

CREATURE MORTALITY: FROM CREATION OR THE FALL?

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A popular doctrine is that animals did not die before the fall of man. This doctrine may be termed original animal immortality. It is presently held among many evangelicals, particularly the group termed young-earth creationists. Its adherents include venerable interpreters from the past. It is presented by adherents as a Biblical doctrine, based on an interpretive scheme built on Genesis, Isaiah, Romans and other books of Scripture.

Not all Bible believers have agreed that this doctrine is true and Biblically supported. The dissenters also include present and past interpreters.

Is there any basis for a fresh review of the issue? Certainly not because of new Scripture, because the canon has been closed for almost two thousand years. Also certainly not because Darwinism is new, with its dependence on survival of the fittest. Ramm remarks concerning this and related questions: "Barrels of ink have been used to describe the effects of sin upon animals and nature."¹ Nevertheless the issue is newly significant in our day because of current debates over the basic tenets of young-earth creationism. The Christian community of scientists contributing to the debate is not of one mind on the issue.

This re-examination of the original-animal-immortality theory is based primarily on Scripture. Views of some interpreters past and present are discussed, but without any claim of complete coverage. The conclusion in brief is that Scripture does not demand the absence of animal death before the fall.

To properly examine the issue requires a lengthy treatment necessitated by the interrelatedness of many issues. These include the properties of Adam, animals and the universe both before and after the fall.

I. HUMAN IMMORTALITY AND THE FALL

1. *Man's physical sensitivity.* As a physical being, man was created with a sensitive nervous system.² The sensitivity it affords is an enablement for physical life. For example, the human ear has otoliths for sensing physical balance in the presence of gravity. The skin has touch receptors

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¹ B. Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 233.

² See J. R. Williams, *Renewal Theology: God, the World, and Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 127-128.

for all manner of physical needs, including avoidance of physical injury. Thus the needs associated with living in a physical environment demand a physical body with nervous sensitivity.

Man and animals are constructed with other systems for survival. The blood's clotting factor and tissue repair mechanisms contribute to recovery from physical injury. The immune system fights bacterial and viral attack. The existence of all these bodily protection and repair systems points to a design for life in a natural world potentially dangerous and harmful in the physical sense.

2. *Sensitivity to pain and suffering.* Thus a susceptibility to a certain measure of pain and suffering is necessary to physical existence as a living being. Some such susceptibility is integral to the notion of man's mandate for dominion over the earth. Dominion involves struggle and with it an exposure to pain.³

3. *Pain increased since the fall.* Pain and suffering are of course greatly increased since the fall because man lost spiritual authority over the creation and now fights against nature and works in it less effectively. Eve was promised an increase of pain in childbirth (Gen 3:16), presumably via either increased fecundity or more difficult labor. Also much pain and suffering are due to evil and persecution directly. God in his manifold wisdom nevertheless uses pain and suffering to bring us to Christ and to help us grow.

4. *Death physical and spiritual.* Historical Christianity has always held that man dies because of sin. Based on Genesis 3, the death of man is seen as the direct effect of the fall.⁴ The technical nature of death, however, has been variously explained. The fact that Adam and Eve persisted biologically after sinning, while having been warned that "in the day that you (sin) you will die" (Gen 2:17), leads most interpreters to conclude that when they sinned they died spiritually—they died in the sense of spiritual separation from God.⁵ Physical death came later as a consequence. At the death of the body, the soul went to either heaven or hell.

³ Ibid. 127; D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1967) 73.

⁴ The perspective here follows historical Christianity in generally rejecting an evolutionary paradigm. That paradigm leads interpreters to novel reinterpretations if not outright rejection of traditional doctrines. N. P. Williams, *The Idea of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, Green, 1924) xxxiv, concluded that the fall was of the life-force, "that the Life-Force corrupted itself . . . at the very beginning of cosmic evolution." A. R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 192, considered the fall a falling short of man to reach his God-intended perfection. All evolutionary interpreters of course accept pre-fall animal death.

⁵ J. M. Gray, *Christian Workers' Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan: Revell/Spire, 1973) 17; D. MacDonald, *The Biblical Doctrine of Creation and the Fall* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1984 [1856]) 134–135. H. Blocher (*In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984] 184) says that A. van Hoonacker derived from 1 Kgs 2:36–46 the view that "you shall die" means "you will fall under the power of a death sentence."

5. *The soul and immortality.* The soul's persistence after bodily death suggests that the soul is immortal inherently.⁶ J. R. Williams argues that the "soul . . . is grounded in and lives out of the spirit,"⁷ which by being God's breath is immortal, and hence the human soul "may be said to be immortal."⁸ "At the death of the body the spirit is 'given up' to God," according to Eccl 12:7; Luke 23:46.⁹ Correspondingly, man in the beginning might have been wholly immortal and then lost his bodily immortality only because of sin. This is the view of Bush: "When the first pair violated the divine command, they immediately became mortal, subject to infirmity and death."¹⁰ Also, according to Shedd "the body of Adam was not mortal by creation. . . . In the original plan provision was made for the immortality of the body."¹¹ But Shedd sees this immortality as peculiar in being vulnerable to loss: "Prior to the fall the human body was not liable to death from internal causes, but only from external. It had no latent diseases, and no seeds of death in it. . . . It could, however, be put to death. If it were deprived of food, or air, it would die. . . . This original immortality of the body . . . was mutable and relative only. It might be lost."¹² Adam's immortality before the fall was therefore probationary.

The view that Adam's immortality was contingent may be developed further. The whole of Scripture teaches that man's existence is never autonomous but is always dependent on providential support from God. Hodge says that "the idea of the absolute dependence of all things on God pervades the Scripture."¹³ Genesis 3:22, furthermore, declares that Adam and Eve had to be banished from the Garden of Eden. This was necessary to deny them access to the tree of life, which itself was necessary for eternal life. Taken first in the literal sense, the verse implies that eating a physical fruit was necessary for eternal life, and hence Adam and Eve were not immortal inherently.

Augustine believed that "Adam's body (was) a natural and therefore mortal body."¹⁴ Further, he said that "Adam's body (was) . . . mortal because he was able to die, immortal because he was able not to die. . . . This immortality was given to him from the tree of life, not from his nature. When he sinned, he was separated from this tree. . . . He was mortal, therefore, by the constitution of his natural body, and he was immortal by the gift of his Creator."¹⁵ In agreement, Litton declares that "he (Adam) was capable of death, but not subject to it. . . . Inherent immortality belongs

⁶ Except for God's power to destroy it in Gehenna (Matt 10:28).

⁷ Williams, *Renewal Theology* 214.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* 213.

¹⁰ G. Bush, *Notes on Genesis* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981 [1860]) 1.90–91.

¹¹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (2d ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980 [1888]) 2.158.

¹² *Ibid.* 159.

¹³ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 1.561.

¹⁴ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman, 1982) 1.205.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 204.

only to the Creator."¹⁶ Chafer says similarly that "the original or unfallen body was capable of death. Death was not then inevitable, though it was possible."¹⁷

6. *The tree of life and immortality.* The usual view is that eating from the tree of life would have maintained Adam's immortality or conferred it permanently. MacDonald disagreed, saying that the tree was merely a sign of the divine promise of life.¹⁸ His disagreement was based partly on the prima facie inherent properties of trees (implying their limitations as mere physical objects) and partly on the frequency of the tree-of-life motif in extra-Biblical literature.¹⁹

Note that the tree of life is construed as more than, or other than, physical in Prov 3:18, which says of wisdom: "She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed." Proverbs 11:30; 13:12 present the tree of life similarly. In Ezek 31:2-9 trees are symbols of kingship and exalted majesty. Verses 8 and 9 specifically mention the preeminence of one tree—namely, Assyria (cf. v. 3)—over all the trees in the garden of God.

Taken more broadly the tree of life had a spiritual character, the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. The tree of life "in the paradise of God" appears in Rev 2:7, offered by Christ to those who overcome in his name. It also appears in 22:2, located on each side of the great "river of the water of life" (v. 1; one tree standing on two sides of the river?).²⁰ In v. 14 Christ says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life." In v. 19 John says, "If anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life." These verses imply that the tree of life provides access to God's eternal fellowship and thus conveys a gift of heavenly status to its partakers.

It is possible that in Prov 10:11; 13:14; 14:27 the tree of life is synonymous with the fountain of life. Again the tree of life is seen as greater than a literal tree.²¹ Blocher defends this point further by saying that the apostle John linked "the description in Genesis with that in Ezek 47, with its monthly harvests and healing leaves."²² Blocher concludes that the tree of life is figurative.²³

Jesus says in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life." In v. 40 he says that "everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal

¹⁶ E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (London: James Clark, 1960) 546.

¹⁷ L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1974) 2.149. For further discussion see Blocher, *In the Beginning* 185-187.

¹⁸ MacDonald, *Biblical Doctrine* 136-137, 354-359.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 149.

²⁰ See also Ezek 47:7.

²¹ F. R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken, 1968 [1903]) 91.

²² Blocher, *In the Beginning* 124.

²³ *Ibid.* 125.

life," and in v. 54 that "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Elsewhere Jesus identifies himself as the door, the shepherd, the light. In their composite these identifications show that Jesus is and gives eternal life. Therefore a broad interpretation is required of the meaning of the tree of life—namely, that in some sense Jesus himself is that tree. The narrow interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3—that the tree of life is simply a literal tree—will not comport with Revelation and John.

This conclusion facilitates our understanding of what might have happened to descendants of Adam and Eve. If no one had sinned in the Garden, and if the earth became filled via reproduction, the immortality of all would have depended on continued obedience to an omnipresent Lord of life. Or permanent immortality might have been conferred on all after a probationary period. If, however, the tree of life were merely a literal tree, how would dispersed descendants have had access to it? A unitary literal tree would not have sufficed.

7. *Loss of eternal life.* It is concluded, therefore, that Adam and Eve before the fall were not by nature immortal but instead had access to immortality as provided in and by the Lord God. Disfellowship because of sin produced immediate loss of eternal life as sin distanced them from Christ, who is the source of eternal life. In reflecting on our dependence on the Lord for life, Elihu commented: "If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust" (Job 34:14–15). This is precisely what God promised to Adam and Eve as a result of sin (Gen 2:17; 3:19) and to other sinners at the time of Noah (6:3).

It is also evident Scripturally that man can experience the disjunction of soul and body. Upon sinning, Adam lost fellowship with God and died spiritually (he retained a deadened human spirit). But for redemption, all sinners are destined for hell, a disembodied existence separated from God. The redeemed go to heaven. Therefore the soul persists beyond physical death. Those reaching heaven apparently undergo purification in going, because even the redeemed have a need for cleansing of residual sin, and no sin can remain in God's presence.

II. CREATION ORIGINALLY TRANSITORY

Since man was never immortal by nature, what of the rest of creation? Psalm 148:6 says of the heavenly hosts: "He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away." If this verse implies an eternal creation, did God change his mind later?

1. *Creation is presently transitory.* It is clear that the present condition is transitory. This is implied by the prophecies of new heavens and a new earth (Isa 51:6; 65:17; 2 Pet 3:7, 10, 12–13; Rev 21:2). All physical things are temporal and transitory (2 Cor 4:16–18; 5:1–4) without being

illusory (as claimed, e.g., in Hinduism). Jesus said in Matt 24:35 that heaven and earth would pass away (see also 1 Pet 1:24).

2. *Creation was originally transitory.* The creation was also transitory from the beginning. Psalm 102:25–27 says: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them, and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” Only if the psalmist is glossing over a change from an eternal to a temporal character of the entire universe, a matter of cosmic importance, could these verses be taken to agree with an eternal creation. The same significant omission would have to be attributed to Isaiah, who was given the simple comparison: “All men are like grass. . . . The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:6–8).

The question raised by Romans 8 will be discussed later.

3. *Only God possesses an eternal nature.* The creation is at times described in terms of eternity so as to draw attention not only to its relative longevity compared to man but also to the inevitable, irresistible character of God’s decrees. Creation is both temporal and transitory, however. (Note that an eternal creation would buttress deism.) Only God is eternal, as stated in 1 Tim 6:16.

III. THE EFFECT OF THE FALL ON NATURE

Despite the above, some writers assert that creation was at first eternal but lost its eternal character at man’s fall. In support of a change at the fall some cite Rom 8:19–22, particularly its mention of creation’s “bondage to decay” (v. 21). “Decay” is taken by such advocates to include both cosmic entropy increases as well as death in the animal kingdom.

1. *The Edenic curse.* The fall, according to Genesis, resulted from deliberate transgression. God prescribed the penalty of death in Gen 2:16–17. To Adam he said, “Cursed is the ground because of you” (3:17). From that time onward procuring food would be onerous. Adam would have to eat plants of the field, not garden fruit.

2. *Effect on the cosmos.* Can it be that the curse toppled creation from a pedestal of eternity? Notice that the Edenic curse was on the ground, not on the whole creation. Genesis 3 does not imply that Adam’s sin brought ruin to distant galaxies.

It is often maintained that thermodynamic decay began at the fall, with the implication that the cosmos thereupon became transitory. This is the argument of young-earth creationists such as Henry Morris.²⁴ Many notable

²⁴ H. M. Morris, *Biblical Basis for Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 195–197.

scientists, who disagree with Morris on earth age and delayed initiation of thermodynamic decay, have nevertheless argued that such decay proves the cosmos had a beginning.²⁵ In response to the idea of a fall-induced decay and terminal cosmos, we note that thermodynamic decay does not destroy matter-energy. It only rearranges its spectral distribution and consequent appearance. Moreover, Scripture nowhere implies that matter per se was originally created eternal but became transitory at the fall.

Moreover, in the primeval creation physical decay was not absent. Plant life, for example, was expressly given as food for man and beast (Gen 1:29–30). As Hayward says, “We need to eat as a consequence of the Second Law (of Thermodynamics), because the available energy in our bodies decreases and must be replenished. . . . And both man and animals needed food before man fell. . . . This implies that they were subject to the Second Law . . . from the moment of their creation.”²⁶ Decay processes of a general sort can also be inferred from earlier in the creation week. When the land was divided from the water at the creation of continents and the seas, heat exchanges must have been operative. When the waters of the deep were divided into waters above and waters below, again heat exchanges occurred. Thermodynamic decay is inherent in heat exchanges.

To maintain otherwise requires an *ad hoc* assumption as to the nature of divine activity during creation week. According to Morris²⁷ some decay-like processes were in operation before the fall, such as “digestion, friction, water erosion, wave attenuation.” But Morris then maintains that such processes must have been “balanced precisely with ‘growth’ processes” so as to preserve a constant entropy. Accordingly it would have been possible to “build perpetual motion machines.”²⁸ Upon the fall, according to Morris, the entire cosmos was made subject to entropy increases as given by the second law of thermodynamics.²⁹

Morris lists various verses that he claims support the notion that the cosmos, living organisms, and man are presently subject to decay,³⁰ in agreement with our earlier conclusions that creation is both transitory and entropically decaying. He argues, however, for the absence of entropy-related decay before the fall on the basis of several other Scripture passages, including Neh 9:6, which says, “You made the heavens . . . and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it. You give life to everything” (Morris probably was focusing on the latter part, because the KJV renders it “thou preservest them all”); Col. 1:17, which says that “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together”; and 2 Pet 3:7, which says that “by the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved

²⁵ See e.g. A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: MacMillan, 1928) 63–86, esp. 83–84.

²⁶ A. Hayward, *Creation and Evolution: The Facts and Fallacies* (London: Triangle, 1985) 184.

²⁷ Morris, *Biblical Basis* 195.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 196.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 196–197.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 199–201.

for fire." But against Morris' view is the fact that none of these verses refers exclusively to the primeval creation; they refer instead to the existing cosmos. They speak of God's providential sustenance and governance of the present order, not of nondecay. If they were evidence for nondecay they would be in contradiction to the numerous passages referring to creation's present decay.

The claim that the fall produced thermodynamic decay is not universally shared by young-earth creationists. Kofahl defended initiation of the decay at creation by arguments similar to those of Hayward.³¹ Kofahl's paper generated opposing views by E. L. Williams³² and Morris,³³ both of whom argued that Kofahl succumbed to uniformitarianism in determining pre-fall conditions. Kofahl was supported by Jansma,³⁴ who accepted both thermodynamic decay and animal mortality from creation onward.³⁵

It is concluded that Scripture makes no claim that the cosmos was originally made eternal and free from thermodynamic decay.

3. *Terrestrial death and decay.* Some writers maintain that the curse also instituted a reign of death, degeneracy, and ordinary physical and biological decay on the earth. They say that even the thorns and thistles appeared because of the fall, either as variants of thornless plants from before the fall³⁶ or as new creations. The latter possibility would of course violate the literal interpretation of creation week—namely, that nothing has been created since the week ended. Others are more cautious. Blocher, for example, says that Paul "gives no indication of either the extent or, above all, the form of the change."³⁷

To understand better the origin and nature of terrestrial death and decay we will first explore man's death a little further.

4. *Only man dies because of sin.* Belief that animal death began at the fall is frequently based on Rom 5:12:³⁸ "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." This appeal is overextended, however, because Paul says that "death came to all men," not to all creation nor to all animals. That the context is limited to man is confirmed by

³¹ R. E. Kofahl, "Entropy Prior to the Fall," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 10 (December 1973) 154–156; Hayward, *Creation* 184.

³² E. L. Williams, "Response to Robert Kofahl," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 10 (December 1973) 156–157.

³³ H. M. Morris, "Another Reply to Robert Kofahl," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 10 (December 1973) 157.

³⁴ S. J. Jansma, Jr., "Comment on Thermodynamics Before and After the Fall," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 11 (December 1974) 177–179.

³⁵ See also Kofahl's response in R. E. Kofahl, "Reply Concerning Entropy Prior to the Fall," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 11 (December 1974) 175–177.

³⁶ MacDonal, *Biblical Doctrine* 169–171.

³⁷ Blocher, *In the Beginning* 183.

³⁸ J. C. Whitcomb and H. M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961) 463.

v. 14, which speaks of death reigning from Adam to Moses. Murray, for example, says that “death permeated to all men because all sinned,”³⁹ and this “by reason of solidaric sin.”⁴⁰ Lange’s commentary, in its discussion of Rom 5:12 and Romans 8, does not mention animal death but only human death.⁴¹ Romans 5:18 further says that “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men,” which a second time links sin with man’s death, not with that of animals. Furthermore Paul notes that “death came . . . because all sinned”—not that death caused all men to sin but that the sin nature passed to all men who then sinned and thereby brought death on themselves. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23; see also Jas 5:20). Death reigned because sin reigned, not the reverse. In 1 Cor 15:21 Paul states: “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” If “death” had meant animal as well as human death, then the logic of the statement would fail because it mentions resurrection of the dead, and nowhere in Scripture is the animal world connected to resurrection. Only man is resurrected, and hence only man dies the death being referred to here.

5. *Animal death past and future.* Since animals do not have the moral capacity to sin, their death cannot have arisen because they sinned, as in the above prescription. Therefore either animal death came with creation or it arose indirectly through the Edenic curse. Calvin apparently thought the former, because in commenting on creation he said that “all things were liable to corruption” and that some populations (of animals) were bestowed with “a power of continuing their race, so preventing it from perishing at their own death.”⁴² Ramm believed likewise: “Ideal conditions existed only in the Garden. There was disease and death and bloodshed in Nature long before man sinned.”⁴³

If Adam was not immortal by nature (see earlier discussion), there is no reason to expect that the first animals were immortal by nature either. Moreover the animals, like Adam, were created with physical sensitivity to pain and suffering as well as susceptibility to death. Unlike Adam, however, the animals were not offered access to the tree of life. This is especially so for beasts outside the Garden. Therefore they had no possible way to achieve immortality. On such considerations one may conclude that animals were created mortal by nature.

Advocates of the other view—that animal death arose via the curse—mention Isa 11:6–9; 65:25,⁴⁴ which describe the peace that in the future will reign even between predator and prey. It is argued that these verses not only predict the future but also “postdict” the past—namely, the situation

³⁹ J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 182 (italics his).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 187.

⁴¹ J. P. Lange, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Scribner, 1899) 176, 269–270.

⁴² J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 1.156.

⁴³ Ramm, *Christian View* 233.

⁴⁴ Whitcomb and Morris, *Genesis Flood* 239.

prevailing at creation. Isaiah 11, however, is entirely forward-looking except for declaring that God will regather the exiles. It does not even hint at a death-free creation. Not only that: In the future here described the "rod" of Jesse will "slay the wicked," which indicates no absence of death. Isaiah 65 also looks forward, proclaiming a future end of sorrow and misfortune. This will occur when God creates a new heaven and a new earth (v. 17). Significantly v. 20 says that on the new earth death will cut short neither the infant's life nor the full years of an old man. If Isaiah 65 were pointing to a restoration of the immortality of both man and beast presumed for the initial creation, why is normal death still allowed in v. 20 ("He who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth") or in v. 22 ("For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people")?⁴⁵ Concerning v. 25, Calvin thought it spoke "allegorically of bloody and violent men, whose cruel and savage nature shall be subdued."⁴⁶

Both passages refer to the peace to prevail "on all my holy mountain" (Isa 11:9; 65:25). Some might say that the holy mountain is the entire earth and that therefore a lion-lamb peace will prevail everywhere. It may be, however, that this peace concerns the children and flocks of God's people and that therefore it will prevail wherever they are found. Isaiah may not be saying anything about predator-prey relationships that otherwise continue elsewhere. The earth can "be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (11:9), bringing creation under man's dominion with resultant freedom from danger to man and his concerns, without the total exclusion of the natural order of animal death away from man's presence.

Lange interpreted "holy mountain" in a similar way by means of Isa 2:2. Here the Lord's mountain is presented as "the chief of the mountains, and . . . raised above the hills." Therefore Lange declared that "the holy mountain . . . will not indeed physically comprise the earth, but it will rule the earth."⁴⁷

It is not clear whether the new creation will involve a total replacement of the existing order or only a substantive transformation of it. The lion will lie down with the lamb (Isa 65:25), which to the extent Scripture here is literal indicates that the new creation will be essentially similar to the present one in overall content and appearance. But great destruction will be involved, according to the apostle Peter (2 Pet 3:10-13), in the changeover from the present world to a new "home of righteousness."

⁴⁵ Notice, therefore, that Isaiah 11 and 65 are not predictive of the new heavens and earth and the new Jerusalem of Rev 21:1-4, when death shall be no more, unless either (1) they mix information about the earthly millennium and the eternal state or (2) all three passages employ metaphor.

⁴⁶ J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 406.

⁴⁷ J. P. Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: The Prophet Isaiah* (New York: Scribner, 1878) 164.

6. *The nature of the curse on the ground.* To understand further whether the curse of Genesis 3 might have brought animal death, the nature of the curse must be explored. Is the curse simply the impact of man's sin on his surroundings, or is it a fundamental change in the natural order? Genesis 5:29 says plainly that God imposed the curse. Some have believed the curse was temporary because in 8:21, following Noah's flood, God says, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man."

Lange states that the Genesis 3 curse was manifested in full in the flood and that "with the last, therefore, is the first curse retracted."⁴⁸ Such retraction would imply that creature mortality at least since the flood is unconnected with the Genesis 3 curse, which therefore did not involve a fundamentally new order of animal death. The notion that God retracted the curse is, however, opposed by Whitelaw who said that the promise of Gen 8:21 is "not a revocation of the curse of Gen. iii.17, nor a pledge that such curse would not be duplicated. The language refers solely to the visitation of the Deluge."⁴⁹

Note that "curse" in Gen 8:21 is the Hebrew word *qll* while in Gen 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29 it is *ʔrr*. The former means "to slight," "to regard or make less than divinely intended," while the latter means "to execrate," "to condemn, as in punishment." The difference does not seem to be important for the interpretation of Gen 8:21. Both God and man pronounce both types of curses. Although in Scripture God, not a man, most often pronounces curses of execration, as if to distinguish true cursing involving God's will from the pagan notion,⁵⁰ a man sometimes makes the pronouncement (cf. e.g. Noah in Gen 9:25). Curses of slighting also are pronounced by both God and man. In addition there seems to be negligible significance in the degree of cursing implied by the two words. The curse of slighting is used in reference to the flood, a major worldwide catastrophe, while the curse of execration is applied to Cain alone in Gen 4:11. Furthermore both words are used interchangeably in Deuteronomy 28. Consequently the question remains whether Gen 8:21 was a retraction of 3:17.

Two more details remain before resolving the question of retraction. (1) God's curses fell on man often, and more than once on the ground (e.g. Gen 3:17; 4:11; Genesis 6–9; Deuteronomy 28; 2 Kgs 22:17–19). The Genesis 3 curse on the ground appears therefore to have been a general introduction to trouble that included catastrophic episodes. (2) Revelation 22:3 declares a time when the curse shall be no more. From the context this may be the curse on the ground, or the curse of death on sinful man, or both of the above.

All points above lead to the conclusion that Gen 3:17 instituted a dispensation of cursing of the ground involving man's disobedience to God

⁴⁸ J. P. Lange, *Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1901) 325.

⁴⁹ T. Whitelaw, "Exposition and Homiletics," *The Pulpit Commentary* (ed. H. D. M. Spence and J. S. Exell; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 1.132.

⁵⁰ See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke; Chicago: Moody) 1.75.

and the ground's reaction. Man has suffered the ground's intransigence generally throughout history and specifically in episodic fashion, as in Cain's punishment and Noah's flood. All the curses involve a direct link with sin. When the new heaven and new earth come, all such cursing will cease.

The key conclusion is that the curse of Genesis 3 involves the ground's response to man's disobedience to God. Neither this curse nor any other, in context, explicitly involves a fundamental alteration of the law-order of the cosmos or of the life-death cycle of the animal realm. No such changes even seem to be implied.

To claim such fundamental changes invites a serious objection based on the provision of plants as food. Plants were given as food for man and beast from the beginning. Food and creatures are thus depicted in their normal context. If the Genesis 3 curse involved changes in the cosmic law-order or creature mortality while plants continued to be exploited for food, a very complex and problematic disjunction threading through the laws of nature (thermodynamic and biological, among others) is being claimed for the fall. Only wild and completely unverifiable speculation could then hope to explain pre-fall conditions. Any such speculation could only be advanced by rejecting the normalcy of the food/creature pre-fall context.

7. Man as agent of God's curse or liberation. Scripture asserts that the curses of Genesis 3; 6–9 were imposed by God as first cause. Was man a secondary cause in either? The flood was a divinely brought judgment imposed on the earth by the will of its Creator. Various natural mechanisms were involved in its implementation. In no aspect of the flood is any action of man mentioned as a secondary cause. Thus there is no basis for maintaining that God's cursing must always involve man as an agent. But sometimes it does, as in God's conditional promises of curses on the Israelites via their enemies in Deuteronomy 28. This very feature—man's agency—does appear to be the case with the curse God imposed on the ground in Genesis 3.

Concerning man's role in this curse, God has provided a commentary in Romans 8. The distinction in the chapter's first half is between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. Paul says, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (v. 9). He also says, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (v. 6).

From this context, then, Paul proceeds in vv. 18–25 to discuss the impact of life in the flesh on the creation. The main thrust of the passage is acknowledged by all commentators to be the creation's future state of release when redeemed man is resurrected. The passage speaks as well, however, of creation's partial release at present because redeemed man already enjoys the "firstfruits of the Spirit" (v. 23).

Paul begins by mentioning the "glory that will be revealed in us" and creation's wait for this revelation in the sons of God (vv. 18–19). He then says that "the creation was subjected to vanity . . . in the hope that the

creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (vv. 20–21).

Who are the children of God? According to John 1:12–13; Rom 8:14, 16–17; 1 John 3:1–2, all Christians are the children of God. As Lange pointed out, the emphasis in Rom 8:21 is on the sharing of the children's glory, not on a glorious liberty of an independent natural world.⁵¹ For the discussion here any possible distinction between "children of God" and "sons of God" appears negligible given the proximity of both terms in vv. 19, 21. By Paul's words, therefore, it must be possible for children of God in the present age to partially release creation from a bondage to decay and bring it into freedom.

Romans 8:22 says that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth." The travail is our childbirth, our new birth, not a new birth of the creation. The creation is in a sense birthing us. It groans until we are brought forth. As we become delivered from sin, creation's burden will be lifted. To the extent we are liberated now, so is creation liberated. In sum, creation's own order (apart from man) has not been fundamentally and permanently altered. Instead, man's sin has imposed on it a burden.

Many writers still say that creation's "decay" must refer to animal death and entropy. In this regard much discussion has centered on the meaning of "creation" in Rom 8:19–21. According to Lange it has been seen either narrowly or very inclusively—that is, as encompassing all of the natural and spiritual world, together with the inanimate and animate creation, and humans both heathen and converted.⁵² The view of Lange's commentary is that it made "no reference . . . to the mathematical or astronomical character of the heavenly bodies, nor . . . to the real rational or spiritual world, but to a creature-life, which can groan and earnestly expect."⁵³ Murray in contrast said that while "*Mankind in general* must be excluded" the passage refers to all of the "non-rational creation, animate and inanimate," and the "material heavens and earth."⁵⁴ If mankind is excluded, then there is "personification here"⁵⁵ because "the creation waits in eager expectation."

How "creation" is understood will of course delimit the meaning of creation's "bondage to decay" or "slavery to corruption." The narrow interpretation of "creation" as referring to creatures would permit "corruption" and "decay" to include either man's depravity, or creature mortality with bodily decay, or both. The wider interpretation of "creation" would permit the inclusion as well of cosmic entropy.

Despite this latitude derived from the word "creation" per se, to infer fall-caused creature mortality from Rom 8:20–21 is incorrect. First, even if "decay" implies creature mortality (to be challenged in what follows) it

⁵¹ Lange, *Romans* 270.

⁵² *Ibid.* 269.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 270.

⁵⁴ Murray, *Epistle* 302 (italics his).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

is presumptuous to assert that the creation was “subjected” to creature mortality at the fall rather than “subjected” (given that attribute) at the beginning as a feature of man’s probationary environment.

Second, the creation’s “bondage” cannot mean slavery to itself. If upon the fall creation was given the inherent properties of entropic decay and creature mortality, how is “bondage” or “slavery” to be understood? Creation cannot be enslaved to its own properties—that is, forced against its own will to follow its own nature. Such a notion is logically impossible. To be enslaved, creation must be abused from without itself by a slave driver—namely, man. If in response one argues that creation’s personification here involves a looseness in Paul’s conceptual precision, or at least in his expression, then basing fall-induced creature mortality on the passage is overextended. In this connection, note that “its” of v. 21, which appears in several translations and which might be taken to point to decay of creation per se rather than of man, is not represented in the Greek text.

Furthermore creation, being impersonal, cannot fully be a slave to anything. Only man, a moral creature, is capable of knowing the frustration of a divided nature. As Paul said in Rom 7:23: “I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.”

Finally, it cannot be proven that “decay” or “corruption” must point unambiguously to death and dissolution of animals. Plants were already subject to death and dissolution before the fall. The passage here does not distinguish plants from animals when speaking of “decay.” Creation’s “decay” seems to be taken as quite general. If so, how can the passage be forced to focus only on creaturely decay?

In addition the phrase “bondage to decay” follows as a parallel to the phrase “subjected to vanity.” In v. 20 the creation was subjected to vanity (futility, frustration, darkened emptiness). The word “vanity,” as used by Paul elsewhere in Eph 4:17, refers to a property of man, not of nature.⁵⁶ The use of “vanity” thus indicates that “decay” should be understood also to refer to man. Calvin understood the text’s use of “corruption” in the context of wickedness, linked to depravity,⁵⁷ but also in terms of biological or physical disintegration.⁵⁸ “Corruption” in Scripture may have either moral or physical connotations. The word for “decay” or “corruption” is applied in 2 Pet 2:12 both to brute beasts, who by their nature are born for capture and corruption, and to man, who blasphemes and in his corruption will perish (be corrupted). Peter here indicates that beasts are by nature mortal and uses their physical decay as a metaphor for man’s spiritual depravity. Paul’s use of the word “decay” in Rom 8:21 may therefore be seen as internally ambiguous. In the larger context, however, it points to man’s depravity and ultimate destruction unless redeemed. The

⁵⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield (*Romans: A Shorter Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985] 196) mentions various interpretations of “vanity” that have been advanced in the literature.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.152.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 1.156.

phrase in v. 21 might therefore be read as “slavery to (our) corruption” or “bondage to (our) decay.”

Therefore on various grounds the vanity to which creation is subjected is the depravity of man with its sinful consequences. As children of God we are called to reverse the enslavement of creation to sin by exercising Spirit-led dominion in order to reveal God’s glory in and against the backdrop of nature (Rom 8:18). For this “the creation waits in eager expectation” (8:19).

One distinct component of creation’s liberation by Spirit-filled Christians is the dispatch of demons. When Adam fell he lost spiritual authority over them, which was later restored to the redeemed of mankind by Christ. Just as Jesus delivered the demon-possessed and controlled where demons could go (e.g. to the pigs in Mark 5:11), so Christians by the Holy Spirit can rid their immediate environment of demons and pacify wild animals made ferocious by demon possession (see Dan 6:22).

Without doubt the fullness of creation’s liberation will not be accomplished until the resurrection, when Christians will enjoy “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23) and when sin will be defeated. In part creation’s liberation is yet future, just as the kingdom of God is not yet fully manifested. The redeemed in Christ are already loosed, however, and by God’s calling are to loose the creation from its bondage to decay to the extent possible in this age.

Those who argue otherwise from Romans 8, saying that decay means both animal death and entropy increases, ignore the context of the chapter, the distinction between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh.⁵⁹

8. *Food supply and death.* The absence of pre-fall animal death has also been argued from God’s designation of food supplies.⁶⁰ For both man and beast Gen 1:29–30 provides green plants for food. After the flood, Noah and his relatives are also given beasts, birds, ground creatures and fish as food to eat. “Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (9:3). It has therefore been argued that man and animal were both vegetarian before the fall and, by extension, that no animal death occurred before the fall.

This argument is not as strong as first appears. The focus in 1:29–30 is on man’s needs, not on those of animals, since otherwise green plants would have been given to the beasts in 1:24. Man is here specifically given seed-plants and seed-fruits, while other creatures are given, in contrast, herbage or grass in general. The prescription taken as a whole recognizes the dependence of the animal kingdom upon the plant kingdom. It is an instruction as to the liberal grant of God’s providence, not necessarily a restriction on what may be eaten.⁶¹ Kidner believes that Gen 1:29–30 “should not be pressed to mean that all (animals) were once herbivorous,

⁵⁹ Whitcomb and Morris, *Genesis Flood* 459; Morris, *Biblical Basis* 78, 123, 196–197, 316; note that Morris nevertheless entitles one chapter “The Life of the Flesh.”

⁶⁰ Whitcomb and Morris, *Genesis Flood* 461–464.

⁶¹ MacDonald, *Biblical Doctrine* 294–295.

any more than to mean that all plants were equally edible to all. It is a generalization⁶² about creaturely dependence on vegetation. Lambert is also cautious.⁶³ Although he believes that man and animals were originally vegetarian, he allows that for animals the Biblical evidence is not sufficient to give certainty. He also asks: If animals turned predator at the fall, why was Adam not warned of this danger upon banishment from Eden? By contrast Adam was warned only of the increase of his toil and of a change in his plant environment.

A collation of Gen 1:29–30 with 9:3 to support fall-imposed animal death is puzzling because the fall preceded the flood by at least a millennium or two. If the fall brought on animal death, why was the grant to eat animals delayed until the flood? Note that pre-flood Abel in 4:4 brought animal offerings, suggesting that his diet contained meat. Also, 9:3 grants meat to man but curiously omits mention of diets of animals. It seems that man's consumption of animals was expanded after the flood for some other reason—perhaps to overcome a harsher environment, or to typically remind man of his own mortality and need of salvation. The fall, it is true, eventually precipitated the flood, but nothing in Genesis 9 blames all animal death directly on the fall.

9. *The curses omitted marine life.* When God said in Gen 8:21 that he would not again curse the ground on account of men and would never again destroy all living creatures, marine life was omitted. According to 6:7, 17–20; 7:21–23 the curse of the flood included only terrestrial creatures. In a generally parallel fashion the curse in Genesis 3 mentioned only the ground and its vegetation, not sea life. Note the omission of marine life from both prescriptions, an omission that is both curious and significant. It speaks first of a terrestrial, not marine, focus for all of Genesis 1–11 (except for the flood), as could be expected for people of arid lands. Therefore other features of Genesis 1–11 could legitimately be interpreted from a terrestrial focus. Second, marine creatures at creation could be seen as including carnivores. The exclusion of sea life from both curses at least permits the possibility of marine animal death as part of the original created order.

From all the above arguments it is concluded that Scripture does not require that the curse of Gen 3:17 initiated animal death.

10. *Death contrasted with spiritual life.* The curse did, however, bring the death of Adam and his descendants. This death is discussed by Paul with an emphasis on a distinction between earthliness and heavenly nature. In 1 Cor 15:21 (discussed earlier) Paul contrasts death with resurrection. The distinction between earthly and heavenly is continued in vv. 47–50:

⁶² Kidner, *Genesis* 52. He seems to ignore the distinctions of plant types recognized by MacDonald.

⁶³ G. R. Lambert, "Was the Pre-Flood Animal Kingdom Vegetarian?", *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 20 (September 1983) 88.

"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again . . . of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8). 2 Corinthians 3:17 concludes a discourse on the glory of the new covenant by emphasizing its origin in the Spirit and by affirming that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." The nature of death introduced into the world because of Adam is therefore primarily a spiritual matter. The claim that animal death derived from the fall is not only incorrect but also involves a mistaken emphasis on the physical as opposed to the spiritual.

11. *Higher versus lower animals.* The view maintaining no physical decay or death before the fall is also argued by Morris via a distinction between sentient and nonsentient life. He asserts: "No death of sentient life, either animal or human, was intended in God's original creation."⁶⁴ This appears to be a bogus distinction for the issue at hand. It is imprecise, at least, because Scripture provides no basis for a definition of "sentient."

One might arbitrarily draw a line between higher and lower animals (without Scriptural support) and argue that only the higher animals were free from death in the pre-fall world. The ecologist, however, would generally regard such an argument as arbitrary in the extreme, given existing ecological relationships and animal anatomy and function. Furthermore even Scripture intimates that predator-prey relationships are part of the created order. In Job 38-41 God mentions them often, with no hint that they are a corruption of his original intent.⁶⁵ Rather, he extols them as part of his wisdom. Psalm 104:21, sometimes regarded as a creation hymn, also mentions that "young lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God."

It must be added as well that an examination of the biological world forces innumerable questions to the fore, all based on obvious predator-prey relationships. Original animal immortality can hardly be maintained without presuming vast anatomical, behavioral and ecological changes in animals at the time of the fall. Scripture is fully silent on such changes, suggesting that there were none. Genesis 3:18-19 mentions only vegetative changes.

IV. CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of deciding in favor of original animal immortality are enormous. The main one is the view that the fossil deposits of the geologic record, which preserve a history of animal death, must have occurred in their entirety after the fall of man. Only one post-fall Scriptural passage can encompass such an immense record, and that is the account of Noah's flood. Pre-fall animal immortality is coupled by its advocates with the fossil death record and a Scripturally argued young-earth position to

⁶⁴ Morris, *Biblical Basis* 196.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Job 38:39-40; 39:14-15 (accidental death), 30.

produce the view known as flood geology. In this view, all or nearly all the world's present-day fossil and stratigraphic sequences were deposited during and soon after Noah's flood.

By contrast, those who reject original animal immortality will usually be found also rejecting young-earth age and consequently rejecting flood geology.

In addition to reasoning from Scripture in favor of original animal immortality and flood geology, Morris rationalizes that evolution, described by Tennyson as "Nature, red in tooth and claw,"⁶⁶ is a "heartless process" inconsistent with a loving God. He "could never be guilty of such a cruel and pointless charade as this!"⁶⁷ For Morris, millions of years of animal death constitute "tortuous aeons."⁶⁸

In response: Eons of death may be offensive, but that is hardly grounds for contrary belief. After all, human death itself is extremely offensive, described in Scripture as an enemy, but it still is a fact. We cannot protest; God, after all, pronounced the death sentence. But he also sent his Son as our Redeemer.

To conclude that animals were mortal from their creation onward must not be considered an affirmation of general evolution or of old-earth age. These and many other related questions have to be carefully explored on an individual basis from both Scripture and nature.

V. SUMMARY

The issue of original animal immortality has been re-examined from a primarily Scriptural base. The context is human death and its cause in the fall of man and the Edenic curse on the ground. The following premises were developed: Creation was transitory from the beginning; Adam's original immortality was not by nature but by access to the tree of life, which was never offered to animals; death immediately caused by sin spread to men only; the lion-lamb peace of Isaiah 11 and 65 is not strictly "postdictive" of Eden nor predictive of a future absence of creature death; man is the secondary cause of creation's bondage to decay; and this bondage is to be in part released by Christians, as children of God, living life in the Spirit. The conclusion is that Scripture does not demand the absence of animal death before the fall. The consequence of concluding otherwise leads to flood geology.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Selected Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson* (ed. M. H. Nicolson; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924) 173.

⁶⁷ Morris, *Biblical Basis* 114.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 193.

⁶⁹ I thank Joseph N. Kickasola, John Rea, and J. Rodman Williams for review of the manuscript, and Barbara Bilyk for secretarial assistance.