

No straight answers on animal death before the Fall

Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering

Ronald E. Osborn

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Lita Cosner

For biblical creationists, a key argument against adding a billions-of-years timescale to Scripture has always been the problem of animal death and suffering preceding sin. If death is a consequence of sin—including animal death and human death—then how does the old-earth Christian explain the fossil record, which is a record of death they would place before any possible existence of Adam?

Because this is an issue many feel old-earth Christians do not address sufficiently, one might eagerly anticipate what Ronald Osborn has to say in *Death Before the Fall*. However, we aren't allowed to get far before he basically abandons any search for an answer to this admitted problem:

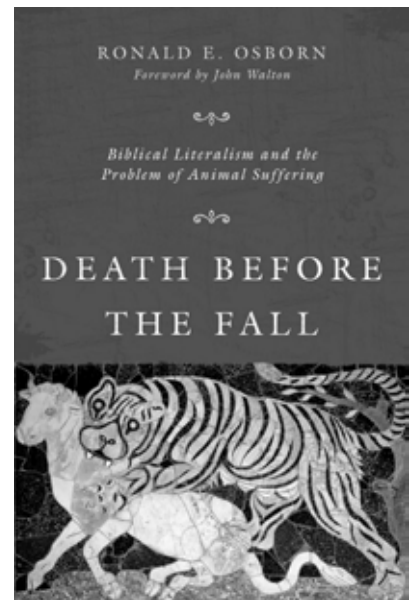
“Readers should be fairly warned from the outset that I offer few confident answers to the problem of animal suffering in the manner of some Christian apologists. Indeed, I usually find such ‘answers’ to be morally repellent in the face of the challenges, which I take to be insoluble this side of the parousia (and quite possibly the other side of the parousia as well). Nevertheless, it would be just as morally irresponsible to abandon the search for clues to the theodicy dilemma from a foregone conclusion that the search

can yield no answers. The ideas presented in these pages are offered in an open-ended, exploratory form based on the belief that partial answers do exist” (p. 20).

One of the most *disappointing* things about this book was the refusal to take any clear stand on the very issue that was the title of the book. But it can also be taken as a tacit admission that from the old-earth standpoint, no answer *exists* to this troubling question.

Discussing anything but the topic

It takes Osborn a while to discuss anything regarding the issue of animal suffering and death before the Fall. First, he attacks the idea of biblical creation on several fronts. In Chapter 1, he argues that Scripture can be read to allow for progressive creation or theistic evolution. He says, “We are left entirely free to think that the Creator might be delighted to see his creation multiply not only in number but also in kind” (p. 26), and “God desires a world that will in some sense be free from his direct control, and the creation is in certain ways marked from the very first moment by the presence of freedom” (p. 27). There is no exegetical argument, particularly for the latter claim, and one is tempted to conclude that no serious exegesis with that conclusion is possible. Indeed, even the most cursory survey of the biblical texts about how God interacts with His creation seems to show that God is glorified by His complete knowledge and control over the animal kingdom. He feeds the birds (Matthew 6:26) and knows when even one falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29).



Osborn also claims that the God's appraisal of His creation as ‘very good’ (*tov me'od*) indicates that it was less than perfect, because the same term is used of Rebekah, meaning ‘very beautiful’, as well as of the Promised Land, both of which fell short of perfection. However, in the specific context of the creation narrative, we have the Creator's own appraisal of His work—which is different from the narrator's appraisal of Rebekah's beauty, not intending to say anything about *moral* perfection. And *tov me'od* culminates six other statements that God's creative work has been *tov*; it is clear that Scripture intends to present a perfect creation completely in line with God's will. If there was any death and suffering, it would have to have been death and suffering that God intentionally created and willed, which *would* create a very real theodicy problem.

In Chapter 2, Osborn argues that biblical creation is a relatively new phenomenon. It's true that the specialized area of *apologetics* devoted to defending the biblical doctrine of creation and bringing the relevant scientific facts to bear on the topic is a fairly recent development. However, there is a long line of biblical interpreters, theologians, and scientists



Figure 1. Old-earth creationists had no good explanation for the death and suffering of creatures that they say lived long before Adam was created.

who have believed and defended the biblical doctrine of creation. Indeed, it could be argued that creation apologetics is the logical outgrowth of the same sort of belief in biblical creation in a context where the doctrine is being specifically attacked and undermined in the church. The lack of a specialized area of creation apologetics in the early church should therefore be taken as evidence of the universality of belief in creation—it simply wasn't even debated.

In Chapter 3, Osborn criticizes CMI in particular for using the James Barr quote, which claims that he (Barr) knew of no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who did not believe Genesis intended to portray a 6-day creation. First, Osborn claims that we do not cite it correctly and it is hard to find. In fact, CMI has provided more information to anyone who has ever asked for it,¹ and we received a copy from the original recipient of the letter with permission to reuse it. But, furthermore, Osborn claims that Barr was wrong, and cites Walter Brueggemann as a scholar of whom Barr should have been aware. There is no indication he wasn't—though Brueggemann was not, and has not since been, a professor at a 'world-class university'.

Barr's statement only covered a narrow, elite group of scholars, and no one has been able to bring up a counterexample to prove Barr wrong.

Osborn also brings up tired arguments about Adam having been created before plants according to Genesis 2 and that the events of Day 6 requiring a long period of time. He certainly was able to cite CMI to criticize the use of

Barr's letter; he might have done some further research in creation literature to find that we have already exhaustively addressed these arguments. What he does not bring up is that the Apostle Paul believed the Genesis account of Day 6, as shown when he said, "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Timothy 2:13).

In Chapter 4, Osborn argues that creation is bad science, because it will not admit evidence against the paradigm. But that could be said about evolution just as easily. The problem with this criticism is that when we are dealing with historical science, what we believe happened in the past plays a large role in how we interpret the evidence. In Chapter 5, Osborn invokes Newton and Boyle as scientists who championed methodological naturalism. Most creation scientists would agree that when it comes to operational science, methodological naturalism is appropriate (answering "God made it that way", while true, is not a *sufficient* answer when we are dealing with operational science—that does not mean that there are not questions of *historical* science which demand supernatural answers).

In Chapter 6, Osborn comes very close to claiming that creationists take

the Bible literally because they are psychologically disturbed. He gives some psychological indicators, then summarizes, "We can now see that fundamentalism, in its often uncompromising literalistic stance toward Genesis, has as much to do with the peculiar psychological makeup of individuals as it does with abstract theological reasoning" (p. 82). It takes breathtaking chutzpah to associate an entire movement with psychological problems, though it does take a bit of the burden off one to prove one's point if you can claim the other person is mentally unstable.

But then, in Chapter 7, Osborn takes it a step further and associates biblical creation with Gnosticism: "In their zeal to define others out of the life of the Christian faith ..., fundamentalist creationists themselves can quickly come to exhibit all the marks of a very ancient heresy" (p. 86). One might notice that, in his zeal to discredit creationists, he has argued himself into a veritable bear trap of an argument. Ancient Gnostics believed that the Demiurge, an evil lower god, created the world, and physical matter was inherently bad. Spirit was seen to be inherently good, and the goal of the Gnostics was to escape the physical world. Creationists believe that God created the world good—therefore physical matter was originally 'very good'. This has been marred *but not obliterated* by the Fall—God Himself became incarnate as an actual human—and God's plan is to *restore* the created world, not simply destroy it. The future new heavens and earth Christians look forward to is a *physical* restored creation. There is simply nothing Gnosticism and biblical creationists have in common, and Osborn loses even more credibility with this argument.

In Chapter 8, Osborn argues that certain theologians interpreted Genesis figuratively. He gives four examples: Barth, Calvin, Augustine, and

Maimonides. Barth was a modern neo-Orthodox theologian who denied biblical inerrancy, and we should feel very free to say he was wrong. Calvin and Augustine were biblical creationists, as shown in *Refuting Compromise*.² And Maimonides was a medieval Jew who was influenced more by antibiblical Jewish tradition (e.g. the Muslim Avicenna and the Greek Aristotle) than by the Scriptures themselves; why would a Bible-believing Christian go to a Jew who rejected Christ to learn about the Scriptures, which we believe pointed to Him?

In Chapter 9, Osborn criticizes those who expect professors at Christian colleges to teach according to a statement of faith that includes creation. He advocates allowing for ‘loyal dissent’ regarding theistic evolution and old-earth views. However, open theists

and Unitarians could also claim ‘loyal dissent’—who decides what the difference is between heterodoxy and ‘loyal dissent’? CMI has always acknowledged differences between Christians that result from different readings of Scripture—like Calvinism vs Arminianism, for example, where both sides hold Scripture to be inerrant and authoritative, but *interpret* it differently—and differences that result from different *authorities*. For instance, it is impossible to interpret Scripture itself as speaking about billions of years; one has to import that idea from modern science. This, in effect, makes science the *authority* over Scripture. This is standard creationist argument, and it would have been nice to see Osborn interact with it, or even acknowledge it.³ It is one thing to appeal to different

philosophical views and advocate for an openness where all sorts of differences are accepted as ‘loyal dissent’, but quite another when someone is ‘dissenting’ against Scripture’s clear testimony; that has never been accepted as a good thing by Christians.

There are 14 chapters in Osborn’s book, and 179 pages of text, not counting the endnotes. So it is significant that we arrive at Chapter 10 and page 126 before Osborn gets around to actually discussing what was supposed to be the subject of his book. He claims that evolution actually solves the theodicy problem of animal suffering “albeit through

the elimination of the Subject who makes the problem a moral problem as such” (p. 126). He argues:

“We must confront the magnitude of animal suffering and death occurring every instant of every day, which evolutionary theory did not create but which it at least has the theological advantage of explaining in a way that does not directly attribute the harshest facts of nature to God’s wrathful response to human sin” (p. 127).

“It is time that biblical literalists at least candidly acknowledge that the challenges they face are not only scientific but theological and moral as well, and that these problems are no less great for them than for process creationists or theistic evolutionists” (p. 128).

The response of the biblical creationist is simple: God created the world, so He has the right to demand obedience of His creatures. When Adam rebelled against God, His response showed the utterly serious and disastrous nature of sin—the whole world was thrown into chaos. It is not our place to tell God that His punishment was too severe or that animals did not deserve to be punished for humans’ sin. In fact, if we view Adam as the federal head of creation, it is logical that not only he and his descendants, but everything under his dominion, would suffer as a result of his sin.

Osborn also claims that, because without death eventually the world would become filled and there would be no more birth, such a world would not really be ‘very good’ (p. 129). Certainly, “be fruitful and multiply” was God’s very good design to fill His creation. But Scripture also looks forward to a time when men and women no longer marry or are given in marriage (Matthew 22:30). So the new heavens and earth—which is the culmination of God’s salvific plan—would not be ‘very good’ by Osborn’s definition!



Figure 2. Osborn’s interpretation of *tov me’od* in the creation account does not take into account its context.

Does young-earth creation require God to deceive?

Osborn claims that biblical creationists are forced to believe in a God who deceives, because He created differently than science seems to indicate:

“Most young earth or young life creationists I have spoken with, when pressed about the weight of empirical evidence, concede that their models cannot explain the physical data from biology and geology in any kind of satisfying way, and that they would have never have arrived at their views were it not for the fact that they begin with a very particular set of assumptions about how the biblical text must be read” (p. 131).

Unfortunately, he does not cite a specific creationist or give a direct quote. But creationists have *always* maintained that what we see in biology and geology *today* cannot fully explain the *origin* of these things. Rather, we appeal to supernatural creation to explain the origin of life and its complexity, and we appeal to the supernatural judgment of Noah’s Flood to explain much of the geological record. Because evolutionists must also appeal to things that defy the laws of physics as we understand them, they are also appealing to ‘miraculous’ origins, albeit without a miracle-worker.

This does not make God a deceiver, however, because He *told* us plainly in Scripture how He created. In fact, deception or truth can only be communicated in *language* and propositional statements. (Tree rings and geological layers do not communicate anything *as such* but must be interpreted.) Rather, if God had created over billions of years, He would be a deceiver, because He communicated in Scripture that it happened quite differently.

In Chapter 11, Osborn offers a ‘midrash’ wherein Adam’s role was to restore an already-corrupted creation but took Satan’s side rather than God’s.

So Christ, whom Osborn wrongly calls the ‘second’, rather than ‘last’, Adam, did what Adam failed to (and could not) do. However, in this (Osborn’s) scheme, Adam did not introduce death through his sin—he only failed to *defeat* death, which would have already existed. This is sub-biblical and therefore unacceptable to the person who takes Paul’s theology seriously. In Chapter 12, Osborn admits that he has reservations with some of the weaknesses in this line of reasoning, and, like Hugh Ross,⁴ points to Job, where God is glorified by providing food for lions and other carnivorous creatures. But this only shows that God is glorified by how He operates in the fallen universe, not that He set things up this way in the first place. Rather, Isaiah 11 and 65 point to the eschatological future where lions will eat straw—i.e., God will still provide their food, but it will no longer be other animals! Given that in Genesis plants are said to have been food for both plants and animals before the Fall (Genesis 1:29–30), it makes much more sense to see Eden and the eschatological order as reflective of God’s true estimation of what is ‘very good’. Indeed, commentators on Isaiah agree that he made Edenic allusions in those chapters.^{5,6}

In Chapter 13, Osborn takes on the biblical creationist argument that a literal reading of the creation account is required in order to make sense of the Atonement. Osborn responds that the way we view the atonement is wrong: “. . . strictly penal-substitutionary readings of Christ’s death and resurrection rest upon a relatively late and individualistic turn in Christian thinking” (p. 160). Rather, Osborn argues “God creates as he redeems and redeems as he creates so that the two are always part of the same act” (p. 160). But what did the *to’v me’od* creation need redemption from? And what does it imply about salvation if Christ’s salvific work

represents not the answer to Adam’s sin and that of his descendants, but the solution to a problem God Himself wove into creation from the start? Most Christians would be disturbed by this theory, but it is actually startlingly honest of Osborn to practically admit his view is incompatible with Substitutionary Atonement.

Conclusion

A book should be judged by its own standards. What does it set out to accomplish? What does it promise the reader? With the title, Ronald Osborn promised a discussion and at least a proposed answer to the problem of animal suffering. He spent well over half the book talking about things only tangentially related to his topic, and then when he got to the topic, he still found countless ways to rabbit-trail away from the matter at hand. Ronald Osborn failed at what he set out to do, and didn’t really accomplish anything else in its stead. *Death Before the Fall* could have been an interesting and challenging book, but unfortunately it simply showed that when it comes to death and suffering before the Fall, neither old-earth creation nor theistic evolution have satisfying answers.

References

1. A PDF of the letter can be found at creation.com/barrletter.
2. See also Zuiddam, B.A., Early Church Fathers on creation, death and eschatology, *J. Creation* 28(1):77–83, 2014.
3. E.g. Batten, D., End-times and Early-times, *Creation* 27(4):43, 2005; creation.com/early.
4. See review of Ross, H., *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, at creation.com/ross-job.
5. Motyer, J.A., *The Prophecy of Isaiah* p. 124, IVP, Leicester, UK, 1993.
6. See also Gurney, R.J.M., The carnivorous nature and suffering of animals, *J. Creation* 18(3):70–75, 2004; creation.com/carniv.