PETERSBURG, Ky. — The entrance gates here are topped with metallic Stegosaurususes. The grounds include a giant tyrannosaur standing amid the trees, and a stone-lined lobby sports varied sauropods. It could be like any other natural history museum, luring families with the promise of immense fossils and dinosaur adventures.

But step a little farther into the entrance hall, and you come upon a pastoral scene undreamt of by any natural history museum. Two prehistoric children play near a burbling waterfall, thoroughly at home in the natural world. Dinosaurs cavort nearby, their animatronic mechanisms turning them into alluring companions, their gaping mouths seeming not threatening, but almost welcoming, as an Apatosaurus munches on leaves a few yards away.
What is this, then? A reproduction of a childhood fantasy in which dinosaurs are friends of inquisitive youngsters? The kind of fantasy that doesn’t care that human beings and these prefossilized thunder-lizards are usually thought to have been separated by millions of years? No, this really is meant to be more like one of those literal dioramas of the traditional natural history museum, an imagining of a real habitat, with plant life and landscape reproduced in meticulous detail.

For here at the $27 million Creation Museum, which opens on May 28 (just a short drive from the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport), this pastoral scene is a glimpse of the world just after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, in which dinosaurs are still apparently as herbivorous as humans, and all are enjoying a little calm in the days after the fall.

It also serves as a vivid introduction to the sheer weirdness and daring of this museum created by the Answers in Genesis ministry that combines displays of extraordinary nautilus shell fossils and biblical tableaus, celebrations of natural wonders and allusions to human sin. Evolution gets its continual comeuppance, while biblical revelations are treated as gospel.

Outside the museum scientists may assert that the universe is billions of years old, that fossils are the remains of animals living hundreds of millions of years ago, and that life’s diversity is the result of evolution by natural selection. But inside the museum the Earth is barely 6,000 years old, dinosaurs were created on the sixth day, and Jesus is the savior who will one day repair the trauma of man’s fall.

It is a measure of the museum’s daring that dinosaurs and fossils — once considered major challenges to belief in the Bible’s creation story — are here so central, appearing not as tests of faith, as one religious authority once surmised, but as creatures no different from the giraffes and cats that still walk the earth. Fossils, the museum teaches, are no older than Noah’s flood; in fact dinosaurs were on the ark.

So dinosaur skeletons and brightly colored mineral crystals and images of the Grand Canyon are here, as are life-size dioramas showing paleontologists digging in mock earth, Moses and Paul teaching their doctrines, Martin Luther chastising the church to return to Scripture, Adam and Eve guiltily standing near skinned
animals, covering their nakedness, and a supposedly full-size reproduction of a section of Noah’s ark.

There are 52 videos in the museum, one showing how the transformations wrought by the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980 reveal how plausible it is that the waters of Noah’s flood could have carved out the Grand Canyon within days. There is a special-effects theater complete with vibrating seats meant to evoke the flood, and a planetarium paying tribute to God’s glory while exploring the nature of galaxies.

Whether you are willing to grant the premises of this museum almost becomes irrelevant as you are drawn into its mixture of spectacle and narrative. Its 60,000 square feet of exhibits are often stunningly designed by Patrick Marsh, who, like the entire museum staff, declares adherence to the ministry’s views; he evidently also knows the lure of secular sensations, since he designed the “Jaws” and “King Kong” attractions at Universal Studios in Florida.

For the skeptic the wonder is at a strange universe shaped by elaborate arguments, strong convictions and intermittent invocations of scientific principle. For the believer, it seems, this museum provides a kind of relief: Finally the world is being shown as it really is, without the distortions of secularism and natural selection.

The Creation Museum actually stands the natural history museum on its head. Natural history museums developed out of the Enlightenment: encyclopedic collections of natural objects were made subject to ever more searching forms of inquiry and organization. The natural history museum gave order to the natural world, taming its seeming chaos with the principles of human reason. And Darwin’s theory — which gave life a compelling order in time as well as space — became central to its purpose. Put on display was the prehistory of civilization, seeming to allude not just to the evolution of species but also cultures (which is why “primitive” cultures were long part of its domain). The natural history museum is a hall of human origins.
The Creation Museum has a similar interest in dramatizing origins, but sees natural history as divine history. And now that many museums have also become temples to various American ethnic and sociological groups, why not a museum for the millions who believe that the Earth is less than 6,000 years old and was created in six days?

Mark Looy, a founder of Answers in Genesis with its president, Ken Ham, said the ministry expected perhaps 250,000 visitors during the museum’s first year. In preparation Mr. Ham for 13 years has been overseeing 350 seminars annually about the truths of Genesis, which have been drawing thousands of acolytes. The organization’s magazine has 50,000 subscribers. The museum also says that it has 9,000 charter members and international contributors who have left the institution free of debt.

But for a visitor steeped in the scientific world view, the impact of the museum is a disorienting mix of faith and reason, the exotic and the familiar. Nature here is not “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson asserted. In fact at first it seems almost as genteel as Eden’s dinosaurs. We learn that chameleons, for example, change colors not because that serves as a survival mechanism, but “to ‘talk’ to other chameleons, to show off their mood, and to adjust to heat and light.”

Meanwhile a remarkable fossil of a perch devouring a herring found in Wyoming offers “silent testimony to God’s worldwide judgment,” not because it shows a predator and prey, but because the two perished — somehow getting preserved in stone — during Noah’s flood. Nearly all fossils, the museum asserts, are relics of that divine retribution.

The heart of the museum is a series of catastrophes. The main one is the fall, with Adam and Eve eating of the tree of knowledge; after that tableau the viewer descends from the brightness of Eden into genuinely creepy cement hallways of urban slums. Photographs show the pain of war, childbirth, death — the wages of primal sin. Then come the biblical accounts of the fallen world, leading up to Noah’s ark and the flood, the source of all significant geological phenomena.

The other catastrophe, in the museum’s view, is of more recent vintage: the abandonment of the Bible by church figures who began to treat the story of creation as if it were merely metaphorical, and by Enlightenment philosophers,
who chipped away at biblical authority. The ministry believes this is a slippery slope.

Start accepting evolution or an ancient Earth, and the result is like the giant wrecking ball, labeled “Millions of Years,” that is shown smashing the ground at the foundation of a church, the cracks reaching across the gallery to a model of a home in which videos demonstrate the imminence of moral dissolution. A teenager is shown sitting at a computer; he is, we are told, looking at pornography.

But given the museum’s unwavering insistence on belief in the literal truth of biblical accounts, it is strange that so much energy is put into demonstrating their scientific coherence with discussions of erosion or interstellar space. Are such justifications required to convince the skeptical or reassure the believer?

In the museum’s portrayal, creationists and secularists view the same facts, but come up with differing interpretations, perhaps the way Ptolemaic astronomers in the 16th century saw the Earth at the center of the universe, where Copernicans began to place the sun. But one problem is that scientific activity presumes that the material world is organized according to unchanging laws, while biblical fundamentalism presumes that those laws are themselves subject to disruption and miracle. Is not that a slippery slope as well, even affecting these analyses?

But for debates, a visitor goes elsewhere. The Creation Museum offers an alternate world that has its fascinations, even for a skeptic wary of the effect of so many unanswered assertions. He leaves feeling a bit like Adam emerging from Eden, all the world before him, freshly amazed at its strangeness and extravagant peculiarities.