenced by Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. The result was an appallingly deficient view of Christianity and the Bible. This is especially sad since Twain once claimed to have read the entire Bible by age 15 (Baetzhold, 1995, p. xvi).

According to the book and its servants the universe is only six thousand years old. It is only within the last hundred years that studious, inquiring minds have found out that it is nearer a hundred million.

Letters from Earth, 1909
Letter 5

Note that Twain tends to give more authority to scientists than to preachers or to the Bible itself. Since Twain's time the assumed age of the universe has increased by 150 times, to 15 billion years instead of 100 million years

Adam was but human—this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake, he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.

Pudd'nhead Wilson, Ch. 2, 1894

There is no other life; life itself is only a vision and a dream for nothing exists but space and you. If there was an all-powerful God, he would have made all good, and not bad.

Autobiography, 1924 (Neider, 1959)

Conclusion

Mark Twain was uniquely gifted in causing his readers laugh at themselves. Neither religion nor science escaped his wit. In his later years, Twain was increasingly embittered toward the Bible and Christianity. His personal misfortunes may have been partially responsible. His oldest daughter, Susy, died in 1896, followed by his wife, Livy, in 1904. Twain also faced continuing problems with bankruptcy and was betrayed in business by close friends.

Mark Twain wrote a final statement just days before he died of heart disease in 1910:

Death, the only immortal who treats us all alike, whose pity and whose peace and whose refuge are for all—the soiled and the pure, the rich and poor, the loved and unloved (Ayres, 1987, p1. 56).

Twain now realized that for him, the time for humor was past. And so it is for everyone who considers the meaning of life. As many have discovered, only Scripture provides satisfying answers.

References

Note: Generally I have referenced the Twain quotes by original title, chapter, and publication date without page numbers. Mark Twain's work is available in so many editions that page numbers are not useful.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

***Homo erectus* and Modern Humans Do Not Demonstrate an Evolutionary Sequence**

Malcolm Bowden and I have some minor disagreements regarding some of the human fossil material. I am disappointed that he has not allowed the matter to rest. To respond to his second letter forces me to criticize the work of a Christian brother, which I do not enjoy doing.

There are two serious weaknesses in Bowden's evaluation of the human fossil material. The first is his apparent obsession with fakes and frauds. Almost one-fourth of his book, *Ape-Men*, is devoted to Piltdown. Piltdown no longer deserves that much attention. It is a non-issue among evolutionists and should be with creationists also. We no longer get mileage from Piltdown, and using it makes it look as if the only material we have is about 100 years old. The other "fakes" that Bowden dwells on are equally non-productive. Does Bowden honestly think that he has given an adequate creationist response to the human fossil material by dwelling on a few "fakes"? He almost seems to imply that all of the human fossil material is questionable. If that is the impression he is trying to give, he has an ethical problem, because that is not true. He will not win over many people by implying that every evolutionist deals in fraud. The approach Bowden has taken is unwise and unnecessary.

In my book, *Bones of Contention* (Lubenow, 1992), I demonstrated that even if we assume (for the sake of argument) that all of the human fossil material is genuine (with the exception of Piltdown) the concept of human evolution is still falsified. My basic thrust was that *Homo erectus* and modern humans do not constitute an evolutionary sequence but were living at the same time as contemporaries. My work has received remarkable confirmation in the 13 De-

cember 1996 issue of *Science* (Gibbons, 1996; Swisher et al., 1996). With the redating of the Java Solo skulls, evolutionists have finally admitted that some *Homo erectus* individuals were living as contemporaries with modern humans. This evidence will precipitate a tremendous debate among evolutionists because it presents real problems for human evolution.

A second major flaw in Bowden's work is his seeming obsession with the human fossils that were discovered in the early part of this century, especially the Java and the Peking material. Everyone knows that this material was recovered before strict scientific methods were in place. Further, the Peking material was forever lost. Bowden is certainly welcome to his opinion on that material, but any opinion on that material will remain subjective and unprovable. It is also well known that the Java material is poorly dated. Dubois and von Koenigswald, who recovered most of it, hired national workers. They did not themselves see all of the material *in situ*. It was for these reasons that I did not dwell on Java/Peking material in *Bones of Contention*. Instead, I dealt with the more than 200 *Homo erectus* fossils that have been discovered more recently under more exacting conditions.

It is for these reasons that evolutionists, themselves, do not use the Java and Peking material as evidence for human evolution as much as they used to. They also tend to stress the more recent evidence. Thus, Bowden's insistence that much of the Java and Peking material is "fake" may possibly be true, but it is almost irrelevant. That is not where the action is. In the war between human evolution and human creation, Bowden is all alone on his own little battlefield. He is capable of doing much good, but he needs to get on a battlefield where there is some action. If anyone is still interested in whether or not some of the Java and Peking fossils are frauds, they are certainly free to read Bowden's work