Why Have You Forsaken Me?
Dying in Ecology and Theology

Local Chapter – Boston
The American Scientific Affiliation
October 29, 2019
John R. Wood

“The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.” - Psalm 104: 21
What is this?

Is it evil?
What is this?

Hint!

Is it evil?
What is this?

Yellow Dung Fly

Is there death?
The Tension

Professionally … I am an ecologist.

Avocationally … I am a believer.
Death is a powerful influence on our behavior and judgement.

Death Salience (awareness) shapes attitudes, arouses us to action.
Death is a powerful influence on our behavior and judgement.

Terror Management Theory
William James (19th Century Philosopher) suggested that death is indeed the worm at the core of the human condition.

History of Christian thinking on death

... alternately embracing and avoiding

The Church and Ars vivendi
The Art of Dying Well
Insects and the Problem of Pain
A 19th Century Dilemma

Ichneumonidae
A Parasitoid

Aphid “Mummy”

Death and Suffering is not a new issue
The Darwinian Method has widely been thought to present challenges to a Biblical understanding of God’s creative works.

Natural Selection is one of the basic mechanisms of evolution, along with mutation, migration, and genetic drift.

N.S. = Synonym for Death
Biological Endings - Types of Death

1. Starvation
2. Malnutrition
3. Predation
4. Parasitic Disease
5. Accident
6. Failure to find a mate
7. Failure to be born
The Biological Phenomenology of Death

Role of Programmed Cell Death

*Caenorhabditis elegans*

Arrows indicate 3 cells that underwent apoptosis (PCD)
The Vitality of Death PCD – Shapes Organisms

Sculpting

Deleting Structures

Adjusting Cell Numbers

Eliminating Dangerous or Injured Cells

PCD & Lace Plant
Death and Normal Development

A case of Syndactyly

Image 1: The development of the foot begins at week 4 as a limb bud and is dependent on a number of genes and signals to develop and grow normally.

Incomplete Apoptosis
(Webbed Toes)

Programmed cell death (apoptosis)
The Vitality of Death

PCD

Predation and Theories of Community Development

Keystone Species Concept in the rocky intertidal
Robert Paine
Programmed Cell Death to the Biosphere

Cells to Atmosphere

Connecting the smallest life forms to biospheric processes

Plankton Bloom
Dilemma of Modern Medicine

For it is my hope and desire that it will contribute to the common good; that through it the higher physicians will somewhat raise their thoughts... that they will become the instruments and dispensers of God’s power and mercy in prolonging and renewing the life of man...

Francis Bacon
1638
The Success of Bacon’s Challenge, the Medicalization of Death and the Demographic and Existential Outcomes

• Globally, people aged over sixty will triple from 600 million to two billion in 2050

(World Health Organization 2008)
The Success of Bacon’s Challenge, the Medicalization of Death

Life Extension

Is Radical Life Extension Possible?

The death spike is getting sharper

Deaths of US women by age

Year 2014:
50% of all deaths occurred within a span of 16.3 years around the average age of death.

Year 1933:
50% of all deaths occurred within a span of 26.3 years around the average age of death.
The Success of Bacon’s Challenge, the Medicalization of Death

Is Radical Life Extension Possible?
The Success of Bacon’s Challenge, the Medicalization of Death

Is Radical Life Extension Possible?

Using Stem Cell Therapy
The Success of Bacon’s Challenge, the Medicalization of Death

Is Radical Life Extension Possible?

Using Stem Cell Therapy

Exponential rise in venture capital
Contrast this with a Traditional View of Death

“Following the lead of Augustine much Christian thought has tended to see death as a result of the fall, as an intrusion in the natural order of things.”

(Nicol – 2011)

“Death is punishment for sin. The first reference to death in the OT (Gen. 2:17), although not without its problems, nevertheless gives the basic orientation for the Biblical understanding of death. Here death is punishment for sin.”

(R.E. Davies - 1975)
However, now consider what early 20th century theologians said about physical death.

“Ludwig Kohler (1932-33) emphasized that none of the Old Testament books referred back to the story of Adam and Eve to explain sin and evil.”

(Spangenberg 2013)
A Theological Paradigm Shift on Death?

Karl Barth (1932)
Dietrich Bonnhoffe (1932-33)
Emil Brunner (1932-33)
Bernard Ramm (1954)
Loren Wilkinson (1976)
James Barr (1992)

Finitude - “Karl Barth has given the most definitive answer to the question concerning death and human nature. Our finite being, argues Barth, belongs to our original God-given nature and is not the result of sin”.

Re-addressing Physical Death Today

From the Academy to the Pew?

Paul Santmire (2000)
Ray Anderson (2001)
Terence E. Fretheim (2005)
Katherine Sonderegger (2009)
John Walton (2009)
John R. Schneider (2010)
Gilbert Meilaender (2012)
James K. Bruckner (2013)
Ronald Osborn (2014)
Doug and Jonathan Moo (2018)
Death and “The Doctrine of Providence”

“… starting from the conviction that the cosmos and its creatures are ordered by mortality and death... All creatures and the cosmos as a whole are marked out, ranked and structured by natural death. Death is not principally and properly the last enemy. Rather it is the structure and order of creaturely being.”

Katherine Sonderegger (2009) – “The Doctrine of Providence. [“Ordered by Death”]
Death and “The Fall in the Lost World of Genesis”

“All of this [ecology] indicates clearly that death did exist in the pre-Fall world …”

“Human resistance to death was not the result of immortal bodies. No, the reason we were not subject to death was because the antidote [to our mortality had been provided …”

[The tree of Life – Gen. 3]

Death is a normal part of the creation

“The curse … does not seem to represent … some sort of mysterious ontological change in the very makeup of creation itself.”

“… the story does not imply that human beings were created immortal.”
Theorizing Death
and
Creation Care

What does a positive view of physical death bring?
Physical Death
Ecological Applications to Creation Care

1st – Biotic death present from the beginning

Genesis 1

Are fruitfulness and death twins in Creation?
Beauty in Senescence and Death

1st – Biotic death present from the beginning

2nd – Land is a gift that includes death

A Story for Today
Physical Death
Ecological Applications to Creation Care

1\textsuperscript{st} – Biotic death present from the beginning

2\textsuperscript{nd} – Land is a gift that includes death

3\textsuperscript{rd} – Flourishing depends upon endings

The pruning metaphor
Unlikely Prophets of Our Time

Temple Grandin (2010)
Dead Cow - “Where did it go?”

Greta Thunberg (2019)
Climate Disaster - “How dare you?”
Why, indeed, have you forsaken me?

Descensus Christi ad Inferos, “The descent of Christ into hell"
The Chora Church, Istanbul, c. 1315 (public domain)
What Finishing Well Looks Like

Rev. John Bonham and Grandson Conner Cantelon

Rev. John Bonham and Grandson Conner Cantelon
Go now in peace
Preaching the good news to all creation

Embracing “Sister Death”

St Francis of Assisi
Resources on Physical Death and Dying

CSCA Pamphlet
https://www.csca.ca/pamphlets/

PSCF article – the ASA Journal

Wood, JRW (2016)
An Ecological Perspective on the Role of Death in Creation.