

Genesis 1–3 as a Theodicy (Updated 5/2016)

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One way of understanding Genesis 1–3 is as an explanation of how there can be evil in a world created by God. Genesis 1 affirms that there was no evil in the world when God created it – it was ‘very good’ (1:31). Genesis 2 and 3 express how evil came into it – through creatures abusing the freedom God had given them. God allowed them to commit their crimes, and only intervened after they had done so (3:8). He then punished them for what they had done, and changed the natural order to make their lives less pleasant for them (3:14–24). In particular, he cursed the ground, and brought physical death on human beings.

This understanding of Genesis 1–3 underlies Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. It has, however, been criticized by modern authors.¹ Here I offer a defence of it.

In what follows, Genesis 1' = 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2' = 2:4–25. I refer to Adam and Eve’s disobedience as the Fall and God’s response to this as the Curse (the word used in 3:14 and 17).²

Relation between Genesis 1' and 2'

Many commentators argue that there are discrepancies between the accounts of creation in Genesis 1' and 2', and that Genesis 2' is from a different source (J) to Genesis 1' (P),³ or describes the creation of a different race of human beings from Genesis 1'.⁴ However, it is possible to harmonize the accounts, such that Genesis 2' amplifies day 6 of Genesis 1', as described below.

Name for God

In Genesis 2', God is called by the personal name *yhwh* and title *'ēlōhîm* (*yhwh 'ēlōhîm*), whereas in Genesis 1', he is simply called *'ēlōhîm*. However, in Genesis 2' the narrative becomes more personal. Genesis 1' is about the creation of the universe; Genesis 2'–4 is about the beginnings of human history, starting from two named

¹ E.g., R.J. Berry, ‘This cursed earth: is “the Fall” credible?’ *Science and Christian Belief* 11 (1999), 29–49; John J. Bimson, ‘Reconsidering a “cosmic fall”,’ *ibid.* 18 (2006), 63–81; Denis R. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have To Choose?* (Oxford and Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2008), Chaps. 9–13. See also R.J. Berry and T.A. Noble (eds.), *Darwin, Creation and the Fall* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009); John Polkinghorne, ‘Scripture and an evolving creation,’ *Science and Christian Belief* 21 (2009), 163–73.

² Heb. *'ārar*, opposite of *bārūk*, ‘bless’ (Gen. 12:3).

³ E.g., John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd edn., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1930).

⁴ E.g., E.K. Victor Pearce, *Who Was Adam?*, 2nd edn. (Exeter: Paternoster, 1976), 3rd edn. (Walkerville, South Africa: Africa Centre for World Mission, 1987); Dick Fischer, *The Origins Solution* (Lima, Ohio: Fairway Press, 1996); Berry, ‘This cursed earth’; Peter Rüst, ‘Early humans, Adam, and Inspiration,’ *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 59 (2007), 182–93; Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, Chaps. 9–10. See also R.J. Berry, ‘Adam or Adamah?’, *Science and Christian Belief* 23 (2011), 23–48.

individuals, Adam and Eve. The introduction of the personal name *yhwh* is therefore explicable.⁵

Function of 2:4

Some scholars take the first half of 2:4 ('These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created') as a concluding summary of Genesis 1', and the second half ('in the day YHWH God made earth and heavens') as the beginning of a quite separate narrative. Derek Kidner, however, argues that the phrase, 'These are the generations of (*tôl'ē dōt*)', is a heading, as elsewhere in Genesis.⁶ He understands the phrase to mean that those about to be described (Adam, Eve, and the Serpent) *issued from* 'the heavens and the earth when they were created', i.e. 'the bare world' of 1:1. Gordon Wenham further argues that 2:4 has a chiasmic structure linking the two narratives,⁷ though this kind of structure difficult to identify with certainty.

Order of creation of animals and human beings

According to Genesis 1', God made the birds on day 5 (1:20–23) and the land animals on day 6 (1:24–25), followed by human beings (1:26–31). According to Genesis 2', as usually translated, he made a man first (2:7), and then the land animals and birds (2:19). However, this inconsistency can be removed by translating 2:19 as a pluperfect, 'Now YHWH God *had* formed from the ground every animal of the field in addition to every bird of the heavens'. Hebrew verbs do not indicate the time of an action: this is determined by idiom and context. The construction here is unusual for a pluperfect,⁸ but other examples are known.⁹

Order of creation of plants and human beings

Genesis 2:4–6 ('... no shrub of the countryside was yet on the earth, and no plant of the countryside had yet sprung up, for ... there was no man to till the ground') could be taken to mean that, when God created the first man (2:7), there was no vegetation. This contradicts Genesis 1', where God created vegetation on day 3 (1:11–13) and human beings on day 6 (1:26–31). However, the state of the earth described in 2:5–6 ('... YHWH God had not sent rain on the earth ... but a stream¹⁰ went up from the earth and watered all the face of the ground') corresponds to the one presented in 1:2, before God separated the waters (1:6–8) and made the dry land (1:9–10).¹¹ On this reading, 2:5–6 reminds the reader of the state of the earth when God started creating

⁵ For a full critique of the documentary hypothesis, see Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Tyndale, 1967), 16–22, 97–100, 184–6, 200–3. See also C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2006), Chap. 8; Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker / Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 46–59.

⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 23–4, 59.

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 55. See also Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 40–2.

⁸ S.R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*, 3rd edn. (Oxford University Press, 1892), Sect. 76, *Obs.*

⁹ C. John Collins, 'The *wayyiqtol* as "pluperfect": when and why,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995), 117–40. See also Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), Sect. 33.2.3; Christo H.J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 167–8.

¹⁰ Heb. 'ēḏ, LXX *pēgē*.

¹¹ Cf. Kidner, *Genesis*, 59–60.

(2:4), and 2:7 picks up the account of creation on day 6. There is a similar recapitulation at 5:1–2.

Number of human beings created

As usually translated, Genesis 1:26–28 seems to speak of the creation of many human beings ('God said, "Let us make man in our image ..., and let them rule" So God created man in his image ...'). This impression goes against Genesis 2', which describes the creation of one man (2:7), and from him, one woman (2:21–22). However, there is a significant change from 1:26 to 1:27. In 1:26, *'ādām* is anarthrous and followed by a plural ("Let us make *'ādām* ..., and let *them* ..."). In 1:27, on the other hand, *'ādām* has the definite article and is followed by a singular and then a plural ('God created *hā'ādām* in his image, in the image of God he created *him*, male and female he created *them*'). Scholars explain the article as referring back to 1:26 ('the [said] *'ādām*') or as emphasizing *'ādām* ('the [very] *'ādām*') or as a collective ('the *'ādām* [kind]'), and the singular as an effective plural.¹² Later in Genesis, *hā'ādām* is used in a collective sense followed by a singular (6:5, 8:21). But why should the writer use a singular when he has just used a plural?

In a recent study, Paul Niskanen argues that *'ādām* here has both a singular and a collective sense, and that the singular pronoun picks up the former and the plural pronoun the latter.¹³ This leads him to suggest the meaning: 'So *'ēlohîm* created *hā'ādām* in his image / In the image of *'ēlohîm* he created each one'.

A much simpler explanation is that *hā'ādām* means 'the man' as it does in 2:7ff.¹⁴ The switch from singular to plural in 1:27 then correlates with the account in Genesis 2', and allows the plurals in 1:26–28 to be identified with Adam and Eve. There is a similar switch in 5:1–2.¹⁵

That Genesis 2'–4 amplifies day 6 of Genesis 1' is further supported by the linking of the two passages in 5:1–3 (5:1b–2 summarizes 1:26–28, 5:3 summarizes 4:25). Jesus himself tied 2:24 to 1:27 in Matthew 19:4–5: 'Have you not read that, from the beginning, the Creator "made them male and female", and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife ..."'. Note that Jesus identifies the narrator of Genesis 2' as God himself.

¹² G.J. Spurrell, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 16; Skinner, *Genesis*, 33; Richard S. Hess, 'Splitting the Adam: the usage of *'ādām* in Genesis i–v,' in *Studies in the Pentateuch* (ed. J.A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1–15; John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 1 (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 86–7; Peter Rüst, 'First man versus Adam in Genesis,' *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 60 (2008), 206–7.

¹³ Paul Niskanen, 'The poetics of Adam,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), 417–36.

¹⁴ Cf. LXX (*ton anthrōpon*); Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (tr. David G. Preston; Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 55. The article in 2:7 is retained (except after *l'*) until 4:25. From this point, *'ādām* is used as a proper name, and *hā'ādām* has a collective sense. On the use of the article, see Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English edn. (ed. E. Kautzsch; tr. A.E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), Sect. 126. See also van der Merwe *et al.*, *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, Sect. 24.4; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Chap. 13.

¹⁵ Here *'ādām* can be taken as a proper name, as in 4:25 and 5:3–5 (cf. LXX).

Note finally that Adam named his wife Eve (*ḥawwā*), ‘because she was the mother of all living (*ḥay*)’ (3:20). This makes Eve the mother of all humanity, not just of one line of it.

Nature of the Curse

Many modern scholars interpret the Curse in relational terms.¹⁶ They understand ‘Let us make man in our own image’ (1:26) to mean that God created human beings with the capability of having a relationship with him. They go on to infer that Adam and Eve had such a relationship, and that the main effect of the Curse was the breaking of this. The Curse also adversely affected Adam and Eve’s relationship with each other, and with the natural world.

Scholars support this interpretation by pointing out that God told Adam that, ‘on the day’ that he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die (2:17). Since on the day that he did eat from it, he did not die physically, the reference must be to ‘spiritual’ death, i.e. to being cut off from God.¹⁷

Scholars also point out that God told Eve, ‘Your urge will be to your husband,¹⁸ but he shall rule over you’ (3:16b). He also told the Serpent, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring ...’ (3:15). These punishments are relational.

Scholars further note that God also told Eve, ‘I will greatly multiply your painful toil¹⁹ ...’ (3:16a), and infer from this that there was suffering before the Curse.

This scheme of interpretation leaves the natural order largely unchanged. Only the relationship of human beings with it has changed. There were thorns and thistles before the Curse, but only after the Curse did they become a nuisance to human beings (3:17–19). This means that what we call ‘natural evils’ (predation, disease, earthquakes, etc.) existed before the Curse, and are not evils. In God’s eye’s, they are ‘very good’ in the sense that they are part of a creation that is fit for the purpose for which he created it.²⁰

There are several problems with this approach as I discuss below.

Image of God

There must be considerable doubt whether the ancient Hebrews understood ‘image of God’ (*ṣelem ʾēlōhîm*)²¹ to imply ‘capable of having a relationship with God’. They are more likely to have taken it to mean ‘looking like God and representing him’, as the context in Genesis implies (‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness,

¹⁶ E.g., Berry, ‘This cursed earth’; Bimson, ‘Reconsidering a “cosmic fall”’; Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, Chaps. 11–13. See also Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, Chap. 6; Berry, ‘Adam or Adamah?’.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Berry, ‘This cursed earth’; Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, Chap. 11. See also Berry, ‘Adam or Adamah?’.

¹⁸ Compare 4:7 where the same idiom is used.

¹⁹ Heb. *ʾiṣṣāḇôn*, as in 3:17 and 5:29.

²⁰ Ernest Lucas, ‘God and “natural evil”’, *Faith and Thought* No. 50 (2011), 16–26.

²¹ The Hebrew requires us to look for a more concrete meaning than the Latin *imago Dei*.

and let them rule over [the earth]', 1:26).²² Remember that, when Ezekiel saw 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH', he saw 'a likeness with the appearance of a man' (Ezek. 1:26–28). Note also that, in the New Testament, Paul says that a man should not cover his head in worship because he is the 'image and glory' of God (1 Cor. 11:7). In any case, in the narrative, not only do Adam and Eve have a relationship with God, so does the Serpent. God speaks to him, as he does to Adam and Eve.

The terms 'image' and 'likeness' are used in a similar way in 5:3. Here Seth is described as being the likeness and image of Adam. What does this mean but that Seth looked like his father and represented him? Adam's other sons are not so described (4:1–2, 5:4).

Death

Genesis defines the death imposed on Adam in two ways. First, God says to him, 'dust you are, and to dust you shall return' (3:19). This describes physical death. Second, the narrator states that God drove Adam away from the tree of life lest he should eat from it and 'live for ever' (3:22–24). This means that he would cease to live (5:5), in contrast to what happened to Enoch (5:24). The reference again is to physical death.

What about God's warning to Adam that he would die 'on the day' he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17)? Genesis presents the fulfilment of this in 3:17–19 and 22–24: on the day Adam ate from this tree, God pronounced death on him, and drove him away from the tree whose fruit would have given him immortality. In other words, he changed Adam's life from one that would not lead to physical death to one that did.

It is true that New Testament scholars distinguish between 'physical death' and 'spiritual death'. This does not mean, however, that Genesis 2–3 is only about spiritual death.²³ In any case, the distinction is not as clear in the New Testament as is commonly supposed. For example, when Jesus says that a person who exercises faith in him 'has gone over from death to the life' (John 5:24), he could be referring to a change in *regime*, from one (lit. 'the death') that leads to physical death and hell to one ('the life') that takes a person through physical death into heaven (cf. Matt. 7:13–14; John 3:36, 6:47, 8:51, 11:25–26; 1 John 3:14).

Similarly, when Paul says in Romans 7 that he 'died' when faced with the Law (vv. 9–10), this could mean that, like Adam, he became *subject* to death. In Cranfield's words,²⁴

²² Cf. Kidner, *Genesis*, 51; Richard S. Hess, 'Genesis 1–2 and recent studies of ancient texts,' *Science and Christian Belief* 7 (1995), 141–9.

²³ Cf. Leon Morris, 'Death,' *New Bible Dictionary*, 301–2. Morris points out that 'the Scriptural passages which connect sin and death do not qualify death. We would not understand from them that something other than the usual meaning attached to the word.' Compare also Philip Duce, 'Comment on "This cursed earth"', *Science and Christian Belief* 11 (1999), 159–65.

²⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 352.

Though he continues to live, he is dead – being under God’s sentence of death (cf. v. 24b). Physical death, when it comes, is but the fulfilment of the sentence already passed.

In the previous chapter, Paul speaks of two ‘ends’, death and eternal life (6:21–23).²⁵

A key verse is 5:12, where he says, (lit.) ‘as through one human being the sin entered into the world, and through the sin the death, and so the death spread to all human beings, in that all sinned.’ Here he is evidently referring to God’s pronouncement of death on Adam and eviction of him from the Garden of Eden, which brought death, and denied access to the tree of life, not only to Adam, but also his posterity.²⁶ The reference is therefore to physical death.²⁷

The only distinction that the New Testament makes explicitly is between ‘death’ and ‘second death’. The latter refers to the death of the wicked following their resurrection from the first death (Rev. 20:11–15, 21:8). It is again a bodily death.

In a recent book, John Walton reasons that, since Adam’s immortality depended on him eating from the tree of life, he was, by nature, mortal.²⁸ Berry takes this as supporting his contention that Adam’s punishment was only spiritual.²⁹ Allaway endorses Walton’s reasoning.³⁰ However, Walton presupposes that the tree of life functioned in the same way before the Curse as after it. After the Curse, the tree conferred eternal life on mortals (3:22), but before the Curse it could have acted to signify and confirm eternal life to immortals.³¹ Certainly, there is no indication in Genesis 2 that Adam needed to eat from the tree in order not to die, and the tone of God’s pronouncement of death in 3:17–19 points to a more radical physical change than nature as created taking its course.³²

Punishment of Eve

God’s punishment of Eve was almost certainly more physical than relationalists infer. When God said to Eve, ‘I will greatly multiply your painful toil ...’ (3:16a), this does not necessarily mean that Eve was suffering already. The verb (*rābā*) does not always denote multiplication.³³ It can simply mean ‘make great’. The sense is then, ‘I will make very great your painful toil ...’. Before the Curse, nerve impulses in Adam and Eve could have been sufficiently strong to act as a warning but not so strong as to cause suffering.

²⁵ See further P.G. Nelson, *Science and Christian Belief* 12 (2000), 166–7; *Making Sense of Romans* (Seaford: Thankful Books, 2009), 41–2, 44.

²⁶ *Making sense of Romans*, 36.

²⁷ Whether ‘the death’ includes the death of animals depends on how the article is understood. I discuss the death of animals in *Big Bang, Small Voice: Reconciling Genesis and Modern Science*, 2nd edn. (Hull: Botanic Christian Books, 2014), 51–3.

²⁸ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 98–100.

²⁹ ‘Adam or Adamah?’, n. 65.

³⁰ Bob Allaway, *Faith and Thought* No. 60 (2016) 32–3.

³¹ Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 62.

³² Cf. Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 160–2; *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 62, 115–6.

³³ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 180–1 and n. 16.

To ‘painful toil’, God adds ‘conception’:³⁴ ‘I will make very great your painful toil and your conception’. Puzzled by this, commentators treat ‘painful toil and conception’ as a hendiadys, meaning ‘pain in childbirth’. But a high level of conception makes sense. Eve would need to have more children to compensate for the physical death of human beings, now denied access to the tree of life (3:22–24).³⁵

God’s punishment of the Serpent was also partly physical as I discuss further below.

Sequel

In the narrative, Adam and Eve continue to have a relationship with God after the Fall (4:1), as do their sons, Cain and Abel (4:3–7). The first reference to someone being cut off from God is when Cain murders Abel and is banished from Eden (4:8–12). Fearing that someone from Abel’s family might find him and kill him, Cain protests, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear. Look, you have driven me away today from the face of the ground, and I shall be hidden from your face ...’ (4:13–14). After God ensures that no one will kill him, we read that ‘Cain went out from the presence of [lit. “from before”] YHWH ...’ (4:15–16).

Curse of the ground

God says to Adam, ‘cursed is the ground because of you’ (3:17). He does not say, ‘cursed are you in relation to the ground’ (cf. Deut. 28:20). The ground is not the whole of nature, but it affects a large part of it.

Goodness of the creation

There are two major problems with taking what we call ‘natural evils’ (predation, disease, earthquakes, etc.) to be ‘very good’. The first is that later Biblical writers do not regard them as ‘very good’.³⁶

For example, the prophet Isaiah foresaw that, in the reign of the Messiah, ‘the wolf shall live with the lamb, ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox’ (Isa. 11:6–7). However metaphorical this passage may be, Isaiah is making a clear value judgment in it. This is that the state of a wolf living with a lamb or of a lion eating straw is better than the state of a wolf tearing a lamb apart or a lion eating flesh. The latter cannot therefore be ‘very good’.

Exponents of a relational Curse answer this by pointing out that there are passages in the Bible praising God for creating and feeding predatory animals (e.g. Psa. 104).³⁷ However, God is no less Creator and Sustainer of the cursed earth as he was of the uncursed. Jesus spoke of God making the sun to rise on the evil as well as the good (Matt. 5:45).

³⁴ Heb. *hērôn*.

³⁵ Cf. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Chap.5. She links the increase in conception to the labour of growing food outside the garden.

³⁶ *Big Bang, Small Voice*, 50–2.

³⁷ See, e.g., Bimson, ‘Reconsidering a “cosmic” fall.’

In any case, Genesis clearly implies that there was no predation before the Curse. In 1:29–30, God says to the first human beings, ‘Behold, I have given to you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree yielding seed in its fruit. It shall be food for you. And to every animal of the earth, and every bird of the heavens, and every creeping organism on the earth, all the greenery of plants is for food’ (cf. 9:3–4).

This passage presents a serious problem to relationalists. To his credit, Denis Alexander tries to address this.³⁸ He writes, ‘It is unlikely that this text refers to vegetarianism, more likely that it is highlighting the theological point that animal sacrifice was necessary only for those who had sinned.’ However, this is unconvincing. For God not to say in Genesis 1 that animals can eat other animals because human beings before the Fall did not need to offer sacrifices is very contrived.

Alexander goes on to say that 9:3–4 represents ‘the renewal of God’s covenant to Noah in which he expressly mandates the eating of all animals, except for their blood’. However, the wording does not indicate a renewal of 1:29–30 but a development of it: ‘Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; like the greenery of plants, I have given you everything.’ The comparison, ‘like (*k^e*) the greenery of plants’, points to an extension in what can be eaten. Early Jewish commentators understood these texts in this way:³⁹

R. Jose b. R. Abin said in R. Johanan’s name: Adam, to whom flesh to satisfy his appetite was not permitted, was not admonished against eating a limb torn from a living animal. But the children of Noah, to whom flesh to satisfy their appetite was permitted, were admonished against eating a limb torn from a living animal [Exod. 22:31].

John Collins tries to downplay 1:29–30 by saying that, while this passage states that man and animals were given plants to eat, ‘it does not say that they ate nothing else’.⁴⁰ The inference that some were carnivorous, besides being forced, takes no account of 9:3–4.

Some scholars maintain that the changes required to convert a herbivore into a carnivore are too big for this transformation to be possible. The changes are surely not, however, too big for God.

Ernest Lucas has recently argued that, on the traditional understanding of Genesis 1–2, Adam and Eve would have been like pampered pets.⁴¹ However, this underplays the moral challenge posed by the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Indeed, this challenge was sufficiently strong for Adam and Eve to fail. Lucas says that his motivation for reinterpreting Genesis is to take account of ‘what, after some careful investigation, seem to be valid scientific conclusions about the age of the earth, its history and the history of life on earth’. However, it is possible

³⁸ Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, 271–2.

³⁹ *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis* 34.13 (Soncino translation).

⁴⁰ *Genesis 1–4*, 165.

⁴¹ ‘God and “natural evil”’.

to reconcile Genesis and modern science without abandoning the traditional interpretation of the former or distorting the latter as I indicate at the end.

The second problem with taking the natural world as we know it to be ‘very good’ is that the psalmist wrote of the earth and the heavens ‘wearing out’ and one day being ‘changed’ (Psa. 102:25–26). Isaiah prophesied that God will create ‘new heavens and a new earth’ (Isa. 65:17–25). Jesus alluded to this prophesy when he spoke about ‘the regeneration’ (Matt. 19:28). Peter urged Christians to look for its fulfilment (2 Pet. 3:1–13). John was given a vision of it happening (Rev. 21:1–22:5). This strand of Bible teaching implies that the heavens and the earth themselves, in their present state, are less than ‘very good’. Indeed, the last passage contains the statements, ‘there shall be no longer be death, or mourning, or crying, and no longer be pain’ (21:4), and ‘*there shall no longer be any curse*’ (Rev. 22:3), relating back explicitly to Genesis 3.

Jesus himself treated ‘natural evils’ as bad. He healed disabilities and diseases (Matt. 4:23–24 etc.), and warned his disciples about decay and natural disasters (Matt. 6:19–20, 24:7, etc.). He linked the collapse of a tower and congenital blindness to the general sinfulness of human beings, not the particular sins of those concerned (Luke 13:4–5, John 9:1–3a). He thus took them as arising out of a natural order that is as it is because of the general sinfulness of humankind – the order after the Fall.

These considerations settle the meaning of other Biblical passages on the creation. Thus, when Ecclesiastes speaks about the futility of the natural order (1:1–11), he links this to the mortality of human beings (4, 11), which renders even good aspects of nature futile (5–7). He is evidently therefore referring to the creation in its cursed state. Likewise, when Paul describes the creation as having been subjected to futility, he links this to the present human condition (Rom. 8:18–23). His picture of the whole creation groaning and travailing together, waiting to be freed from the bondage of corruption, points forward to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, and no more curse.

The Serpent

Most commentators take the Serpent to be, or to symbolize, or to be in thrall to, the Devil. This confounds the theodicy.

However, there is nothing in the passage to indicate this.⁴² The author refers to the Serpent throughout by the ordinary word for snake (*nāḥāš*), and describes him as one of the animals God had made (3:1). The author nowhere states that he is inherently evil, only ‘clever’ (*ārûm*, 3:1), a word that can have a good or bad sense (e.g. Prov. 12:16 and Job 5:12 respectively). What the Serpent does is misuse its cleverness with the very reasonable argument that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would not bring death, only knowledge of good and evil (3:1–5). After God curses him, he becomes the animal we know, living on its belly, eating at ground level, menacing and being menaced by human beings (3:14–15).

⁴² Cf. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 187–8.

It is true that, in the New Testament, the Serpent *is* identified with the Devil (Rev. 12:9, 20:2). If Genesis 3 is understood literally, this means that the Serpent, having started off as one of the animals, *became* the Devil. Its spirit lived on after the death of its body, attaching itself to the angels, and marauding the earth (Job 1:6–7, 2:1–2; 1 Pet. 5:8, etc.). Its physical offspring, however, are the snakes we know (cf. Luke 10:18–19).

Many Christian commentators identify the Devil as a fallen angel, who posed as, or took possession of, the Serpent. This identification is based on Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:13–17. However, the first prophecy concerns the king of Babylon (Isa. 14:4) and the second the king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:12).⁴³ The identification in any case misses the whole point of Genesis 3, that evil in the world originated *within* it, and did not come in from outside. God created the world good; creatures misused their freedom and spoiled it.

Conclusion

There is a good case for taking Genesis 1–3 as a theodicy. When people ask, ‘Why do natural disasters happen?’, we can answer, ‘When God created the universe, it was good; when human beings disobeyed, he made the world a less pleasant place.’ There is no need to look for an explanation elsewhere.

This understanding of Genesis constrains the way we seek to reconcile the Biblical account of creation with modern science. There are still methods of doing this, however. Donald MacKay has presented one,⁴⁴ and I have given two others.⁴⁵

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⁴³ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 42.

⁴⁴ Donald M. MacKay, ‘The sovereignty of God in the natural world,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21 (1968), 13–26.

⁴⁵ Nelson, *Big Bang, Small Voice*, Parts II and III.