THE MYTH MUSEUM:

The creationists are back with a vengeance. This is bad news for liberal Christians and for science education.

On May 28, the Creation Museum will open in Petersburg, Ky. This is no mom and pop operation. It's a high-tech, 60,000-square-foot, $24 million commitment to prove that the biblical account of Genesis is factually correct in every detail. They would have you believe that the Earth is only about 6,000 years old; everything was created in seven 24-hour days; humans and dinosaurs lived together; and Noah's flood created not only the Grand Canyon, but its rocks as well.

The museum rises from a patch of rural land at the northern edge of the Bible Belt in greater Cincinnati. Just a few minutes from the region's main airport, near the state's border with Ohio and Indiana, it's strategically located within a day's drive of two-thirds of the U.S. population, 58 percent of whom believe that some form of creationism should be taught alongside evolution. This, according to a recent poll from the Pew Research Center.

I'm not an intellectual snob. I'm not an atheist. I'm not saying God didn't inspire the Bible. What I'm suggesting is that we should not confuse biblical mythology with biblical fact.

To begin research for this column, I pulled my dusty copy of "Bulfinch's Mythology: The Greek and Roman Fables Illustrated" off the shelf. The scholarly mythologist Joseph Campbell, who wrote the introduction, considered it as "the best known ... most readable and generally useful, introduction in English to the classics of our mythological heritage."

Written by Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867) and originally published as "The Age of Fable" in 1855, its first chapter begins with these words: "The religions of ancient Greece and Rome are extinct ... They belong now not to the department of theology, but to those of literature and taste."

This is exactly the way I feel about Genesis. In our modern, scientific era, I would no more look to the Bronze Age mythology called Genesis for answers about how the planet works than I would to the Classical Era mythology of Zeus, Venus, Apollo, Prometheus, Pandora and Bacchus. But I would certainly look to both mythologies as the literary fountainheads of Western art and literature.

Practically anyone -- believers and unbelievers alike -- can appreciate Genesis as a beautiful and stunningly insightful creation myth coming straight from the austere landscapes of the Middle East. Likewise, practically anyone can appreciate the radioactive decay of platinum isotopes as an accurate atomic clock coming straight from the heart of physics and chemistry. The two views are not in conflict because one is mythological and allegorical, the other logical and specific. Each appeals to a different part of our brain.

I would not expect to walk into a mythology museum and see exhibits trying to convince me that Achilles actually killed the hydra, or that Cupid really did shoot arrows through people's hearts without killing them. Nor would I expect to see exhibits trying to convince me that serpents use apples to tempt human beings, or that Noah really did come aground on a mountaintop. Yet, this is exactly what the museum exhibits try to convince you is true.

If successful, the Creation Museum will lead to two negative outcomes. First, the contorted logic of the exhibit scripts will embarrass more liberal Christians who do not read the Bible as inerrant truth. Second, by presenting mythology as fact, tens of thousands of young people will become confused.
This will retard the pace of public science education because some unlearning will have to take place before learning can begin.

Imagine yourself in an anti-art museum. It would be stripped of works of the creative imagination rendered skillfully. Now imagine yourself in an anti-science museum. It would be stripped of logic and evidence.

The Creation Museum will be such a place. Replacing scientific arguments will be emotionally grabbing, visual theater where the chairs move and where the audience will be misted by water. The last time this happened to me I was experiencing "Alien Encounter" while on family vacation at the Magic Kingdom in Disney World.

Boycott the Creation Museum.