



Did Animals Die before the Fall?

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One profound difference between old- and young-earth creationists¹ is the question of animal death before the creation of Adam and Eve. Old-earth creationists believe that the vast majority of the geologic record depicts earth history prior to the appearance of humans, and that this record is replete with evidence of animal death before humans existed.

Young-earth creationists, on the other hand, attribute signs of death in the fossil record to Noah's Flood (for the most part), which is post-Adamic. They reason that animal death is part of the curse, so animals could not have died before Adam sinned.² James Stambaugh writes: "Those who accept the Bible believe that death is a punishment for sin; death must have come into existence *after* Adam fell."³ Likewise Mark Van Bebber and Paul Taylor argue: "Because animals did not die until after Adam's sin, the fossils are evidence of death *after* Adam's sin, not before."⁴

For John D. Morris, nothing less than the Christian faith hinges upon the question of death before the Fall.

If death existed before Adam, then death is not the penalty for sin. How, then, did Christ's death pay the penalty for our sin? If death is not tied to Adam's sin, then life is not tied to Christ's death and resurrection, and the Christian faith is nothing.⁵

The idea that animals died before the Fall is abhorrent to young-earth creationists. Van Bebber and Taylor state:

Thus, the Progressive Creation [old-earth] scenario involves a process of elimination, death by fang and claw—cold and unmerciful to the weak. Could even a sadist think of a more cruel and ugly way to pro-

duce the animals over which Adam was to rule? What a horrible thing to accuse Jesus Christ of doing!⁶

These arguments sound plausible, but they break down upon closer scrutiny.

To wit, suppose just for the sake of argument we agree that Adam's sin is the direct cause of animal death. Even this premise does not establish a logical necessity that death chronologically followed his act of sinning. Death could have been imputed to animals prior to Adam's disobedience. Here is why. In essence, those who affirm that death in the animal kingdom flowed chronologically from Adam's sin reason as follows:

First premise: Adam's sin (the cause) resulted in death in the animal kingdom (the effect);

Second premise: An effect must follow chronologically from its cause;

Therefore: Death came after Adam sinned, not before.

Conclusion: Animals that existed before Adam sinned did not die.

A syllogism of the above form is necessarily correct if both premises are correct. That is, if one accepts the premises as true, then one must also accept the conclusion as true.

Now, consider a parallel argument:

First premise: Jesus's sacrifice (the cause) resulted in salvation for humanity (the effect);

Second premise: An effect must follow chronologically from its cause;

Therefore: Salvation came after Jesus's death, not before.

Conclusion: Humans that existed before Jesus's death were not saved.

But the second argument must be rejected, based upon ample biblical data that saved individuals lived before Jesus's death.⁷ So where is the error in the syllogisms? The second premise—God's imputation of sin (or of righteousness) can precede the cause!⁸

These arguments stand or fall together. If one accepts the fact that God can impute Jesus's righteousness retroactively, then one must accept that God can impute Adam's sin retroactively. Conversely, if one denies that Adam's sin can be imputed retroactively, then one must deny that Jesus's righteousness can be imputed retroactively. This latter deduction, however, implies that no one existing before Jesus's death was saved; but this is a deduction both young- and old-earth creationists should reject!

Animal death before Adam's sin, therefore, presents no theological difficulty, for there is no logical prerequisite forbidding animal death before Adam's time. Concomitantly, this also means that there is no theological or moral

mandate to search for a post-Adamic event, like Noah's Flood, to explain animal death prevalent in fossils.

If one accepts the fact that God can impute Jesus's righteousness retroactively, then one must accept that God can impute Adam's sin retroactively. Conversely, if one denies that Adam's sin can be imputed retroactively, then one must deny that Jesus's righteousness can be imputed retroactively.

As a final point,⁹ the original premise—that animal death is the result of Adam's sin—is unwarranted. Scripture is silent on the extent to which Adam's punishment was imputed to the rest of creation, including the death of animals. In Rom. 5:12-21, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that the sin of Adam, which resulted in death, was imputed to the rest of humanity; nothing in his discourse implies that Adam's sin affected animals. Adam is the federal head of *humanity*, not of the entire creation.¹⁰

Moreover, in Rom. 8:18-25, Paul spends ample time discussing the futility, bondage, and decay of creation as a whole, but he does not attribute this condition to Adam's sin.¹¹ Rather, it is a direct result of God's sovereign will, so creation in its entirety might be "brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (verse 21). Futility, bondage, and decay appear to be part of the created order. It is gratuitous, therefore, to imply that Adam's sin, in and of itself, brought these debilitating effects to the entire cosmos.¹²

We conclude that the claim that animals died only *after* the Fall lacks support. I encourage my young-earth brethren, therefore, to abandon this argument as a theological prerequisite that fossils reveal evidence of death after Adam sinned, not before.¹³ ⚙

Notes

¹I use the term "old-earth creationist" for one who believes that the earth is on the order of 4.6 billion years old. The term "young-earth creationist" represents one who believes that the earth is around 10-20 thousand years old.

²The death of plants and the death of billions of algae, bacteria, and protozoa before the Fall is not a problem for young-earth creationists. These entities were necessary for proper ecology of the earth. Nevertheless, although plants and animals operate on the same molecular chemistry, some young-earth creationists propose that plants do not constitute "Biblical life." Unlike animals and humans, plants (and other living entities) do not depend upon blood, whereas for humans and for higher animal forms, the "life is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11, 14; Deut. 12:13; cp. Gen. 9:4 and Deut. 19:6). Hence, it is argued, because of the "blood solidarity" between humans and higher animal forms, Adam's sin resulted in the death of animals as well as the death of humans. See James S. Stambaugh, *Death before Sin?* Impact article # 191 (El Cajon, CA: Institute for Creation Research, 1989) Available online at www.icr.org/index.php?module=articles&action=view&ID=295.

³Stambaugh, *Death before Sin?* Stambaugh continues the same line of thinking at www.icr.org/index.php?module=articles&action=view&ID=344.

⁴Mark Van Bebber and Paul S. Taylor, *Creation and Time: A Report on the Progressive Creationist Book by Hugh Ross* (Gilbert, AZ: Eden Communications, 1996), 21 (emphasis theirs).

⁵John D. Morris, "Death before Sin" (#20011023) in *Days of Praise* (El Cajon, CA: Institute for Creation Research, 2001). Available online at www.icr.org/index.php?module=articles&action=view&ID=18303.

⁶Van Bebber and Taylor, *Creation and Time*, 21, 22.

⁷E.g., Abraham, David, Daniel, Job, and many more (check Hebrews 11). This should also be seen in the light of Paul's discussion in Galatians 3 that the mode of salvation has remained constant throughout history. That is, God did not use one manner of salvation for Old Testament saints and another for New Testament saints. All are saved by Christ's atoning death.

⁸I am indebted to Robert J. Dunzweiler, late professor of systematic theology at Biblical Theological Seminary, for this insight.

⁹Whether one agrees or disagrees with my analysis in this and in the next paragraph, the conclusion that animals could die before the Fall still obtains.

¹⁰John Murray correctly sums up the extent of Adam's headship: "When he [Paul] says 'entered into the world' he refers to the beginning of sin in the human race and 'the world' means the sphere of human existence," John Murray, "The Epistle to the Romans" in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 181.

¹¹Some have suggested Satan's fall as the cause of the rest of creation's futility. This idea is prominent in, but not limited to, the so-called "Gap Theory." I do not subscribe to this theory. See Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change: Genesis 1.1-2.4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1997), 94-8.

¹²This is implied, for example, by Van Bebber and Taylor, *Creation and Time*, 46; and by Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), 47. Here, by "world," Morris means the entire earth. To me, Romans 8 implies that nonhuman death was part of the original created order, but it is well beyond the scope of this article to delve further into this subject.

¹³I thank a couple of anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

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