

BY MAN CAME DEATH....

by R H Johnston

Introduction

This research note explores the biblical evidence¹ concerning the introduction of death into the world, and the associated question of meat-eating both for man and animals. Much of this material differs from commonly accepted opinions, and the reader is therefore particularly reminded to search the scriptures to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11).

The Creation was "very good", but not "perfect"

The process of creation in Genesis 1 is punctuated by statements that what God had created was "good" on six occasions (on days 1,3(twice),4,5,6), concluding with the statement that it was all "very good" (day 6).

Note that this creation was not said to be "excellent", still less was it "perfect". Biblically there is no such thing as created perfection: perfection is only achieved after a process of maturation or bringing to completion, as a concordance study of the word "perfect" shows. Even Christ Himself is said to have been "made perfect" through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). Only when this perfection process is complete does the thing being perfected become incapable of failure - the hallmark of true perfection. As the Fall was to show, the potentiality of the creation for failure was then all too real. Moreover the creation was by nature earthly, and not heavenly (1 Corinthians 15:47), and not the intended final result (1 Corinthians 15:50).

The creation was not even excellent. Some aspects of the creation even appear to have been less than "good" - the work of day 2, the creation of the heavens with the waters above and below, is not described as good (Genesis 1:6-8). Perhaps this was because these arrangements were inherently unstable: they were responsible for Noah's Flood (Genesis 7:11).

¹ The paper is written from a literalist perspective on the early chapters of Genesis. Even if Genesis is regarded instead as a "worldview" book – that is a book intended to express the worldview of the Hebrew people, to reveal their God, their origins, ancestry and their place in the (Middle eastern) world at a later period - it still reflects the Biblical understanding of how death entered the world. And consequently Genesis is the basis upon which the NT understands death's origin and consequently how its effects are undone in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Is Man's Fall immediately responsible for the introduction of all death?

Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 make man responsible for the introduction of death. Romans 5:12 says (NASB), "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned -", whilst 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 reads, "For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive." In view of the importance of the subject, it is perhaps surprising that no other scriptures deal directly with the introduction of death into the world.

Although some people believe that these scriptures make man responsible for the introduction of death to *all* living things, such a view cannot be sustained. The issue being dealt with in these passages is our spiritual redemption (see also 1 Corinthians 15:54-57), the undoing of our death in the sense of our separation from God, and *this context limits the discussion to the introduction of death for human beings*. If the passages were interpreted more widely, Christ's redemptive purpose would need to extend to "make alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22) the animal kingdom generally, which is implausible: such a wide interpretation of the scope of the atonement receives no support elsewhere in the New Testament.

It is certainly true, of course, that as the consequence of man's sin, the land-living animals, apart from those saved in the Ark, perished in Noah's Flood (Genesis 6:17, 7:23). But this does not prove that animals had been immortal at any time before this. The first recorded death of an animal is (presumably) at Genesis 3:21, since Adam and Eve were clothed by God in animal skin. Thus the Fall of man was responsible for the *killing* of these particular animals. But it would be unreasonable to conclude from this that animal mortality *from natural causes* started at the time of the Fall and was the direct consequence of it. (There is a vast difference between dying from natural causes and being violently killed.)

The nature of the serpent was changed as a result of the Fall (Genesis 3:14-15), though the nature of the prophecy, especially in Genesis 3:15, makes it unclear whether this is really intended to be a curse on an animal kind rather than a curse on Satan who had appeared in that guise.

Even the thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18) which were to become a trial to Adam's husbandry may have already existed, since the main point being made there is that Adam would now have to work hard for his food against opposition, rather than simply pick it off a tree in the garden of Eden. There is more than a hint from the way it is expressed, that the curse pronounced upon the ground (Genesis 3:17) may have been indirect, the consequence of being given up to fallen Adam's activities upon it. (Such a view is consistent with what we know of ecology.)

Although God may have caused physical changes to animal and plant life in direct consequence of the Fall, this cannot be definitely established from the biblical evidence. In fact, such a hypothesis, which is in any case difficult to reconcile with the finished creation declared in Genesis 2:2, is unnecessary. It seems more likely that such changes as did take place were more the consequence of the creation being given up by God to futility (Romans 8:20), by means of man's Fall and his consequently barred access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24), with the result that man could no longer fulfil his creation role as ruler (Genesis 1:28) and cultivator and keeper of the natural world (Genesis 2:15). Man had failed to subdue the rebellion within his domain by the serpent (Genesis 3), and the rest of the natural world appears to have become progressively more anarchic after the Fall as a result of the lack of an effective ruler (Hebrews 2:5-8). Isaiah 11:6-9, especially verse 6, lends support to this view.

Evidence for death before the Fall

Moreover Genesis 2:17 makes it very probable that death (though, it must be emphasised, probably not *violent* death) had already occurred prior to the Fall. Unless this statement were meaningful to Adam - that is that Adam properly understood the concept of "death" - then there was hardly any point in telling him disobedience would have death as its consequence. Moreover, he might then have had a justifiable complaint of injustice against God that he did not realise the important implications of breaking the commandment. Whether the "death" he knew of was limited to the now non-existence of fruit he had eaten, or whether it included the death of animals, can only be a matter of speculation: there is no hard evidence. However it should be noted that in scripture only man and animals are said to possess life: moreover although vegetable matter could be free-will offerings to God, only animals were acceptable for atoning sacrifices. Whatever "death" did include must have been sufficient to provide a satisfactory analogue of what Adam would suffer if he broke the commandment. On the basis of this verse, the fact that biblical "life" is confined to man and animals, and these sacrificial principles, it seems probable that only animal death could have provided an adequate object lesson.

Genesis 3:22 lends further support, for this verse suggests that before the Fall, Adam had only the *potential* to live indefinitely, this being dependent on his eating from the tree of life. (We shall see below from the New Testament, that this eating must have been an on-going experience.) He was not *inherently* immortal: his immortality was dependent on his continuously drawing on the life of God, symbolised in the need to eat from the tree of life. Human death is thus revealed as the consequence of the separation from the tree of life, and from God, the source of life. Adam was separated from the source of life on the day he disobeyed the commandment, and the process of his dying began, so fulfilling the (otherwise curiously phrased) prophecy that "in the day that you eat from it,

dying you will die" (Genesis 2:17 (literal)). This parallels the New Testament teaching about receiving and maintaining our spiritual life in Christ. Jesus described himself as "the bread of life", and John, by his careful use of the Greek tenses in John 6:27- 40, makes clear this coming to Jesus and believing and feeding on Him in order to have eternal life has to be an on-going rather than a once and for all experience (cf. the need to "abide", John 15:6). This is confirmed by the continuing presence of the tree of life in the eternal City, in Revelation 22:2, after many other things have become superfluous (Revelation 21:22,23; 22:5).

It hardly needs to be said that if Adam was not inherently immortal before the Fall, then it must be true, *a fortiori*, that the animals were not immortal. Since some animals have short lives, it was probably not difficult for God to find a suitable object lesson when he gave Adam the command.

Food and carnivorism - man

The originally assigned food for man was the plants yielding seed that are on the surface of the earth, and trees which have fruit yielding seed (Genesis 1:29). This was changed to "the plants of the field" (Genesis 3:18) following the Fall, and later extended to meat eating after Noah's Flood (Genesis 9:3). However since Abel was a keeper of flocks (Genesis 4:2), it seems probable that men were eating animals very soon after the Fall (N.B. Abel's offering was a free-will present (Strong's 4503), which was probably eaten (cf. Leviticus 10:12), *not* a whole burnt offering for atonement (Strong's 5903) like that offered after the Flood by Noah (Genesis 8:20)). The command to Noah to take seven pairs of clean animals as opposed to one pair of the unclean (Genesis 7:2-3) lends further support to the view that man was already eating meat before the Flood.

Food and carnivorism - animals

The food for animals was originally wider in scope - "every green plant" (Genesis 1:30) - but there is no record of when this became extended to the wide range of plants and animals which animals eat today. It would appear from the very limited number of animals of each type taken into the ark (Genesis 6:19-20) and the form of the command concerning food supply (Genesis 6:21) that all the animals which entered Noah's Ark were then at least *capable* of existing on a vegetarian diet, even if they did not normally do so. (Even today some animals that are normally carnivorous can survive on a vegetarian diet.) Later it was stated (Isaiah 11:6-9) that it would be a sign of the Messiah's rule when once again the animals become strictly vegetarian.

The time when some animals became carnivorous cannot be ascertained from scripture. Probably some animals simply followed the example already provided

by man. A possible time was following the Flood. Genesis 9:2 records that the animals became fearful of man at this point, and, combined with the great food stress which must have arisen during and following the Flood, it seems possible that it was at this point that animals developed their fear of each other, and some became carnivorous. That food stress may have been partly responsible for carnivorism in animals is speculative, but it compares with the biblical human parallel of people eating their children and other unusual foods in time of siege (Deuteronomy 28:52-57).

It is not entirely clear whether the animals were designed from the beginning with the potential for carnivorism, or whether God made deliberate structural changes to them later. Apart from the doubtfully relevant reference in Genesis 3:14 discussed above, there is no evidence that God *directly* interfered with the design of the animals or of man at any time after He completed their creation. Indeed, as already mentioned, Genesis 2:2 would seem to preclude this. It would therefore seem that the potentiality, at least, to develop carnivorism was built into the original design of some animals at creation. The genetically based selective process taking place within the biblical kinds may then have been sufficient to lead to the hunting instincts and meat-eating behaviour now characteristic of carnivorous animals.

Conclusion

We should beware claiming a greater initial quality of creation, or a wider effect of the Fall and the Flood than that which can be sustained by the plain statement of scripture. It is possible to account for the present futility of the created world by the separation of man from the tree of life and his associated failure to exercise dominion over creation. Hence, after God finished His work in Genesis 2:2, He did not need to make any creative adjustments to His Creation to deal with the consequences of the Fall.

Man is responsible (in Adam) for his own death, both his physical death, and his separation from God. Man was not created *inherently* immortal, but was capable of living for ever by virtue of his continuing reliance upon the fruit of the tree of life.

Man was probably not responsible for animals being subject to death from natural causes, since this process probably pre-dates the Fall. Man is, however, undoubtedly responsible for the judgement of God in the time of Noah which led to the violent deaths of all but the few land animals and birds which were saved in the Ark.

At creation all animals and man were intended to be vegetarian, but some appear to have had the *potential* for hunting and meat-eating built into their original

design. Man appears to have become meat-eating almost immediately after the Fall, though this was not specifically sanctioned by God until after the Flood. There is no clear evidence about when some animals became meat-eating, but the latest time for this must have been immediately following the Flood. They probably followed the example of carnivorism already set by man.

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (Editions: 28.7.96, 30.12.96, 10-11.7.97, 2.10.1997, 5.9.2018)

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