

The Creation Debate: Part Two— Life in the Laboratory?

Dr. John Ankerberg with Dr. Duane Gish

[Editor's note: In June 1990 The John Ankerberg Show taped a series of interviews with men from several branches of the sciences regarding the evidence for creation. For technical reasons we were unable to air these interview. Nevertheless, we have decided to re-release portions of these interviews in a series of articles so you could read the arguments that were being made at that time—more than a decade ago.

Considerable effort has been made to quote the gentlemen correctly. We have attempted to find the correct spelling of the scientific terms used. However, the reader should keep in mind that this is a transcription of oral interviews. Mistakes in spelling and in the technical language should be laid at the feet of the editor.]

Dr. John Ankerberg: Duane, take us back to the laboratory where the scientists have tried to reproduce DNA by natural processes. How did they set it up? What was their theory? Where were they going with it? And, what did they find out?

Dr. Duane Gish: Well, John, one of the very earliest experiments was done, in fact it was the very earliest experiment which was actually performed in the laboratory, was that of Stanley Miller, working with Harold Urey. Now what Stanley Miller did, he went in the lab and set up this apparatus. He assumed that the hypothetical primordial atmosphere contained methane, ammonia, hydrogen and water vapor, among other things. And, so he put those gases in his apparatus. Now he had to have an energy, a very strong energy source, and he assumed that lightning would have been one of the natural phenomenon in that primitive earth, so he provided an electric spark discharge for the energy source. He circulated these gases through this apparatus with a constant sparking. And he had a condenser which condensed the products and isolated them in a trap. Now the gases continued to circulate for, say, one or two weeks, but the products were immediately isolated in the trap.

Ankerberg: Which wouldn't have happened in the pre-biotic soup.

Gish: Well, no. You see, there are several objections to this procedure. First of all, what he found in the trap were a few amino acids. I remember a newspaper headline describing this experiment said that scientists are near to creating life in a test tube. Well, of course, that is a rather absurd statement. The only thing that Dr. Miller obtained was a few of the amino acids, the building blocks of protein. That's light years short of creating life.

But you see, the reason that this experiment has no relevance, first of all, there is no such atmosphere on the hypothetical primordial earth to begin with. But even assuming that, the only reason Dr. Miller got a detectable quantity of product was the fact that he had a trap which immediately isolated the products once it formed. The gases were continually exposed to the energy source, the products were immediately isolated in the trap. Now, that was a very clever device, because Dr. Miller knew that the rate of destruction of those compounds vastly exceeds the rate of formation. So, unless he isolated these products in the trap he would never get a detectable quantity of product because the rate of destruction exceed the rate of formation by a million to one or greater.

Now the problem. Several problems. First of all, there are no traps on the hypothetical primordial earth, no organic chemists there with a trap, no natural trap. But even if there were a trap, you see, that also would be fatal to any theory on origin of life, because the purpose of the trap is to remove the product from the energy source; therefore, to prevent its destruction. But you see now you're dead. You've reached the end of the line, because you have no energy available to go to the next step. Now you have amino acids in the trap. The next step would combine those amino acids to make a protein. But you can't do that. You don't have any energy there.

Ankerberg: Yeah, but the scientists would say, "Hey, we've got sunlight as being energy." And I think I read somewhere that it is like having the bricks to build a house. Okay? If you have energy without design, it's like having dynamite. You can have a lot of energy, but that is not going to put that house together. So if you have energy, you still need to have some mechanism that will tell you what to do with that energy to program it to operate in the right direction.

Gish: Of course, you see the very purpose of the trap is to remove it from the energy because the energy would destroy the product. Now if you bring in sunlight, if you bring in ultraviolet light, or something like that, what are you going to do? You're going to destroy your product, you see, at a rate that vastly exceeds the probability these things will be linked together. And so the experiment really is meaningless.

Ankerberg: How many amino acids would you need and what would have to happen to get up to the next stage of protein?

Gish: Well, in proteins today, there are 20 different kinds of amino acids. Now another thing that is very important here is that in any experiment in the laboratory or in nature that would produce amino acids you get two forms—except for glycine which is simplest amino acid—all other amino acids can exist in what we might call a left-handed form and a right-handed form. If you put your left hand up to the mirror the mirror-image is your right hand, but you cannot superimpose a right hand on the left hand. Now the same is true of these amino acids. They exist in two forms: a left-handed form and a right-handed form.

Now, chemically they are indistinguishable, practically indistinguishable. One is produced just as easily as the other and so you produce 50% of each. Furthermore, when they link together one links together just as easily as the other. So if they link together in some evolutionary process chemically, you would have a 50-50 mixture and you would not know whether the first amino acid is a left-handed or right-handed, or the second amino acid is left-handed or right-handed or so you would get a mixed up mess.

But in proteins today without exception, every amino acid is left-handed. There are no exceptions. If you have a protein enzyme with 600 amino acids and if you would substitute one right-handed amino acid for one of those left-handed amino acids, you would have absolutely no activity at all. Now evolution has been working on this problem for many years. How is it that proteins are exclusively left-handed, but you would have 50% of each to start with?

Ankerberg: In other words, by natural chance and in their experiments they came up with 50% right-handed and 50% left-handed.

Gish: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ankerberg: And those left-handed ones destroy the next process?

Gish: The right-handed amino acid cannot be utilized to make a protein. And they have

to be exclusively left-handed. Now, what the creation scientist is saying is that that speaks of deliberate choice. Now, when I was synthesizing proteins, I always made sure that I selected a left-handed amino acid. Now, furthermore, these things very easily are converted into the other form. I had to be very careful about my selection of a solvent, about the kind of reagent I used to link them together. I had to very carefully watch the temperature. Watch all of these conditions very carefully, and still there is always a danger of converting the left-handed form to the right-handed form and then we lose all activity. And to think that this just happened in some primordial ocean, it's, well, let's put it this way, it stretches the imagination to the breaking point.