

# Reading Genesis

## IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS

BY RONALD OSBORN

“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” the Creator of Hebrew Scripture asks the “scientific” creationist and the Darwinian evolutionist alike (Job 38:4). “Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death? Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all” (Job 38:17–18). The God who speaks from out of the whirlwind “caused the dayspring to know his place; That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it” (Job 38:12). Yet there is no hint of wickedness or “natural evil” in the wildness and even ferocity of the animal kingdom. These aspects of his creation God seemingly delights in.

The Lord is the one who has carved “a way for the lightning of thunder” (Job 38:25). He causes “it to rain on

the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man; To satisfy the desolate and waste ground”

(Job 38:26–27). The Creator provides meat to the ravens, which are both scavengers and predators (Job 38:41). He is the one who helps wild donkeys to escape their masters and gives them “the wilderness, and the barren land” for a home (Job 39:6). The ostrich “is hardened against her young ones” and does not tend to her eggs because God has not “imparted to her understanding” (Job 39:16–17). The Lord commands the eagle to “make her nest on high” from where “she seeketh the prey” so that “Her young ones

also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she” (Job 39:27, 29–30). We see God’s grandeur and wisdom in “the treasures of the snow” and “the treasures of the hail,” in fearless warhorses whose necks are “clothed with

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*Job and his friends. Wood engraving after a painting by Max Michael (German painter, 1823 - 1891), published in 1882.*

thunder,” and in the Behemoth and the Leviathan (Job 38:22; 39:19).

The God of the whirlwind—the God who takes responsibility for all the creation, in all its strange, bewildering, endlessly innovative and untamed processes—may leave us perplexed and dismayed. But lest we question the justice or goodness of God’s ways in creating the eagle, the lion, and the great sea monsters, we should ponder the verse that follows closely after the poem’s vivid description of eagles feeding their young the blood of other animals.

“Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?” God demands of Job (Job 40:2, NASB). It is a question we must continue to ask ourselves today. Classical rabbinical hermeneutics, especially during the period of the Babylonian exile, included a method known as targum that involved imaginatively retelling and expanding upon the ancient biblical texts in more contemporary idioms. Without calling it this by name, William Brown offers the following targum on the final chapters of the book of Job:

Job . . . fasten your seatbelt and let us travel, you and I, into the dark, cold depths of another world, free from the propellers and harpoons of the surface, free from the “toil under the sun.”

. . . Behold the enigmatic *Grimpoteuthis*. Humans call it the Dumbo Octopus, though they are quite confounded about what it does in the deep. It simply rests on the bottom, wrapped in its mantle. Job, do you know what it does sitting so still and quietly in the dark? Answer me, Job, for surely you know! No? All right, then, I’ll let you in on a secret: It’s meditating on the Torah! . . . But my favorite creature of the deep is the one that humans disparagingly call *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, “the vampire squid from hell,” so named because it so repulsed its first discoverers. But it is my mascot of the deep: half-squid and half-octopus, dating back to 200 million years ago. Oh yes, you were born before then, weren’t you Job? This creature can do something no other complex creature can: it can dwell quite happily in the oxygen-depleted layer of the ocean because of its special respiratory blood pigment. Being the slowest cephalopod of the sea doesn’t hurt either.

And yet there remains a deep scandal in death and suffering in nature that we must not allow the inspired poetics of the book of Job to cause us to forget or to become comfortably adjusted to. There are things under heaven and in earth that we should not be at peace with, and the jaws of the Behemoth, I would submit, are one. I have seen crocodiles on the riverbanks of Masai Mara in Kenya, near the end of the wildebeest migrations, their bellies distended from feasting. It is said they continue to kill even after they are engorged, without any interest in eating their prey. There is a turn in the Mara River where the wildebeest herds often cross and where, by early November, desiccated carcasses litter the banks, to be picked over by Marabou storks, maggots, and flies. One can smell this open graveyard and hear the din of the birds from some distance. Some of the corpses lie partially submerged, their horns protruding from the fetid brown water where they were trampled in the stampede

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or ravaged by the massive reptiles. Calves sometimes manage to cross the river only to find themselves trapped by its steep banks. They drown in exhaustion amid the bellowing of thousands of their kind preparing to plunge after them into the murky water. These are the realities we must add our "Amen" to if we grant the God of the whirlwind who glories in the Behemoth and the Leviathan the final word. But on the banks of the Mara River, one's conscience might very well balk.

Perhaps Slavoj Žižek has discerned a vital truth in his provocative rereading of the book of Job not as a story of divine power over the creation but instead, in a certain sense, of divine impotence within it. God "solves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle," Žižek declares, "he himself comes to share Job's astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe." God's answer from out of the whirlwind amounts not to a negation but an intensification of Job's protest. What God is in effect saying, Žižek proposes, is that he too has no rational answer for the creation, that he is suffering along with Job. If God sounds slightly irritable it's because he's really just trying to hold it all together! But Žižek (a self-described atheistic materialist) goes still further, pressing the final chapters of Job in the direction of a radically Christocentric interpretation that sees Job's silence at the end of the book as being filled with the pathos of one survivor bearing prophetic witness to the sufferings of another:

What Job suddenly understood was that it was not him, but God himself who was in effect on trial in Job's calamities, and he failed the test miserably. Even more pointedly, I am tempted

to risk a radical anachronistic reading: Job foresaw God's own future suffering—"Today it's me, tomorrow it will be your own son, and there will be no one to intervene for him. What you see in me now is the prefiguration of your own Passion!"

Whether or not we accept this interpretation, we must confess that there is nothing in the reading of Job I offered earlier that a devout Jew or Muslim could not affirm. But Christianity—the faith whose central event is the brutal execution of the God-forsaken God on a Roman cross—greatly complicates and deepens our understanding of the divine response to suffering, whether of humans or of animals. It also denies us any stoical pact with the cruelties of death as divinely fated necessities of life. Death is the final enemy.

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paradise restored. Rather, the end is greater than the beginning—and was always meant to be so through the mystery of the incarnation.

One striking implication of biblical literalism is that Genesis tells us everything we need to know about God’s way of creating, without any reference whatsoever to the Christ of the New Testament. God’s stupendous might, God’s total control, God’s complete domination of the creation by sheer fiat—such are the divine attributes that most impress the literalist and fundamentalist religious imaginations when they open the book of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is in fact nothing intrinsically *Christological* in these “plain” reading approaches to Genesis 1 or in the sorts of “scientific” and lexical arguments most often used to advance them. One can be a strict literalist on Genesis without possessing a trinitarian understanding of the divine nature and without any reference to the God who walked

among us, whose power and glory are paradoxically revealed in his weakness and agony. Literalist logic is strictly linear, requiring no rereading of what comes first in the light of what comes after. Perfect creation (C), we are told, is followed by fall (F) is followed by plan of redemption (P) is followed by the cross (though in his foreknowledge God’s plan of redemption is sometimes said to be prior to the creation event as well). The cross is thus turned into the final proof in a theorem, the first variable of which does not include or require the God of the cross at all, except perhaps through an additive process ( $C + F + P = \dagger$ ). For orthodox Christians this is surely a grave theological problem.

Literalists will respond that their approach is the only one that preserves the classical doctrine of the atonement. Hence the title to one creationist book, which boldly wagers the entire significance of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection not simply on the duration

of the days of Genesis but on the fathoms deep of Noah’s deluge: *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary: Why a Global Flood Is Vital to the Doctrine of Atonement*. But while these ways of relating the New Testament to the Hebrew Bible might have a certain simplifying clarity for many believers, they also reflect a highly questionable set of assumptions about the narrative arc of Scripture. They fail to see (or refuse to acknowledge) that strictly penal-substitutionary readings of Christ’s death and resurrection rest upon a relatively late and individualistic turn in Christian thinking, replacing a more ancient tradition of “ransom” or *Christus Victor* theology that emphasized not human “genetic” sinfulness but rather Christ’s co-suffering and copresence with all of creation, and his battling against and gaining victory over powers holding all finite creatures in bondage to decay. Such a ransom theology (Nancey Murphy points out) is clearly amenable to evolutionary frameworks in

ways the individualistic legal-forensic model is not.

God’s way of creating, in this understanding, cannot be separated from God’s way of redeeming and never could be separated from the beginning. God creates as he redeems and redeems as he creates so that the two are always part of the same act,  $C\dagger$  or  $\dagger C$ . But what if we will never understand either Genesis or natural history properly if we do not begin with a radically Christocentric understanding of the *character* of God and the *governance* of God as revealed in the Jesus of history who is the crucified Savior of the world? This is the possibility that kenotic theology would have us wrestle with—that what literalists have long charged is theistic evolution’s greatest weakness is in fact its greatest



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strength. As Polkinghorne writes:

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God with Jesus, nor supposed that the historic episode of the incarnation implied that there was, during its period, an attenuation of the divine governance of the universe. The incarnation does, however, suggest what character that governance might at all times be expected to take. It seems God is willing to share with creatures, to be vulnerable to creatures, to an extent not anticipated by classical theology’s picture of the God who, through primary causality, is always in total control. [I]n allowing the other to be, God allows creatures their part in bringing about the future.

This response to the problem of animal suffering and “natural evil” will of course be hard for believers in conservative wings of the Reformed tradition to accept. Christians who insist that God’s omnipotence entails his absolute predestination of all events, including even human choices, will see little reason to grant nature any space of authentic freedom or indeterminacy either. Some Barthians who insist upon an unbridgeable chasm between God and his creation will also struggle with Polkinghorne’s embrace and reformulation of the task of “natural theology.” I have no stake in defending such pictures of God. Whatever its difficulties, the only position that makes any moral, religious, or rational sense of human moral evil to my mind is the one that declares that the divine will *wills* human free will, and is both powerful enough and self-giving enough to create beings with the capacity to make meaningful, self-defining choices that are morally and spiritually significant. And in the same way we speak of moral evil as resulting from human

free will, we should now somewhat analogously speak of natural evil and animal suffering as emerging from free or indeterminate processes, which God does not override, and which are inherent possibilities in a creation in which the Creator allows the other to be truly other. God grants the creation the freedom of its own being. “The Creator wills that his creation itself should affirm and continue his work,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “he wills that created things should live and create further life.” And God continues to create in and through these processes, while still allowing the creation to be as it is, each element and organism working out its inner principles according to its kind.

The Creator God revealed in the *kenosis* of Christ is neither the remote Designer or Grand Engineer (*deus otiosus*) of Enlightenment deism, nor what Polkinghorne calls the “Cosmic Tyrant” of classical theism who utterly dominates animals not simply once but twice, first in the act of forming them without allowing them to participate in their own making, and second in the act of cursing them without granting them any understanding of their own suffering. Instead, a kenotic picture of the Creator insists that God’s creative might and sovereign rule are always expressed in harmony with his character as revealed in the historical person of Jesus, whose way was one of co-suffering humility, nonviolent self-limitation, and liberal self-donation. As John Haught writes, a Christocentric theology that places such a high premium on creaturely freedom awakens us not so much to the *design* of creation as to its *drama*. The world that God calls into being does not have the character of a “perfect” contrivance or complex invention to be disassembled using techniques of reverse engineering so as to prove God’s existence (in

the manner of “intelligent design” theory). A god who could be so trapped beneath a microscope would not be the self-revealing and self-concealing God of Jewish and Christian faith at all. Rather, the creation is best seen as an improvisational theater or musical performance in which the director invites the actors—and not human actors alone—to join in the writing of the script, with all the danger and all the possibility that this implies. “A God of freedom and promise invites, and does not compel, the creation to experiment with many possible ways of being, allowing it to make ‘mistakes’ in the process,” Haught writes. “This is the God of evolution—one who honors and respects the indeterminacy and narrative openness of creation, and in this way ennobles it.”

Or, as Terence Fretheim writes of “natural evils” such as earthquakes and floods, “the created moral order” is best grasped as “a complex, loose causal weave.” God “lets the creatures have the freedom to be what God created them to be.” At the same time, “the looseness of the causal weave allows God to be at work in the system in some ways without violating or (temporarily) suspending it.” This opens the door to the possibility of suffering, whether from the sheer randomness of plate tectonics and bolts of lightning that set forests ablaze or from the rise of adaptations in some creatures that are harmful to others. We might summarize this view of the natural world (although, as Cunningham points out, theologically all natural/supernatural dualisms are problematic and only defensible from the standpoint that the creation is supernatural and God alone *natural*) by saying that God’s way of creating and sustaining primarily takes the form of divine *providence* working within history, including natural history, rather than absolute *miracle* radically interrupting history from without (which is by no means to deny the possibility of what to human eyes might appear as “interrupting” miracles in other contexts, or even as punctuating parts of the creation process/event itself).

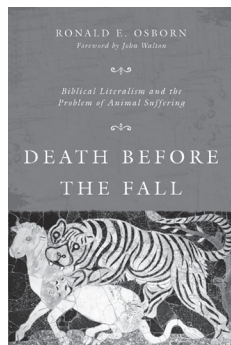
Such a paradigm of creation fits well, some have found, not only with the evidences of biology and geology—helping to make both theological and scientific sense of those unsettling parts of nature creationists seldom care to linger upon—but also with the cosmology of the new quantum physics. In place of the old billiard ball model of causation in Newtonian physics, and even contra Einstein, who attributed all seeming indeterminacy

to our incomplete knowledge of the processes at work (“God does not play dice,” Einstein famously declared), the quantum factor of the new physics says that there is *real* indeterminacy in the universe, that at the most basic level of existence—the level of elementary particles and atomic structures—there is radical uncertainty, so that there can even be effects without causes. The theological implications of Heisenberg’s celebrated uncertainty principle are as disturbing to the Designer God of classical theology as Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Is there not something defective or weak or negligent, we might well ask, in a Creator who would inscribe such lawlessness, such lack of predetermined order, at the very heart of material existence? Or is it in fact we ourselves who have long held defective notions about God’s character, which must be completely rethought in the light of the self-emptying Christ of the New Testament—the One who draws all of creation ever deeper into his own fullness of life with an implacable yet noncoercive and infinitely patient love, the King who scandalously creates and rules the universe from a throne in the form of a cross? And are we prepared to follow this Creator who neither prevents nor rationalistically explains but instead *enters into* the suffering and contingency of his creation and in so doing redeems it?

There is still another sense in which we must learn to read Genesis in radically Christocentric theological terms rather than as mere historical chronicle. For orthodox Christianity, Cunningham points out, it is not Adam but *Christ* who is the first true human, the axis mundi by whom we must now re-envision all that came before as well as all that comes after. Some have insisted that without a historical Adam the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus would be devoid of meaning. But this claim amounts to a denial (even if unintentionally so) of the centrality of Christ; for it gives the fallen Adam of Genesis an interpretive primacy over the Jesus of history that Paul and the Gospel writers do not allow. For disciples of Christ, it is only *in Christ* that the ancient story of human origins and destiny can be rightly understood—not the other way around. We do not read the story of Christ “Adamicly.” We reread the story of Adam *Christologically* in the light of the second Adam who is also the *first* Adam, the first fully human being of whom the ancient story is only a type, a dim shadow and longing, a “figure of him

that was to come” (Rom 5:14). In the Common English Translation, those passages in the Gospels in which Christ refers to himself as “the Son of Man” are translated “the Human One.” The New Testament proclamation is not that the Adam of Hebrew Scripture must now be greatly elevated as the father of humankind lest Christ have died a pointless death. It is that He who comes last is first. The Christian *euangelion* is not an accentuation or amplification but, in a real sense, a subversion of the first Adam’s theological and historical significance (whether or not a historical Adam existed). It is only through the *kenosis* of Christ—his self-emptying death upon a “tree”—that our eyes have at last been opened to the real nature of good and evil for the first time. The cross is at once the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. When Christ cries, “It is finished” on Easter Friday, the creation of the world is at last completed. Nor is Christ’s rest in the tomb an observance of Jewish Sabbath law. It is the *first* Sabbath to which Jewish law and the creation story proleptically pointed. Genesis is not science or journalism but *prophecy*. And it is by entering into Christ’s way of self-emptying love and reposing with him in his Sabbath rest that we bear witness to this hope: that one day we will also share in our Lord’s resurrection and glorification. Only then will Christ be all in all. The Sabbath, as Cunningham writes, “is therefore the meaning of creation”—we are “a species of the sabbath.”

This article is taken from Chapters 12 and 13 of *Death Before the Fall* by Ronald Osborn and republished with permission.



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## Endnotes

1. Tellingly, the same literalists who vehemently oppose theistic evolution on theodicy grounds are no less adamant when we arrive at the book of Joshua that we must accept without question YHWH’s commanding the Israelites to commit genocide of the inhabitants of Canaan—women, children, the elderly and animals. While there may be significant differences between the two problems, this seeming volte-face in moral concern for the suffering of the innocent (what did Canaanite cattle have to do with the sins of their masters?) suggests that it is an essentially divine command ethic rather than deep anguish at the realities of human or animal suffering that is driving literalist interpretations in both cases.



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