

THOUGHTS ON ROMANS 8.18-27

Does “bondage to decay” signify “animal death”?

The Young Earth Creationist assumption that Scripture teaches there was no death, even of animals, before the fall, is found on close examination not to be what the creation accounts actually teach. I will not go further with that here. However, one passage that seems on the face of things to overturn this conclusion is the passage in Romans 8 which speaks of the “creation itself being liberated from its bondage to decay.” It would seem 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, presumably at Christ’s coming. If this be the correct interpretation, a New Testament witness would seem to be excluding any old earth view that presupposes the existence of animal death before mankind sinned. The Young Earth case is concluded.

But it has to be questioned if this is what Paul has in mind. There are many things within the text, in comparison to the Genesis account, which do not tie up, and which actually seem better to point elsewhere. These notes are an attempt to elucidate these, and to explore possibilities for alternative meanings.

First, though, let us examine a little more closely the stated effects of the fall in Genesis. What we are told there is that, in response to sin, God’s judgement was:

- (a) That the serpent was cursed.
- (b) That the woman was cursed in the reproductive and marital sphere. We may assume her whole gender shares this curse.
- (c) That the man (the federal head of the race and therefore considered the more guilty) was cursed in relation to food production from the ground, and in his eventual death after a life of hard toil. We may assume the whole human race shares this curse.
- (d) That the man was excluded from Eden (a very special environment, remember) to keep him from access to the tree of life. This is the origin of human death, whether that implies physical, spiritual or both.

Note that the curse of death found its fulfilment in man’s subsequent exclusion from a specific source of life (the tree of life). It would seem very reasonable that the rest of his curse may well have been linked to his expulsion, too, from the garden environment to the world outside. So man may have been exiled to the world-of-weeds, rather than weeds coming to the world *de novo*.

In other words, nothing is specifically said about damage to the created order at all, apart from the punishment of the serpent, and even that does not necessarily imply any loss of legs. Even if one were to grant that the existence of thorns and thistles was a newly formed aspect of creation, there is no warrant at all to extrapolate from there to a wholesale change in creation to produce everything we consider sub-optimal, such as predation, carnivory and parasitism, and still less the coming into being of adverse weather, earthquakes, vulcanism etc. To address a once-popular YEC theme, there is nothing at all in the curse that suggests the introduction of entropy – thorns are by no stretch of the imagination an example of energetic entropy; their nuisance to agriculture is on the contrary because of their vigorous growth.

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So there is actually nothing in Genesis 3, and certainly nothing elsewhere in Scripture, that says God performed a new act of creation in adapting animals to a fallen world. We do, on the contrary, have several passages extolling God's creation of carnivores, dangerous monsters like Leviathan, storms and earthquakes.

The specific linkage of this understanding to Romans 8.21 is that the YEC understanding has conflated "decay" with "death", assuming that both had no presence in creation before the fall. But whatever else one can say 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 in order to relate Romans 8 to "fallen nature" in literal terms, one has to admit that life-forms which depend on decay for their livelihood would *not* be eagerly awaiting the abolition of decay, but only animals which had become subject to death through man's sin. Yet no such distinction exists in the text, and it is certainly tenuous to translate "the whole creation in bondage to decay" as "animals in bondage to death."

As an aside, it is worth observing that for animals to be exempt from death before the fall, they would have needed access to the one tree of life in Eden (or else why would man require it?). A little thought will show the problems this would cause for sea creatures, protozoans and animals on the opposite side of the globe.

Having pointed out the inadequacy of the assumptions made (by most of us, it has to be said) about the Romans 8 passage, I would like to cast an equally critical gaze on the passage as a whole and show that all may not be as we like to think.

The context of the passage

Firstly, look at the context of the passage. Having extolled life in the Spirit over life in the flesh, Paul turns to Christian suffering. Our passage leads on to (and presumably 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 of the common problems of being mortal.

How would the groaning of inanimate creation about its decaying state help develop this argument? It would seem not to. Though I cannot yet say positively what the verses *do* contribute, it seems unlikely that they mean what we think they mean.

Some key words

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

Creation

We cannot actually assume that Paul means "inanimate nature" by this word. The word κτισις 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

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to which Paul draws attention (vv38-39) are death and life, angels and demons, present and future, any 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 death or biological 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 ματαιοτες, 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. Ecclesiastes is fruitfully viewed as a commentary on the effects of the Genesis fall in the world of men.

But in no case does either the Greek or Hebrew word refer to the natural world affected by the fall. If Paul is using it thus, he is teaching something absent elsewhere in Scripture.

Hope

The usual Greek word ελπις 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 – those things are entirely human attributes. If indeed “decay” does indicate “death”, is it actually true to say that even mortal animals are longing that death should cease, let alone the whole inanimate creation?

But it would be foolish to exclude some kind of figurative use here. If the trees of the field can clap their hands in the Old Testament, why should not creation be said to have hope?

It would, of course, make perfect sense if “hope” were attributed to the human or angelic creation, without having to anthropomorphise nature.

But it makes more sense to see the “hope” as being exercised by God, as the projected outcome of his subjection of creation. I know of no other reference to God’s “hoping”, and it would seem strictly speaking improper to attribute hope to the omniscient God. And yet Paul might be using the word in the sense of God’s future purpose and expectation, not yet fulfilled.

God as the one who hopes is more rational. For even assuming inanimate creation to be capable of hope, from its viewpoint it would not have been subjected, in the fall, to frustration “in hope”, but to frustration as part of man’s judgement. Creation might have *gained* hope from the plan of salvation later revealed, but that is not what the passage says.

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But if God is the one who hopes, it makes nonsense of the conventional interpretation. For God did not put creation into bondage in the hope that he would free it again, but in the hope that this bondage would contribute in some way to his plan to save mankind. Doubtless the achievement of such a great salvation would provide a reason to reverse any curse on creation, but this was not the reason for imposing the curse in the first place, nor therefore can it be the reason for God's hope in the passage.

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

Liberated

Comes from the root ελευθερος. 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 the penalty for sin.

Bondage

Δουλεια similarly, though not common 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 v15 of this chapter. Again, it is never used of mortality *per se*.

Decay

Φθορα, decay or corruption, is again not hugely common in the New Testament. Paul uses it and its cognates both of biological decay and of the result of sin, and in many cases both are clearly meant. So in 1 Cor 9.25 athletes compete for a corruptible crown, which is clearly a biological use. In Romans 1.23 "images like corruptible men" reflect both the mortality and sinfulness of man. In 1 Cor 15.42 & 50 the corruption is that of human mortality. But often a purely moral/spiritual corruption is meant (Jude 10; 1 Pet 3.4; 2 Pet 1.4; 2.12; 2.19).

Yet it is not without significance that this word is the one used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew *shachath*, which invariably carries the sense of human sinful corruption. 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" upon the land/earth. As the NIV recognises by translating this phrase "all the people", human sin, rather than the presence of decay is meant. And it would 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 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.

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Seeds of possible interpretations

If the idea of a post-fall, altered creation groaning for deliverance from death is not evidenced by the passage, then what other possible frameworks are there on which to build our interpretation?

- 1 I have heard of, but not studied, a line of interpretation that takes “creation” as Paul’s term for the nation of Israel. Though this sounds implausible at first, a number of eminent scholars have apparently argued in its favour, so it would be worthwhile interacting with their work. Were it found to be true, it would be a simple matter to apply it to this passage, and it would make a great deal of sense theologically. Imagine that, for creation, “Israel” were substituted in each place. Coming from the discussion of the new life in Christ Paul introduces Christian suffering, much of it then at the hands of the Jews (and he goes on to discuss Israel in the next chapter). Vv19-21 would then be telling how Israel, subjected by God to futility and corruption because of their disloyalty to the covenant, longs for freedom from sin, from death and from God’s disfavour. We Christians actually possess this freedom, and yet are like them groaning until it is consummated at Christ’s coming. Currently, though, this interpretation still sounds implausible to me – I stand to be corrected.
- 2 Another, related, view would be that by “creation” Paul means the totality of the human creation. In favour of this, as of the last suggestion, is Paul’s use of words that fit far more easily with man and his spiritual condition than with nature and its physical condition, as well as the context of the passage. In this case it would be the curse on man in Eden that produced the frustration and ongoing corruption (original sin and death), and the hope of salvation that was the direct reason for doing so. Rom 11.32 would be a summary of this. The drawback of this suggestion, in my view, is that although mankind in general is certainly groaning at his lot, it is far from clear that the majority are “waiting in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”
- 3 A third, related, possibility is that Paul combines both Israel and the Gentiles in this brief passage. The common sinfulness of the two apparently disparate groups has, after all, appeared from the start of the letter, and gets detailed treatment in ch 9-11. In this case one could take both the fall in Eden and the failure of Israel to be freed by the law as the “bondage to decay”, and treat v19 as referring mainly to Israel.
- 4 My next suggestion is that a figurative treatment of the non-human creation *is*, indeed, intended by Paul. But in view of the difficulties mentioned above, it could not refer to a supposed bondage to death, predation, volcanic upheaval and the like imposed by God after the fall – there is just insufficient evidence for this in Scripture, let alone in science. But the prophets are full of the concept of this world being restored not to its original state, but into a wholly new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, as Isaiah puts it. Paul takes up this theme in more than one place, with his emphasis being on the physical being replaced by the spiritual. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit” not only because it is sinful, but because it *is* flesh and blood. Adam was a flesh and blood creature, so had he not sinned, would he have attained to the spiritual eternal life achieved by union with the only Son of God? It is speculation to ask, but it is clear

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that God intended to achieve something greater than his original creation despite, and even through, the catastrophe of sin. In this sense the original creation, though “good¹”, was originally created in bondage to the physical and corruptible. Man’s sin hindered any change in that situation except for the worse. Figuratively the physical creation would be groaning to become the spiritual creation, already exemplified in the sons of God, and even more so as it witnesses the ungodly blot of man’s sin on the earth.

However this interpretation seems to me to deal rather inadequately with the problem of the “human” terminology referred to above.

- 5 Lastly another suggestion (not mine) is that “bondage to corruption” refers to the shed blood and decay which fallen man has forced the creation to bear. This would directly parallel the blood of Abel crying out to God from the ground in Gen 4, the pollution of the land by Canaanite sin, etc. This would be a variation, and can easily be understood as a component of, suggestion 4. The more I study this the more sense it makes, for close examination of the Flood story suggests the earth may have been corrupted by the blood shed on it (eg by Cain, Lamech) and therefore needed to be cleansed. This view is endorsed in the Noahic covenant, which has to do with shedding human blood. Such a theme is common in Jewish thought (eg the land “vomiting out its inhabitants” because of their perversion). The corruption of the earth through perversion, bloodshed and idolatry since the flood would certainly cause it to groan if Abel’s blood alone caused it to cry out! Paul, then, may well have been picking up on a Flood motif.

Conclusion

My conclusion at this stage is that I have not come to a conclusion. But it’s early days. It was the findings of science that forced me to look at this passage anew. But it is the internal and Scriptural evidence that leads me to conclude that, at least, the conventional interpretation is inadequate. As I finish this paper, I am most drawn to Suggestion 3, with Suggestion 4 as a second option. That might change.

[The Hump of the Camel](#)

¹ “Good” really means “suited to its purpose.” Insisting it means “perfect” is a modern interpolation. The fact that it needed to be subdued by man shows that there was room for improvement.