Creationist Ministries Provide a Distorted View of Human Evolution

Adam Benton

INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular young-earth creationist arguments is that “there are no transitional forms.” This is a criticism frequently leveled at human evolution, with many creationists noting the paucity of fossil evidence for our species’ development. Institute for Creation Research founder Henry M Morris, for example, claimed, “all known fossils of ancient humans would fit on a billiard table” (Morris 1974:202). This is an argument that continues to be made, with some of the young-earth creationists who attended the debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye asking, “Why is there only one Lucy?” (Stopera 2014).

The fact of the matter is that this claim is simply wrong. We have found tens of thousands of hominin fossils (remains more closely related to modern humans than chimpanzees), representing over 6000 individuals (Smithsonian 2014), dozens of which are just as scientifically important as Lucy (AL 288-1). The hominin fossil record is far from complete, but there is nevertheless an overwhelming body of evidence in favor of human evolution. How then could these young-earth creationists still be complaining that too few hominin fossils have been discovered?

I hypothesize that the large young-earth creationist ministries, such as Answers in Genesis (who hosted the debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye) are not providing accurate representations of the human fossil record. If they focused on a select few examples, such as the Lucy specimen, and minimized or omitted references to others, this would create the false impression that the number of hominin fossils is much smaller than it actually is. Thus, if people relied upon these organizations as their primary source of information on human evolution, they would wind up with a distorted view that might lead them to ask “Why is there only one Lucy?” This paper tests this hypothesis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The websites of three of the largest creationist ministries—Answers in Genesis (AiG), Creation Ministries International (CMI), and the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), found at http://www.answersingenesis.org, http://www.creation.com and http://www.icr.org, respectively—were examined for references to five critical hominin fossils. The number of references to these fossils was then compared to the number of references to Lucy, which, as Stopera (2014) shows, is a popular topic among young-earth creationists. As such, Lucy provides a good standard against which to compare discussion of these other, arguably equally important, fossils in order to determine if they are being underrepresented by these young-earth creationist ministries.
Identifying the additional fossils used for this comparison is difficult, given the aforementioned volume of choice. Ultimately, two criteria were used. First, these fossils should have accrued a similar number of citations to Lucy, demonstrating that they are just as scientifically important and so should be receiving a significant amount of coverage. Second, they should all be more than ten years old to limit the effect of time as a confounding factor. All three of these websites were created within the last ten years (according to the Domain Age Tool at http://www.webconfs.com/domain-age.php/), so selecting fossils that predate their founding means that they will have had an equal amount of time to discuss each one. Conversely, if newer examples were used, then not as many articles would be expected to have been written about them. Several fossils match these criteria, of which the five most significant were selected for the examination.

**Sahelanthropus tchadensis** (TM 266-01-060-01). Uncovered in 2002, this fossil is notable for being the oldest known hominin, dating to 6–7 million years ago (Brunet and others 2002). Its age places it shortly after the chimp and human lineages diverged (Langergraber and others 2012), so it can provide valuable insight into what some of the first members of the human family looked like. The proximity to the divergence has caused some to question whether it does belong to the human family (Wolpoff and others 2002), but the fact that it appears to have been bipedal (Zollikofer and others 2005)—a characteristic unique to hominins (Richmond and Jungers 2008)—strongly indicates that it is a hominin.

**“Selam/Lucy’s baby”** (DIK-1-1). Discovered in 2003, this is an Australopithecus afarensis (the species to which Lucy belongs) that was around three years old when it died ~3.3 million years ago. As a juvenile, this fossil is a great source of evidence on how our ancestors grew and matured. It is also especially notable as it contains several parts of the anatomy not previously preserved along with part of its spinal column, which was still in situ, confirming that it was vertically orientated (a large piece of evidence in favor of bipedalism amongst this species) (Alemseged and others 2006).

**“Nariokotome boy/Turkana boy”** (KNM-WT 15000). Discovered in 1984, this individual was 7–8 years old when he died ~1.5 million years ago. Although this individual is not an adult, at the time of its discovery, it was one of the most complete examples of *Homo erectus* ever found, making it an important source of information on the species (Graves and others 2010).

**Australopithecus garhi** (BOU-VP-12/130). In 1996, this fragmentary skull from a previously unknown species of *Australopithecus* was discovered in Ethiopia. Although the fossil itself is incomplete, it is nevertheless of critical importance as it is associated with the earliest evidence of stone tools, dating to ~2.6 million years ago (de Heinzelin and others 1999). Although stone tools are used by a variety of primates, for decades it was believed only members of our genus, *Homo*, manufactured them with precision (Semaw 2000). This fossil raises the fascinating possibility that australopithecines were actually the first tool makers, despite having a brain no bigger than a chimp’s (Asfaw and others 1999).

**Dmanisi specimens.** This Georgian site was accidentally discovered in 1991 by archaeologists studying the medieval town there. Since then, several skeletons have been uncovered, belonging to some of the earliest individuals to migrate out of Africa ~1.8 million years ago (Gabunia and Vekua 1995), making this a critical site. It is an ongoing excavation; and
new fossils are continuing to be uncovered (Lordkipandze and others 2013). References to fossils discovered after the 2004 cut-off date were omitted.

The three aforementioned creationist websites were searched for references to these five fossils, the results of which are presented in Table 1. The technical name, species name, and colloquial nickname (where applicable) were searched for. Foreign translations of pages, lists of links to articles (or where the article about a fossil was referenced as a “see also”) and year in review pages were omitted from the final count, given that these pages do not contain any discussion of the actual fossils. Further, only free access pages were counted, as these are the only ones the vast majority of readers will have access too. This requirement will probably not affect the results of the search, given that only one article behind a pay wall was discovered. This search was performed on March 3, 2014.

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**Results and Discussion**

The number of references to each of these fossils is presented in Table 1. The data reveal that CMI, AiG, and the ICR reference Lucy an order of magnitude times more than they reference *Sabelanthropus*, Selam, Nariokotome boy, *Australopithecus garbi*, and the Dmanisi specimens. Answers in Genesis is particularly notable here. While these five fossils are mentioned on an average of six pages each, Lucy is mentioned on over five hundred pages! While the other two organizations are not so extreme, they nevertheless mention Lucy on vastly more pages than these other important fossils. The ICR’s website, for example, contains no pages that mention two of these, yet more than forty pages that reference Lucy! It is readily apparent that the organizations are underrepresenting these fossils.

It is worth noting that when the same methodology was applied to Piltdown man, a 102-year-old hominin hoax, a striking pattern emerged. The ICR has 9 pages, AiG has 65, and CMI has an amazing 79 English-language pages that refer to Piltdown man. So, although it is a hoax and therefore has no impact on modern paleoanthropological thinking (save as a cautionary tale), references to the irrelevant Piltdown man outweigh references to each of the legitimate fossils except Lucy on all of these sites. Creation Ministries International even makes more references to this irrelevant hoax than to Lucy.


**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is apparent that Answers in Genesis (AiG), the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), and Creation Ministries International (CMI) are presenting a distorted view of human evolution, glossing over critical fossils and creating the false impression that there is little evidence for human evolution. In fact, the evidence is voluminous. I do not mean to argue that this distortion is intentional deception; writers at these organizations may simply be unaware of the vast majority of paleoanthropological literature, or perhaps prefer to discuss Lucy, as it is the example with which they are most familiar.

Regardless of the ultimate cause, the end result is clear: people who rely on AiG, CMI, and/or the ICR for information on human evolution will wind up woefully underestimating the hominin fossil record. As such, in the ongoing cultural debate between creationists and science, importance should be placed on improving science education, on making people aware of the vast amount of evidence in favor of human evolution and fixing the holes in their knowledge left by these creation ministries. Simply dissecting young-earth creationist arguments is not enough; more work has to be done to raise the level of knowledge. This makes the work performed by organizations such as the National Center for Science Education increasingly important to compensate for the distorted view of evolution presented by creationists.

**References**


**About the Author**

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