



William Horst

# Creation's Slavery to (Human) Corruption: A Moral Interpretation of Romans 8:20–22

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*In Romans, Paul describes creation groaning in anticipation of eschatological freedom from present slavery to corruption (Rom. 8:20–22). Scholars commonly interpret creation's slavery to corruption as an allusion to the curse God pronounces on the ground in response to the transgression of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17–19), which Paul understands as reflective of the corruption of creation by the introduction of physical death and decomposition. This article argues that "slavery to corruption" is better understood in reference to human moral corruption of the sort Paul describes in the preceding chapters (Romans 6–8). Under this interpretation, the groaning of creation is reminiscent of a number of biblical prophetic texts in which the earth is said to mourn over the detrimental effects of human sin. Such a reading has important implications for Christian theological reflections on both evolution and environmentalism.*

In his letter to the Romans, Paul explicates a tension between future hope and present suffering:

<sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy of comparing to the glory that is about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the eager expectation of the creation anticipates the revelation of the children of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not voluntarily, but because of the one who subjected it, in the hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to corruption, resulting in the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>For we know that the entire creation groans and travails together until now, <sup>23</sup>and not just the creation, but also we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we anticipate the adoption, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>1</sup> (Rom. 8:18–23)

Paul alludes to suffering that he and his audience experience—probably in the form of persecution<sup>2</sup>—as well as suffering that creation experiences in the form of subjection to futility (v.20) and bondage to corruption (v.21). In the midst of present suffering, Paul, his audience, and personified creation groan together

in anticipation of deliverance and divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> In some sense, these parties can be said to share a common eschatological hope in the midst of the hardships of the present age.

Scholarly interpreters of Romans typically understand the subjection of creation to futility and corruption as an allusion to the narrative of Eden—found in the book of Genesis—in which Adam and Eve disobey God, and as a result, the ground is cursed:<sup>4</sup>

And to the man [God] said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3:17–19)

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Earlier in Romans, Paul says that sin and death entered the world through Adam (Rom. 5:12) before describing how the negative consequences of Adam's transgression are ultimately addressed by the abundant grace of God through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:15–21). Scholars commonly associate the inception of death through Adam with creation's present subjection to corruption. They explain that Paul imagines bodily death and physical decay to be pervasive phenomena within creation that began with the Edenic curse on the ground and will persist until the end of the age, when the children of God will be glorified (Rom. 8:19; cf. 5:2). The redemption of bodies, which Paul and his audience look forward to (Rom. 8:23), is also typically associated with this grand narrative of the introduction and ultimate removal of the processes of death and decay from God's good creation. In other words, creation in general, and the bodies of believers in particular, will alike be liberated from perishability and disarray at the end of the present age. Some interpreters go so far as to say that the release of creation from bondage to decay involves the reversal of the entropic principle, which was introduced to creation in response to primordial trespass.<sup>5</sup> In short, the standard interpretation of this passage of Romans maintains that the "corruption" to which creation is presently in bondage is a physical phenomenon associated with death, which is alien to God's creation, yet which characterizes present existence.

The typical interpretation of Romans 8 has important implications for discussions about Christian faith and evolution. If humans emerged from an evolutionary process of development that took place over the course of billions of years as countless generations of living organisms reproduced and then died, it follows that death and decay must have been active on the earth long before the first humans could have disobeyed God and thereby introduced such phenomena through their folly. It seems that the common interpretation of Romans 8 and an evolutionary understanding of human origins are mutually exclusive. Thus such an interpretation presents a serious difficulty to Christians who would maintain both the authority of scripture and the validity of evolution.<sup>6</sup>

One curious feature of the widespread, "physical" interpretation of creation's bondage to decay in Romans 8:20–21 is the frequency with which its proponents go out of their way to state how clear and obvious it is that Paul has in mind the primordial curse God places on the ground in Genesis.<sup>7</sup>

Under close examination, the evidence in support of this common interpretation is by no means clear or obvious. In the most straightforward reading of Genesis, the curse on the ground relates to its agricultural yield, since the explicit result is that Adam will work the fields in order to cultivate wheat with which to make bread, instead of enjoying the free fruit that is so abundantly present in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:17–19). Nothing in the early chapters of Genesis suggests that this agrarian curse has anything to do with the introduction of processes of decay to a creation that previously lacked such phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Adam and Eve are warned that they will surely die if they eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 2:17; 3:3–5), but this appears to result from their being denied access to the tree of life when they are expelled from the garden (Gen. 3:22–24). The curse on the ground is associated with a change in the amount of toiling Adam will need to do to provide for his family, not with human mortality or any other change to the created order. It is certainly conceivable that Paul does imagine that the Edenic lapse introduced mortality and other aspects of decay to God's creation, but the evidence in favor of finding an allusion to the curse of Eden behind the subjection of creation to corruption in Romans is flimsy at best, and scholars do not normally proffer compelling argumentation in favor of it.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative interpretation of creation's bondage in Romans deserves consideration, namely, that creation's bondage to corruption involves human *moral* corruption, rather than the sort of *physical* corruption that occurs when an organism dies on Earth. Creation presently suffers from the detrimental effects of pervasive moral depravity, and this moral decadence is the fundamental plight from which Paul awaits liberation in the discourse of Romans.

### The Mourning of Creation in the Biblical Prophets

In Romans 8:20–22, Paul describes creation groaning and experiencing labor pains in connection with bondage to futility and corruption. Indeed, this image of personified creation's groaning is probably the most captivating element of the present passage of interest. Several scholars have noted a potential connection between the notion of creation's present groaning in Romans and a number of passages among the prophets of the Old Testament in which the earth is said to mourn as a result of human sin (Amos 1:2; Hosea 4:1–3; Jer. 4:23–28; 12:1–4, 7–13;

23:9–12; Isa. 24:1–20; 33:7–9; Joel 1:5–20).<sup>10</sup> For example, the prophet Jeremiah mentions that the land in the region of Judah mourns and suffers because of a drought as well as the impending invasion of foreign rulers who will bring further desolation to the region:

How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, “He is blind to our ways.” ... Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. (Jer. 12:4, 10–11a)

Both the drought and the invasion are forms of divine judgment against pervasive ungodliness and hypocrisy among the people of the region (Jer. 12:1–2).<sup>11</sup> The land mourns because God’s judgment against the people who occupy the region causes detrimental effects for the land. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah describes the earth mourning due to devastation that is about to come upon it as a divine judgment against Israel’s violation of the covenant between God and the people:

The earth mourned, and the world was ruined; the exalted ones of the earth mourned. And the earth behaved lawlessly because of those who inhabit it, because they transgressed the law and changed the ordinances—an everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse will devour the earth, because those who inhabit it have sinned; therefore those who dwell in the earth will be poor, and few people will be left. The wine will mourn; the vine will mourn; all who rejoice in their soul will groan. (Isa. 24:4–7, NETS)<sup>12</sup>

The exact details in each of the relevant prophetic passages vary, but all of the passages in question personify the land of Israel and describe it mourning over human sin and its problematic implications for the health and well-being of the land itself.

It is noteworthy that none of the passages in which the earth is said to mourn evoke the notion of an Edenic fall, nor are any of these passages concerned with the presence of death or decomposition in the created order. The land’s mourning is about the destructive outworking of widespread injustice and moral corruption among the people who inhabit the territory of Israel, or some subset thereof. In essence, the creation suffers with humans as the people receive divine judgment for their iniquity. This notion constitutes a substantial tradition within

the Jewish scriptures, particularly the prophetic writings.<sup>13</sup>

In a series of journal articles, Laurie J. Braaten interprets the groaning of creation in Romans as an evocation of the prophetic notion of the mourning of the earth over human sin and the resultant judgment. He rightly argues that the basis for attributing creation’s groaning to this tradition of terrestrial lamentation is stronger than the grounds on which scholars more commonly argue that Paul alludes to the divine curse on the ground found in the book of Genesis, since the earth’s mourning is a widespread tradition in the Old Testament that bears a clear resemblance to the groaning of creation in Romans, whereas the link between this Pauline material and the Edenic curse is at best vague, speculative, and tenuous.<sup>14</sup>

Braaten draws a further connection between the groaning of the Spirit in Romans and several passages among the prophetic texts he analyzes in which humans are said to mourn, or are encouraged to mourn, together with the land of Israel over the destructive effects of human sin.<sup>15</sup> Paul describes the work of the Spirit within believers to guide intercessory prayer and groaning in anticipation of eschatological deliverance:

[N]ot only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies ... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Rom. 8:23, 26)

The indwelling Spirit, the believer, and the whole of creation groan together. This is not unlike certain prophetic passages related to the mourning of the land of Israel, in which humans are said to mourn in unison with the land. For instance, the prophet Joel calls upon priests of Israel to mourn together with the personified land over her desolation:

The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord. The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. (Joel 1:9–10)

The ancient Greek (i.e., Septuagint) translation of Isaiah also mentions leaders of the people mourning alongside the earth itself: “The earth mourned, and the world was ruined; the exalted ones of the earth mourned” (Isa. 24:4, NETS; cf. Isa. 24:7).<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah

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describes the mourning of the earth—including mountains, animals, the sky, and the ground (Jer. 4:23–28)—and then continues on to describe Jerusalem's groaning over the imminent invasion of foreign armies (Jer. 4:29–31), which hints that the people of God who inhabit the region of Judah mourn together with the subhuman creation because of the common plight of desolation that will accompany violent invasion.<sup>17</sup> Given that a number of the prophetic passages about the mourning of the land of Israel attest a theme of human mourning and groaning alongside the mourning of the land itself, Paul's description in Romans of the groaning of the righteous alongside the groaning of creation itself constitutes an additional point of congeniality with this prophetic biblical tradition.

The groaning of creation and the bondage of creation are closely related metaphors in Romans 8:20–23, since creation's present state of bondage is clearly the cause of creation's groaning and suffering. If Paul does indeed evoke the prophetic motif of the mourning of the earth when he describes creation's groaning in Romans, then his description of creation's bondage to futility and corruption in verses 20–21 is most naturally understood to refer to the suffering of nonhuman creation alongside the suffering of humans due to human sin with its destructive effects, including the judgment of God toward sin (see further below).

The elements of interest in Romans 8:20–23 that best support scholarly arguments in favor of finding an allusion to a primordial curse on the ground—namely, the groaning of creation and creation's bondage to futility and corruption—are the same elements that arguably bear an even greater thematic resemblance to passages among the Old Testament prophets about the mourning of the land due to sin. I do not see any reason that it would make sense to suppose that both biblical traditions are evoked by the same elements of Romans. Thus, there remains little reason to insist that the bondage and groaning of creation alludes to an inherent state of physical corruption that resulted from the sin of Adam and Eve.

### Moral Corruption in Romans

The notion that creation's bondage to corruption and futility in Romans 8:20–21 has to do with the destructive effects of human moral depravity is supported by a number of instances of the language of slavery

that occur in the preceding chapters of Paul's letter (Romans 6–7).<sup>18</sup> Paul characterizes life apart from Christ as a state of slavery to sin. For example, he says,

[T]hanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:17–18)

In this and other similar material (cf. Rom. 6:6, 11–14, 16–22), Paul characterizes life prior to baptism (cf. Rom. 6:3–4) as a state of obedient slavery to sin, whereas life in Christ is characterized by obedience to God and freedom from sin. A bit further on in the letter, Paul adopts the persona of an individual in a state of bondage to sin apart from Christ.<sup>19</sup> It is clear from his portrayal that slavery to sin is not merely a matter of obedient alignment with the cause of sin. Rather, a person in a state of slavery to sin is inextricably bound to sinful behavior and needs to be rescued:

I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:14–19, 21–24)

In contrast to the moral slave who is afflicted by sin, and who walks according to the flesh, Paul and his audience walk according to the Spirit and submit to the will of God (see, especially, Rom. 8:4–9). In this sense, they have been liberated from bondage to sin. Nonetheless, the possibility remains that members of Paul's audience could be duped by sin and fall back into a state of slavery as a result. This is evident because Paul exhorts his audience to obey God's will and not to submit to sin (Rom. 6:12–14), and warns that there will be dire consequences if they live in accordance with the flesh rather than the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Presumably, the possibility of believers once again falling under the control of sin

will be removed once and for all when God's glory is revealed (cf. Rom. 8:18).

The literary context of Paul's references to creation's subjugation under futility and corruption (Rom. 8:21-22) gives us good reason to explore a moral, rather than physical, interpretation of his language. The words "corruption" and "futility" in this passage are sufficiently flexible that they could describe physical decomposition and transitoriness, or moral corruption and depravity.<sup>20</sup> Given that Paul employs the imagery of slavery, domination, and warfare to describe human subjection to sinful desires in the preceding chapters of Romans, it would make sense that creation's bondage also has something to do with moral disorientation.<sup>21</sup> It would be uncharacteristic of Paul to speak of rocks, plants, and animals as morally disoriented, but another interpretive possibility emerges if we consider Paul's description of creation's groaning in this same passage as an evocation of the biblical prophetic tradition of the earth's mourning over the detrimental effects of human sin (see above). When we consider the themes and motifs that characterize the chapters leading up to Paul's reference to creation's bondage to corruption, it should lead us to understand creation's bondage as the suffering of creation that results from pervasive human moral depravity. In other words, human moral disorientation does not have detrimental effects on humans only (cf. Rom. 1:18-32); it is also more broadly destructive to creation as the domain that humans inhabit. For this reason, creation eagerly awaits God's redemption just as Paul and his audience do.

Paul refers to the object of his future hope as "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23), where "redemption" signals a release from captivity.<sup>22</sup> Paul probably imagines future bodily liberation to occur when he and his audience will be united with Christ in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:5), and receive the gift of eternal life (cf. Rom. 2:7; 5:27; 6:22-23). While it is certainly reasonable to expect that redeemed bodies will no longer be subject to death or decomposition, it is not apparent that the elimination of mortality is Paul's chief interest as he refers to bodily redemption at this point in the discourse of Romans. In the preceding chapters (Romans 6-7), Paul constructs moral slavery as a domination by sin that takes place in the members of the body. The person who is enslaved to sin finds that the law of sin is at work in the members of his or her body, waging

war against the law of his or her mind, and thereby compelling him or her to carry out immoral actions (Rom. 7:23; cf. 6:12; 7:5, 25), with the result that such a person longs to be rescued from "this body of death" (Rom. 7:24). To live in a manner free from slavery to sin is to present the members of one's body in service to God, rather than in service to sin (Rom. 6:13, 19; cf. 12:1). A person who lives in such a manner puts "the deeds of the body" to death by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). With these and other comments, Paul shows that the human body is the domain in which one's subjection to sin plays out. Given the ways in which the body factors into the discourse of Romans, Paul's reference to "the redemption of our bodies" is appropriately understood to refer to believers being set free from any further possibility of moral slavery. In other words, Paul's eschatological hope in Romans has primarily to do with total and final freedom from sin, and this moral freedom is quite probably what Paul means when he alludes to bodily redemption.<sup>23</sup>

## Human Corruption and the Suffering of Creation

Paul does not explain exactly how creation suffers because of human moral depravity, as his chief focus is on the hope of glory, which is incomparably greater in magnitude than any present sufferings (Rom. 8:18). Nonetheless, it is worth considering exactly what sorts of phenomena Paul's audience might assume he has in mind when he suggests that human moral corruption has detrimental effects on creation. In his commentary on Romans, Robert Jewett intriguingly suggests that

imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world, leaving ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as evidence of ... universal human vanity.<sup>24</sup>

This is as good a suggestion as I have found in the literature on this passage. Consistent with this interpretation, J. Donald Hughes extensively documents historical evidence for ecological problems in the ancient Mediterranean world, and shows that human activity, especially imperial activity, clearly contributed to numerous forms of ecological degradation in the Mediterranean world of the Roman era, during which Paul wrote.<sup>25</sup> Simply put, evidence for the detrimental implications of misguided human

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actions on human habitation was apparent in Paul's day, much as it should be apparent to most observers of the world in the twenty-first century.

### The Introduction of Death through Adam in Romans

One additional exegetical consideration must be addressed for my interpretation of Romans 8 to hold water. As I mentioned above, scholars who find a reference to the Edenic curse on the ground in Romans 8 typically bolster their interpretation by appealing to the introduction of death through Adam, which Paul discusses earlier in the letter (Rom. 5:12–21). Of particular relevance is the assertion that "sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12), where the "one man" in question is clearly Adam (cf. Rom. 5:14). If Paul has already made reference to death entering the world through Adam earlier in Romans, then he apparently understood that humans are susceptible to death because of the trespass of Eden. Thus it is not much of a stretch to interpret creation's subjection to corruption a few chapters later (Rom. 8:21) as likewise alluding to a physical corruption of creation through the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Although interpreters of Romans 5:12 commonly understand the inception of death through Adam to indicate that humans became mortal as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve,<sup>26</sup> the passage can alternatively be understood to describe the moral corruption of humanity, rather than the introduction of physical death. Under this understanding, "death" is a moral metaphor. A person is morally "dead" if they live under the sort of moral slavery that Paul attributes to humans apart from Christ (see above).<sup>27</sup>

The moral-metaphorical use of the language of death was fairly common among Jewish and Greco-Roman authors from around the time of Paul. For example, Ben Sira, a Jewish author from the second century BCE, frames foolishness as a death-like state: "a fool's life is worse than death" (Sir. 22:11; cf. Sir. 22:9–15). Seneca the Younger, a Roman Stoic author from the first century CE, says that lazy people who "listen to their bellies" should be considered dead even while they live, since they accomplish no more than a corpse (*Epistulae morales* 60.4). Numerous other authors relevant to the milieu of Paul likewise describe human folly and a lack of self-control using the metaphor of death.<sup>28</sup>

Of particular interest for the interpretation of Romans is Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish interpreter of scripture from the first century CE, who pervasively employs the metaphor of the "death of the soul" to describe people who lack moral self-control and are instead mastered by unvirtuous appetites.<sup>29</sup> Philo is especially interesting because he interprets the Edenic sentence of death placed on Adam and Eve as the "death of the soul" rather than the death of the body, which Philo considers to be natural.<sup>30</sup> Essentially, God subjected Adam and Eve to domination by sinful passions as a punishment for their disobedience, much as Paul describes life apart from Christ as subjection to sinful passions (see, especially, Rom. 7:5–6; cf. above). Although Philo does not indicate that the sentence of moral-metaphorical death placed on Adam and Eve also spread to the rest of humanity, as the Adamic material of Romans would suggest (Rom. 5:12–21), his comments nonetheless attest the plausibility of a moral-metaphorical interpretation of the Edenic narrative within the Judaism of the first century CE.

A moral-metaphorical interpretation of the inception of death through Adam in Romans is further supported by Paul's metaphorical use of the language of death elsewhere in the letter. As Paul takes on the persona of an individual in a state of bondage to sin apart from Christ (Rom. 7:7–25; see above), he describes his domination by sin as a kind of death:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Rom. 7:9–13)

Here, "death" does not pertain to the death of the body, but rather to an increase of covetousness in response to the biblical prohibition against coveting (cf. Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; Rom. 7:5–8; 8:2). Paul goes on to describe the work of sin in the members of the body, which pushes him to long for release from "this body of death" (Rom. 7:23–24). Again, "death" does not appear to have anything to do with mortality or the physical death of the body. Rather, sinful passions exercise control within the body, thereby forcing a person to commit sinful behavior against

his or her will (Rom. 7:14–23), and this state of bondage to sin can be described as “death.”<sup>31</sup>

The fact that Paul uses the language of death as a metaphor for a lack of moral self-control in close proximity to his allusion to the inception of death and sin through Adam (Rom. 5:12–21; 7:5–25) suggests the serious possibility that the inception of death through Adam may involve the introduction of moral corruption of the sort Paul describes in the letter (Romans 6–7), rather than the death of the body. At a basic level, this interpretation resembles the suggestions of some authors at the intersection of Christian faith and evolutionary science who propose that the inception of death through Adam should be understood as “spiritual death” rather than physical death.<sup>32</sup>

Based on the aforementioned considerations, the inception of death through Adam in Romans 5 does not necessarily problematize a moral reading of creation’s slavery to corruption in Romans 8. In fact, both passages can be read in light of Paul’s concern about the moral bondage of humans apart from Jesus Christ, and his confidence that freedom from moral bondage—for humans as well as for creation more broadly—is possible through the redemptive work of Christ.

### When Did Creation Become Enslaved to Corruption?

Romans 8 is ambiguous about when creation came to be subjected to futility and corruption. If we accept that the corruption in question has to do with human moral corruption, we could potentially link the beginning of creation’s slavery to the entry of sin and (moral) death into the world through Adam, which Paul discusses in Romans 5 (see above), and many interpreters accustomed to reading Romans 8 as an account of an Edenic “fall” will be inclined to take such an approach. This is certainly a possible interpretation, but as I discussed above, the passage does not allude to the narrative of Eden as clearly as interpreters often claim, and other interpretations are possible. For example, David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate note the lack of a clear allusion to Adam in Romans 8. They suggest that the subjection of creation to corruption may refer more generally to the whole of Genesis 3–11, which portrays the primordial (moral) corruption of humanity in a variety of accounts, including Adam and Eve’s eviction from Eden, Cain’s murder of Abel,

the Flood, and the Tower of Babel.<sup>33</sup> If this is what Paul has in mind, then the subjection of creation to the detrimental effects of human moral corruption could be interpreted as a gradual rather than a punctiliar process. For that matter, Paul’s letter to the Romans includes an even more general account of the corruption of humanity due to human refusal to give glory to God:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom. 1:18–25; cf. 1:26–32)

Paul describes God giving rebellious humans over to their appetites—with detrimental results—because they did not give due glory to their Creator. As a result, humanity became still more corrupt and a laundry list of vices abounded (see, especially, Rom. 1:29–31). Paul is not explicit here about exactly who he is describing, exactly when God’s “giving over” of rebellious humans took place, and whether the increase in corrupt behavior described here took place at one point in time, gradually over a longer period, or periodically at various times and in various places. The account is not necessarily a description of the introduction of sin into a world that previously lacked it (cf. Rom. 5:12). Rather, humans who were already morally disoriented became still more corrupt as a result of divine action (cf. Rom. 1:26, 28).

Although the description of human moral decline in Romans 1 does not refer to the corruption of creation per se, it does describe humans “becoming futile” in their thinking (Rom. 1:21), which potentially parallels the “futility” to which creation is said to be subjected later in the letter (Rom. 8:20).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this and several other parallels have led some scholarly interpreters of Romans to find in Romans 8 the

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resolution of the situation introduced in Romans 1.<sup>35</sup> Under such an interpretation, we might say that the creation joins with Paul and his audience in longing eagerly for liberation (Rom. 8:19–23) from the moral corruption that Paul describes abounding as a result of misguided human worship (Rom. 1:18–32).

Ultimately, the etiology of creation's slavery to corruption in Romans is ambiguous. If we understand "corruption" in the moral sense for which I have argued, then we could potentially take Paul to refer to the introduction of moral corruption into the world through Adam (Rom. 5:12–21),<sup>36</sup> or to the increase of sin's pervasiveness in some more general way (Rom. 1:18–32). This ambiguity makes the passage adaptable to multiple possible understandings of the origin of human sin. As David Horrell et al. rightly emphasize, Paul's focus in Romans 8 is not on the plight of creation's corruption, but rather on the solution of redemption in Christ and on believers' hopeful, anticipatory posture toward Christ's redemption.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

Although the "physical" interpretation of creation's subjection to corruption and futility in Romans 8 is pervasive among Pauline scholars, the basis for such a reading is less clear and solid than its proponents often claim. The broader themes of Romans 6–8 are more consistent with an interpretation under which "corruption" and "futility" refer to human moral depravity; creation's bondage to human depravity reflects the fact that human disorientation from God is detrimental not only to humans, but also to God's creation as the habitat of humans. Whereas the standard interpretation presents a substantial problem for Christians who accept that humans emerged from an evolutionary process to which death is intrinsic, the moral interpretation for which I have argued can be much more readily harmonized with an evolutionary understanding of human origins. One must still work out how to understand the inception of moral corruption within God's creation,<sup>38</sup> but the problem of conflicting etiologies of physical death is resolved.

My interpretation also has implications for how contemporary Christians might think about environmentalism. Paul's point in Romans 8 is certainly not to call his audience to some form of ecological activism, nor do I suggest that environmental concerns are the only ones contemporary Christians ought to

consider when thinking about the suffering of creation due to human moral depravity.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the present, multifaceted ecological crisis is a key issue in our day and age, and my exegetical analysis of Romans lends itself to reflection about the role of human sin in this ecological crisis. In the twenty-first century, it should not be difficult to imagine how human greed, selfishness, and pride lead to increased consumption, waste, pollution, and a lack of sustainability.<sup>40</sup>

I further suggest that my interpretation of creation's slavery to human corruption prompts a more active posture toward creation's present languishing than does the conventional, "physical" interpretation.<sup>41</sup> If the big problem with creation that Romans expresses has to do with a divinely mandated ontological transformation involving entropy, decomposition, and the like, then a believer in Christ can really do little in the face of such challenges other than to pray and wait for deliverance to come. Prayer is obviously important to the life of faith, and Paul does make clear that prayer is an important feature of a believer's engagement with the present age (see, especially, Rom. 8:26–27), but if we understand creation's present mourning as a result of the negative consequences of human moral corruption, then followers of Christ can potentially play a more active role in working against the dominating forces of futility and corruption in anticipation of Christ's full eschatological redemption. Paul calls upon his readers to submit the members of their body to God (Rom. 6:13, 16; cf. 12:1) and to put sinful deeds to death by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). In other words, to live faithfully in Christ is to live out one's liberty from sin through bodily actions that are consistent with the will of God. In the face of the earth's suffering due to various pervasive human vices, this embodied faithfulness should certainly include efforts to avoid and counteract the abuse of creation that is so pervasive in the twenty-first century. †

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This translation is my own. English translations of all other biblical passages are taken from the NRSV, except where otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup>Several elements of Romans suggest that the Roman believers were experiencing some kind of persecution from outside the community of faith, or at least that they were concerned about the possibility of such persecution. Paul reassures his audience that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:31–39), and his rhetoric along these lines includes a series of questions that fit a context in which the audience is concerned



about opposition from other people: “Who is against us?” (8:31), “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?” (8:33), “Who is to condemn?” (8:34), “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:35). Paul also insists that persecution, violence, and other forms of hardship pose no serious obstacle to the love of Christ toward himself and the Roman believers (8:35–36). In chapters 12–13, Paul encourages the Roman believers to engage in various behaviors that would facilitate good relations with the broader society in Rome, such as extending mercy and generosity to persecutors (12:14–21), being subject to governing authorities and paying taxes (13:1), loving neighbors (13:9–10), and living in a respectable manner (13:13). Edward Adams argues persuasively that these exhortations suggest the probability of strained relations between the Roman believers and their broader society in this particular city (*Constructing the World: A Study in Paul’s Cosmological Language* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000], 195–220). We do not have much historical evidence from which to reconstruct what the Roman believers were experiencing around the time Paul wrote to them, but any social strain may well have been related to an edict of Emperor Claudius several years earlier (ca. 49 CE) that a number of Jews, including at least some Jewish Christians, must be expelled from Rome (see Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 25; Acts 18:2; cf. Romans 16:3–5; and Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007], 531–54). Romans is normally dated in the mid- or late-50s CE (see, e.g., Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 18–21).

<sup>3</sup>The Greek word, *ktisis*, translated “creation” in this passage, could also potentially indicate an individual “creature,” rather than “creation” as a whole. Several exegetes of Romans argue that the word should here be understood to refer to the human body, which is subject to sin and death (cf. Romans 6–7), and which will be redeemed at the revelation of eschatological glory (e.g., W. Fitzhugh Whitehouse, *The Redemption of the Body: Being an Examination of Romans VIII. 18–23* [London, UK: Stock, 1892], 42; J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Redemption of Our Body: The Riddle of Romans 8:19–22,” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 104–14; and Gregory P. Fewster, *Creation Language in Romans 8: A Study in Monosemy* [Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013]). This reading implies that the liberation of the *ktisis*, to which Paul looks forward (8:21), is equivalent to the redemption of bodies, to which he also refers (8:23). However, several considerations make this reading difficult. First, it would be strange for Paul to refer to the body in its subjection to sin and death using the word *ktisis* in Romans 8:19–23, since he typically uses another word, *sōma*, with roughly the same connotation elsewhere in Romans (4:19; 6:6; 7:24; 8:10, 11, 13; cf. 1:24; 12:1). For that matter, Paul refers to the body in its subjection to sin and death using *sōma* just after his several uses of *ktisis* in my passage of interest (8:23), and it would be quite perplexing if Paul chose to refer to the body with *ktisis* in Romans 8:19–22, and then suddenly switched to the more typical term *sōma* within the same passage. Second, Paul constructs a parallel between the *ktisis* and “we ourselves” (8:23) in our passage. If *ktisis* and “we ourselves” both essentially refer to humans, then the passage seems oddly redundant, whereas if *ktisis* refers to the broader created world, then it makes sense that Paul would wish to highlight solidarity between his audience

and the creation they inhabit. Third, as I discuss below, Paul’s comments about the *ktisis* resemble a tradition in biblical prophetic writings in which the earth mourns, and this parallel supports understanding Paul’s description of the groaning *ktisis* in reference to creation rather than an individual “creature.” Scholarship of the last several decades has generally taken the view that *ktisis* in Romans 8:19–23 refers to the created world. (Adams, in *Constructing the World*, pp. 19–21, notes the emerging consensus and discusses the interpretive options at greater length than I have done here.)

<sup>4</sup>E.g., John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1971), 40; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1980), 1:413–15; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 469–75; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 505; Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 512; and Nicholas A. Meyer, *Adam’s Dust and Adam’s Glory in the Hodayot and the Letters of Paul: Rethinking Anthropogony and Theology* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 215–23.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., T. Ryan Jackson, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters: A Study of the Historical and Social Setting of a Pauline Concept* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 163.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., in a recent essay, Hans Madueme (“All Truth Is God’s Truth: A Defense of Dogmatic Creationism,” in *Creation and Doxology: The Beginning and End of God’s Good World*, ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018], 59–76) rejects evolutionary creationism in favor of young earth creationism (or rather, a nuanced version that he calls “dogmatic creationism”) because evolutionary creationism conflicts with “the bond between fall and human death” (“Truth,” 65), which Madueme finds in passages such as Romans 8.

Some authors solve the apparent conflict between an evolutionary account of the origin of death and decay with passages like Romans 8:18–23 by distinguishing between what Paul himself thought and what faithful Christians should take to be the core message of scripture. For instance, Denis O. Lamoureux distinguishes between the inerrant, spiritual “message” of the Bible and the incidental, culturally-conditioned elements that the biblical authors included by default. Lamoureux considers the inception of sin and death through a single pair of common, primordial progenitors to be among the standard assumptions of Paul’s day, and thus suggests that for the purposes of modern Christians, Adam and Eve can be treated as archetypal of sinful, mortal humanity in general (for Lamoureux’s fullest treatment of “the sin-death problem,” see *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008], 305–29). My contention in this article is not that this sort of approach is always wrongheaded, but rather that with respect to Romans 8, it is unnecessary.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:303; Gibbs, *Creation*, 40; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 515; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), 257; Trevor J. Burke, “Adopted as Sons (ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ): The Missing Piece in Pauline Soteriology,” in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008),

285; R. J. (Sam) Berry, "Natural Evil: Genesis, Romans, and Modern Science," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 68, no. 2 (2016): 87; and Guy Prentiss Waters, "Theistic Evolution Is Incompatible with the Teachings of the New Testament," in *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, ed. J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, Ann K. Gauger, and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 897.

<sup>8</sup>Wojciech Szypula, *The Holy Spirit in the Eschatological Tension of Christian Life: An Exegetico-Theological Study of 2 Corinthians 5,1–5 and Romans 8,18–27* (Rome, Italy: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007), 260.

<sup>9</sup>I will discuss the relevance of Romans 5:12–21 below.

<sup>10</sup>See esp. Laurie J. Braaten, "The Groaning Creation: The Biblical Background for Romans 8:22," *Biblical Research* 50 (2005): 19–39; and \_\_\_\_, "All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28 (2006): 131–59. Braaten makes the nuanced point that the "groaning" of creation should be identified with the biblical tradition of the earth's mourning, whereas creation's "travail" has to do with the pain of judgment. The conceptual distinction between these verbs is supported by the fact that the creation, Paul's "we," and the Spirit are all said to "groan" (expressed with cognates of the Greek verb *stenazō*, 8:22, 23, 26), whereas only the creation is said to "travail." See especially Braaten, "All Creation Groans," 132–41. For analysis of this group of prophetic passages, see further Katherine M. Hayes, *"The Earth Mourns": Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup>Hayes, "The Earth Mourns," 108–14.

<sup>12</sup>Here and elsewhere, the abbreviation "NETS" indicates that an English translation renders the Greek text of the Septuagint, and is taken from Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). The Septuagint is relevant for interpreting the New Testament because the Septuagint was generally the Bible of the earliest Christians, and the New Testament authors frequently quote from the text of the Septuagint, in particular, in their writings (Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, "Glossary," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013], 586). Although the matter is somewhat complicated in the details, it is apparent that Paul's quotations of scripture are often shaped by the Greek textual tradition, including a number of quotations from Isaiah, in particular. For details, see, e.g., Florian Wilk, "The Letters of Paul as Witnesses to and for the Septuagint Text," in *Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures*, ed. Wolfgang Kraus and R. Glenn Wooden (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 253–71; and Tim McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 148–53.

The Masoretic (Hebrew) text of Isaiah 24:4, 7, consistent with the Isaiah Scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, includes the verb *bl*, which can potentially be translated with the senses "dry up" or "mourn" (Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4 vols. [Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1994–1999], 1:6–7). The Septuagint (Greek) text translates this verb with *pentheō*, which unambiguously refers to mourning (Frederick W. Danker et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testa-*

*ment and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 795).

<sup>13</sup>See Braaten, "The Groaning Creation," 29–31; and \_\_\_\_, "All Creation Groans," 142–45.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Similarly, see Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 105–6; and Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 3 vols. (Zürich, Switzerland: Benziger, 1978–1982), 2:149–51. Jonathan Moo argues for a particularly strong parallel between Romans 8:19–22 and Isaiah 24–27, which includes such an instance of the earth's mourning ("Romans 8:19–22 and Isaiah's Cosmic Covenant," *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 1 [2008]: 74–89).

<sup>15</sup>Braaten, "The Groaning Creation," 28–37; \_\_\_\_, "All Creation Groans," 141–53; and cf. \_\_\_\_, "Earth Community in Joel 1–2: A Call to Identify with the Rest of Creation," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28, no. 2 (2006): 113–29.

<sup>16</sup>On the relevance of the Septuagint for the interpretation of the New Testament, see note 12. Instead of "the exalted ones of the earth mourned," the Masoretic text and the Isaiah Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls include the more cryptic phrase, "the height of the people of the earth."

<sup>17</sup>In the Greek (Septuagint) text of Jeremiah, the prophet describes the groaning of Jerusalem with the words *stenagmos* and *ōdinō* (Jer. 4:31), which correspond to the two cognate verbs that Paul uses in Romans to describe creation's mourning and groaning in unison, *sustenazō* and *sunōdinō* (Rom. 8:22).

<sup>18</sup>Braaten ("All Creation Groans," 157–58) likewise connects creation's bondage (Rom. 8:20–21) with material earlier in the letter related to human subjection to a lifestyle characterized by sin and death (Romans 6).

<sup>19</sup>The literature surrounding the question of the identity of the speaker of Romans 7:2–5 is too vast and complicated to address thoroughly here. As an example, Werner Georg Kümmel rightly argues that Paul's assertion that "I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin" (Rom. 7:14) is incompatible with his later claim that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Rom. 8:2), since Paul would presumably grant that he, in addition to his hearers, has been set free in Christ. Thus, when Paul uses the first person to describe suffering under the dominion of sin (Rom. 7:7–25), he cannot reasonably be understood to be describing his own present experience. Rather, he is adopting and describing a different perspective (Werner Georg Kümmel, *Römer 7 und das Bild des Menschen im Neuen Testament: Zwei Studien* [Munich: Kaiser, 1974], 41–42, 125–26). Stanley Kent Stowers argues persuasively that this passage of Romans should be understood as an example of an ancient Hellenistic literary device called a "speech-in-character" ("Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character [ὑποσπονδία]," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995], 180–202), though I think it more likely that Paul portrays a general experience of life in slavery to sin, rather than the specific experience of a gentile proselyte prior to Christian conversion, as Stowers argues. Paul's first-person description of domination by sin (Rom. 7:7–25) is immediately preceded by a contrast between his and his audience's former subjection to sinful passions and their present freedom in the Spirit (Rom. 7:5–6), which suggests that his description of domination by sin (Rom. 7:7–25) is an expansion of his and his audience's former subjection to sinful passions (Rom. 7:5), and that the subsequent

passage of Romans, which describes freedom in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1–13), is an expansion of his brief description of his and his audience's present spiritual freedom (Rom. 7:6). For a thorough exegetical treatment along these lines, see Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 503–21.

<sup>20</sup>"Corruption" (*phthora*, Rom. 8:21) has several potential shades of meaning, including "dissolution, deterioration, corruption" (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:42; Col. 2:22) and "inward depravity" (Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1054–55; and cf. Güntner Harder, "φθειρω, φθορά, κτλ," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976], 9:93–106). The moral sense of *phthora* appears multiple times in 2 Peter (1:4; 2:19) and in the Septuagint (Ps. 102:4; Micah 2:10; Wisdom 14:12, 25).

If "corruption" (Rom. 8:21) is understood in reference to physical deterioration and decay, then "futility" (*mataiotēs*, Rom. 8:20) could be understood as the transitoriness that accompanies existence in a creation characterized by such decay (cf. Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 621). If "corruption" is understood as a moral metaphor, then "futility" would denote the moral emptiness and error that accompanies moral corruption.

<sup>21</sup>Paul describes death using tyrannical language several times in Romans, as well (Rom. 5:4, 17, 21; 6:9), but this language can also potentially be understood in reference to moral corruption, rather than physical death. See below.

<sup>22</sup>Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 117.

<sup>23</sup>It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a thorough discussion of 2 Corinthians 5, but it is worth noting that this portion of the letter contains a number of parallels to my passage of focus in Romans. Like Romans, 2 Corinthians describes believers groaning in anticipation of ultimate freedom from the present state of bodily existence (2 Cor. 5:1–4), and notes that the Spirit also plays a role in anticipating this future freedom (2 Cor. 5:5; cf. Rom. 8:26–27). Freedom from the present state of bodily existence may also be what Paul means when he says, "If anyone is in Christ, (there is a) new creation: the old things passed away; behold, new things have come!" (2 Cor. 5:17), though the meaning of this sentence is not completely clear, and a broader understanding that includes cosmic transformation is certainly possible (see Douglas J. Moo, "Creation and New Creation," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 1 [2010]: 39–60). The notion of anticipated freedom in 2 Corinthians differs from Romans in that the key plight in 2 Corinthians involves present, bodily suffering at the hands of persecutors (see 2 Cor. 1:4–11; 4:8–18), without a clear sense that this suffering has anything to do with the body's involvement in sin. The notion that the broader creation groans alongside believers is also not apparent in this passage of 2 Corinthians. This sort of diversity among parallel passages of Paul's letters is typical, and probably has much to do with the differing occasions of the letters (see esp. 2 Cor. 1:4–11).

<sup>24</sup>Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 513. See further Sheralée N. Thomas, "κτισις in Romans 8:18–23 in Light of Ancient Greek and Roman Environmental Concerns: A Suggestion," *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 10 (2007): 135–52.

<sup>25</sup>J. Donald Hughes, *Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans: Ecology in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). Along similar lines, see Micah D. Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The*

*Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 63–68.

<sup>26</sup>E.g., Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1949), 327; Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:290; Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:389; and Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 273–74.

<sup>27</sup>For a detailed argument in favor of such an interpretation, see William Horst, "Morality, Not Mortality: The Inception of Death in the Book of Romans," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 71, no. 1 (2019): 24–36. Martinus C. de Boer reaches a similar conclusion in passing ("Paul's Mythologizing Program in Romans 5–8," in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013], 11). On the relevance of 1 Corinthians 15 for understanding Romans 5, see Horst, "Morality, Not Mortality," 31–33.

<sup>28</sup>E.g., Sallust, *Bellum catilinae* 2.8; *Letter of Aristeas* 212; Dio Chrysostom, *To the People of Alexandria* 16; Musonius, *Fragment* 20; Plutarch, *Moralia* 1128d; and Josephus, *War* 7.344; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 493a; \_\_\_\_, *Cratylus* 400c; and \_\_\_\_, *Phaedrus* 250c. For additional examples, see Dieter Zeller, "The Life and Death of the Soul in Philo of Alexandria: The Use and Origin of a Metaphor," *Studia Philonica Annual* 7 (1995): 40–54; and Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 34.

<sup>29</sup>E.g., Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 2.77–78, 82; 3:52; \_\_\_\_, *On Agriculture* 67–77; \_\_\_\_, *On the Posterity of Cain* 73–74; \_\_\_\_, *That the Worse Attacks the Better* 70; \_\_\_\_, *On Planting* 37; \_\_\_\_, *On Flight and Finding* 55; \_\_\_\_, *On the Special Laws* 1.345; and \_\_\_\_, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 2.45. For discussion, see esp. Zeller, "The Life and Death of the Soul in Philo of Alexandria," 19–40; and Karina Martin Hogan, "The Exegetical Background of the 'Ambiguity of Death' in the Wisdom of Solomon," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 30, no. 1 (1999): 1–24.

<sup>30</sup>Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.105–8; cf. \_\_\_\_, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.52; \_\_\_\_, *Who is the Heir?* 52–53; and \_\_\_\_, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.16, 45, 51.

<sup>31</sup>Emma Wasserman, in *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), convincingly argues that "death" in Romans 7 should be understood against the backdrop of the metaphorical language of death in Hellenistic moral discourse, especially the "death of the soul" found in the writings of Philo.

<sup>32</sup>See, e.g., Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: Christian Perspectives on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive, 2011), 210–12, 226; Denis R. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford, UK: Monarch, 2008), 245, 253, 260–67; Daniel M. Harrell, *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008), 111–26; Daniel C. Harlow, "After Adam: Reading Genesis in an Age of Evolutionary Science," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (2010): 190; George L. Murphy, *Models of Atonement: Speaking about Salvation in a Scientific World* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2013), 69–70; and Berry, "Natural Evil," 92, 97.

<sup>33</sup>David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 75, 81–82, 135.

# Article

## Creation's Slavery to (Human) Corruption: A Moral Interpretation of Romans 8:20–22

<sup>34</sup>The first passage includes the verb *mataioō* (“became futile,” Rom. 1:21), whereas the second passage uses the cognate noun *mataiotēs* (“futility,” Rom. 8:20), but an attentive reader cannot help but notice the parallel. It is worth noting that this cognate group occurs in Romans only in these two passages, and is relatively infrequent in the New Testament in general (see Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 14:15; 1 Cor. 3:20; 15:17; Eph. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:6; Titus 1:10; 3:9; James 1:26; 1 Pet. 1:18; and 2 Pet. 2:18).

<sup>35</sup>E.g., Steve Kraftchick, “Paul’s Use of Creation Themes: A Test of Romans 1–8,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987): 83–84; Braaten, “All Creation Groans,” 158; and T. Ryan Jackson, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters: A Study of the Historical and Social Setting of a Pauline Concept* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 151.

<sup>36</sup>Although Paul might understand creation to have become enslaved to corruption initially through Adam, I do not think the phrase, “because of the one who subjected it” (Rom. 8:20) refers to Adam, as some have proposed (e.g., Brendan Byrne, “Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8.18–22,” in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 199; and Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], 56). Instead, I agree with the majority interpretation that God is the one who subjected creation to futility, since I am aware of no good reason to think that Adam would have subjected creation to futility “in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to corruption, resulting in the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21), whereas it makes perfectly good sense that God would do something like this with such a hope in mind (see, e.g., Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:414; Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 508; Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 514; and Scott W. Hahn, *Romans* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017], 139).

<sup>37</sup>Esp. Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*, 77, 81–82.

<sup>38</sup>Various relevant essays dealing with an evolutionary understanding of the inception of sin can be found in William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith, eds., *Evolution and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

<sup>39</sup>Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate caution against ecologically focused interpretations of Romans 8 that attribute to Paul too nuanced an understanding of the causes of environmental degradation (*Greening Paul*, 65–71).

<sup>40</sup>Likewise, Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kevin J. O’Brien, in *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), reflect in detail on the ecological relevance of virtue.

<sup>41</sup>Interestingly, Luzia Sutter Rehman, in “To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8.22–23,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2004), 74–84, argues that the imagery of labor and groaning in Romans should be understood as active rather than passive anticipation of the end of the age, based especially on the fact that much hard work goes into giving birth.

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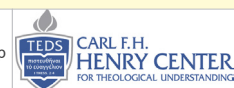
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