

How does the Genesis account of the Fall of Man relate to Evolution?

A traditional understanding of Genesis holds that God created the world perfect, without suffering and death. This is based on statements like Genesis 1:31 “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Then man fell to temptation, sinned and the resulting curse brought suffering and death to humans and to creation for the first time. How does this relate to the idea that nature “red in tooth and claw” evolved over many thousands of years, culminating in homo sapiens? The two seem to be completely contradictory. Would God who is love have intentionally created a world where suffering is widespread and nature is “red in tooth and claw”?

The traditional view was that Genesis shows that God did not intend such a situation, but, having created humans with free will, this allowed the possibility of the situation going wrong, as it did, with the resulting suffering and carnage in nature. What is more, God intends to renew creation so that the suffering and death which he never intended are removed:

Isa 11:6-9 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isa 65:25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,’ says the Lord.

However, when interpreting Scripture we must relate, amongst other things, to the established facts of science. Truth is truth, wherever it originates. Scientists say that it is beyond reasonable doubt that nature “red in tooth and claw” evolved over many thousands of years, culminating in homo sapiens. How do Christians who accept that interpret the relevant passages of Scripture? Also some Christians say that there are difficulties with relating a literal creationist view to the teaching of Scripture. We shall see more about these issues below.

Christians who accept evolution believe in God as creator and do not have any problem with God specially intervening with respect to the spiritual nature of mankind, or even about him dealing with an original “human” couple. Also they accept that the idea of the Fall is crucial to biblical theology.

Was creation perfect before the Fall?

Genesis states that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (1:31). However does that mean it was perfect, without any suffering, death and evil? There are problems with this idea in the biblical text.

Firstly, Satan existed before the Fall so there must have been some disorder and evil before man fell.

Secondly, man was told: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Von Rad comments: “The expressions for the exercise of this dominion are remarkably strong: *rada* [NIV ‘rule’] ‘tread,’ ‘trample’ (e.g., the wine press); similarly *kabas* [NIV ‘subdue’], ‘stamp.’”²

D C Spanner writes: “The Hebrew word for ‘subdue’ is *kabas*, and in all its other occurrences in Scripture (about twelve in all) it is used as a term indicating strong action in the face of opposition, enmity or evil. Thus, the land of Canaan was ‘subdued’ before Israel, though the Canaanites had chariots of iron; weapons of war are ‘subdued’; so are iniquities. The word is never used in a mild sense. It indicates, I believe, that Adam was sent into a world where **NOT** all was sweetness and light, for in such a world what would there be to subdue? The animals, it suggests, included some that were wild and ferocious; and Adam was charged to exercise a genuinely civilizing role and promote harmony among them.”³

Kidner writes: “It seems, indeed, from Romans 8:19-23 and from what is known of the pre-human world, that there was a state of travail in nature from the first, which man was empowered to ‘subdue’ (1:28) (perhaps little by little as he spread abroad to ‘fill the earth’), until he relapsed instead into disorder himself.

Even now his power over nature (Ps. 8:6-8; Jas. 3.7) reflects this primal ability; the ordering influence of the Man, Christ Jesus, shows what was its full potential, one day to be realized everywhere and for ever (Rom. 8:19).⁴

He adds: “Man was called to ‘subdue’ creation. The nature-miracles of Jesus give some idea of the control which man under God might have exercised (cf. Heb. 2:8, 9).” The writer to the Hebrews asks with the Psalmist: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour and put everything under their feet.’ In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them” (Heb 2:8-9).

Thirdly, the Hebrew of Genesis 3:16 literally means: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing.” Hence pain was a reality before the Fall but increased after it. So this was not a perfect world without pain. The committed creationist might object that Eve was the first woman and had not had children. But the creationist would have to explain why the words “greatly increase” were used. A reasonable explanation would be that Eve was aware of pain in childbirth, even if not in her own experience.

Was there animal death before the Fall?

The Bible does not say that there was no death (or suffering) amongst animals before the Fall. In Genesis 1:24-25 God says: “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so.

God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.” The Hebrew word for “wild animals” is *chayyah*. There seems good reason to understand this as at least including carnivores: *Chayyah* means carnivore in the great majority of its uses in the Old Testament.⁵ It is contrasted with “livestock” or cattle which are, of course, herbivores in Gen 1:24-25.

There is a great deal of evidence that carnivores long pre-date human beings. There is a great deal of evidence that some animals are specially designed for carnivorous feeding, e.g. those with stings, fangs, sharp beaks, talons etc. Some people have pointed out that if these creatures had been redesigned as carnivores after the Fall, some of them would have needed major re-creation which contradicts the creationist tenet that God finished all creation in six days. There is no biblical, let alone scientific, evidence that some herbivores became carnivores only after the Fall. In Genesis 2:19-20 Adam is called upon to name the animals and, presumably, the names he chose remained in usage. In which case, he chose the name for a lion from a Hebrew root meaning “in the sense of violence,” that for an eagle means “to lacerate”, that for an owl means “do violence” or “treat violently.”

How does “nature red in tooth and claw” relate to God declaring his creation “very good”? HCG Moule writes: “God pronounced His creation ‘good;’ but this ‘goodness’ may mean only goodness in respect to its then work and purpose; and this may have included death and suffering, as in fact it seems to have done.”⁶

Is the death of animals essentially an evil, incompatible with the goodness of God? There seems to be good reason to say it is not. God himself is said to bring about the death of animals:

- He called for animal sacrifices.
- He clothed Adam and Eve in animal skins.
- He claims to provide carnivores with food: the lion (Job 38:39, Psa. 104:21), the raven (Job 38:41, Luke 12:24), etc.

There are some inconsistencies in saying that a loving God couldn’t possibly have intended creation to be “red in tooth and claw.” Creationists sometimes say this about the millennia of death in creation described by evolutionists. However, these same creationists justify God allowing thousands of years of carnage amongst innocent animals since the Fall.

On the other hand we can all be sentimental about nature “red in tooth and claw.” Yet most of us are not sentimental about having a good joint of meat! We regard it as a normal provision for our diet. Could that not be the case for the animal kingdom also?

Some people have said that the statement: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen 2:17) would be meaningless unless Adam and Eve had some experience of death (i.e. before the Fall). This would seem a natural implication of the account.

Those Christians who do not accept the idea of recent creation (which includes some creationists) point out the difficulties raised by the idea that there was no animal death before the Fall:

- It would mean that there were no predatory animals, which they say is clearly contrary to the evidence.
- The planet would have been increasingly and chronically overcrowded because of population growth. This would be a threat to the ecosystem and could, in itself, lead to other species becoming extinct.
- What has been described as the “invariably complex, beautiful relationships between millions of plants and animals” –a vast network of interdependence and symbiotic relationships - would have been very limited because no animal would feed on another.
- It would mean there was no accidental death amongst animals. But they say surely extensive accidental death cannot be ruled out from the pre-Fall world. Many small creatures would be accidentally killed by the movement and eating habits of larger creatures. Herbivores will swallow countless mites, aphids and microbes. Large animals will step on smaller ones. Animals will sometimes fall or suffocate.
- It would mean that the fossil record detailing millions of years of death amongst animals has been misunderstood and would have to postdate the arrival of homo sapiens.

There is another challenge, however. What about the two Isaiah passages above which foretell a new earth in which, it appears, there is no carnivorous activity? Is this creation as God always intended it and originally created it? Or are they symbolical passages speaking of a blissful human existence and harmony with nature? On the other hand, if the Fall did in fact adversely affect the whole of creation, even though there was animal death before it, is it possible the Isaiah passages are symbolical of this adverse effect being removed from the animal kingdom?

Professor FF Bruce writes: When Isaiah looked forward to the peaceful coexistence of wolf and lamb in the messianic age, he voiced his hope in the language of poetry, but his poetry enshrines no pathetic fallacy but something much more biblical and substantial : ‘They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (Is. xi. 9, RSV). The Christian will neither hold that at present ‘all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds’, nor will he write the world off as belonging to the devil. The world is God’s world, and God will yet be glorified by all His works. And when God is glorified, His creatures are blessed. If words mean anything, these words of Paul denote not the annihilation of the present material universe on the day of revelation, to be replaced by a universe completely new, but the transformation of the present universe so that it will fulfil the purpose for which God created it. Here again we have an echo of an Old Testament hope — the creation of new heavens and a new earth ‘wherein dwelleth righteousness’ (2 Pet. iii. 13, quoting Is. Ixv. 17, Ixvi. 22; cf. Rev. xxi. i) . But the transformation of the universe depends upon the completion of man’s transformation by the working of God’s grace.”⁷

Was man immortal before the Fall?

The traditional view is, of course, that death was a new experience for humans after the Fall. Genesis 2:16 -17 says: “The LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Gerhard von Rad points out that “the text does not say, ‘You will become mortal,’ but rather, ‘You shall die!’”⁸ Derek Kidner 9 writes: “These words do not necessarily imply that man was not naturally mortal. God ‘alone has immortality’ (1 Tim. 6:16, RSV), and the presence of the tree of life in the garden indicates that if man is to share the boon it must be an added gift. As R. Martin-Achard has put it: ‘Before the Fall, between Adam and death, which is part of his natural lot as an element in his human heritage, there stands the Living God; His presence is sufficient to ward death off . . .’¹⁰

Another question is, if man was immortal before the Fall why was there any need of procreation? Even if each couple only had two children and there was no death, within 50 generations there would be over a trillion people on earth! If each couple had only two children and each generation was 20 years, and there was no death, in 55 generations (1100 years) the population would be 36 trillion. Imagine the effects of this in terms of overcrowding, disease and starvation.

Was all physical death a penalty of the Fall?

Paul writes: “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21-22). He also wrote: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12).

The traditional understanding of these passages focuses on “death” meaning physical death but various aspects of the biblical evidence have to be taken into account: As we have seen there is good reason to think that there was death before the Fall and human beings were not immortal. It is important to note that Adam did **NOT** die physically when he disobeyed God. Genesis 5:5 states: “Altogether, Adam lived a total of 930 years, and then he died.” In view of this, what is meant by “death” in Genesis 2:17; 3:2-3; Romans 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22? It seems likely that

“death” is used in both a physical and spiritual way. It does not mean that immortal human beings suddenly became mortal but it could mean that physical death became a negative experience. Kidner writes that the ‘translation’ of Enoch “perhaps illustrates what God had prepared for man.” Hebrews 11:5 says: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: ‘He could not be found, because God had taken him away.’ For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.” Kidner seems to be saying that man may not have been naturally mortal but that, had he remained in a close relationship with God, he would have experienced ‘translation’ like Enoch, not death.

John Calvin wrote: “Truly the first man would have passed to a better life, had he remained upright; but there would have been no separation of the soul from the body, no corruption, no kind of destruction, and, in short, no violent change.”¹¹

If this is a correct way of thinking then, for humanity, the Fall meant death was no longer a positive transition from life to life but a threatening and fearful experience with a sense of loss, alienation, sorrow and regret.

What was the effect of the Fall on the animal kingdom? The passages about the Fall do not refer to animals. Genesis 3 only speaks of the cursing of the ground (human work becoming a burden) and of the cursing of the serpent (Satan). Romans 5:12 and 1 Cor 15:21-22 clearly refer to human beings, not animals. The Fall is a penalty of sin. But animals do not have a spiritual nature able to communicate with God. They are not guilty of sin or subject to judgment. However that is not to say that the animal kingdom doesn’t suffer from ‘collateral’ effects of the Fall. This seems to be summed up in the following words of St Paul: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:18-23).

The whole of fallen creation, including humanity, experiences frustration and bondage and yearns for the ultimate cosmic redemption.

As Griffith Thomas puts it “there seems no reason to doubt that the fact of sin has in some way affected the entire constitution of things created. How this has come about, and what precisely is involved, it is of course impossible to say with definiteness and completeness; but the more we realize the oneness of the universe the more we shall come to the conclusion that everything is somehow involved in human sin. Very much that we see around us goes to show that nature is not now in a normal condition, or in that state in which it was originally created by God. Physical suffering among animals, catastrophes and cataclysms in nature have some moral meaning, we may be sure, and it is by no means certain that they would have been in the world if sin had not entered Nature is in many ways purposeless (ver. 20) and unable to realize its true ideal. There is an arrested development through sin, a consciousness of bondage, and a pressure of pain.”¹²

Conclusion

Some Christians are creationists but those Christians who accept evolution do not see any contradiction between the process of evolution and the biblical teaching on the Fall of man when the text is properly interpreted.

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1 Creationism is a term used to cover a spectrum of beliefs, from those who take Genesis 1-3 literally and believe in six 24 hour days of creation and an earth not much more than 10,000 years old, to those who would regard the “six days” as six eras of time, and a greater age for the earth, but deny evolution except within the species.

2 Gerhard von Rad, Genesis, Old Testament Library, SCM Press, London 1963, p. 58.

3 D C Spanner, Primal Creation, See <http://www.creationandevolution.co.uk/>

4 Derek Kidner, Genesis, An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Tyndale Press, London 1967, p. 73

5 In the uses where its eating behaviour is clear it is a carnivore in 20 passages (Gen. 37:20; 33, Lev. 11:27; 20:6, 26:22; Isa. 43:20; Ezek. 5:17; 14:15, 21; 29:5; 32:4; 33:27; 34:5, 8, 25, 28; 39:4, 17; Hos. 2:12, 13:8) and a herbivore in 4 passages (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 11:2; Num. 35:3; Isa. 40:16).

6 HCG Moule, Romans, Cambridge Bible, Cambridge University Press, 1899, p. 151.

7 FF Bruce, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Tyndale Press London 1963, p169f.

8 Gerhard von Rad, Genesis , Old Testament Library, SCM Press, London 1963, p. 79

9 Derek Kidner, op. cit, p. 65

10 From Death to Life (Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 19. Quoted in Kidner.

11 John Calvin, Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1, Christian Clasics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, p. 119. See <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.pdf>

12 WH Griffith Thomas, St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1956, p. 220 -222