

The Fall: a cosmic catastrophe— Hugh Ross’s errors on plant death in the Bible

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A plain reading of the Bible explains the origin of death and suffering as the result of Adam’s Fall, while this is an insuperable problem for all old-earth compromise views. Even if only human death were considered, fossils of undoubted *Homo sapiens* are ‘dated’, by methods that old-earthers accept, as far older than any possible biblical date for Adam. There are also baneful consequences to the status of the Australian Aborigines if they really have been in Australia for 40 ka.

While Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 are referring explicitly to human death, the Bible also states that animal death is also the result of the Fall, while the original vegetarian condition will be restored in the future. Yet the fossil record is full of death, disease and suffering of animals, and long-agers date these fossils long before man appeared. By contrast, plants are shown not to die in the biblical sense.

Arguments by leading progressive creationist, Hugh Ross, are fallacious on biblical grounds, and are even inadvertently undermined by fellow long-agers.

Creation/Fall/Redemption

Dr Hugh Ross is well known for adding billions of years to the Bible, claiming that the creation days were long ages. His view is often called progressive creationism. However, biblical creationists have long pointed out a major problem for this view—that the Bible teaches that death came through sin. Indeed this is foundational to the gospel. But if millions of years are real, then the fossil record must predate sin. But fossils are the remains of dead creatures—therefore, millions of years entails that death predates sin, which in turn entails that death is not the result of sin. This makes God the author of gratuitous death and suffering instead of the righteous Judge who justly enacted punishment for sin.

This also has baneful consequences for the gospel. Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 clearly teach

that human death came because of the Fall. The latter even contrasts the death of the first Adam with the Resurrection from the dead by the Last Adam, Jesus.

This is a real problem for Ross’s view, because according to dating methods he accepts, there are undoubted human fossils ‘older’ than his date for Adam. And of course, fossilization requires death!¹

Ross’ stand has been further brought into question with the recent redating of two partial skulls of *Homo sapiens* that were unearthed in 1967 near the Omo River in southwestern Ethiopia. Radiometric dating (which Ross fully supports) has now placed them at 195,000 years ago:

⁴⁰Ar/³⁹Ar ages on feldspar crystals from pumice clasts within a tuff in Member I below the hominid levels place an older limit of 198 ± 14 ka (weighted mean age 196 ± 2 ka) on the hominids. ... Our preferred estimate of the age of the Kibish hominids is 195 ± 5 ka, making them the earliest well-dated anatomically modern humans yet described.²

Omo I has always been viewed as thoroughly modern in appearance. And although Omo II, which consists of just a skull with no face, has more primitive features, Fleagle maintains that it is still best assigned to *H. sapiens*, particularly as both skeletons are now thought to be the same age.³

So undoubtedly modern humans are dated—by methods that Ross upholds—to be far older than his date for Adam. We hope this will open his eyes to the fallacy of long-age ‘dating’ and to the unshakeable truth of the biblical timescale.⁴

There are also baneful consequences of Ross’s view for the Australian Aborigines. According to radiometric dating, they are older than the date he gives for the Flood, and even his dates for Adam allow the possibility that he was younger than the Aborigines. This has the horrifying implication that the Aborigines are not human!

Cosmic scope of the Fall

Ross’s problems don’t end there. God gave Adam dominion over creation, so when Adam fell, the whole creation suffered. Romans 8:18–25 teaches that the ‘whole creation’ is groaning in pain, because it was ‘subjected to futility’. The late New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, then Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, affirms that this passage is indeed speaking of the Curse which fell on the whole creation—the entire universe—as a result of the Fall.⁵ Bruce also considered who ‘subjected the creation to futility’ and concluded that the text indicated that it was ‘most probably God’, and most unlikely that other commentators could be right when they suggested Satan or Adam.⁶

Another expert commentator on Romans, New Testament scholar C.E.B. Cranfield, likewise made it very clear that ‘creation’ in Romans 8:19–20 was universal: ‘the sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and

inanimate'.⁵ Further, Cranfield explicitly states '[t]here is little doubt that Paul has in mind the judgment related in Genesis 3:17–19, which includes (v. 17) the words “cursed is the ground for thy sake”’,⁷ thus relating the Fall to the creation outside mankind as well.⁸

Yet another commentator on Romans 1–8, James Dunn, wrote:

‘The point Paul is presumably making, through somewhat obscure language, is that God followed the logic of his purposed subjecting of creation to man by subjecting it yet further in consequence of man’s fall, so that it might serve as an appropriate context for fallen man; a futile world to engage the futile mind of man. By describing creation’s subjection as “unwilling” Paul maintains the personification of the previous verse. There is an out-of-sortedness, a disjointedness about the created order which makes it a suitable habitation for man at odds with his creator.’⁹

Ross supporter Norman Geisler also affirmed that the Fall was a cosmic disaster. And more recently, Chuck Colson and Nancy Pearcey gave a good account of the biblical teaching of the origin of death and suffering in their book, *How Now Shall We Live?*¹⁰

‘God is good, and the original creation was good [Genesis 1:31 actually says ‘very good’]. God is not the author of evil. This is a crucial element of Christian teaching ... there would also be no basis for fighting against injustice and oppression, against cruelty and corruption, for these, too, would be reflections of God’s own nature, and, therefore, inherent in the world as he created it.

‘... Redemption means the restoration and fulfillment of God’s original purposes’ [p.194].

‘The consequences of sin affect the very order of the universe itself. ... the Fall affects all of nature ... their rebellion injected disorder into all of creation’ [p. 197].

‘Every part of God’s handiwork was marred by the human mutiny ... At the Fall, every part of creation was plunged into the chaos of sin, and every part cries out for redemption. Only the Christian worldview keeps these two truths in balance: the radical destruction caused by sin and the hope of restoration to the original created goodness’ [p.198].¹⁰

Mr Colson believes in long ages, so he evidently doesn’t see the implication of what he is writing (Mrs Pearcey certainly used to be a YEC, since she wrote for the *Bible Science Newsletter*, and even for *Creation* magazine,¹¹ but seems low-key on the issue now). That is, the fossil record shows the very effects of chaos, cruelty and corruption they say came from the Fall, and wasn’t part of the good creation. Therefore, the fossil record must have come after the Fall, which rules out millions of years. Instead, the globe-covering Flood of Noah’s time would

explain many of the massive fossil deposits.¹²

Animal death and the Fall

Part of this creation is the animal kingdom, so this must also have suffered, and the fossil record is stark testimony to that. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that animals were not always being destroyed by cataclysms, and were not always tearing each other to pieces.

This is shown by the diets that God originally instituted. Gen. 1:29–30 clearly teaches that animals and people were both created vegetarian. As pointed out in my exposé of Ross’s book, *The Genesis Question*,¹³ Dr Ross accepts that these verses teach *human* vegetarianism before the Fall, but he is inconsistent in denying the original *animal* vegetarianism taught in exactly the same words in exactly the same context.

Further, even one of Dr Ross’s supporters, apologist Dr Norman Geisler, recognizes this.¹⁴ We have documented that Basil the Great, John Calvin and John Wesley also understood Genesis 1:29–30 as teaching that animals were all created vegetarian. So it’s Ross’s view that is the aberration.

Another strong case against carnivory being part of the original creation, also pointed out by Geisler, comes from Isaiah. Isaiah 11:6–9 and 65:25 prophecy that there will be a time in the future with no bloodshed in the animal kingdom. These are famous passages about a lion and calf, wolf and lamb, and a vegetarian lion and a harmless viper. Significantly, both passages close with indications that this reflects a more ideal world and the current world does not: ‘They shall not hurt or destroy ...’ and ‘They shall do no evil or harm ...’.⁶ These indicate that hurting, harming and destroying animal life would not have been part of a ‘very good’ creation. Commentators such as Dr Alec Motyer, Principal of Trinity College, Bristol, have noted that these passages are a partial restoration to what it was like in Eden:

‘There is an “Edenic” element in Isaiah’s thinking (see on 2:4b) ... the life of nature itself is transformed. Verses 6–8 offer three facets of the renewed creation and verse 9 is a concluding summary. First, in verse 6 there is the reconciliation of old hostilities, the allaying of old fears; predators (*wolf, leopard, lion*) and prey (*lamb, goat, calf, yearling*) are reconciled. So secure is this peace that a youngster can exercise the dominion originally given to humankind. Secondly, in verse 7 there is a change of nature within the beasts themselves: *cow* and *bear* eat the same food, as do *lion* and *ox*. There is also a change in the very order of things itself: the herbivorous nature of all the creatures points to Eden restored (Gn. 1:29–30). Thirdly, in verse 8 the curse is removed. The enmity between the woman’s seed and the serpent is gone (Gn. 3:15ab). *Infant* and “weaned child” have nothing to fear from *cobra*

and *viper*. Finally, in verse 9 the coming Eden is Mount Zion—a Zion which fills the whole earth. Peace (9a), holiness (9b), and “knowing the Lord” (9c) pervades all.¹⁵

The problem for *all* long-age views is that the fossil record demonstrates carnivory, and Ross dates this to millions of years before the Fall. But this contradicts the clear biblical teaching that *animals were not eating each other before the Fall*. Geisler has also completely missed this point, so at least Ross is being more consistent when he simply denies that animals were created vegetarian, the way the Bible and Geisler say they were.

What do creationists mean by ‘no death before the Fall’?

Many anti-creationists knock down a straw man by simplistically attacking a ‘no death before sin’ statement out of context. That is, they argue that plants and individual cells died before the Fall, e.g. when animals ate plants.

However, creationists have often pointed out that ‘no death before sin’ applies to what the *Bible* calls death, which is *not* always the way modern biologists use it. The Bible doesn’t talk about plants dying, even though modern biologists do. Rather, the Bible talks about plants *withering*, for example.

What is the difference? Answer: the creatures affected by death were those the Bible calls *nephesh chayyâh*. When it refers to man, it is often translated ‘living soul’, but, of other creatures, including fish, it is often translated ‘living creature’. However, it is *never applied* to plants or invertebrates. Therefore, there is a qualitative difference between the deaths of the (vertebrate) animals called *nephesh chayyâh* and plant death. This is further supported by the account of the Flood and Ark. The living creatures (*nephesh chayyâh*) intentionally rescued on the Ark did not include plants (or invertebrates).¹⁶ In any case, it should be obvious that plants don’t experience suffering or pain as animals do. But Ross amazingly has claimed:

‘But even plants suffer when they are eaten. They experience bleeding, bruising, scarring and death. Why is the suffering of plants acceptable and not that of animals?’¹⁷

Is Ross serious? Plants don’t have a brain to interpret tissue damage as pain.

Do plants ‘die’ in the biblical sense?

In *The Genesis Question*,¹⁸ Ross further tries to justify applying ‘death’ to plants in the biblical sense. He appears to believe that if he can prove that plants die in the same sense as animals, then he will have undermined the creationist case against animal death before the Fall.

‘And by the way, botanists did not originate the claim that plants experience life and death. The Bible said so first’ (p. 100).

He tried to back this up in note 24, p. 125, with the passages Exodus 10:12–17, Job 14:8–10, Psalm 37:2, Matthew 6:28, 30 and John 15:6. Let’s analyze these in turn:

Ex 10:17 Pharaoh, after locusts destroyed the crops, says: ‘Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this *death* from me.’

Note first that this is an *uninspired request from the pagan Pharaoh*. Note that the Bible does not endorse everyone it quotes or every action it records. Biblical inerrancy requires only that people are reported accurately, not that the people are correct. E.g. Psalm 14:1 accurately reports a fool saying something false: ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”’ Job 2:9 accurately reports Job’s wife saying, ‘Curse God and die,’ but clearly doesn’t endorse such a thing!

Even more importantly, the results undermine Ross’s claim anyway. Note that Pharaoh says ‘remove this death from me’, and the result was *not* restoration of the crops (which is the only thing that would support Ross’s claim), but removal of the *locusts*.

Ex. 10:19 ‘And the LORD turned the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea. Not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt.’

So the *locusts* were the ones described as ‘death’, i.e. the *agent of death*, since human and livestock death is a sure result of the destruction of the crops.

Job 14:8–10 ‘Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put out branches like a young plant. But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?’

But this passage does not vindicate Ross’s views on plant death, because clearly this plant is not even dead in the modern biological sense! After all, it can sprout branches again if only there is water available. This passage actually *contrasts* this ‘death’ with man’s physical death, which is permanent (until the final Resurrection).

Psalm 37:2 ‘For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.’

This is the sort of thing we pointed out—the Bible describes plants as fading and withering, *not dying*.

Matthew 6:28, 30 (Jesus) ‘And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ... If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?’

There is nothing about living or dying here. The NASB has ‘which is *alive* today’, but ‘alive’ is in italics to indicate that it has been added by the translators to make

sense (in their opinion) and wasn't in the original language. It is folly to derive biblical doctrine from the insertions of translators.

John 15:6 'If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.'

Once again, plants are said to wither. None of these cases support Ross's claim.

Ross's debate tactics

Dr Ross debated AiG's astrophysicist Dr Jason Lisle in December 2004.¹⁹ The moderator, Dr Bob Grant, had already hosted Dr Ross on his show by himself (and was to do so again), and Dr Grant seems to be under the same misapprehension:

'Now, in one curious point to me, Dr Lisle if I may ask the question, the idea that food was being consumed or that there was some kind of end of life process for plant or vegetation prior to the fall. That is a thought or an idea introduced into this conversation that perhaps you could respond to that directly.'

Dr Lisle responded

'Of course. And Ross's mistake here was taking the scientific definition for death and assuming that that's the same as the biblical definition for life and death. And they're not the same, you see. In science life is defined in a particular way, but according to Scripture, plants are not alive. The Hebrew word *nephesh chayyâh*—it's referring to living souls, and the Bible doesn't apply that to plants. Plants you can think of as biological machines. They're not alive in a biblical sense, animals are and human beings are.'

Ross replied

'Well, Jason, I've refuted that in a thing that's up on our Reasons.org website where I list a number of passages in the Old Testament where plants are referred to as experiencing life and death. And the interesting thing is that the identical word used to refer to the life and death of humans are also those words used in that context.'

However, as shown above, there is no refutation in these passages. Dr Ross failed to address Dr Lisle's point that plants are *not nephesh chayyâh*, also shown above. Sadly, Ross continued to ignore this point throughout the debate, and instead proceeded with:

'Well right and an answer to Isaac [a caller], I mean you really want to look at the entire Bible before you decide what the Bible calls living or dead. For example you can go to Exodus 3–10 where it's talking about the plagues that are poured



Photo by M. Mitchell <www.sxc.hu>

Among the nephesh chayyâh (living creatures) God made in Creation Week are the fish on Day 5 (Genesis 1:20–23). There was no death of any nephesh chayyâh before Adam sinned, so the above dead stingray could never have been found on an Edenic beach.

down upon Egypt, and there it makes it quite clear that Scripture is saying that plants do experience life and death in the same way the soulish animals do, in the same way that human beings do.'

Ross commits the elephant hurling fallacy here, giving the impression of weighty evidence by citing *eight* chapters that allegedly support his case. It is a most unfair debating tactic, since under the time constraints it is impossible to skim through all this to find out what on earth he was talking about. Also, it did not address what Dr Lisle actually argued about plants not being *nephesh chayyâh*. Instead, Dr Ross implies that there are many references to plant death in these chapters of Exodus. Certainly, the Hebrew for die/death (*mût/mavet*) is used a number of times in these chapters:

Ex 4:19 'for all the men are *dead* which sought your life.'

Ex 4:24 'the LORD met him [Moses], and sought to *kill* him.'

Ex 7:18 'And the fish that is in the river shall *die*'

Ex 7:21 'And the fish that *was* in the river *died*'

Ex 8:13 'the frogs *died*'

Ex 8:13 'And the LORD did according to the word of Moses. The frogs *died* out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields.'

Ex 9:4 'But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall *die*.'

Ex 9:6 'All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel *died*.'

Ex 9:7 'And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was *dead*.'

Ex 9:19 ‘for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will *die* when the hail falls on them.’

Ex 10:17 (Pharaoh after locusts destroyed crops) ‘Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this *death* from me.’

Ex 10:28 ‘Then Pharaoh said to [Moses], “Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall *die*.”’

However in all these chapters, all but one of these clearly refer to people, livestock, frogs and fish, all *nephesh chayyâh*. The only exception that *might* be taken as referring to plant death is Ex 10:17. So far from wide application of ‘death’ to plants in the chapters he cites, Ross’s case is based solely on a *single* plea from a *pagan*. And as shown above, even this one does not apply the word ‘death’ to plants.

Conclusion

Despite what many people think, the main issue for creation is not the length of creation days or the age of the earth. Rather, the issue is what our *authority* is—is it God’s written Word, the Bible, or man’s fallible opinions of the history of Earth and life on it? And if we use exegesis, i.e. reading things out of the Bible, then we can only find normal-length creation days. It is only with eisegesis, i.e. reading secular long-age ideas into the Bible, that anyone can invent long-age creation ‘days’.

And from the Bible, we learn that there was no death of any *nephesh chayyâh* before sin—both humans and animals ate plants, which do not die in the biblical sense. Therefore any animal or human fossils must have come after sin. And the Bible spends three whole chapters explaining a watery cataclysm that would explain this—the globe-covering Flood of Noah’s day.

Therefore the young-earth is *not* the primary focus. Rather it is a *corollary* of biblical authority—a deduction from the propositional revelation of normal-length creation days and death caused by sin. Long-age views undermine this sin-death causality, and thus have baneful consequences for biblical authority and indeed the gospel. This is why I wrote *Refuting Compromise*.²⁰ Indeed, the first chapter is on the importance of the right authority, and chapter 6 has much detail on the origin of death and suffering because of sin.

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