



R. J. (Sam) Berry

Natural Evil: Genesis, Romans, and Modern Science¹

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Paul's reference to a "frustrated" and "groaning" creation in Romans 8:19–23 clearly refers to the "Fall" described in Genesis 3. How should we understand Genesis 3? Traditionally it has been used to explain the presence of disease and disaster in this world, but the historicity of the Genesis Fall account is frequently doubted on both anthropological and genetic grounds. Moreover, it is not directly referred to elsewhere in the Bible. The Romans 8:19–23 passage is not easy to understand. It makes the best sense if it is regarded as the climax of God's work as described in Romans 5–8, complementing the completeness of Christ's work set out explicitly in Colossians 1:17–20. Both the Genesis and Romans passages emphasize the relationship of God to creation. Concentrating on Genesis 3 at the exclusion of Romans 8 is to lose the relevance of God's plans for us, not least his commands to care for his creation. This article explores the connection of the two passages and their relevance to modern life and practice.

David Hull, in his review of Phillip Johnson's *Darwin on Trial*, writes,

What kind of God can one infer from the sort of phenomena epitomised by the species on Darwin's Galápagos Islands? The evolutionary process is rife with happenstance, contingency, incredible waste, death, pain and horror ... He is certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.²

Hull raises what is probably the most difficult question to those looking in at the Christian faith. Is the God of the Bible worth belief?

In his much-quoted Hulsean Lectures, Norman Williams puts it:

Perhaps the gravest of the intellectual difficulties which restrain men of thoughtfulness and goodwill from giving their allegiance to the Christian faith is that which inheres—not in any one article or detail of our religion, not in its doctrines of the Triune being of God, or of the two natures of Christ, not in Atonement, miracles, sacraments, or eschatology—but in the fundamental assertion that "God is love."³

Can the God worshipped by millions of Abrahamic faith believers be reconciled with the "God of the Galápagos"? The God described in scripture is clearly one who controls the natural world, even if some of the events recorded can be "explained" by naturally occurring events. The plagues in Egypt (Genesis 7–10) could be an ecological progression—although the deaths of the non-Israelite firstborn do not easily fit such an interpretation. It has been suggested that "the Lord [who] drove the sea away with a strong east wind all night long and turned the seabed into dry land" (Exod. 14:21) may have used a rare meteorological event combined with a fortuitous landslide—although the miracle here was essentially one of timing. But a plausible mechanism for a miracle does not invalidate divine action.⁴ Jesus

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himself builds on Psalm 104 when he declared that God “feeds them [the birds]” and “clothes the grass in the fields” (Matt. 6:26, 30). Not only that, we are told “even the wind and sea obey him” (Matt. 8:27). Barnabas and Paul assured the credulous Lycaonians that “the living God ... sends you rain from heaven and the crops in their seasons” (Acts 14:15–17).

Some disasters can fairly be attributed to human failings (think of the man who built on sand in Matt. 7:26 or the foolish virgins in Matt. 25:1–13), but it is stretching credulity to suggest they all disasters are the direct result of incompetence. The thousands who died in the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 or the one in Haiti in 2010 or that in Nepal in 2015 may have suffered as a result of living in weak houses on tectonic fault lines, but they cannot be directly blamed for their fate. Many cancers have an environmental cause (such as smoking or ingesting asbestos), but others are clearly the result of “chance” genetic changes. Is the world intrinsically unsafe? Can all of our problems be put down to an act of disobedience in a Middle Eastern Eden long ago? Such was the “traditional” interpretation, and it is still held by many Bible believers despite the evidence of massive earth movements long before humans appeared on Earth, of diseased dinosaurs, and of no detected discontinuity in the fossil record before and after humans appeared. As Hull and Williams have pointed out in their different ways (see previous page), this disjunction between older understanding and newer discoveries has led many to reject the authority of the Bible and often religious faith altogether.

One way forward is to jettison the Bible account in Genesis 3 as pure fantasy. A not uncommon judgment is that of Patricia Williams:

both the literal and liberal interpretations of the narrative of Adam and Eve have collapsed. The reputed historicity [of Adam and Eve] conflicts with well-established scientific theories ... Science says the claim liberal theology inherited from literalism, that we are alienated and exiled is false ... [but] the concept of alienation is recent. It arrived with agricultural surpluses and class distinctions about ten thousand years ago ... Jesus shows that we are not alienated from God, but live in God’s presence.⁵

This is a gross travesty of Jesus’s teaching, never mind his atoning death, and includes an illegitimate

assumption that we learn from “well-established scientific theories” about God’s involvement with his creation. This is a category mistake.

Probably the most frequent approach is to treat the Fall as “myth.” Unfortunately, the word is popularly misunderstood as meaning simply “a story that is false.” Because of this, it seems best to avoid the term altogether and accept Howard Marshall’s judgment that myth is “a confusing and slippery term in theology; it is used in so many ill-defined ways by individual theologians, that it would be no bad thing if its use were prohibited.”⁶

Do the stories in Genesis 2 and 3 have any grounding in history? If we are to be faithful to the findings of geologists and palaeontologists, we cannot claim that there were no “natural disasters” before the advent of humankind.⁷ In particular, there must have been deaths of both individuals and groups before humanity appeared. Once there were dinosaurs; now there are no dinosaurs. Does it help to interpret the account as nonliteral (which does not mean untrue)? The common Hebrew word for man is “*ish*” but another word (*’adam*) is used instead in Genesis 1–5 (34 times). It is often assumed that *’adam* is used in Genesis 2 and 3 because of a word play with “*adamâ*,” the ground. The man Adam was created from the *adamâ* and will return to the *adamâ*. On six occasions an individual (“Mr. Adam”) is clearly meant (4:21, 25; 5:1, 3, 4, 5), but here *’adam* is not preceded by the definite article. In other words, when the text speaks of “Adam,” it almost always means “humankind,” implying the earthy one, *’adamâ*.

This imputation is fine and internally consistent for the Genesis account, but it fails to account for the main thrust of biblical theology. Can there be any link between an improving ape (an “*’adamâ*”) and human sin? The Bible describes sin as rebellion or missing the mark. It is difficult to discern any meaning to this if we are apes on a (presumably upward) trajectory toward humanness. The Bible account of humanness is of repeated failure and apostasy, redeemed only by God’s coming in Christ and reconciling humankind through the cross; the Christian gospel is that the relationship between Creator and creation can be restored, but this possibility necessarily presupposes that there was a relationship requiring repair. This seems very different from the evolutionary picture of “a great ape trying to make good.”

"A great ape trying to make good" is essentially the secular understanding of the human story. This was set out by the Cambridge theologian F. R. Tennant in his Hulsean Lectures in 1902⁸ and accepted by many of his successors. Tennant argued that the idea human beings could be held responsible by their Creator for an original sin committed at some point in the distant past was rendered impossible by knowledge about the evolution of living things in general and the origin of humankind in particular. He claimed that the Augustinian notion that some kind of inherited flaw or stain had been passed on by generation from our aboriginal ancestors was fatally undermined because it involved a Lamarckian theory of acquired inherited characteristics. For Tennant, this negated the idea that sin had somehow entered the human condition at a specific moment in history. The reality of sin was all too plain; notwithstanding, it was a mistake to think of it as having come about because of a fall from a state of original righteousness. Rather, it was part and parcel of the way our species had evolved from its animal ancestry.

The same theme was propounded even more strongly by N. P. Williams in his Bampton Lectures of 1924. He asserted that the only thing modern knowledge permits us to affirm about our first parents

is not a Fall but a failure—a failure to "move upward, working out the beast," a failure to rid themselves of the anachronistic "ape and tiger" strain in their blood, a failure to emancipate themselves from the fatal flaw of deficiency in "herd-instinct" or gregarious feeling, the flaw of which their developing intellects had made them progressively conscious.⁹

Probably the most influential advocate of this approach was Ernest Barnes, Fellow of the Royal Society, Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge (where he taught the geneticist R. A. Fisher), and then Bishop of Birmingham from 1924 to 1953. In his Gifford Lectures, Barnes wrote,

Within the last four centuries the old Jewish cosmology has vanished. Science has created an entirely different picture of the nature and duration of the Universe. The single act—or week—of "Creation" is replaced by a process of unimaginable extent ... Man is the outcome of Nature's processes ... I postulate that there is a certain community of nature between God and man, that all human minds are reproductions "in limited modes" of the Divine Mind, that in all

true human thinking there is a reproduction of the Divine thought; and, above all, that in the highest ideals which the human conscience recognizes there is a revelation of the ideal eternally present in the Divine Mind.¹⁰

In a widely reported Westminster Abbey sermon, Barnes quoted from the Presidential Address of the anatomist Arthur Keith to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, declaring that

the story of Adam and Eve is reduced to the status of folklore, and the horrible theory of the propagation of sin, reared on the basis of the Fall by Augustine, could be rejected ... Biology showed that much that is evil in man's passions and appetites is due to natural instincts inherited from his animal ancestry. Man is not a being who has fallen from the ideal state of innocence: he is an animal slowly gaining spiritual understanding.¹¹

In light of this sort of rhetoric, it is not surprising that conservative Christians reacted against any belief in human evolution, and, more damaging, came to view the whole science-faith debate as dangerous. No wonder the Adventist George McCready Price was wont to proclaim, "No Adam, no Fall; no Fall, no Atonement; no Atonement, no Savior."¹²

The problem with all this is that there is no evidence whatsoever of humankind "getting better." Peter Bowler has documented the fate of the widespread assumption from the late nineteenth century that accepting a reconciliation of evolution with faith automatically meant that we are part of a divinely planned evolutionary progression.¹³ Bowler's analysis is as follows:

Liberal thinkers were convinced that they could make common cause with a science that had turned its back on materialism. [But this] exposed cracks that had only been papered over in the earlier negotiations [i.e., in the immediate post-*Origin* years]. If Christians accepted that humanity was the product of evolution—even allowing the process could be seen as the expression of the Creator's will—then the whole idea of Original Sin would have to be reinterpreted. Far from falling from an original state of grace in the Garden of Eden, we had risen gradually from our animal origins. And if there was no Sin from which we needed salvation, what was the purpose of Christ's agony on the cross? Christ became merely the perfect man who showed us what we could all hope to become when evolution finished its upward course.¹⁴

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But as Bowler points out, unfortunately for this interpretation,

the economic depression of the 1930s and the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe drove home the message that there was something deeply flawed in the moral state of the West. Secularists turned to Marxism as a way of saving the idea of progress, but to many religious people it seemed the liberals' optimistic hopes of perfecting humanity were misguided ... Neo-orthodoxy transformed the churches in the late 1930s and 1940s ... Karl Barth called for a return to the traditional vision of humanity as proclaimed in the Gospels: Human nature is deeply troubled because we have become alienated from God, and only His grace can save us ... [But] neo-orthodoxy didn't want an alternative view of creation or a return to the argument from design – it just wasn't interested in science.¹⁵

A Historic Adam?

The idea that a Mr. Adam ever existed is almost universally rejected outside very conservative circles. The inference that the species *Homo sapiens* is wholly derived from a single person or couple (or even a small number of individuals) is both genetically implausible and lacks any palaeoanthropological evidence.¹⁶ However, this genetical argument is irrelevant if we take seriously the Bible description of humanness. Genesis 1:27 portrays humanness as a specific act of God, while Genesis 2:7 describes it as a divine in-breathing into an already existing entity.¹⁷ In other words, a work of God is differentiated from “an ape on the way up” into an “imaged-beast”; this “imaged-beast” can be called *Homo divinus*, differing and distinct from the biological species *Homo sapiens* by the possession of God's image. There is no reason to assume that it would be anatomically or genetically changed. The terminology of *Homo divinus* was suggested by John Stott.¹⁸ For some, this name is an unnecessary confusion, but for many it is a useful clarification.¹⁹

If the image is confined to humankind as Genesis 1:26, 27 seems to make clear, it must have been “introduced” at some time in history (I use “introduced” without intending any implication about mechanism; it was a transforming event rather than an addition).²⁰ The conventional assumption is that humanness appeared as an emergent character involving self-consciousness or self-knowledge.²¹ The

essential point is that it must have happened in time. Claims have been made that it was coincident with burying the dead or with including grave goods with the dead, or with the appearance of cave paintings, but these are no more than guesses.²²

What is the “image”? Expositors of Genesis 1 commonly associate it with the practice of conquerors leaving a statue (“image”) of themselves in conquered cities to remind the inhabitants of their authority.²³ For Middleton,

the *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God's rule or administration of the earth's resources and creatures.²⁴

This calling (or function) can also (and perhaps more usefully) be described as our transformation into body-soul unities—which is, of course, our creation as human beings in the fullest sense, as *Homo divinus* rather than *Homo sapiens*. For Chris Wright,

The expression “in our image” is adverbial (that is, describes the way God made us), not adjectival (that is, as if it simply described a quality we possess). The image of God is not so much something we possess, as what we are. To be human is to be the image of God.²⁵

“Image” should not be confused with the notion of “soul,” which is an unhelpful assumption of dualism.²⁶ Claus Westermann expresses “image” as effecting kinship: “The relationship to God is not something which is added to human existence; humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God.”²⁷

Dermot McDonald argues similarly. After an extensive review of the scriptures, he concluded that image should be taken as indicating “sonship”:

Man's chief end is to glorify God. Such was God's intention for the man he made. But man could only respond to the divine desire in so far as he reflected God's glory. And it was in him so to do because he was created in the image of God with the gift of sonship ... All men are in the image of God by reason of an original creative sonship through Adam.²⁸

Middleton sees our role as “representing and perhaps extending in some way God's rule on Earth through the ordinary communal practices of human sociocultural life,”²⁹ which is not very different from

C.F.D. Moule's conclusion, "the most satisfying of the many interpretations, both ancient and modern of the meaning of the image of God in man is that which sees it as basically responsibility."³⁰ John Walton summarizes the image as four-fold: the role and function that God has given humanity; the identity we have as human beings; our task to represent God in this world; and to indicate the relationship God intends for us.³¹

The personal nature of the image is emphasized by the language of Genesis 1:26, "let *us* make human beings," whereas all the other acts of creation are the results of an impersonal fiat, "let there be." It is implied also by the incident of Adam and Eve trying to hide from God (Gen. 3:8, 9). All this strengthens the idea that God's image in us is about relationship—to God, to other humans, and to the rest of creation. Such a functional understanding of God's image accords both with the Genesis texts and the need to incorporate Paul's teaching on Christ as the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), not least our destiny to share Christ's image (Rom. 8:29).³² It also implies that the result of the disobedience in the garden was a breaking or interruption of that relationship.³³ Terence Fretheim suggests that we should express the Fall as a falling "out" or "apart," the result of mistrusting God and wanting autonomy from him.³⁴

An important inference from emphasizing that our humanness is a relationship bestowed by God and not an "addition" to an existing prehuman, is that its spread is also a divine act, and can be reasonably assumed to have spread to all individuals of the species alive at the time. In other words, neither our "image" nor, by implication, any sort of "original" sin depended on longitudinal transmission like a genetic trait, but solely depended on the sovereign will and action of God. John Walton calls this "radiate transmission," using the analogy that opening a door to a sealed source of radiation results in the entire area and population being irradiated.³⁵

These considerations all support the idea that the Genesis "Fall" can best be seen as essentially a break in relationship between Creator and creature. This is more in accord with the understanding of the Eastern Church than the Western. For Augustine and the Western Church which has largely followed him, Adam and Eve were conceived as perfect before they "fell." In contrast, the Eastern tradition deriving from Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus was that

God gave humanity divine grace to progress toward full union with the Creator. As the first humans developed self-awareness, they became aware of God's call and his demands on them. In other words, as *Homo sapiens* became *Homo divinus*, they were for the first time able to respond—to obey or disobey. James Barr suggests that the Genesis 3 story can best be read not as one of lost immortality, but of a lost *chance* for immortality.³⁶ It is possible to understand it as "the coming of age of an ape on the way up," but also as the very different idea of an emerging consciousness being challenged at some stage by God's implanted image. Only the second interpretation seems to accord with the subsequent history of humankind. Humanity's being is affected—deprived of life—because we are deprived of communion with God.³⁷ The Fall was not the cosmic explosion described in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but anarchy produced by the disordered relationships between the sexes and with the nonhuman creation.³⁸

Adam and Humanity

God's "imaging" of *Homo sapiens* and the subsequent disobedience of *Homo divinus* must have taken place after the emergence of *Homo sapiens* as a species, sometime in the last 200,000 years or so. There are no direct references to the "Fall" in the Old Testament after Genesis 3 (and the word "Fall" is not even used there), but human rebelliousness is described throughout scripture (and its effects throughout secular history). The only specific description of the events of Genesis 3 is in Romans 5:12–19 (also 1 Cor. 15:21), which compares "the one man through whom sin came into the world" with the saving grace of the "one man, Jesus Christ."

Is it legitimate to understand the "one man" of Romans 5 as indicating a group which disobeyed in the early stages of humanness? Presumably Paul thought of Adam as a man who lived in history just as he probably regarded the earth as flat and bounded above by a firm roof. It could be argued that because of this he had no reason or comprehension not to compare one individual ("the first man," Adam) with another individual, Jesus Christ. But such an imputation of Paul's limitations may be wrong. In his commentary on Romans, Leon Morris writes:

the one man [Adam] is very important and underlies the whole discussion. Twelve times in verses 12–19 we have the word *one*; repeatedly Paul refers to the

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one man Adam (and to one sin of that one man) and opposes to him (and it) the one man Jesus Christ (and his one word of grace). The one man and his sin and the one Savior and his salvation are critical to the discussion. [Notwithstanding, he warns that] Paul's argument in Romans 5 is very condensed and in all translations and comments we must allow for the possibility that Paul's meaning may at some point be other than we think.³⁹

Stott enters no such caveat. He writes:

Scripture clearly intends us to accept their [Adam and Eve's] historicity as the original human pair: the biblical genealogies trace the human race back to Adam, Jesus himself taught that "at the beginning the Creator made them male and female" and then instituted marriage, Paul told the Athenian philosophers that God had made every nation from "one man," and in particular, Paul's carefully constructed analogy between Adam and Christ depends for its validity on the equal historicity of both.⁴⁰

John Collins also opts for their historicity. He reviews recent interpretations, although depending strongly on N.T. Wright, who seems less dogmatic.⁴¹ John Walton argues that Adam and Eve can be regarded as archetypes for humanity, and that Romans 5:12–14 "affirms the reality of sin and death entering human experience in an event and therefore implies a historical Adam."⁴²

Other conservative commentators take a more nuanced view. James Dunn writes:

Paul's theological point [in Romans 5 does not] depend on Adam being a "historical" individual or on his disobedience being a historical event as such ... The effect of the comparison between Adam and Christ is not so much to historicize the original Adam as to bring out the individual significance of the historic Christ.⁴³

F.F. Bruce takes a step further back. He comments on Romans 5:12 ["It was through one man that sin entered the world and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race"]:

It is not simply because Adam is the ancestor of humankind that all are said to have sinned in his sin (otherwise it must be argued that because Abraham believed God all his descendants were automatically involved in this belief); it is because Adam is humankind.⁴⁴

Peter Enns is unequivocal. He has written,

One can believe that Paul is correct theologically and historically about the problem of sin and death, and the solution that God provides in Christ without also needing to believe that his assumptions about human origins are accurate. The need for a savior does not require a historical Adam.⁴⁵

The best we can conclude is that there is no consensus among commentators, even those who firmly hold to the inspiration and authority of scripture.⁴⁶

How does the current condition of humankind relate to the Genesis story? Derek Kidner in his commentary on Genesis is clear:

the unity of mankind "in Adam" and our common status as sinners through his offence, are expressed in scripture not in terms of heredity (Isa. 43:27) but simply in terms of solidarity. We nowhere find applied to us any argument from physical descent, such as that of Heb. 7:9, 10 (where Levi shares in Abraham's act through being "still in the loins of his ancestor"). Rather, Adam's sin is shown to have implicated all men because he was the federal head of humanity, somewhat as in Christ's death "one died for all, therefore all died" (2 Cor. 5:14) ... After the special creation of the first human pair clinched the fact that there is no natural bridge from animal to man, God may have now conferred his image on Adam's collaterals to bring them into the same realm of being. Adam's "federal" headship of humanity extended, if that was the case, outwards to his contemporaries as well as onwards to his offspring, and his disobedience disinherited both alike.⁴⁷

Adam (and Eve) disobeyed God, resulting in their original and intended relationship being fractured (they "died"),⁴⁸ and this affected all other members of the species by divine fiat.

Kidner's interpretation is not universally accepted. Henri Blocher discusses the issue at length and concludes that "the decisive consideration when we search for the rightness of the 'fact' [of being born sinners] remains the headship or capitate structure—the organic solidarity of the race, the spiritual dimension of humanity's oneness."⁴⁹ He accepts that his view might differ from the "current headship solution," although he clearly does not reject the concept.

Paul on Genesis 3

Is a historical Adam anything more than a possible interpretation—a way out for conservatives? Romans 5:12–19 certainly implies the existence of a “Mr. Adam.” But this implication is strengthened when we take it in the fuller context of Paul’s argument in Romans 5–8, which summarizes the whole history of God’s dealing with his creation and of his patient and gracious ordering despite humankind’s repeated disordering.

Genesis 1–3 is a vignette of a disorder-reorder cycle in which the intended integration of humans with the whole creation gives way to dislocation and fracturing of that integration. The cycle is repeated with the Noah story and then by the Babel episode. The history of Israel then continues with a seemingly endless procession of rebellion and failure, followed by God’s saving deliverance. The climax comes, of course, with God coming in the person of Jesus Christ and is completed in his redeeming death and clinching resurrection. All this is recapitulated in Romans, beginning with a rehearsal of human disobedience (1:18–32), followed by recalling the covenant and God’s promises, and culminating in chapters 5–8. Chapter 6 tells of God’s people passing through the waters (baptism, in parallel with crossing the Red Sea, *q.v.* 1 Cor. 10:2) and being freed from slavery (as they had been from Egypt). The final consequence is described in Romans 8:19–28, which clearly refers to the origin and pervasiveness of disorder.

The effects of Adam’s disobedience are said to be that the created universe was “made subject to frustration” (Rom. 8:20) and is “groaning as if in the pangs of childbirth” (v. 22). It is undeniably a difficult passage and most expositors do not help much,⁵⁰ but it is a key one—perhaps *the* key one—in the present context. James Dunn points out that, at one level, it “recalls the extent to which believers continue to be thoroughly bound up with creation, and that precisely as part of and not despite the process of salvation.”⁵¹ Dunn comments,

The point Paul is presumably making, through somewhat obscure language, is that God followed the logic of his proposed subjecting of creation to man by subjecting it still further in consequence of man’s fall, so that it might serve as an appropriate context for fallen man.⁵²

Kidner supports Dunn’s interpretation when he contrasts the pre-Fall situation with our present existence:

Leaderless, the choir of creation can only grind on in discord. It seems from Romans 8:19–23 and from what is known of the prehuman world that there was a state of travail from the first which man was empowered to “subdue” until he relapsed into disorder himself.⁵³

Charles Cranfield has used the same analogy with a powerful and often repeated *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

What sense can there be in saying that the “sub-human creation—the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn, or the planet Venus—suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence?” The answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties and all its life, created for God’s glory, is cheated of its true fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God’s praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways; but since their praise is destined to be not a collection of individual offerings but part of a magnificent whole, the united praise of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that which they were created to be, so long as man’s part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.⁵⁴

Henri Blocher makes essentially the same point:

If man obeys God, he would be the means of blessing the earth, but in his insatiable greed ... and in his short-sighted selfishness, he pollutes the earth and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert (cf. Rev. 11:18). That is the main thrust of the curse of Genesis 3.⁵⁵

Richard Bauckham points out that the word translated “groan” (Rom. 8:22,23) may mean “mourn,” linking it with the language used by the prophets about the repeated rebellions of God’s people, rather than a single disobedience in Eden. He argues that the phrase “the creation was subject to futility (or frustration)” (Rom. 8:20) probably refers to the ecological degradation described by the prophets, when they spoke of the earth mourning, the soil losing its

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fertility, plants withering, animals dying (Isa. 22:4, 33:9; Jer. 4:28, 14:4, 23:10; Hosea 4:3; Amos 1:2; Joel 1:10–12, 17–20). Furthermore, it helps to recognize the way that “frequently in the Bible, language of divine judgment describes the way acts have consequences in this world. Disruptions of the created order of things cause further disruption that rebounds on the perpetrators.”⁵⁶ While Bauckham is correct to insist that Romans 8:18–23 refers to more than Genesis 3, his arguments also strengthen the importance of the events portrayed in Genesis 3.

The “Fall” is not primarily about disease and disaster, nor about the dawn of self-awareness. Rather, it is a way of describing the fracture in relationship between God and the human creature made in his image.⁵⁷ The rupture means that we rattle around in our space, as it were, producing disorder within ourselves, with our neighbors, and with our environment (human and nonhuman). This will continue until our relationship with God is restored and we become “at peace with God through our Lord Jesus who has given us access to the grace in which we now live; and we exult in the divine glory which is to be ours” (Rom. 5:1, 2)—words which condition and explain the state of nature which Paul uses later in the same passage (Rom. 8:19–21).

The Romans 8 passage makes it clear that our calling is not simply to ourselves and our current neighbors, or even to our children and grandchildren, but to the whole future of creation. In Francis Bridger’s words,

We are called to be stewards of the earth by virtue not simply of our orientation to the Edenic command of the Creator but also because of our orientation to the future. In acting to preserve and enhance the created order, we are pointing to the coming rule of God in Christ ... The knowledge that it is God’s world, that our efforts are not directed toward the creation of an ideal utopia but that we are, under God, building bridgeheads of the kingdom serves to humble us and to bring us to the place of ethical obedience.⁵⁸

In contrast, Martyn Lloyd-Jones seemed to regard the passage as wholly apocalyptic.⁵⁹

Tom Wright makes essentially the same point:

Paul is talking [in Rom. 8:18–21] about the glory which he says is to be revealed “to us” (v.18). What he means by that is instantly explained and unpacked in the next few verses. The whole creation,

the entire cosmos, is on tiptoe with expectation for God’s glory to be revealed to his children. “Glory” is not simply a kind of luminescence, as though the point of wisdom were that we would eventually shine like electric lightbulbs. “Glory” means, among other things, rule and power and authority. As other writers (notably Saint John the Divine) make clear, part of the point of God’s saving of his people is that they are destined not merely for a relaxing endless holiday in a place called “heaven,” but that they are destined to be God’s stewards, ruling over the whole creation with healing and restorative justice and love.⁶⁰

In the Noachian covenant (Gen. 9:8–17), God explicitly includes “all creatures” alongside Noah and his family. Indeed, there is a strong case that God first covenanted with creation itself when he established order in it, long before humans appeared on the scene (Jer. 33:25: “These are the words of the Lord: If there were no covenant for days and night, and if I had not established a fixed order in heaven and earth, then I could spurn the descendants of Jacob and of my servant David”). He renewed his covenant repeatedly throughout history—with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, culminating with Jesus the Christ. The God of Creation and the God of Redemption are one and the same (Rev. 4:6–11). As David Fergusson puts it,

Creation can only be understood from the perspective of redemption. There is too much wastage, pain and untimely death to make this view possible apart from a particular conviction about the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection.⁶¹

For Oliver O’Donovan,

The redemption of the world, and of mankind, does not serve only to put us back in the Garden of Eden where we began. It leads us on to that further destiny to which, even in the Garden of Eden, we were already directed.⁶²

Richard Bauckham insists,

Salvation is not the replacement but the renewal of creation. God’s purpose in history and in the eschatological future does not abstract humans from nature, but heals the human relationship with nature.⁶³

Robert Murray concludes his examination of the “cosmic covenant” by asking, “Have theologians betrayed the Bible’s message?” He is clear that

the Bible teaches us that neither sin nor salvation are affairs merely between us as individuals and

God; sin entails alienation from our nature which relates us to God's other creatures, while salvation entails our re-integration in a vaster order of harmony which embraces the whole cosmos, as we may interpret Paul's tersely expressed vision in Romans 8.⁶⁴

Tom Wright describes Romans 8:18–28 as

one of the most central statements in the New Testament about what God intends to do with the whole cosmos. [T]he matter is set out quite clearly ... Paul's whole argument is that the renewal of God's covenant results in the renewal of God's creation.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Where does all this get us in trying to understand natural disasters? Some of these can certainly be attributed to human actions. Former British Government Chief Scientific Adviser John Beddington has warned of the "perfect storm" approaching from climate change and our growing requirements for energy, food, and clean water as the world population climbs toward nine billion—all factors dependent on or caused by human action.⁶⁶ Geologist Bill McGuire has spelled out how a changing climate can trigger earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic action.⁶⁷ Pests and parasites may afflict us, but they are not themselves the result of our sin. We have Jesus's own authority that those who died when the tower in Siloam fell were not greater sinners than others (Luke 13:3–5).

We have to face the reality that suffering is a central thread in scripture—perhaps particularly in the New Testament where we read of the sufferings of Christ and of those who follow him (2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 1:29, 3:10; Heb. 2:10, 5:8). There is no magic way or hidden knowledge to escape the way the world is, but there is a sure support and promise for the way we are called to live.

Peter Enns regards

the general scenario that Paul is laying out [in Rom. 8:18–27] is one of perseverance of hope, by the Spirit, in a state of suffering, a suffering that causes groaning—so much so that the Spirit himself joins along ... These sufferings seem to be connected in some way to the believer's "obligation" to resist the "sinful nature" and the cosmic grains of "frustration" and "bondage to decay" to which it has been subjected (vv. 20–21). In other words,

the sufferings Paul refers to likely have some connections to the "decay" of creation, one of its manifestations being the daily struggle to resist being controlled by the sinful (i.e., preconversion) nature.⁶⁸

When Paul looked back at Genesis 3, he recognized suffering (Rom. 8:22–23) but also a present hope: God's kingdom *has* come; it is not a distant possibility. Our challenge is to get right the relationship between present and ultimate hope. Tom Wright comments that Paul's assurance of the future in Romans 8:19–21 is based on two things,

the biblical promise of new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17, 66:22) and the creation story in which human beings, made in God's image, are appointed as God's stewards over creation. Putting the picture together, in the light of the way the created order is out of joint, and the clear biblical and experiential belief that the human race as a whole is in rebellion against God, Paul saw ... the answer, if the creator is to be true to the original purpose, is for humans to be redeemed, to take their place at last as God's image-bearers, the wise steward they were always meant to be. Paul sees that this purpose has already been accomplished in principle in the resurrection of Jesus, and that it will be accomplished fully when all those in Christ are raised and together set in saving authority over the world (see 1 Cor. 15:20–28).⁶⁹

This is where our pains and uncertainties come together with God's work in creation and redemption.

To recapitulate:

1. Science excludes a single progenitor (or pair) for humankind, beyond reasonable doubt.
2. We are distinct from the apes/early hominins through being "in God's image." The essence of this is that we [should] have a relationship with God.
3. This relationship implies that we are accountable to God; otherwise it is meaningless.
4. Our "imaging" must have occurred in time; it could be described as "pre-Adam" becoming "Adam." Stott's suggestion of *Homo sapiens* becoming *Homo divinus* is conceptually helpful.
5. God's intended (or "primal") plan of relationships fractured through our free choice. Consequently, we are at the mercy of outside

forces in our relationships to God, to each other, and to the rest of God's creation—which is urgently waiting for us to take our rightful place in God's plan.

6. These relationships are repairable only through Christ's atoning work. That is completely uncontentious. †

Notes

¹Some of the material in this article has appeared in R.J. Berry, "This Cursed Earth: Is 'The Fall' Credible?," *Science & Christian Belief* 11, no. 1 (1999): 29–49; —, "Eden & Ecology: Evolution & Eschatology," *Science & Christian Belief* 19, no. 1 (2007): 15–35; —, "Adam or Adamah?," *Science & Christian Belief* 23, no. 1 (2011): 23–48. Bible quotations are from the Revised English Bible.

²David L. Hull, "The God of the Galápagos," review of Phillip Johnson's *Darwin on Trial* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1991), *Nature* 352 (1991): 485–86.

³N.P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1927), 3.

⁴R.J. Berry, "What to Believe about Miracles," *Nature* 322 (1986): 321–22; D. Wilkinson, *When I Pray, What Does God Do?* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015).

⁵Patricia Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 199–200.

⁶H. Marshall, "Myth," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S.B. Ferguson, D.F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 449. Marshall suggests four different and more rigorous ways of treating the Genesis 3 account: (1) an explanation of how sin and disobedience came into the world; (2) an expression of the present fallen state of humankind—"our" plight in the form of a story; (3) a poetic description of the human predicament, with symbolism capable of further re-interpretation; or (4) a story whose actors include God and a serpent who miraculously speaks.

⁷D.A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); D.R. Montgomery, *The Rocks Don't Lie* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012); M.J.S. Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁸F.R. Tennant, *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 35–37; J.W. Chappell, "Rethinking the Historical Fall in the Light of Evolution," *Science & Christian Belief* 25 (2013): 131–54.

⁹N.P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, 517.

¹⁰E.W. Barnes, *Scientific Theory and Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 2–3.

¹¹E.W. Barnes, *Should Such a Faith Offend?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 311.

¹²See, for example, George McCready Price, *Predicament of Evolution* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1925), chapter 13. Intriguingly, Price drew his quote from British atheist Robert Blatchford, in *God and My Neighbour* (London: Clarion Press, 1903),

Accepting evolution, how can we believe in a Fall? When did man fall? Was it before he ceased to be a monkey, or after? Was it when he was a tree man, or later? Was it in the Stone Age, or the Bronze Age, or the Age of

Iron? And if there never was a fall, why should there be any atonement? (p. 159)

¹³P.J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early Twentieth Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); —, *Monkey Trials and Gorilla Sermons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁴Bowler, *Monkey Trials and Gorilla Sermons*, 187.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶D.R. Alexander, *The Language of Genetics: An Introduction* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011); C. Stringer, *The Origin of Our Species* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); F.J. Ayala, "Human Evolution: Whence and Whither?," in *Evolutionary Biology: Conceptual, Ethical, and Religious Issues*, ed. R. P. Thompson and D. M. Walsh (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 13–28.

¹⁷Genesis 2:7 emphasizes the uniqueness of the human creation; it says nothing about the image. Notwithstanding, "this verse matches and completes the classic 1:27" (D. Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary [London: Tyndale Press, 1967], 60).

¹⁸J.R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (London: Scripture Union, 1972), 63.

¹⁹For example, G. Finlay, "Homo divinus: The Ape That Bears God's Image," *Science & Christian Belief* 15 (2003): 17–40; G. Finlay, "Human Genomics and the Image of God," Faraday Paper no. 14 (Cambridge, UK: Faraday Institute, 2009); D. Venema, "Genesis and the Genome: Genomics Evidence for Human-Ape Common Ancestry and Ancestral Hominid Population Sizes," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (2010): 166–78.

²⁰Allan Day, in "Adam, Anthropology and the Genesis Record," *Science & Christian Belief* 10 (1998): 115–43, complains that imputing a specific act of God implies "semi-deism."

²¹For example, C.S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), wrote,

For long centuries, God perfected the animal which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself ... Then in the fullness of time, God caused to descend on this organism, both on its psychology and physiology, a new kind of consciousness which could say "I" and "me," which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgements of truth, beauty and goodness. (p. 68)

²²J.W. van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

²³G. von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972), 60: "Just as powerful kings, to indicate their claim to domination, erect images of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man, is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem"; see also, E.C. Lucas, *Can We Believe Genesis Today? The Bible and the Questions of Science* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 175. Richard Middleton, in *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), suggests that the statues were more usually those of a god rather than the king himself, but this does not change their emblematic status (p. 26).

²⁴Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 27

²⁵C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 119.

²⁶There is a growing literature on the proper understanding of the soul. See W.S. Brown, N. Murphy, and H.N. Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and*

- Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998); M. A. Jeeves, *From Cells to Souls – and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); J. B. Green and S. L. Palmer, eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); M. A. Jeeves, ed., *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).
- ²⁷C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 158.
- ²⁸H. D. McDonald, *The Christian View of Man* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 40.
- ²⁹Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 60.
- ³⁰C. F. D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament: Some Reflections on Biblical Ecology* (London: Athlone, 1964), 5. For the working out of this responsibility, see R. J. Berry, ed., *When Enough Is Enough: A Christian Framework for Environmental Sustainability* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2007).
- ³¹J. H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 42.
- ³²C. E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation: The Didsbury Lectures, 1990* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1992), 99–100; R. S. Briggs, “Humans in the Image of God,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): 111–26.
- ³³The image was not obliterated by the “Fall” (Gen. 9:6). In *Genesis 1–11*, Westermann comments, “It is not a question of a quality in people but of the fact that human beings can have a history with God. The image and likeness of God are only there in the relationship between God and the individual” (p. 468).
- ³⁴T. E. Fretheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 468.
- ³⁵J. H. Walton, “A Historical Adam: Archetypal Creation View,” in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. S. N. Gundry, M. Barrett, and A. B. Caneday (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 106.
- ³⁶J. Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).
- ³⁷T. A. Noble, “Original Sin and the Fall,” in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges*, ed. R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2009), 99–129.
- ³⁸J. J. Bimson, “Reconsidering a Cosmic Fall,” *Science & Christian Belief* 18, no. 1 (2006): 63–81.
- ³⁹L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 228.
- ⁴⁰J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 163.
- ⁴¹C. J. Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2011), 87ff. N. T. Wright has written “Do We Need a Historical Adam?” in *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 26–40. Wright is somewhat equivocal on historicity. He writes, “Just as God chose Israel from the rest of humankind for a special, strange, demanding vocation, so perhaps what Genesis is telling us is that God chose one pair from the rest of early hominids for a special, strange, demanding vocation. This pair (call them Adam and Eve if you like) were to be the representatives of the whole human race ... The point of it all is vocational: if we can study Genesis and human origins without hearing the call to be an image-bearing human being renewed in Jesus, we are massively missing the point. (pp. 37–39)
- ⁴²Walton, “A Historical Adam: Archetypal Creation View,” 106; Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 100–101.
- ⁴³J. D. G. Dunn, *Word Bible Commentary* 38A: *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 272, 290.
- ⁴⁴F. F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 6, *Romans* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1963), 130.
- ⁴⁵P. Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 143.
- ⁴⁶Gundry, Barrett, and Caneday, eds. *Four Views on the Historical Adam*.
- ⁴⁷Kidner, *Genesis*, 30, 29.
- ⁴⁸Adam and Eve were told that they would “die” if they ate the fruit of a particular tree (Gen. 2:17); the New Testament describes those not “in Christ” as dead (e.g., Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13; 1 John 3:14). It is wrong to equate the death so described as physical death. Mark Worthing (“The Christian Doctrine of the Fall in the Light of Modern Science,” in *Festschrift für Hans Schwarz*, ed. D. Ratke [Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999]) writes, “The point of the Fall is that spiritual death became a part of our human reality as a result of human disobedience to God. While, theologically speaking, there are undeniable links between spiritual and physical death, there is no reason to insist that the death that entered the world through human sin must also have been physical death as such. The problem here is not with the Fall itself but with an overly idealised view of the original state. With regard to the problem of competition, pain, difficulties associated with growth and development, there need be no insurmountable conflict between contemporary evolutionary theory and the Christian doctrine of the Fall.
- ⁴⁹H. Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 129.
- ⁵⁰N. T. Wright, in *New Heaven, New Earth* (Cambridge, UK: Grove Booklet B11, 1999), notes that the Romans passage is regularly marginalized in mainstream Protestant interpretations of Romans. If you insist on reading Romans as a book about how human beings “get saved,” in the sense of “going to heaven when they die” you will find that these verses function as a kind of odd, apocalyptic appendix. That in consequence is how the tradition has often regarded them, both in the “radical” scholarship of Lutherans like Bultmann and Käsemann and in the “conservative” readings of much evangelical scholarship. (p. 12)
- ⁵¹J. D. G. Dunn, “Spirit Speech: Reflections on Romans 8:12–27,” in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 88.
- ⁵²Dunn, *Word Bible Commentary* 38A: *Romans 1–8*, 487.
- ⁵³Kidner, *Genesis*, 73.
- ⁵⁴Some observations on Romans 8:19–21, in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L. L. Morris on His 60th Birthday*, ed. R. Banks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 227.
- ⁵⁵H. Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 184.
- ⁵⁶R. Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), 92–100.
- ⁵⁷Bimson, “Reconsidering a Cosmic Fall.”
- ⁵⁸F. Bridger, “Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (1990): 290–301.

Article

Natural Evil: Genesis, Romans, and Modern Science

⁵⁹D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans. Exposition of Chapter 8:17–39: The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975).

⁶⁰N.T. Wright, "Jesus Is Coming—Plant a Tree!," in *The Green Bible* (London: Collins, 2008), I-74–I-89.

⁶¹D. Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator* (London: SPCK, 1998), 87.

⁶²O.M.T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 55.

⁶³Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 150.

⁶⁴R. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Theories of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), 165.

⁶⁵N.T. Wright, *Romans and the People of God*, 12.

⁶⁶J. Beddington, "Perfect Storm," a speech given at a UK government conference, Sustainable Development UK 09, March 19, 2009, in Westminster [London], <http://www.gren.org.uk/resources/Beddington'sSpeechatSDUK09.pdf>.

⁶⁷B. McGuire, *Waking the Giant: How a Changing Climate Triggers Earthquakes, Tsunamis, and Volcanoes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶⁸P. Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 190.

⁶⁹N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in R.W. Wall, J.P. Sampley, and N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10: *Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 596.

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