

A Look at Biblical and Ancient Extra-Biblical Perspectives on Death

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The issue of whether or not there was death before the entrance of sin on earth is actually a very large topic with many fascinating facets, all of which have potentially significant theological implications for us as Seventh-day Adventists.¹ This study will focus briefly on the following inter-related questions: Was there death on earth before the Fall? Was death part of God's original plan for creation before sin entered the world, or was it introduced as a punishment for wickedness after the Fall? Was animal death included in the death sentence at the Fall, or did animals die before the Fall? I will conclude with a few comments on two "problem" texts—Psalm 104 and Isa 65.

Does the Bible Know of Death Prior to the Fall?

One of the ideas we occasionally hear that would "solve" the tension between the Bible's extremely "short" earth history and the deep time that conventional science demands is that there were perhaps two "creations of life." It is suggested that the initial one occurred millions (billions?) of years ago and accounts for the bulk of the geologic column and the fossil record it contains. In view of the evidence of predation and death (including mass mortality layers and the like) in this fossil record, some add the idea that perhaps God permitted Satan to rule over the earth during this period. Then this earth was somehow destroyed, and there was a second "creation." This second creation is supposedly the one we find recorded in Scripture, wherein the earth was created in six days in the more recent past and the current biota, including humans (which appear at the very top of the geologic column), came at about this time.

Concerning the so-called first creation, it is difficult, to say the least, to accept an idea for which there is not a scrap of evidence in Scripture. There is

¹ Marco T. Terreros, *Theistic Evolution and Its Theological Implications*. Ph.D. Dissertation, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1994.

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simply no positive Biblical support for such a suggestion (the proposal that some—e.g., C. I. Scofield of Scofield Reference Bible fame (1917; 1967)—have made to change the verb has not been taken seriously by most linguists).²

A Perfect, Completed Creation. Of course, this lack of any reference to an earlier creation has provided an open field wherein speculation can and has run wild without restraint. I would suggest, however, that while the Bible provides no knowledge of a “pre-creation creation,” there are subtle nuances in the Hebrew text that appear to *preclude* it. This conclusion comes in part from a study done by my colleague Dr. Jacques Doukhan.³ Specifically, Doukhan argues that each stage of the creation is unambiguously characterized as good (*tov*). Moreover, both Genesis 1 and 2 teach that perfect peace reigned, not just between the human couple, but between humans and the animal kingdom (I will come back to this point in a moment). The end of the creative process is characterized by the word *wayekal*, generally translated as “finished” or “completed” (NIV). Doukhan argues that this word conveys more than the mere chronological idea of “end.” It also implies the *quantitative* idea that nothing is missing and there is nothing to add, confirming that death and all the evil that will strike later have *not yet* (an important concept in Hebrew) affected the world.

Doukhan then goes on to argue: “At the same time, the biblical text does not allow for speculation or supposition of a precreation in which death and destruction would already have been involved. It clearly indicates that the ‘heavens and earth’ which are presented in Genesis 2a (the conclusion of the creation story) are the same as those in Genesis 1:1 (the introduction of the creation story).” Doukhan concludes, “The event of creation (Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a) witnesses to, and is told as, a complete and total event which admits neither the possibility of a prework in a distant past (gap-theory) nor a postwork in the future (evolution).

Doukhan’s argument becomes even more potent if one accepts Richard Davidson’s analysis of Genesis 1.⁴ Davidson’s work is significant because he argues that the phrase “in the beginning” in verse 1 points back to the “ultimate” beginning of the universe, not simply this earth. Davidson supports Sailhammer’s linguistic argument that Genesis 1:1 refers to this initial creation of the

² The Hebrew verb *hay'ta* in Gen 1:2—“the earth was without form and void”—is translated by active gap advocates as “the earth *became* without form and void.” However, this translation goes against *hay'ta*’s normal usage and defies rules of Hebrew grammar (Fields 1976). These folks also translate the Hebrew *asa* (“made”) as “remade,” so that Gen 2:4b reads, “When the Lord God *re-made* the earth and heavens,” rather than the usual translation, “When the Lord God *made* (*asa*) the earth and heavens.” However, the Hebrew verb *asa* cannot be translated that way—it is parallel with “create.”

³ Jacques B. Doukhan, “Where Did Death Come From? A Study in the Genesis Creation Story,” *Adventist Perspectives* 4/1 (1990): 16–18.

⁴ Time and space do not permit a full review of Davidson’s study, but his work is built in part on John Sailhammer’s analysis of Genesis 1 found in his *Genesis Unbound: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account* (Sisters: Multnomah, 1996). I believe Sailhammer has provided a valuable work, but it has some serious weaknesses which Davidson corrects.

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universe and that it is *separate* from the creation found in the rest of Genesis 1, which would have happened more recently. (While this can support an old earth but young life argument, the time between the beginning of the universe and the earth itself was not the focus or even a concern to an ancient Hebrew). Combining Doukhan and Davidson's analyses, the Hebrew writer is arguing that God's creative activity throughout the universe was not completed until this earth, itself, was created. If this analysis is correct, it not only precludes an earthly precreation with its subsequent death, but also denies that death occurred *anywhere* in God's entire created universe prior to the Fall. Nevertheless, even if one rejects Davidson's argument, Doukhan's argument alone maintains that the Hebrew text denies any precreation or death before the Fall.

The "Not Yet" of Creation. Doukhan offers additional arguments why death does not exist before the Fall. One of these parallels my own concerning Genesis 1 and 2 and deals with the Hebrew word *terem*, which conveys the concept of "not yet." As Doukhan points out, the entire Eden story is clearly written from the perspective of a writer who has already experienced the effects of death and suffering and therefore describes the events of Genesis 2 as a "not yet" situation. While I focused on the "not yetedness" of *siah hasade* (thorns and thistles), *esev hasade* (grain plants that make bread), men to cultivate the *ground* to grow the latter (which occurs only after the Fall!—prior to this man is tasked to cultivate *the garden* that God planted), and rain (which does not appear as a source of agricultural water until after the Fall), Doukhan adds other elements that appear in the text and support the idea that Genesis 2 does indeed serve as a prolepsis for Genesis 3. While some are explicit, as I pointed out, many more are implicit. For example, the dust (*afar*) from which man is made anticipates the dust to which he will return after the fall; the assignment of man to keep the garden anticipates his being forced out, whereupon the cherubim are entrusted to keep the garden. Doukhan shows that the *not yet* concept is also displayed in a play on words between *arom* (naked) and *arom* (cunning [of the serpent]), the former "prolepsis" pointing to the latter to indicate the tragedy which will be later initiated through the association between the serpent and human beings, which has *not yet* occurred. Doukhan's conclusions were anticipated by J. T. Wash, who also noted that "there is a frequent occurrence of prolepsis in the Eden account." Taken together, these all point to a great divide in earth's history—a time before sin and death and a time after. Sin and death do not occur until Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God.

Was Death Part of the Original Creation?

Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant. In many respects, the ancient peoples of the Near East were obsessed with the topic of death, as is evident in their elaborate burial rituals and in many of their writings. However, there is not much in ancient literature on the *origin* of death. The closest such story, perhaps, is a story from the Epic of Gilgamesh, found on Tablet 11 and commonly referred to

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as Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant. The essence of the story is that after the death of his dear friend and companion Enkidu, with whom he had shared many adventures, a distraught Gilgamesh sets off in search of eternal life. Gilgamesh learns that the long-lived hero of the Flood, Utnapishtim, knows the secret of avoiding death. Gilgamesh seeks out Utnapishtim and learns from him that before the Flood there was a plant that kept you alive as long as you would keep eating from it. Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim for the location of the plant and learns that it is now at the bottom of the sea, submerged there during the great flood. Gilgamesh determines to retrieve the plant, obtains a boat, and rows out to the middle of the sea. When he arrives over the spot where the plant is submerged, he takes a great breath, dives down into the depths, finds the plant, and retrieves it. He rows back to shore, where, exhausted from his ordeal, he falls into a deep sleep. While he is sleeping, a snake slithers along the shore, sees the plant, and eats it. When Gilgamesh wakes up, he finds his plant gone! He spies a snake skin nearby and realizes that the snake has deprived him of eternal life!

Various scholars have contemplated what this story might have meant to the ancients. Some have suggested it was intended to answer the question, Why do snakes shed their skin?—they apparently understood this as a way the snake rejuvenated itself. Others note that there were strong traditions among ancient Mesopotamians that the antediluvians had incredibly long life spans. Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant answers the question of why this is so. However, others have pointed out that Gilgamesh begins his quest for the Magic Plant after the death of his dear friend Enkidu, and that the story, perhaps, was intended to answer the question, Why do people die, or conversely, why don't they live forever? The answer seems to be that death had its origins when mankind lost access to the Magic Plant—that we were deprived of eternal life because a nasty snake stole it from us.⁵

Death in the Bible. The imagery and parallels invite comparisons with the Biblical account. Unfortunately, time precludes an examination of how these stories might relate to each other. Nevertheless, we still would like to explore what the Bible says about this subject. According to contemporary critical scholarship, the most authoritative work is probably Lloyd R. Bailey's *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (1979).⁶ Bailey's approach reflects the typical historical critical perspective prevalent at the time of his study. Bailey believes that the Bible's views on death changed through time as first ancient Israel and then the Christian church reacted to specific historical circumstances around them.

Bailey acknowledges that ancient Israel's "canonical" understanding of death is found in the Genesis creation accounts.⁷ However, he suggests, behind

⁵ Ronald A. Veenker, "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant," *Biblical Archeologist* 44/4 (1981): 199–205.

⁶ Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Bailey's work is cited prominently and favorably in the 1992 Anchor Bible Dictionary article on death.

⁷ Bailey, 36.

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chapters 2-3 “there may be two earlier folk explanations (etiologies) of human mortality. The first, according to Bailey, concerns a “protohuman” couple in primeval time warned by their creator not to partake of the fruit from the tree of knowledge. If they did, they “would surely die.” Bailey explains that according to this particular “folk story,” “death would be an intrusion into the Creator’s design, a curse under which humans were of necessity placed, a manifestation of their fallen state.”

The second “folk story” Bailey detects is that humans were intended to be mortal—to die—from the very beginning. The evidence Bailey presents for this folk story are the verses that show that man shares a common essence with the animal kingdom. Since animals died from the beginning—and Bailey assumes this was the case!—so must humans have died. Bailey also assumes that in this folk story humans were always forbidden access to the tree of life. Unfortunately, only a fragment of this second etiology is preserved in the Bible, including only a part of the following verse (Gen 3:22)—“Then the Lord God said, ‘ . . . lest he [humankind] put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever . . .’” Bailey bemoans the fact that at this point the text breaks off, leaving us without the ending of this second story. Nevertheless, this verse fragment shows, according to Bailey, that God never intended to make man mortal from the beginning. This verse fragment was later merged into the first story.

Bailey argues that the idea of death as punishment does not appear in the rest of the OT and, thus, it is etiology #2 that provides the basic perspective of the rest of the OT.⁸ The idea that death was divine punishment did not emerge until the intertestamental period and, especially, the New Testament period.

In a more recent study on death in the Bible that came out in 1992, Kent Harold Richards acknowledges that there seems to be little preoccupation with the origin of death in the OT, that is, few texts directly address this issue, Genesis 3 being the major exception.⁹ However, in contrast with Bailey, Richards notes that “the understanding of death as part of some original plan is far less compatible with the wide range of texts.”¹⁰ That is to say, death was *not* a built-in part of God’s original creation according to the Bible. Rather, Richards argues, the most obvious explanation for the origin of death is as a *punishment for disobeying* God. Whereas Bailey fails to identify any OT texts, apart from Genesis 3, that support the idea that death was the result of divine punishment, Richards identifies numerous such texts. For example, Ezek 18:4, “Behold all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins shall die.” Other such texts include Ezek 18:4; Ps 37:9, 34; Ps 68:2; cf John 3:16; Ps 37:10, 20; Isa 40:24; Mal 4:1. While these latter don’t refer to the

⁸ Bailey, 38.

⁹ Kent Harold Richards, “Death,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 108–110.

¹⁰ Richards, 109.

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original death sentence, they emanate from that judgment and were indeed part of the ancient Israelite understanding.

Is the Death of Animals a Moral Issue?

Is the Bible Concerned Only with Human Death?

These questions are critical to our current discussions, I believe. Norman Gulley has alluded to the theodicy problem—trying to explain how a loving God could or would allow millions of years of death and suffering in the animal kingdom prior to the creation of humankind.¹¹ This seems especially incongruent with the description given of our Creator as a God who assures us of His love and care for us by reminding us that He does not forget even a sparrow (Luke 12:6) and He feeds the ravens (Luke 12:24). Therefore we should not worry about whether He will care for us, for are we not “more valuable than many sparrows?”

It is often suggested that the Bible is concerned only with human death (Rom 5:12)—that the death of animals is not a moral problem. This argument seems to me to be clearly contradicted by Rom 8:19–23:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

Time and space do not permit a full discussion of this significant text, but it is important to note that advocates of the idea that death reigned in nature for millions of years prior to the appearance of mankind have given considerable attention to this passage. This is because the common reading of the text suggests that *nature* was directly affected by the Fall. Since this interpretation contradicts the model that holds that death existed in nature for millions of years prior to the seven-day Creation (and hence the Fall), there have been several

¹¹ I am a big fan of Lewis, having read everything he wrote and perhaps a few things he is said to have written, but didn't. Lewis grappled with the problem of animal pain and strove to come up with an answer in his *The Problem of Pain* study and elsewhere. His initial attempt was of a theistic evolution nature and was not very satisfying, as is evidenced in subsequent writings to critics of his position. Lewis at least acknowledged and fully recognized the problem and wrote that we must “turn with distaste from ‘the easy speeches that comfort cruel men’, from theologians who do not seem to see that there is a real problem, who are content to say that animals are, after all, only animals.”

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attempts to reinterpret the passage. The focus of attention has been on the word *ktisis* or “creation.” Opponents of the traditional view argue that *ktisis* can be translated as “creature” (which is true) and that “creature” is the intended meaning here. Moreover, they argue that the creature referred to is not the sub-human creation, but rather is a non-Christian human. They differ on who these individuals are, but the prominent suggestions are either Gentiles or Jews.

There are several problems with this alternate interpretation, in my opinion. For one thing, this translation seems to go against the majority of commentators and translators. However, I will briefly mention one other. For the “creature” interpretation to work, they must deny that the author intended to personify *ktisis* or nature—as far as I can tell, they accomplish this by simply asserting that early Christians did not personify *ktisis* (“creation”). However, this assertion does not appear to be accurate—in fact there is considerable evidence that *ktisis* was indeed personified and represented as a woman in both the Greek and early Christian world. Indeed, there are several mosaic floors that illustrate the personification of *ktisis*. Moreover, the reference in Romans 8 to the *pains of childbirth* (from the Greek root *sunodino*) reinforces the idea that the early Christians did indeed adapt the Greek personification of nature, and that is how *ktisis* is being used here.

However, I believe there are indications within Scripture beyond Rom 8 that indicate that the death of animals *is* a moral problem, and that their death—indeed, their present behavior as manifested in the predator/prey relationship—is tied directly to the acts of humanity, especially the human disobedience that led to the Fall. Insights into this issue come from two studies—the one by Doukhan (mentioned above) and another by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, an Israeli scholar. We will begin with Frymer-Kensky, whose study into the cause of the Flood provides valuable insights into human/animal behavior prior to the Flood. According to Frymer-Kensky:

Genesis states explicitly that God decided to destroy the world because of the wickedness of *man* (Gen 6:5). Although this traditionally has been understood to mean that God destroyed the world as a punishment for mankind’s sins, this understanding of the passage entails serious theological problems, such as the propriety of God’s destroying *all life* on earth because of the sins of man.¹²

She is arguing that rather than the sins of man, it was the shedding of blood—the flood was not so much punishment as a cleaning act.

However, Frymer-Kensky goes on to answer this dilemma by noting that “Genesis also states that God brought the flood because the world was full of *ḥāmās*.” The word *ḥāmās* is a fascinating word. It may sound familiar because its Arabic cognate is essentially the same word as the name for a militant branch

¹² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1–9,” *Biblical Archeologist* 40/4 (1977): 150.

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of a Palestinian political group that employs terrorism to achieve its political goals. This word is usually translated into English as “violence,” but as Frymer-Kenski points out, the term is very complex, with a wide range of meanings that render normal lexical analysis insufficient. Rather, she employs a semantic analysis to more fully grasp the nature of this evil that was so great, it necessitated the Flood. Semantic analysis includes a close examination of the context in which the word is used. This includes the context of not only the biblical text, but also its extra-biblical parallels, such as the Atrahasis Epic.

Frymer-Kensky points out that in both the Atrahasis Epic and Genesis 1–11 “solutions” are proposed to deal with “the problem of man” to keep these problems from reoccurring.

However, since the problems are perceived as quite different in each of these primeval histories, the solutions are likewise different. In Atrahasis, the problem is overpopulation, and the solution involves ways of inhibiting human reproduction.¹³ In Genesis the problem is *ḥāmās*, and the solution involves inhibiting the reoccurrence of *ḥāmās*. What, precisely, is *ḥāmās*? Frymer-Kensky shows us that the answer to the problem is in the solution. In the case of Gen 1–11, the solution is provided in the laws that God established immediately after the Flood—the so-called “Noahide” laws.

According to Genesis 9, God issued three commandments to Noah and his sons immediately after the flood: (1) he commanded man to be fruitful, to increase, multiply and swarm over the earth; (2) he announced that although man may eat meat he must not eat animals alive (or eat the blood, which is tantamount to the same thing—Gen 9:4); and (3) he declared that no one, neither beast nor man, can kill a human being without forfeiting his own life, providing for the execution of all killers, “whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.”¹⁴

That animals are included in the new law implementing capital punishment is an indictment of the role they played in bringing *ḥāmās* into the world. In short, *ḥāmās* involved violent bloodshed. The world had descended into an environment of wanton mayhem, indiscriminate killing, wherein humans were killing humans, humans were killing animals (and eating them alive), and animals were killing humans (and no doubt eating them!). While the text does not specifically address this, animals were no doubt killing and eating other animals. It had literally become a dog eat dog world.

Frymer-Kensky’s emphasis is on how blood shed through violent acts—*ḥāmās*—pollutes and how the flood cleansed the earth from the pollution of

¹³ Anne Kilmer, “The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and its Solution as Represented in the Mythology,” *Orientalia* 41 (1972): 160–77; William J. Moran, “The Babylonian Story of the Flood [review article],” *Biblica* 40 (1971): 51–61; cited in Frymer-Kensky, 149.

¹⁴ Frymer-Kensky, 152.

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ḥāmās—the blood spilled through acts of violence. However, the point I would like to highlight is that this act of *ḥāmās* was *not* perpetrated solely by mankind—rather, it was also perpetrated by the animal kingdom. It is the actions of man *and* beast that call forth the judgment of the Flood—not simply that of man alone. Neither are acting in the manner ordained to them by God at the time of their initial creation. What was this manner?

My colleague Jacques Doukhan describes both the relationship of man and animal and the nature of their behavior as they were ordained by God during Creation week.¹⁵ Doukhan points out that the Hebrew verb *radah* (to have dominion), which is used to express man's special relationship to the animal, "is a term which belongs to the language of the suzerain-vassal covenant without any suggestion of abuse or cruelty. In the parallel text of Gen 2, man's relationship to nature is also described in the positive terms of covenant. Man gives names to the animals and not only indicates thereby the establishment of a covenant between him and them, but also declares his lordship over them. That death and suffering are *not* part of this relationship is clearly suggested in Genesis 1, where man's dominion over the animals is directly associated with the question of food source. The food provided, both for man and animal, is to be that produced from plants, not animals (cf. Gen 1: 28–30). In Gen 2 the same peaceful harmony lies in the fact that animals are designed to provide companionship for man, even if neither complete nor adequate (Gen 2:18).

In view of the acknowledged polemic nature of Gen 1–11 vis-à-vis Mesopotamian primeval histories, it is interesting to note that the nature of the man/animal relationship in Genesis is just the *opposite* of that of the Sumerian account (known as the Eridu Genesis). According to the latter, it is said that before the Flood, mankind "did not have to fear attacks from animals; however, there was no control of animals" (i.e. domestication).¹⁶ This is quite the opposite of how the Bible describes the antediluvian world—a world in which the animal kingdom is in rebellion, and the peaceful relationship between man and beast and beast with beast has broken down—not only were humans killing each other, but animals were killing humans as well.

In essence, *ḥāmās* represents the complete breakdown of the covenant that God had established between *man and the animal kingdom* in Genesis 1:28–30. Rather than the peaceful, non-predatory world where man rules over the animals as a benevolent lord and the only food sources for both are plants, *ḥāmās* signals a planet in rebellion in which man no longer rules and the animals no longer submit; both are now locked into a mutually aggressive relationship of kill or be killed, and the mouths of both are stained with the blood of each other. This is not to say that the violence did not include humans killing each other (murder);

¹⁵ Doukhan, 16–18.

¹⁶ William J. Moran, "The Babylonian Story of the Flood [review article]," *Biblica* 40 (1971): 51–61.

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it certainly included that, but the bloodshed goes well beyond that, extending into the animal kingdom itself. It also includes the emergence of a carnivorous appetite—a taste for blood—on the part of both man and beast. Hence we can understand the stern new prohibitions that God places upon both man and beast after the Flood subsides.

God attempts to reduce the aggressiveness of the animal kingdom towards man by proclaiming: “The fear of you and terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea . . . “ God condescends towards man by allowing him to eat flesh, “every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you as I gave the green plant.” However, God prohibits the eating of animals alive or eating their blood, “only *you shall not eat flesh with its life—that is the blood.*” God then institutes capital punishment for *both man and beast* in the event that either kill a human being, “Surely I will require your life blood; [and] from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man: whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God he made man.” As Frymer-Kensky points out, these latter commands are to reduce the possibility that *ḥāmās* —the polluting of the earth by the indiscriminate and wanton shedding of blood—will again appear on the earth.

I would also emphasize that the significance of this OT understanding of *ḥāmās* from the time of Noah did not simply fade away in later biblical times. Indeed, it continued to be embedded within later OT laws and, according to Frymer-Kensky, was still significant during the time of the New Testament church—they were seen as Pre-Jewish and, hence, universal.¹⁷

It is important to note that these Noahide prohibitions did not restore earth to its pre-Fall state. The benevolent lordship and peaceful relationship between man and beast described in Gen 1:28–30 no longer existed—the covenant was broken. The strife and competition that emerged between man and the former subjects of his kingdom continues, although animals now fear mankind. The food source for both man and beast was no longer restricted to plants—*both* now

¹⁷ According to Frymer-Kensky, in Acts 15, when the early church is wrestling with the problem of whether or not Gentiles who wish to join the Christian church should be circumcised, the decision of James is that circumcision will not be required; however, Gentiles are still instructed to abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from eating blood, from things strangled, and from fornication. Many commentators carelessly assume that James has made a compromise solution here—the Jewish ritual of circumcision will be dropped, but other Jewish requirements will be continued. However, these three continuing requirements were not merely Jewish ritual laws that the church was slow to drop. Rather, they were understood by the early Christian church to transcend Judaism; they originated not with Moses, but in the earlier Noahide commandments and were believed to be applicable to all peoples and cultures. They were certainly to be required of all believers as long as sin reigns on the earth. The Jews understood these three prohibitions to protect against the “three cardinal sins . . . offenses from which all the nations must refrain”—“murder, idolatry, and sexual abominations” (154).

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ate flesh, although mankind was prohibited from eating the blood—and the killing of humans by both other humans and animals was explicitly prohibited and to be punished by death. These latter restrictions were intended to reduce the negative impact of the Fall on nature by restricting in the strongest possible way (through capital punishment) the savagery of *ḥāmās*.

The emergence of *ḥāmās* introduces a *new* element that appears in the post-Fall world that was *not* part of the original creation. The repeated pictures throughout the OT of a New Earth must be seen within the context of *ḥāmās*. The new world order is a world in which man no longer strives with nature. Rather, the peaceful coexistence that pertained to the edenic world is seen as restored. It is not just coincidence that these utopian descriptions are linked to yearnings for deliverance from a strife-torn world. Thus, we read passages such as Isa 11:6–9:

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy shall lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Post-script—Two “Problem” Texts

Isaiah 65. Some suggest that Isa 65:20 indicates that the ancient Hebrews believed there would be death in the New Earth:

No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought accursed.

The key to understanding this passage is (as is often the case) the context. The expressions in Isa 65 are not really metaphorical; rather, they are idiomatic. That is, they are idioms that are familiar and appropriate to the historical circumstances that Israel found itself in, when this passage was penned. What was that situation? Israel was facing annihilation from invading powers (due to their rebellion against God).

Idioms can contain literal elements with regards to the immediate historical context. For example, building houses and having others inhabit them, or planting a vineyard and having another reap the harvest was a very real concern in Iron Age Israel, which found itself constantly under attack from outside invaders. Premature death was also associated with warfare and siege conditions. The key is verse 23, where it summarizes the preceding verses by proclaiming that God's people will *not* labor in vain or bear children for calamity. The threats of the past—including very real threats that Israel was confronting, such as siege

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warfare—will *not* exist in the new earth. Verse 20 is not saying people won't live forever in the new earth; rather, it is saying they will not be subject to the ravages of conflict that characterized their present existence.

The anti-strife message of verses 19–22 is capped off in verse 25, where the wolf and the lamb will graze together and the lion will eat straw like the ox. This verse stands apart from 19–22 in that it is not describing the ravages of war; rather it is simply describing a new world order that will *not* be characterized by strife. It is interesting that it does not say the Babylonian will get along with the Israelite—even though this is certainly included. But the new world order extends to *all* aspects of God's domain, including *nature*—"they will do no evil or harm in *all* My holy mountain," says the Lord.

By failing to view this passage in its historical context, I believe critics miss the idiomatic characteristic of the verses. The point is *not* that we might or might not build houses in the New Earth, but that others won't take them from us *in battle*. The point is *not* that we might or might not plant vineyards in the New Earth, but that others won't deprive us of the fruits of our labors *through conflict*. And finally, the point does *not* concern the nature and/or length of life in the new earth, but that the *deadly conflict* that typified Israel's existence *will no longer claim life*.

In short, the nature and/or length of life in the New Earth is *not* the point of Isa 65—only that life won't be lost through conflict. The reference in v. 22b to the days of his people being like the lifetime of a tree can actually be viewed as a symbol of eternal life. To argue that Isa 65 envisions death in the New Earth is not only incorrect, but is completely missing the point of the passage. Other passages, of course are more explicit about eternal life.

Isaiah 25:8: He will swallow death forever. He will wipe the tears from all faces. The reproach of his people he will remove from all the earth.¹⁸

Daniel 12:2–3: Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.¹⁹

Psalm 104. There is no question that Psalm 104 is a Creation Psalm. Some suggest, however, that Psalm 104 teaches that *death* was a part of the original creation (the implication that animal death is not tied to the Fall and could have, therefore, existed for some considerable time [millions of years?] before the Fall, which then brought death to humans as well). One of my problems with this interpretation is that it erroneously (in my opinion) assumes that Psalm 104 is describing the *pristine* creation—God's creation as it was after the first week, but before the Fall. I disagree. There is no doubt that Psalm 104 is a Creation

¹⁸ Some critics, not surprisingly, suggest that the line "He will swallow death forever" is not original in this passage (Bailey, 73). Bailey himself questions whether this line was a literal expectation or simply poetic exaggeration.

¹⁹ Again, most critics dismiss this passage as a late 2nd century text.

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Psalm, but its intent was *not* to describe the pristine, pre-Fall creation. Rather, its point is simply to give God credit for the Creation as it was at the time of the Psalmist!

There are several indicators that it is the Psalmist's *contemporary* world of creation that is being described: (1) the reference to the Cedars of Lebanon (v. 16), which would only be important and of interest to Israel during the Iron Age; (2) ships sailing on the seas (v. 26)—ships were certainly not part of the original pristine creation, but were a major component of Iron Age Israel's economy; (3) earthquakes and volcanoes (v. 32) were typically instruments of God's judgment in the *post-Fall world*—many earthquakes were well known during the time of Israel, although these would certainly not be limited to that time period (the Psalmist is giving credit to God for His *power* over His own creation here); (4) the writer's appeal to God that sinners, who were unfortunately part of God's creation as it was at the time the Psalmist was writing, be consumed and the wicked be no more (v. 35). This latter statement makes no sense in a pristine, pre-Fall world.

Within the context of these indicators that show it is the *Psalmist's world* that is being described and *not* the pristine, unfallen world, the references to "beasts of the forest that prowl" about and "young lions roaring after their prey" make perfect sense. God's creative acts penetrate the fallen world—He is still the Creator, even of this Fallen world.

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