

Chapter 3 – Other red herrings

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven; see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys: having such a reverent esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels. The bride of a monarch, in her husband's chamber, hath no such causes of delight as you.

Thomas Traherne¹

All flesh corrupt

In this chapter I will look at the main Scriptures outside the creation and garden narratives that are used to argue for a “fallen Creation”. The first passage is still in Genesis, and is occasionally used to support the corruption of the natural world. It is the preamble to the flood narrative in Genesis 6. As the KJV puts it:

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.

And God said unto Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold I will destroy them with the earth.²

The interpretation would be that not just man, but the whole of nature, has become wicked and violent, so that the animals, now addicted to hunting and killing, have to be destroyed too. There is already some sleight-of-hand going on in that, simply from ignoring the previous verses. To begin with, the cumulative narrative since the exile from the garden has been all about the increase in *human* violence. Then ch.6 begins with the mysterious episode of the marriage of the “sons of God” with “the daughters of men”, and with the possibly linked stories of giants. Clearly, God disapproves, because he first limits “the days” of mankind, probably by announcing the date for judgement rather than the reduced age of people, and then (in the same KJV version):

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.³

¹ Traherne, Thomas (1636-1674), *Centuries of Meditations* (New York: Cosimo Classics 2007) 1/7, p.19.

² Gen. 6.11-13.

³ Gen. 6.5-8.

So it is man's wickedness that causes both the human and animal death in the Flood, and the man Noah who is shown grace by being saved, and through him the others on the ark. In any case, a brief consideration of the story shows that an "evil natural world" cannot be the real issue. In the first place, the blame for the corruption is laid at the feet of "all flesh", which immediately excludes the inanimate world, not to mention the thorns and thistles of Gen. 3.18 (remember that vegetation is part of the environment of day 3, not of the functionaries of day 6). Volcanoes and hurricanes are exempted from all blame! And so are sea creatures, which are, literally, in their element during the Flood.

In the second place, if the "corruption" and "violence" referred to the proliferation of life-forms exhibiting adaptations for predation, parasitism and so on, then it is immediately apparent that bringing a breeding colony of them into the ark would have no remedial effect whatsoever. Predators and parasites would simply emerge from the ark to breed true "after their kinds".

I don't want to attempt a complete commentary on the significance of the flood story here, but most of the problems it holds regarding "fallen creation" are solved once one follows the modern translations in interpreting "all flesh" as "all Adam's descendants" (eg NIV: "all people"). It is human sin that leads to human violence, and although a major point of the story is to show that even Noah remains tainted with sin (witness his later drunkenness), it is a lot more plausible for the narrative to suggest the possibility of purifying the race from evil, by preservation of a righteous man, than purification of creation from predation, through rescuing carnivores. In any case, it is not only carnivores, but gentle herbivores too, that were destroyed in the Flood.

The question does indeed remain of why God should wipe out the animals, and indeed the whole landscape, because of human sin, but it's a question that the idea of a fallen natural world does nothing to answer at all. The best explanation I have come across is the Hebrew concept of the land's being ritually polluted by the human blood shed upon it. This echoes the blood of Abel "crying from the ground" in ch.4, explains the specific link to "violence" and also makes sense of the covenant God cuts in ch.8, which is all about promising not to destroy the earth again, but demanding an individual accounting from both humans and animals that shed *human* blood, and so defile the image of God. In other words, Noah's covenant introduces the concept of individual judgement for human bloodshed, and of holding that judgement in store until the end of the age.

In a similar way Leviticus speaks of the corruption of Canaan by the detestable sexual sins of its inhabitants, and not by the actions of its animals:

*Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.*⁴

Even more germane is a passage in Numbers:

"Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed

⁴ Lev. 18.25.

it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites.”⁵

The flood itself, as virtually all commentators agree, is representative of an act of de-creation by God: he temporarily returns his world (or the polluted part of it if the flood is viewed as localised) to its original state of watery chaos before, as it were, re-creating it as the waters recede and the ark's inhabitants once more “go forth and multiply upon the earth.”

The satanic world

Although I've not seen it so used, this text from 1 John could be seen as a proof-text that the whole nature was usurped by Satan after the Fall:

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.⁶

To interpret it thus would, of course, be to deny the whole theology of nature we have seen so far in the Old Testament. But the explanation, of course, lies in what John habitually means by “the world”. In 2.15 he writes:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

A platonic, or even gnostic, dislike for the material realm could be understood here, were it not that John goes on to describe “*everything in the world*”: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It is this world of idolatrous desires that will pass away, and consistent with John's habit, “the world” in ch.5 represents the human world apart from God. It has no bearing whatsoever on created nature.

Bondage to decay

One major passage that seems on the face of things to overturn the conclusion that Creation is still “as created” is the passage in Romans 8 which speaks of the creation itself being liberated from its bondage to decay. It deserves extended treatment:

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.⁷

This would seem, on superficial reading, to refer to the curse on nature in Genesis 3 which led to death, and nature's subsequent liberation from death with the revelation of the glory of God's sons,

⁵ Num. 35.33-34.

⁶ 1 Jn. 5.19.

⁷ Rom. 8.18-22.

presumably at Christ's coming. Only we have already seen that Genesis 3 contains no such curse, making these five verses the first and only Scriptural witness to such a radical degradation of nature.

There is a rather useful principle that if a doctrine is taught at only one place in Scripture, there is a pretty good chance you've misinterpreted the passage. That is certainly the case here. It has to be questioned if a "fallen Creation" is really what Paul has in mind at all in this single instance of just five verses. There are many things within the text, in comparison with the Genesis account, which do not tie up, and which seem to point elsewhere, and particularly to Paul's innovative development of the theology of resurrection and the age to come.

The "fallen" understanding of Romans 8.21 has, in fact, conflated "decay" in the NIV with the quite separate notion of "death", and even more illegitimately, sometimes with "suffering", assuming that one means the other and that neither had any presence in creation before the fall. But whatever else one can surmise about the Edenic world, one can confidently say that decay occurred. If not, then where did plants obtain their nutrition, or where *would* they have obtained it as organic nutrients were depleted over time? What would happen to the banana skins Adam threw away, or the excrement of man and beast?

So if one attempts to relate Rom. 8 to "fallen nature" in literal biological terms, one has to explain why those innocent life-forms which depend on decay for their livelihood (the earthworms, the fungi, the very green plants that depend on decayed humus for nutrients) would not be eagerly *dreading*, rather than hoping for, the abolition of decay. Those animals which had become subject to *death* through man's sin might desire a change, but death is not mentioned in the text, and it is rather tendentious to translate "the whole creation in bondage to decay" as "animals in bondage to death."

Let us instead look at the context of the passage. Having extolled human life in the Spirit over life in the flesh, Paul turns to Christian suffering in the flesh. Our passage leads on to (and paves the way for) the assurance that nothing can separate believers from Christ's love, and the whole context of this is that our sufferings and subsequent glory reflect those of Christ. Those sufferings cover hardship and persecution, bodily privation and violence, and the opposition of spiritual powers – in other words what we might call specifically *Christian* suffering. These are the substance of our "groaning" in the Spirit (v23). There is no word there of the common problems of being mortal, except that the culmination of our hope is eternal life in Christ after physical resurrection from the dead, of which Christ himself is the forerunner.

Secondly, let us look at some key words in Paul's vocabulary.

Creation: We cannot simply *assume* that Paul means "nature" by this word. The word *ktisis* certainly covers that, but elsewhere (eg Mk. 16.15, Col. 1.23) it means the human creation only. In the immediate context of the chapter, the features of Creation to which Paul draws attention (vv.38-39) are death and life, angels and demons, present and future, all powers, height and depth. Not only are none of these mentioned in the original Genesis account of creation, but not a single one of them is subject to biological death or decay. Conversely Paul omits any reference to the ordinary animal world, or to the inanimate elements we consider most disordered and chaotic, such as earth, water and atmosphere.

Frustration: The word is *mataiotes*, occurring only twice more in the NT where it means “sinful ignorance” or “empty boasting”. However it also corresponds to the Hebrew *hebel*, which it represents in the Septuagint Greek Bible with which Paul would have been very familiar as a diaspora Jew. Mostly in the OT it has the same connotation of moral emptiness and futility, but the majority of references occur in the book of Ecclesiastes. Here it refers to the futility of all human affairs, the overall message being that God has subjected mankind to such “vanity” in the hope he will seek his purpose in God alone. In fact, Ecclesiastes is fruitfully viewed as a commentary on the effects of the Genesis Fall in the world of men. It could well be that Paul, in turn, is commenting on Ecclesiastes, in the light of the promised resurrection, by using the same keyword in Romans 8.

But in no case does the rest of Scripture use either the Greek or Hebrew words to refer to the natural world. If Paul is using it thus, he is using the word in a new way.

Hope: The usual Greek word *elpis* is used here. But who is exercising hope? If the creation is meant, it is pertinent to ask in what sense the non-human creation could be said to “hope” at all. No animal is capable of either dread or hope for the future (other than the fear of imminent death) – those things are entirely human attributes. Even if “decay” *did* indicate “death”, is it actually true to say that mortal animals, let alone the whole inanimate creation, are longing that death should cease? It would seem either that Paul is not referring to the “natural” Creation at all, or that he is personifying it for some specific reason.

But it could equally be that the “hope” is actually being exercised by the One whose will subjected it, that is God. The sense would be that it was for some future purpose (the “hope”), rather than for some past misdemeanour, that God put Creation in bondage. This is more rational, for even assuming inanimate creation to be capable of hope, then from its viewpoint it would not have been subjected, if it were corrupted by the Fall, to frustration “in hope”, but to frustration as part of man’s judgement. Creation might have (figuratively speaking) *gained* hope from the plan of salvation later revealed, but that is not what the passage says.

What is certainly clear is that the object of “this hope” in v24 means the redemption of our human bodies from sin and death, and this salvific sense is its predominant meaning throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Liberated: This word comes from the root *eleutheros*. In the NT its use is always either of liberation from human slavery, or from sin, or (by the same token) from the law. It is never used of the non-human realm, nor of death apart from as the penalty for sin. So once more, if nature is referenced, it is in some figurative personification, rather than literally.

Bondage: *Douleia* similarly, though not a common word in the New Testament, can also cover human slavery or, more commonly, bondage to the law (and through it to sin), the sense Paul gives it in v.15 of this chapter. Again, it is never used of death *per se*.

Decay: *Phthora*, decay or corruption, is again not a hugely common word in the New Testament. The New Testament uses it and its cognates both of biological decay and of the result of sin, and in some cases both may be meant. So in 1 Cor. 9.25 athletes compete for a *corruptible* crown, which is clearly a biological, or at least material, use. In Rom. 1.23 “images like *corruptible* men” reflects principally the mortality of man too, though perhaps hinting at moral weakness too. In 1 Cor. 15.42 & 50 the

corruption, again, is that of human mortality. Sometimes, but not in Paul, a purely moral/spiritual corruption is meant (Jude v.10; 1 Pet. 3.4; 2 Pet. 1.4; 2.12; 2.19). Paul's own use of the word, however, is always to do with mortality, not immorality.

Yet it is not without significance that this word is the one used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew *shachath*, which as we saw earlier in this chapter carries the sense both of human sinful corruption and of *ritual pollution* of the land consequent to this. Most notably, this is its sense in Genesis where it occurs three times in 6.11-12 and nowhere else. This triple repetition emphasises that the "whole land/earth" had become corrupt, and that "*all flesh had corrupted his way*" (KJV) upon the land/earth. As the NIV recognises by translating this phrase "*all the people*", human sin and ritual pollution, rather than the presence of biological decay or natural evil, is meant in this passage. It would in any case be foolish for God to judge this latter sort of corruption if, indeed, he had deliberately subjected the earth to it according to Romans 8.

All these key words, then, are used elsewhere often, and in some cases virtually exclusively, of the world of men, and particularly of the human moral and spiritual sphere. We ought certainly to be cautious of the assumption that in this passage alone they are used of the physical effects of the fall on non-human creation, especially when the surrounding context deals entirely with the realm of the Spirit and salvation from sin.

Before suggesting what I believe to be the true import of this passage, it may be useful to cover the various ways ancient theologians viewed the passage; not that they have a unified "orthodox" view, but that they provide useful insights and, almost to a man, do *not* interpret it as evidence of a corrupted natural world as moderns do.

The next chapter consists of a study of the ancient authors on the doctrine of "fallen Creation" overall, but I think it convenient to deal with their views on this particular passage here.

Irenaeus quotes Rom. 8.21 in a discussion of the resurrection of the dead⁸. Ever the conservative exegete, he gives no direct interpretation of "creature", but does go on to use the word "creature" ("creation" in modern versions of Romans) twice of human beings in the page or so of comment. It seems clear that he assumes the human creation is the subject of the passage.

Methodius, however, does seem to apply the term to the created order as a whole. He speaks of the whole world being ordained to continue rather than be destroyed (in contradiction of heretical teaching that the physical world is temporary)⁹. The verse appears in describing the created order's intrinsic material corruptibility and mortality, and its future transformation to incorruptibility. There is no reference to sin in his treatment.

Archelaus, also dealing with heretics, alludes to our passage in his fragmentary *Disputation with Manes* when he writes: "*Then the universal creation will be moved and perturbed, uttering prayers and supplications, until he delivers it from its bondage.*" By this he clearly implies the rational creation (capable of prayers and supplications), and probably the human rather than the angelic.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.* V. XXXVI.3.

⁹ Methodius, *Discourse on the Resurrection* VI.

Origen is characteristically influenced by Platonic ideas of the inferiority of matter to spirit, and comes at the passage in a rather left-field way from our point of view, though striving, he says, to teach “*what is in accordance to the creed of the church*”. Ours is actually quite a favourite text of his, quoted several times. In *De Principiis*¹⁰ he is discussing rational beings, both corporeal and incorporeal. Largely this is to discountenance any pagan tendency to worship the heavenly bodies as gods, on the grounds that they too are created rational beings. He reasons that in Rom. 8 “creature” signifies the sun, moon & stars, because they are clothed with bodies, and set apart to the office of giving light to the human race. His point seems to be that Paul mentions them as the greatest of the non-human creation. The “vanity” to which they have been subjected, he suggests, is simply their corporeal nature “*as a kind of burden which enfeebles the vigour of the soul.*”

In other words, his contrast (whilst couched in Platonic, anti-corporeal thought) is between the corruptible first creation and the transformed creation in Christ – not between a good creation corrupted by sin and then restored by Christ. The same emphasis occurs in his other uses of the text.¹¹

John Chrysostom in his commentary on Romans, in contrast to the others, does suggest that the personification of creation in Romans 8 is a literary technique signifying the lower (irrational) creation’s bondage to corruption because of man’s sin. This he sees, however, as God’s work “intended for our correction.” Questioning the unfairness of this apparently unjust action of God’s, he argues that creation has had no wrong done to it for (a) it was made on our account anyway (b) there is no evil involved to a creation “void of soul and feeling” and (c) it will eventually become once more incorruptible for our sake. You’ll note that even in Chrysostom the modern idea of the Devil’s agency in nature’s change is completely absent. Also note that the “corruptibility” of the whole created order rather than “animal death” is his concern, though that might well be included.

Augustine returns to the more common (in those days) interpretation of “creature” as the rational creation, and in his case he means the human creation in the sense of “the whole human being”. One modern source summarises his interpretation:¹²

Augustine understands this verse [8.22] to refer to the entire human being, which includes body, soul and mind and in this sense “all creation”, on the grounds that the text says “omni creatura”, not “tota creatura” (De diu. quaest. 67,5). The former adjective is understood distributively, as applying to all created things which have body and soul and mind, and only human beings meet this definition; the latter adjective is understood collectively, as applying to all created things without restriction. According to this interpretation creation in its entirety is subjected to vanity, ie to earthly change and vulnerability, but in hope of resurrection (Exp. prop. Rom. 53; De diu. quaest. 67).

In summary, then, the early interpretation of Romans 8 is pretty varied, but refers in most cases (a) to some aspect of the rational creation, rather than to nature and (b) to the corruptibility inherent in our material condition rather than to the effects of the fall, Chrysostom being the only exception.

¹⁰ Origen, *De Principiis* 1, VII.5.

¹¹ *De Principiis* II.IX.7; III.V.1; III.V.4; *Contra Celsum* V.XIII; VII.LXVI; VIII.5.

¹² Patte, Daniel and TeSelle, Eugene, *Engaging Augustine on Romans* (London, Continuum-3PL, 2003)

Martin Luther: taking one example only from a much later age (the age, as I shall argue, in which the “fallen Creation” teaching first took hold) Luther has a rather ambiguous attitude to the question of a fallen creation, and his *Lectures on Romans* gives probably his most mixed message about it. Interestingly he starts by saying that most interpreters of the passage take it to refer to humanity (not nature) as the “creature”. For himself, he prefers to see it as nature, subjected to vanity by humanity. Yet he mainly attributes this vanity not to a change of nature’s character, but to the misuse of nature by man (in a rather novel understanding uncongenial to the “traditional view”), for he says:

*For all that God made “was very good” (Gen. 1.31) and is good to this day.*¹³

Its redemption he takes to mean a restoration of its proper use by man, which is not inconsistent with the Patristic views we have seen. Yet he also condemns philosophers and theologians for talking of nature’s felicity and not perceiving its mourning and sighing, and fields the idea (admitting it to be without Scriptural proof) that the sun was brighter before the Fall. Yet even this relatively late interpretation is a far cry from the almost universal assumption now that Paul teaches that nature has been rendered evil by the Fall, and is groaning to be purified at the second coming of Christ.

What are we to conclude from all this? Certainly not that nature is corrupted by the Fall, which is neither warranted by the text nor understood by all but a small minority of earlier interpreters. It seems to me that we should understand it in the context of Paul’s understanding of the cosmic effect of Christ’s resurrection, or in other words the “new heavens and new earth” first taught in Isaiah.

To Paul, the victory of Christ brings more than just a return to the innocence of the first Creation. It replaces the kind of life that is of the earth with the life that is of heaven. This is most fully expounded in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus was raised, in his human body, as the firstfruits of a new kind of life, the spiritual rather than the natural. Likewise, in the resurrection those in Christ become eternal and imperishable:

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

*I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*¹⁴

¹³ Luther, Martin, *Lectures on Romans* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1961), p.238.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 15.42-51

If the kingdom, to Paul, cannot be inherited by the perishable, it follows that the new heavens and the new earth, which constitute the “*home of righteousness*”¹⁵, must also become imperishable downstream of the new Creation in Christ.

And so, Paul is suggesting in Rom. 8, the natural creation (which he has personified for literary purposes) has been, from its original foundation, tied to mortality but longing for immortality, to corruption but awaiting incorruption, to the naturally-empowered (*psuchikos*) but destined for the spiritually-empowered (*pneumatikos*).

If the Fall affected this, we may surmise that it was only because the long winter of human history has delayed the spring of the world's transformation for so long. Had Adam not sinned, and had he stayed in the garden to learn wisdom (“the tree of good and evil”) from God in the shelter of immortality (“the tree of life”), it would seem that his eventual role would have been, somehow, to spread the fruit of Yahweh's garden to the whole created order long ago as the ruler and subduer of creation, in the image of God. The garden would have been a bridgehead for imperishability to the whole world.

As it is, the salvation that God has now achieved by his own arm¹⁶, through the Incarnation of Christ, is in the wisdom of God far more glorious, and perhaps even the final state more wonderful. But since what is to come is still unknown and indescribable, it is foolish to make the attempt. But what is certain is that it was not how Creation was in the first chapter of Genesis, and therefore the pre-fall state is not what is being described in Romans 8, but the result of new creation in Christ.

Wolves and lambs

This leads rather neatly to the last set of passages I will deal with, urged in support of the doctrine of a fallen natural world, which is in Isaiah. The first is in the context of a Messianic prophecy, in which the Branch of Jesse will defeat Israel's enemies and unite them, judging the wicked in favour of the righteous. It begins:

*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.¹⁷*

¹⁵ 2 Pet. 3.13.

¹⁶ Isa. 59.16

¹⁷ Isa. 11.6-9.

Isaiah 65 has similar contents, in a passage announcing the new heavens and new earth. It clearly describes the same future situation, for

*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.¹⁸*

The argument from YECs is that these passages predict a return to the original state of Eden. I guess the Old Earth argument might be that they show God's dissatisfaction with his original, fallen, creation and his desire to replace it. Certainly both passages portray a contrast between the present age and the age of Messiah.

The first comment to make is that these passages are prophetically symbolic rather than literal. This is abundantly clear from ch.65.20, which pictures the new age as free of infant mortality, yet with people dying of old age at, usually, over a hundred years old. This is pictured as a similar sign of blessing to the tamedness of wolves. So Isaiah's vision of the future age still contains human death, giving no support at all for the fictional time of deathlessness for animals claimed for the beginning. When the New Testament picks up "new earth" language, it is clearly on the understanding of eternal life and the defeat of death in the light of the Resurrection: mere longevity must therefore be a metaphor.

But for *what* are these passages metaphors? It is very clear as we dig deeper that the picture in both is of "the Great Israelite Dream" – the ideal life of an independent farmer dwelling amongst his kinsmen and cultivating his allotted land-inheritance on the slopes of Mount Zion, close to the king and to God's Temple.

The animal references must be understood in this context, rather than as a description of nature in the raw. In each case a wild animal is paired with the livestock to which, in this present age, the latter might fall prey, to the loss of the farmer. No wild herbivores are mentioned. It is more to do with the Israelite landholder dwelling in God's promised safety than the correction of a cruel natural order.

There *is* a hint of Edenic imagery in the mention of the snake, which in ch.65 eats dust (a reminder of the effectiveness of God's curse in Genesis 3) and in ch.11 is safe for a child to play with. This, I think, is intended as a *contrast* with the garden, not a return to it: in the old Eden you couldn't trust your wife with the snake, but in the new you can even let your baby play with it. But this imagery is used less in order to compare the new world with Eden than to emphasise God's new beginning: "Eden on steroids."

There is indeed a contrast, whatever the metaphorical context, between this present age and the age to come. But is there any implication that this is a contrast between a damaged creation and a repaired one? I would argue, rather, that it's a contrast between the first, good, creation and a new, better, creation. This is a progression that actually goes back to Genesis 1, and helps us understand

¹⁸ Isa. 65.25.

not why the present creation is “naturally evil”, because Scripture does not state that it is, but why it could be better than we find it.

Genesis 1 (which, remember, is a functional and anthropocentric account, not a materialist cosmology) speaks of God systematically imposing order on chaos. But when he creates man, it is not only as his image on earth but in order to “rule” and “subdue” it. Necessarily, then, it was not completely subdued already, and some elements of chaos remained.

In the context of an old earth, it is clear that the world had existed successfully without human intervention or government for billions of years, so what can this “rule” mean? The fact of the Fall into sin prevents us being able to answer this question completely from history. The workaday physical occupations of agriculture and civilisation seem to be part of it¹⁹. But could it not also be that part of man’s intended role was to “tame” the wilder aspects of nature that were acceptable and even admirable in the pre-human world, but shown to be less than a perfect expression of God’s loving nature (not to mention dangerous to man) once his viceroy appeared on the scene? Is not Genesis suggesting that God delegated the final part of the ordering and subduing of his world to mankind?

Man, though, failed to bring about any such transformation. The Bible teaches, partly through such passages as these in Isaiah, that this failure is to be corrected by the transforming work of Christ, the last Adam. He completes the work that man failed even to begin properly. So it is not that, through man’s sin, nature became corrupt and needs to be restored to Eden, but that because of man’s sin, the primeval world failed to be completed and needs the work of Christ to take it forward. Indeed, it would seem possible that in God’s economy the work Christ achieves in the creation is even beyond what man was originally commissioned to do, just as his salvation from sin takes us not back to Eden, but beyond that to the realm of the spirit where temptation can never again harm us.

Does that future include vegetarian lions? I think it is dangerous to conclude that from what is, after all, a prophetic agricultural pen-picture. Even the New Testament is careful to remain with veiled metaphor in describing the age to come. But it is even more dangerous to conclude from these two passages that non-vegetarian lions are in any sense “evil” or “fallen”, especially when Psalm 104.20 presents them as so piously seeking their food from God.

¹⁹ Middleton, J Richard, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2014) pp.41-49