

# Mortality and Animal Existence in Ronald Osborn's *Death Before the Fall* | BY DARYLL WARD

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

by Ronald E. Osborn  
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HTTP://WWW.BILLHOLSTEN.COM/PHOTOS/BOTS/WANA-2008--MAMMALION-ON-BUFFALO-KILL.JPG

Ronald Osborn's *Death Before the Fall* opens with an unforgettable story of his own childhood witness to three young female lions feasting on their recent kill of a cape buffalo. He describes the lions' chests and muzzles soaked in blood and recalls the "stench" of death in the air. The lions had not dragged the buffalo's carcass out of the road on which their family car was traveling, so they were forced to move around what Osborn describes as "this beautiful scene of carnage" (12). His childhood world, Osborn tells us, "was deeply mysterious, untamed, dangerous, beautiful and good... And the danger was part of its goodness and its

beauty." Indeed, the beauty and goodness are "inextricably linked to cycles of birth and death, as well as suffering, ferocity and animal predation" (13, emphasis mine).

If we can see the beauty and goodness of lions eviscerating their prey, it will not "ring true" to call this world of ours cursed or evil. "There is a doubleness to all of animal existence... with birth and death, comedy and tragedy, suffering and grandeur, appearing as *the interwoven and inseparable aspects* of a single reality that defies easy moral categorization (14, emphasis mine).

In order to see that the reality of animal existence makes easy moral categorization impossible, one must recognize the

## Is animal suffering truly a dilemma?



profound deficiencies in the account typically offered by individuals who read the Bible literalistically. As his opening narrative implies and his declaration that the “central” riddle of the book lies in the relationship between animal beauty and suffering confirms, the deep problem the book addresses is “...Why...would a just and loving God... require or permit such a world to exist” (14)?

Biblical literalism claims to have an answer. God’s initially-perfect creation is groaning under the divine curse justly imposed in retribution for Eve’s and Adam’s sin. Literalists who might not claim this as a satisfactory answer to the question are minimally certain that any other narrative would prove God is neither loving nor just.

Osborn devotes two-thirds of his work to dismantling the ideas that the Bible must be read literalistically to be read faithfully, and that the narrative arising from such a reading is theologically superior to any reading that acknowledges what is known about natural history regarding “death before the fall.”

My mother taught me that “a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still,” and Osborn’s critique of literalism and its theodicy will not persuade the convinced. But what it can do, and what we may hope it will do, is supply anyone not yet or no longer convinced of literalism with multiple reasons for faithful reading of Scripture that eschews literalism and inspires theological wisdom regarding animal suffering.

Briefly catalogued, the reasons he offers for rejecting literalism (as opposed to such literal readings as his own and those of figures like Augustine and Calvin) are as follows:

1. Literalism is an example of failed epistemological foundationalism (44).
2. It shares with scientism the false notion that there is only one kind of knowledge, namely “scientific” knowledge (49).
3. The “scientific” pursuits implied by literalism amount to the conglomeration of ad hoc hypotheses that are definitive of degenerating research programs (59).
4. Literalism fails to grasp the theological necessity of methodological atheism in science, a

- necessity implied by divine transcendence of all secondary causation (72).
5. Literalism is closely allied with fundamentalism, which leads to a coercive communal politics originating in a need for communal purity (79).
6. Literalists exhibit “identity foreclosure” and “premature integrity” as described by Erik Erikson (82).
7. Literalists belie their claim regarding the primacy of Scripture by insisting on authoritative interpretations (83).
8. Literalism manifests a long list of the characteristics of Gnosticism, a besetting heresy (86).

All of this is by way of prolegomena in preparation for addressing the central riddle of animal suffering. Osborn is clear that “...there are no tidy answers to the theodicy dilemma of animal suffering...” (126). This is well said, with one important reservation: is animal suffering truly a dilemma? As with all the dimensions of “the problem of evil,” there is in fact an entirely satisfactory answer to the problem of animal suffering—namely, the elimination of animal suffering and the redemption of its myriad victims. Then again, perhaps we are dealing with a dilemma after all.

*Death Before the Fall* can be fruitfully read seeking what its various insights suggest for accumulating wisdom regarding animal suffering as we wait for redemption. Three things in particular deserve concentrated attention. First, the author offers a ringing affirmation that the world and animal existence are “very good.” Osborn is firmly in accord with the whole span of Christian and Hebrew theology on this point as his reading of the book of Job demonstrates. Second, Osborn points to a Christology of kenosis as a model for understanding God’s being in relationship to history. And third, he suggests God’s way of creating and sustaining life primarily takes the form of providence working within history as opposed to radically interrupting it.

Others inclined to join Osborn in thinking along these lines will do well to consider more extensive development of these notions than was

either necessary or possible within Osborn's chosen rhetorical context. To begin, we ought to question the inseparability of the goodness of the earth from its accompanying horrors. If actual animal existence, with its "inextricably-linked cycles of birth and death" and its "inseparable aspects of suffering and tragedy" is beautiful and good, surely it is entirely fitting for a just and loving God to create a world manifesting these forms of beauty and goodness. This is not to say that a just and loving God either intends or permits concomitant animal suffering. It is simply to note that if animal existence as we know it can be called very good and beautiful, and the only possibility of realizing that goodness and beauty is inseparable from suffering, then God cannot be faulted for enduring the suffering for the sake of the goodness. If there is an actual problem with animal suffering, as opposed to a mere failure to grasp its essential relation to animal beauty, then we must assume that, as necessary as such suffering is in the world as we know it, it is finally unnecessary.

The degree to which the author may be willing to assert a necessary connection may be seen in his critique of a notion of deathless creation assumed by biblical literalists who deny the presence of death before Eve and Adam's fall. Concerning the problem of "stasis" that burdens a literalistic reading of Genesis, Osborn writes, "In a spatially finite and deathless world... there could not be endless procreation... It would be a creation without new creation." In agreement with John Haught, he asserts such a world would be "dead on delivery" (128–129).

Such arguments seem to me to underestimate the radical character of Christian hope. What makes them powerful and worthy of critical reflection, however, is the fact that inconceivable states of affairs cannot exist. Therefore if the beauty of animal existence cannot even be conceived apart from animal suffering—if the link between beauty and suffering in animal existence is inseparable in this sense—then God himself could not create a world with animals that did not include suffering. A few more thoughts on

necessity may be useful for further reflection.

Christian theology has generally denied the necessity of our cosmos, including the earth, in two senses. It has denied that the world exists necessarily, and it has denied that the form of its contingent existence is necessary. These convictions regarding contingency and the freedom they imply turn out to be crucially important to Osborn's interest in theodicy. Even more fundamental to his sense of the goodness of the creation than the facts of procreation is the fact of indeterminacy and the possibilities of freedom it affords. In a cosmos exhibiting indeterminacy and agency, many have asserted, suffering is inevitable. Just as the price of procreation is supposed to be death, many argue that the price of freedom is pain. One thinks here of the process-creationists Charles Hartshorne and Philip Clayton, to name only two. Robert John Russell is to be commended for his dissent from this view.

The assertion of the "inevitability" of suffering in an indeterminate world requires the assumption of a multiplicity of agents whose actions are not fully ordered toward, or by, any transcendent good. It is far from obvious that an open world fully ordered by perfect goodness is inconceivable. By my lights, the two most insidious features of evil are the degree to which it succeeds in appearing necessary for the enjoyment of good and its power to capture the imagination by this appearance.

Although *Death Before the Fall* occasionally comes close to a freewill theodicy of the sort that accommodates evil in the interest of the superior goods freedom bestows, Osborn does not go the distance, to his credit. Theodicies in general and freewill theodicy in all of its forms exaggerate the actual freedoms of finite agents and unjustifiably constrict the freedom of the infinite one.

Here Osborn's second important insight comes into view. Divine freedom includes the possibility of full participation in the contingencies of history, natural and recorded. On this side of the question, Osborn says the Cross denies us any "stoical pact with the cruelties of death as divinely fated necessities of life. Death

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is the final enemy” (158). It can, and also should, be said that the Cross denies the necessity of seeing suffering and death as the inevitable outworking of an open creation. Kenotic Christology supplies the key for understanding. Such a Christology reveals that “...God’s creative might and sovereign rule are always expressed in harmony with his character revealed in the historical person Jesus, whose way was one of co-suffering humility, nonviolent self-limitation and liberal self-donation” (162).

Challenging his readers, Osborn asks: “...are we prepared to follow this Creator who...*enters into* the suffering and contingency of his creation and in so doing redeems it?” (164). Much—or should one say everything—depends on the meaning of that redemption.

If the life of Jesus is actually revelatory of the Creator, then Christology offers us more than a “fellow sufferer who understands.” Instead, that life makes hope for the Sabbath Rest of all creation rational. It is important to recall that the central affirmation of Christology in all of its forms (including kenotic ones) is that the Creator really participates in his creation with the precise purpose of overcoming evil and its correlative suffering and death—i.e., to redeem it. God in Christ does not, according to the author of Philippians, reconcile himself to the world. He does not simply dwell with us. He reconciles the world to himself. (The ultimate vice of theodicy is the reconciliation of God to the world.) If reconciliation of the world to God is the effect of his self-emptying, then the world will become non-violent.

The reality of the Cross makes the full participation of divinity in the literal conditions of the creation undeniable. However, it is only the Cross because of the resurrection. Without Easter, the Cross becomes a potent demand for a stoic pact with the necessity of death. Osborn rejects such accommodation. “There are things under heaven and in the earth,” he writes, “that we should not be at peace with, and the jaws of the Behemoth, I would submit, are one” (157). Jesus Christ makes his rejection plausible.

Finally, a kenotic Christology can facilitate the formation of a coherent doctrine of providence. It strikes me as one of the book’s most valuable recommendations that creation be prominently understood in terms of providential participation in the world. Such thinking need not compromise the equally necessary affirmation that before God began to create the world, there was nothing other than God.

The desire for a satisfactory theodicy may originate with anxious revulsion at one’s own mortality, even if one is not moved by the suffering and death of others (including our animal siblings). But there is a deeper issue than our mortality and suffering. The question raised by our own animal existence is whether there is any one worthy of unrestricted praise and unqualified submission. Is there one worthy of worship? If we examine the creation, we might conclude it fitting to worship the creator. But Christians must be clear that they hold God to be the Creator. They do not consider just any conceivable creator to be God. If Jesus is the revelation of the Creator, a Creator thoroughly hidden in the remainder of the creation, then there is one worthy of worship. There is one worthy of worship because the story of Jesus is the story of real participation in the creation that relieved its suffering, vanquished its demons and raised the dead to life—gifts that only divinity can give.

It is to be hoped that this thoroughly informed, fair-minded, generous and insightful volume will find a large audience. And it is to be even more fervently desired that the book will supply the impetus for genuinely new approaches to its themes. It is reasonable to hope that even literalists will enlarge their love of the Bible if they see that recognition of the facts of natural history does not compel stoic despair. The seeds for such recognition are present in this valuable essay. ■

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