



James C. Peterson

Worth the Steep Price

Whether looking in this issue at the near future of artificial intelligence or at the distant past of origins, how we frame the discussion in time affects our evaluation of it. Let's take a moment to look at the bigger picture, the full context that affects our understanding of origins, life now, and what is in store for us in the future.

The Christian tradition describes the one God as a trinity of persons characterized by love in relationship even before creation. God has generously created a world in which other sentient creatures can come to be and love. But along with the consciousness that makes love possible comes the potential for suffering. Siddhartha Gautama thought that the very essence of sentience is suffering. That has often been the human experience. However, the current consensus, that the universe began about 13.8 billion years ago, means that consciousness and suffering are relatively recent. At least on our planet, there would be no suffering for a barren rock or for a primordial soup. Creatures that are sentient enough to suffer at all have been around for perhaps only the last half a billion years, hominids for a hundredth of that, *Homo sapiens sapiens* for less than a twentieth of the time of hominids, and recorded history for a twentieth of that. If the age of the universe were a book, the portion of its existence with conscious suffering, particularly human suffering, is on the last pages.

The Christian tradition proclaims that God's plan is to extend the life of his people with him forever. So, miles of library shelves could not contain the books to come, with always just as many more miles to go. The promise is that in the life to come, God will be so close as to wipe away every tear (Rev. 21:4). Might it be that conscious suffering on our brief page might be worth what it enables for those years to come? God could have created a world with no suffering by having no sentience; hence, there would be no choice for evil, no possibility of self-destruction, no opportunity to choose or reject relationship. Making possible the best gifts of life may require consciousness and, for a time, the possibility of the worst tragedies of life. Living on the page that contains these decisions and suffering, is a steep price for the moment, but only for the moment.

Jesus delayed his return to Mary and Martha so that there would be time for their brother Lazarus to die (John 11:6–7, 15). When Jesus did arrive, he saw their tears and wept with them (John 11:33–35). He felt their sorrow, even though he knew that his plan was to bring Lazarus back to life. The sisters' tears grieved Jesus, even though he knew their suffering was temporary and would be relieved to a better end (John 11:43–44). Suffering matters in its moment, but it can be reframed by its broader context.

It is amazing what one can endure if one knows that it is temporary and meeting a purpose. Jesus saw this in the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross that followed, as he directed his disciples to Psalm 22 that begins "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" but continues, "For God has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help ... They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!" (Ps. 22:1, 24, 31).

The Apostle Paul did not know what we now see as the evident age of the universe. Yet he did write,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:22–23)

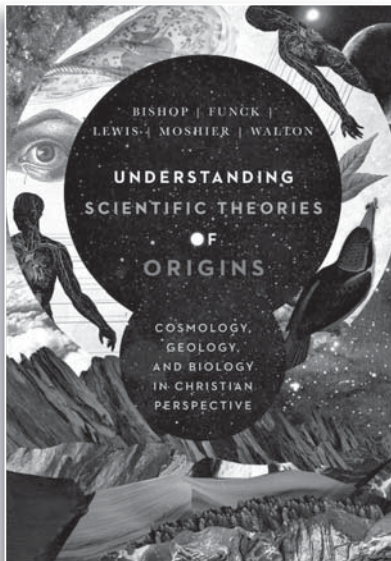
The metaphor is one of a painful transition to the decades of life to come. The womb provides an extended start with no suffering. Then there is a transition with pain for all involved, but it results in a new life. It is understandable to fear the sharp pain of childbirth, yet it comes mixed with the excitement of the expectation of the new life to come that is worth the pain it requires.

Living in the brief time that we do, can seem like all that life is when we are immersed in it, but it may be that our genuine suffering now is both a crucial and an exceptional one-off. ▽

James C. Peterson, *Editor-in-Chief*



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