

survive long on their own; they need to infect someone or something.”² Viruses have some ontological status, but not autonomous personhood (although more could be said).

Third, in the Gospel stories, and in much anecdotal and theological literature, evil spirits are noted to be associated with, perhaps parasitic on, sin (e.g., Eph. 4:26, 27; 1 Tim. 3:6). Indeed, their ontology may increase when fueled by human sin. However, it is difficult to understand how creatures not made in God’s image, without moral responsibility, can sin and thus allow an entry point for demons. Furthermore, should Christians, who are authorized to expel demons, be expelling demons from animals?

Fourth, all the deliverance stories in the Gospels and Acts have theological purposes—primarily to reveal Jesus’s identity and purpose. As his kingdom advances (Jesus moves to unclean places), we see more demonic activity, since evil spirits work to thwart God’s purposes, and hinder salvation. It is difficult to see how violent behavior in animals may interfere with the kingdom of God, other than in a very general sort of manner, such as suffering and human disillusionment.

Despite these points, I cautiously support the concept of evil spirits possibly being a causative factor in “natural” evil. We cannot dismiss everything that lacks scientific or clear biblical support. I suggest that a both/and or multifactorial approach is more fruitful.³ Some events that are incompatible with God’s character and will may be random (by-products of normal processes, similar to Polkinghorne’s free process defense) whereas others may result from the interference of demons. Or, perhaps more likely, evil occurs due to some interaction between them, as well as human sin or abdication of responsibility. Perhaps demons are parasitic on negative natural occurrences making them worse. It may be interesting to note any association between human sin and “natural” evil—this may strengthen arguments for the role of evil spirits. (David Bentley Hart suggests this with respect to the 2004 tsunami.⁴)

The issue is interesting but complex!

Notes

¹See E. Janet Warren, “Chaos and Chaos-Complexity: Understanding Evil Forces with Insight from Contemporary Science and Linguistics,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 63, no. 4 (2011): 255–66; E. Janet Warren, *Cleansing the Cosmos: A Biblical Model for Conceptualizing and Countering Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012). In support of Emberger’s nonviolent approach, I argue against the use of “spiritual warfare” language.

²Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 195.

³See Warren, *All Things Wise and Wonderful: A Christian Understanding of How and Why Things Happen, in Light of COVID-19* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

⁴David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

E. Janet Warren
ASA Fellow

Author’s Reply

I welcome Janet Warren’s identification with the “few” of us who consider an angelic fall helpful in understanding “natural” evil. Warren points out that the concept of evil spirits as causative factors in “natural” evils does not enjoy abundant, clear biblical support, but she is also wary of too quickly dismissing the concept on that basis alone. Indeed, as I attempted to demonstrate in my article, the plausibility of the concept resides in its resonance with the Bible’s revelation of an unseen supernatural reality behind observed events, a reality where good and evil spiritual beings are in conflict. A reasonable and defensible corollary is that this spiritual conflict extends to deep time processes such as evolution.

Warren’s comments about the complex causality underlying “natural” evil are well founded. Her suggestions about the parasitic nature of evil spirits and the usefulness of a multifactorial approach to “natural” evil are welcome and helpful. To be clear, the intent of my article was not to simplistically claim that all undesirable natural occurrences are the result of demonic activity; rather, my goal was to question the attribution of evolutionary evil to God’s willful plan. Doing so, as explained in my article, is contrary to the character of God as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus.

In an effort to better understand the complexity of this issue, Warren offers four comments/questions. I will comment on those aspects of her comments/questions most pertinent to my article.

First, I do not believe a postulated primordial fall of Satan requires acceptance of the gap/restoration theory of creation as popularized in the Scofield Reference Bible of the early twentieth century. This theory postulates a long gap of time between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis 1 in which an original creation (v. 1) was destroyed as a result of the fall of Satan, followed by recreation (v. 2). My article makes no mention of *when* Satan fell other than to indicate that a fallen Satan likely influenced or distorted the evolutionary process from early on.

Second, Warren suggests I “ascribe too much power to evil spirits.” But why downplay their power? After all,

Letters

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, a being described as the *ruler* of this world and as holding the power of *death*. Certainly, the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus to heaven has limited Satan's power in the present. But prior to Jesus's ascension, Satan and the other fallen angels apparently enjoyed considerable power and are portrayed as formidable foes (Dan. 10:13, Rev. 12:9). Pertaining to my article, the question to be considered has to do with their capabilities throughout evolutionary time—a matter of speculation, certainly, but the Bible offers little reason to underestimate Satan's power in primordial time.

Third, I agree with Warren's reluctance to think of animals sinning, thereby allowing entry points for demons. Nor do I think that Christians should be in the business of expelling demons from animals. The premise of my article is that evil spirit beings, working in opposition to God's will, distorted the evolutionary process resulting in the violence and suffering associated with evolution. The mechanisms underlying such distortions lie in the realm of speculation. My article does not suggest that, for this distortion to occur, it is necessary for demons to possess animals in the same manner as recorded for humans.

Lastly, Warren wonders how the "violent behavior in animals may interfere with the kingdom of God." Extending her tentative answers, I suggest that the attribution of the violence and suffering associated with the evolutionary process to God's willful intent presents not simply "human disillusionment" but, rather, a thoroughly contradictory portrait of God's character as revealed by Jesus. To suggest that predation, harmful mutations, cancer, deadly pathogens, etc. are all *God's ideas* and/or the only way God could have created, is to erect a substantial barrier, at least for some, to coming to faith and inclusion in the kingdom of God.

Warren rightly concludes that the causation of "natural" evils is complex. Mystery is interwoven with complexity. With no desire to downplay the complexity of the issue, a major goal of my article was to support the claim that the nature of the character of God is not part of that mystery or complexity. By ascribing the violence and suffering of the evolutionary process to evil spiritual beings working in opposition to God's will, God's good, loving, and nonviolent character is consistent throughout all time.

Gary Emberger
ASA Member



Employers: Find Your Next Great Hires

- **EMAIL** your job directly to job-seeking professionals
- **PLACE** your job in front of highly qualified members
- **SEARCH** our Resume Bank using robust filters to narrow your candidate search
- **MANAGE** jobs and applicant activity right on our site
- **LIMIT** applicants only to those who fit your requirements

Professionals: Keep Your Career on the Move

- **SEARCH** and apply to jobs at institutions that value your credentials
- **UPLOAD** your resume so employers can contact you. You remain anonymous until you choose to release your contact information
- **CREATE** job alerts and receive an email each time a job matching your specified criteria becomes available
- **ACCESS** career resources, job-searching tips and tools

Visit <https://careercenter.asa3.org> to get started!