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Genesis: The No-Agony-Before-Adam View

Introduction

The view that is articulated here can be named the *No-Agony-Before-Adam* view. Quite simply it maintains that God created a perfect world in which there was no pain or suffering and in which humans and animals (either all, or at the very least those that could be described as ‘conscious’) did not die. Death and suffering only entered the world after Adam fell. I will argue that as a theological point the post-Fall origin of death and suffering is more important than the question of the age of the earth or the amount of biological change (evolution) that has taken place since creation.

The No-Agony-Before-Adam view is an umbrella under which several more specific views may rest. Most obviously there is the Young Universe Creationist view, which usually holds that the Universe was less than six days older than Adam, in whose time death entered the world.¹ Another possible position within the No-Agony-Before-Adam view is that the Universe itself had existed long before Adam, but that the Earth was less than six days older than Adam.² A further possible position would be to conclude that rocks showing signs of death (i.e. fossil-bearing rocks) are young, but that the physical earth as well as the Universe are old. This would allow for death to have arisen after Adam. While I hold that the Young Universe Creationist position represents the most natural reading of the biblical text, I shall not be arguing that position here. Although the various No-Agony-Before-Adam sub-positions may end up with scientific views billions of years apart, with some proposing that the earth and Universe are thousands of years old and others that they are billions of years old, these approaches belong together in maintaining that the issue of death and suffering is one of the most important theological considerations in formulating a doctrine of origins.

1. Life and Death as Themes in Genesis 1–9

The first thing we need to do is to review the material in Genesis 1–9 as it relates to life and death.

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¹ Although the Young Universe Creationist position is not widely held within secular academia the position that the author of Genesis 1 maintained that the world was created in six literal days is nearly universally held.

² This is a view that seems to be held by a number of Seventh-Day Adventist scientists though they are not particularly explicit on this. See, for instance, Harold Coffin, *Origin by Design* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing, 1983), pp. 15–16, and Leonard Brand, *Faith, Reason, and Earth History: A Paradigm of Earth and Biological Origins by Intelligent Design* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1997).

We see in Genesis 1 that God creates life and that creation climaxes in the creation of humankind. The second instruction given to humankind is the following:

See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. (Gen. 1:29)³

Humans are given an exclusively vegetarian diet, which consists of a *subset* of plants. By contrast in the next verse we read:

And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. (Gen. 1:30)

The inclusive list of animals and birds (but not sea creatures) is given an exclusively vegetarian diet. The narrative associates these dietary provisions with a situation in which everything was ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:30).

It is worth considering what could be meant here, and what would be understood by an ancient reader. The Hebrews were well aware that there were animals in their time which ate flesh, as also that there were birds which did so. How could they understand this passage as anything other than that there had been a time when things were other than how they were in their own day?

The picture that we have gained from Genesis 1:29–30 is confirmed as we read Genesis 2. There we are introduced to a garden in which the man and his wife may eat fruit. Verse after verse tells us of green provisions or their irrigation (2:5, 6, 8, 9, 10–14, etc.). The plants are again explicitly associated with food (‘good for food’, 2:9). The man’s work relates to the plants (2:15) and he is commanded concerning what he may eat and what he may not eat (2:16–17). All animals and birds (but not sea creatures) are brought before the man (2:19–20), but there is no hint of a relationship of fear between the man and the animals, and certainly no hint that the man might eat an animal, or that an animal might harm the man. Thus, despite the contrasts that have often been noted between the perspectives of Genesis 1 and 2, we see a significant unity in their presentation of an environment in which plants form the exclusive dietary provision for humankind and animals.

Genesis 2:17 anticipates a situation in which the man may have disobeyed, saying, ‘in the day that you eat of it [the fruit] you shall die’. As we read later we see that the man did not literally die the day he ate the fruit. Two explanations of this verse are often brought forward. First, one might suggest a non-literal use of the word ‘day’. Thus the NIV renders simply ‘when you eat of it you will surely die’. An alternative has been to understand some non-literal form of death. Perhaps the man ‘spiritually died’ when he ate the fruit. Whichever solution one takes, the man certainly did, eventually, die physically as a result of his action. As a minimum, then, the consequences of the man’s disobedience entailed his physical death even if they were not exhausted by it.

Chapter 3 continues with the same picture of plants as food as there is discussion of the eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here, however, for the first time ‘death’ becomes a reality. After the fateful meal in Genesis 3:6 the human pair make fig loincloths for themselves and the LORD God comes to pronounce judgment. At this point a number of new things appear in the text: phrases limiting existence, such as ‘all the days of your life’ applied to the serpent (3:14), enmity, conflict and (implied)

³ Unless marked otherwise biblical quotations come from the NRSV.

pain (3:15). Pain is explicitly mentioned for the woman in 3:16,⁴ and toil, necessarily entailing pain, for the man, again with the phrase implying limitation of life, ‘all the days of your life’ (3:17). Nevertheless, the narrative still maintains talk of a vegetarian diet (3:18, 19). As for clothes, the man-made plant-based minimal coverings are replaced by God-made fuller coverings based on an animal or animals that had died (3:21). It seems best to regard the garments of v. 21 as contrasting with those of v. 7 in all three respects (maker, extent, and material) rather than trying to restrict the contrast to one aspect (e.g. whether the garments were divinely made or not). Thus the narrative purposefully though subtly highlights animal death.

We continue to chapter 4 and notice there the offerings of Cain and Abel. Scholars have debated in what respect these offerings are contrasted. Is there a contrast between Abel’s offering of the firstlings and fat portions and Cain’s offering which is not distinguished as coming from the best? Or, is there a contrast between the fact that Abel offers animals and Cain offered plants (Gen. 4:2–4)? There is no need to create a disjunction here. As with the threefold contrast with the clothes the sacrifices may display contrast in both respects. Otherwise why would the narrative highlight differences between the offerings? A narrator who tells us that one offering was accepted but the other not and gives details of contrasts between the offerings, and yet does not want us to use those details to answer the burning question of why one offering was accepted and the other not, is guilty of infusing the narrative with false leads to throw us off the scent of its real meaning.

The sad narrative sadly leads us to the point of the first human death, by murder (4:8) and the Bible’s first mention of blood (4:10). Cain fears that he too will be killed (4:14), and goes off and has descendants. The seventh descendant from Adam by this line, Lamech, evidently worse than Cain, boasts of his achievement in killing someone. Death thus has a prominent place in Genesis 4.

In Genesis 5 death also has a prominent place as there is a chorus after every name in the genealogy saying ‘and he died’. This chorus is lacking in a similar genealogy in Genesis 11, suggesting that death is being thematised at this earlier point in Genesis, but not later. As if to highlight the ubiquity of death—and lest we should be swallowed up by the lack of hope—we are told of the remarkable exception of Enoch (like Lamech of 4:23 seventh from Adam), who did not die (5:24).

Events between the sons of God and the daughters of men in 6:1–2 again result in limitation of life. God says, ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred [and] twenty years’ (6:3). Whether this speaks of a limit to life-span or, more probably, of 120 years left till the Flood the result is the same—death. There is the explicit contrast between God’s *spirit* and human *flesh* associated with this announcement. At this point God announces that he will blot out humans together with animals and birds (but not sea creatures; 6:7). God not only regrets having made humans, but also having made animals and birds (6:7). The grouping of humans, land animals and birds is familiar to us by now. But we must ask, why should animal and bird death result from human sin? Why are these two categories of death associated?

⁴ In the phrase ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing’, the word ‘increase’ does not necessarily imply that there were ‘pangs’ beforehand. All that is necessarily entailed in the verb is that something is present in great quantity *after* but not before.

When God looks at the earth he sees that all the earth is ‘corrupt’ (6:11; Septuagint *phtheirō*)⁵ and is full of violence (which implies pain). The language of ‘corruption’ is continued in 6:12, applied to the earth and to ‘all flesh’. When ‘all flesh’ is used in the context (e.g. 7:15, 16, 21; cf. 8:17) the reference includes humans, animals and birds (but not sea creatures). It is therefore most natural to read 6:12 as talking of a corruption which affects humans, animals, and birds. This is confirmed in 6:13 where God determines to destroy ‘all *flesh*’ because it is filling the whole earth with ‘violence’. The obvious implication is that ‘violence’ is coming not merely from humans, but also from animals and birds. How many animals or birds can we now name that are not sometimes violent? Here we are struck by the contrast with the picture from before the Fall. Back then all animals and birds ate plants alone and seemed to have a docile relationship with the man.

The motif of animal corruption provides a potential explanation for why God might regret having made them. Whether we decide that God regrets making the animals and birds because he knows that so many of them are going to die in the Flood, or because they have become violent the Bible here clearly establishes animal pain as regrettable and therefore bad, not good.

The grouping of humans, animals, and birds is continued as the narrative tells of Noah’s construction of the ark. God says that he will destroy ‘all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die’ (6:17). Given that ‘death’ has already been thematised within Genesis and that the grouping of humans, animals, and birds has also been established it seems reasonable to conclude that the narrative is saying that human, animal, and bird death come as a result of sin highlighted earlier in the narrative.

But there is hope. Some of ‘all flesh’ (the same grouping) are to be taken on the ark ‘to keep them *alive*’ (6:19–20). The life of this selection from ‘all flesh’ contrasts with the death of the rest. The narrative continues to emphasise food, as Noah is commanded to make provision for the feeding of the animals on the ark (6:21). He is to gather ‘every kind of food that is eaten’, or perhaps ‘every kind of food that may be eaten’. The menu is presumably vegetarian since Noah is not going to be storing meat for a year, or taking extra livestock as food.

Genesis 7 introduces the concept of ‘clean animals’ (7:2). In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 we will see that clean animals are exclusively vegetarian, even though the extent to which vegetarian diet was the ground for categorization as clean is a matter of debate among scholars. ‘Every living thing’ (7:4) is to be destroyed. The chapter ends with emphatic repetition applying death terminology to the same group: humans, animals, and birds are linked together in death (7:21–23).

Genesis 8 describes the descent and end of the deluge and concludes with animal and bird sacrifice (8:20–21). After this sacrifice God vows that he will not destroy every living creature (8:21). God is here concerned about limiting animal death, which the narrative clearly views as negative rather than as an inconsequential by-product of God’s judgement on humans.

Genesis 9 opens with a command to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ (9:1), which reminds us very much of God’s initial command to humankind (1:28a). Immediately after this, God talks of the relationship between humans and animals, which

⁵ We will return later to the cognate word *phthora* ‘corruption’, which occurs in Rom. 8:21.

is now to be characterised by ‘dread’ (9:2) rather than just ‘dominion’ (1:28b). The third sequential parallel between Genesis 9 and 1 is talk of diet (9:3). Here there is an explicit contrast with 1:30, since humans are now allowed everything to eat, not just plants. There is a restriction about blood, however (9:4). Animal death and human death are shown to be parallel (even if not of equal importance) in that the death penalty is ordained for any animal that kills a human (9:5). Likewise, humans who kill humans are themselves to be killed (9:6). The narrative ends with God making a covenant not to cut off ‘all flesh’ with a flood (9:11). This covenant is not merely made with humans, but four times is explicitly said to be made between God and the animals as well (9:12, 15, 16, 17). God is very concerned about animal suffering and death.

In conclusion, Genesis portrays death as coming after the Fall. Death is a major theme in this section and the theme cannot merely be restricted to human death.⁶ Rather the narrative constantly associates human, animal, and bird death. It does not make a qualitative distinction between these. Associated with this theme are implications of pain, suffering, and violence. It is not right to see the entrance of death or suffering as instant. In the careful descriptions of dietary provisions in particular we see suggestions of a transition through time from a vegetarian diet to one in which meat-eating occurred and was subsequently regulated.

2. Paul’s Understanding of Genesis, Death, and Suffering

Having completed our survey of death’s entry into the world in Genesis we may turn to Paul’s descriptions of the entry of sin into the world, especially in Romans 5:12–21 and in 1 Corinthians 15:21. We may note, obviously, that in these passages Paul expresses the same idea as we found to be a theme in Genesis when he observes that death follows sin. On the other hand, the Pauline texts seem basically to have an anthropological focus. Paul is not here concerned with animal death, but only with establishing that human death follows human sin. That said, Paul nowhere restricts the meaning of death in Genesis merely to human death. We may note that when Paul reads Genesis he clearly does not see some mere ‘spiritual’ death as the result of the Fall since he parallels human death resulting from the Fall with Christ’s physical death. We must at least conclude from Paul that he believed that the Fall resulted in physical death for humans, even if its implications were not exhausted by that.

A passage with more striking implications may be Romans 8:18–23. In 8:18 Paul contrasts present sufferings with some time in the future, and in 8:20 he talks of a time when creation was ‘subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who

⁶ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 42, says, ‘It would be necessary to decide whether the Bible sees animal death as an “evil”. It seems to us that this is not the case, and the speeches of God in the book of Job exalt the terrifying beauty of the beasts of prey as God’s work (Jb. 38:39ff.; 39:26ff. and the description of Leviathan in Jb. 41).’ While I concur that there is no proof-text equating animal death and evil, my thematic reading of Genesis suggests that animal death is not part of the good creation. God can exalt ‘beasts of prey’ as his work, but could also similarly eulogize the violent destruction of Nineveh in the book of Nahum, or the use of the fierce Chaldeans in Habakkuk 1:5ff., but these texts do not address the question of what an ideal world would look like. By contrast, when we do have such a description, beasts of prey are tame and lions are specifically mentioned as being vegetarian (Isaiah 11:6–9, esp. 7). Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 124, explicitly sees the vision of Isaiah 11 as inspired by Edenic motifs. This only serves to confirm that our reading of the importance of vegetarianism within the Eden narrative is not a modern imposition on the text.

subjected it'. Although commentators sometimes debate the identity of the one who subjected creation to futility, entertaining possibilities such as Adam or Satan, most agree that the reference is to God.⁷ Here we must envisage that the effects of the Fall reach wider than just the human race (something implied in the Genesis narrative, e.g. Gen. 3:17–18). Creation is specifically said to have been subjected to 'decay' (8:21; Greek *phthora*, the noun related to *phtheirō* in the Septuagint of Gen. 6:11; see above). In fact, 'the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now' (8:22). The 'whole creation' clearly is not a mere metonymy for humans. We must imagine some effects of the Fall on the wider creation, beyond humanity. Since 'corruption' would seem to entail decay, creation's decay may be closely associated with the spread of death beyond humans, as established from our reading of Genesis.

3. Theological Considerations: Suffering, Death, and the Cross

So far we have argued that explicitly in Genesis and possibly implicitly in Paul death and suffering, both human and animal, follow the Fall. There are further biblical-theological and moral reasons why this should be so.

The importance of the principle that physical death and suffering are a consequence of sin is obvious when we consider the cross. God's solution to the problem of sin was to send the Son to (a) suffer and (b) die. It was not sufficient for Christ to die without suffering. Nor was it possible for him to suffer on the cross, say 'It is finished' (John 19:30) and then come down from the cross without actually dying. The sufferings had to be sufferings that led to death. If we may work back from solution to plight we may infer that both physical death and suffering are involved in the punishment for sin. It is therefore inappropriate for these things to be around before sin, i.e. before the Fall. At least from this we must conclude that human suffering and death post-date the Fall.

The New Testament, however, creates a strong analogy between Christ's death on the cross and the Old Testament sacrificial system. In fact, the Old Testament itself builds on the analogy between human and animal death. This makes it more awkward to construct a theological system in which human death has an entirely different relationship to sin from animal death. The death of a sacrificial animal may be reckoned to deal in some way with a human's sin. The only animals that may be offered are clean animals and birds. Sea creatures are not acceptable—as in Genesis they are treated as a separate category. The death of sea creatures is not a clear concern of the biblical text.⁸ While we may admit that human and animal death are different from the point of view of what follows death, at a physical level they are analogous.

4. Scientific Implications of the No-Agony-Before-Adam View

At this point I want to consider some implications of the No-Agony-Before-Adam view for those involved in science.

If death and suffering of humans post-date the Fall there are significant implications for a limited range of scientific disciplines, most particularly archaeology and anthropology. There are, however, much more wide-ranging implications if animal or bird death and animal or bird suffering post-date the Fall. It is important to affirm here

⁷ E.g. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 321.

⁸ However, the fact that we cannot find *exegetical* grounds for treating the death of sea creatures as important should not lead us to conclude that there will be no other grounds for regarding it as important.

that the Bible is not really about science. It is not a scientific textbook and it is written so as to speak to people of every age, not so that it speaks particularly to people in a scientific age in a way qualitatively different from the way it spoke before that scientific age.

It would, however, be erroneous to conclude from this that the Bible had no implications for science.⁹ Since science is involved with every aspect of life and so is the Bible, we find frequent overlap. Even texts that are not written in scientific language may have scientific implications.

One obvious implication is that there should be no human death before Adam. Contemporary Christians differ in their conceptions of the relationship between Adam and fossil hominid remains. If I understand Prof. Blocher rightly he places Adam around 40,000 years ago.¹⁰ But whether one places Adam earlier or later, the question for anyone who accepts the consensus dating of hominid remains is what one is to do with hominid remains earlier than the point to which Adam is assigned.

From an amateur's perspective I would make the following observations: if you accept the consensus dating for remains it is difficult to maintain that all humans currently alive come from an ancestor as recent as 40,000 years ago because of the widespread geographical distribution of hominid remains. Moreover, if you have a physical sequence of ancestors leading up to an 'Adam' from 40,000 years ago then it will be rather difficult to maintain that physical death came as a result of Adam's sin when presumably physically similar beings were dying before Adam.

We need to think ourselves back to the hypothetical stage just before such an Adam. If you accept that such an Adam was 40,000 years ago then let us say 41,000 years ago.¹¹ If you prefer another date then we will go just back before that. If you accept the standard datings of hominid remains you will almost certainly be faced with the scenario of a hominid who physically looks very much like your 'Adam'. Is it theologically neutral to say that such a pre-Adamic hominid died? Was death not painful then? Prof. Blocher admits that the Neanderthals (whom he seems to place before Adam) buried their dead.¹² Did they not grieve in doing so? Was this creature not intelligent enough to be in agony leading up to death? Under the No-Agony-Before-Adam view all such hominid remains represent descendants from Adam and post-date the Fall. It is almost certainly easier to undertake the critical re-evaluation of dates that takes place within No-Agony-Before-Adam schemes than it is to fit a convincing account of Adam and the Fall within the conventional dating.

No-Agony-Before-Adam schemes do not need to reject all or even most aspects of conventional dating methods. However, Christians who are unwilling to subject the consensus dating to any kind of critical re-evaluation will have also to reckon that diseases, cancers, and a host of other causes of pain and ultimately death affected beings with no great physical difference from ourselves *before* the Fall.

⁹ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 24, and I agree here.

¹⁰ Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Apollos: Leicester, 1997), p. 40.

¹¹ In standard dating Australian Aborigines are now held to have been in Australia 60,000 ago. Christians who accept standard dating have therefore either to conclude that Aborigines are not descended from Adam (which might make mission amongst Aborigines harder than at present!) or that the date for Adam needs to be pushed back further than 40,000 years ago. In this sort of scheme Neanderthal remains both pre-date and post-date 'Adam'.

¹² Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 229.

If I may personalise the issue, at the risk of being accused of majoring on the emotional effect of an argument, are we evangelicals content that disease and pain should affect beings physically like us before the Fall? If you are visiting your mother who is dying of cancer and you reflect on her physical condition, the question is, is she suffering the bad effects of the Fall, or is she experiencing something that was part of God's good creation before the Fall?

If we may broach the question of animal death we see that many Old Earth Creationists or Progressive Creationists believe that animal death took place prior to the Fall. If one accepts the consensus position on dating techniques it is hard to avoid this conclusion. It is thus necessary, on this model, to believe that animals and birds have been suffering and dying for at least several hundred million years prior to Adam and the Fall. This will involve the suffering and death of literally trillions of creatures.¹³

This hardly seems morally neutral. Cruelty to animals in many forms is an offence that can lead to imprisonment, not because we believe that cruelty to animals damages the psyche of the human showing cruelty, or because we do not wish humans to get used to acting in a way that they might then transfer to humans. We recognise that cruelty to animals is wrong because we recognise that to inflict needless pain on animals is wrong, because animal pain is bad. The fact that animal suffering is not neutral is recognised by those opposed to animal experimentation (vivisection) and also by those who undertake animal experimentation, since the latter employ scientists to monitor the amount of pain felt, with the aim of minimizing pain that is not deemed 'necessary' for the experiment. However, if animal pain is neutral any attempt to minimize it is a misguided waste of effort. If animal pain is neutral then it is completely unclear why vets should use anaesthetics, yet it seems a logical consequence from the positions of many evangelical theologians that whether or not an anaesthetic is used is indifferent.

The Bible makes clear that animal suffering is not neutral. Proverbs 12:10 extols kindness to animals. The recurrent metaphor of God and leaders of his people as shepherds of a flock of sheep protecting them from wolves seems to presuppose that for sheep to suffer is not good, and that what the wolves do is not part of a perfect order (contrast Isaiah 11:6–9). Perhaps the strongest articulation of God's care for animals comes in the book of Jonah, which makes a special theme of God's compassion (4:2) and ends 'And should I not be concerned about Niveveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?' (4:11). God's concern for animals not only ends the book but is tied to his self revelation in Exodus 34:6–7. God thus reveals himself as a God concerned about animals.¹⁴

In the No-Agony-Before-Adam position animal suffering comes after the Fall. Accepting the validity of the Geological Column (i.e. that rocks all around the earth's surface are found basically in a regular and predictable order), as I do, I would therefore put Adam at a point prior to the appearance of animal fossils that seem to have suffered.

¹³ In the No-Agony-Before-Adam scenario not only is all such suffering after Adam, but there are many times fewer creatures that have suffered. In No-Agony-Before-Adam models, because of the shorter timescale for life forms, fewer creatures have existed during earth history and the fossils that survive represent a higher proportion of the creatures that have existed than in other scenarios.

¹⁴ 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned?' (1 Cor. 9:9) is of course part of an *a fortiori* argument, not an absolute denial of God's concern for animals.

I might be asked to make my position more precise. Am I saying that microbes or plants did not die before the Fall? No. As a non-scientist I would prefer not to venture into the specifics. I would prefer to avoid naming specific points in geological history as correlating to a specific point in the theological narrative. I am interested rather in making clear the things that are clearest. The Bible gives us little, if any, detail about microbes, just as it tells us relatively little about sea creatures. It also tells us very little about the stars. We should resist the temptation to exaggerate the amount of biblical material on a subject to suit our curiosity.

It might be urged that, unless one can draw a definite line between what was affected by death at the Fall and what was not, one cannot really maintain one's position. After all, if a microbe could die, why not something larger, and so on?¹⁵ To this I would reply that it may be that a line can be drawn, but that does not mean that I can draw it on exegetical grounds. Secondly, I would note that incremental changes can produce qualitative changes. Thus, while it is impossible to say the exact number of grains of sand that are the minimum requirement for making a pile of sand, we can nevertheless maintain that piles of sand do exist and that some collections of sand grains do not constitute a pile.

I do not want to be prescriptive to scientists about every aspect of what could occur before the Fall and what had to take place afterwards. That said, it does seem clear that the large-scale suffering of numerous higher-order animals as well as of hominids is best placed *after* Adam's sin rather than before it.

The scientific implications of this position are considerable. First, all of those rocks that are judged to contain records of suffering and death of such creatures will have to be dated after Adam. This will involve not only a critical reassessment of the consensus position on radiometric dating, but also of many other aspects of the standard models of earth history. This critical engagement need not necessarily reject all aspects of the standard scientific models.

A word may be said here about the scientific implications of the position one takes over the six days of Genesis 1. The No-Agony-Before-Adam position clearly requires a significant rethink of some scholarly conclusions. This is the case regardless of whether one understands the days of Genesis 1 as a sequence of literal historical days, or as a literary framework, or has some other understanding, such as that the days were ages. If the days of Genesis are taken as literal historical days it will have implications for cosmology and astronomy as well as for the age of the physical earth. However, even on a framework hypothesis (such as Blocher's 'literary interpretation') or day-age approach to Genesis, if one admits agony and suffering only after the Fall the implications for basically terrestrial disciplines like geology are still immense. This is important because discussion amongst Christians sometimes suggests that the major factor in one's approach will be what one does with the days of Genesis. I would rather say that the primary methodological dividing line in approaches is not between Old and Young Earth *per se*, nor between Theistic (divinely guided) Evolution and Special Creation with only microevolution. The major theological dividing line in approaches is between models that allow agony before Adam and those that do not. I have sought to show that the position that I adopt is not dependent on any single passage, but is supported by a range of texts and by consideration of such Christian doctrines as a theology of the cross.

¹⁵ In the Bible plants are sometimes said to 'die': John 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:36–38.

This is not in itself an argument for a Young Earth. It is possible to hold to an Old Earth and either to reject or accept pre-Adamic suffering. Likewise it is possible to hold to a Young Earth and to reject macroevolution, or to allow macroevolution but not ‘megaevolution’,¹⁶ or a Young Earth Creationist may simply say that the short timescale suggests that there would be few examples of macroevolution.¹⁷

Appendix I: A Christian Approach to Knowledge and to Academic Research

I want here to address the relationship between Special and General Revelation. In particular this appendix is in some way a counterpart to Prof. Blocher’s ‘Appendix: Scientific Hypotheses and the Beginning of Genesis’ in his book *In the Beginning*. Here I offer my own approach, as a non-scientist, to the issues involved in our knowledge of origins.

1. Special Revelation and General Revelation

The first thing to establish is the relationship between Scripture and knowledge of the world through Science. Revelation given in Scripture is generally identified as Special Revelation. Revelation from the world around us is often known as General Revelation. Since Francis Bacon (1561–1626) it has been common to speak of the Book of Nature as if this is in some way a counterpart to the Book of Scripture. From a theological perspective, it must be recognised at the outset that Nature and Scripture are not two equal sources of revelation. Thus while Scripture is literally a book, or a collection of books, Nature is only a book metaphorically. Though Scripture sometimes describes phenomena of Nature as ‘talking’ (e.g. Psalm 19:1–4), this is not to be taken literally, and what Scripture claims can be inferred from nature is rather limited. Psalm 19:1–4, for instance, tells that God’s glory is seen in creation, but not necessarily the relationship between the glory and the One whose it is. Romans 1:19–21 speaks of knowledge of characteristics of God through Nature. We do not have scriptural warrant, however, to believe that if Scripture speaks clearly on an issue, we are to adapt our understanding of that in the light of General Revelation.

On some issues, such as that pain postdates Adam, Scripture appears, to me at least, to speak clearly. If we ask what Nature says we must recognise that any information we get on the issue will be by inference and hypothesis. Nature will address these issues only once we have constructed a fairly complex model of interrelationships between various

¹⁶ Brand, *Faith, Reason, and Earth History*, adopts this term; cf. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, pp. 223–24.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Kurt P. Wise, *Faith, Form, and Time: What the Bible Teaches and Science Confirms about Creation and the Age of the Universe* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002), pp. 198–99. Historically, those who have believed in a Young Earth have not always been opposed to significant change in biological forms. See, for instance, the Puritan Matthew Poole (1624–79), *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (reprint Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1962), p. 18 [commenting on Gen. 6.15 and responding to objections that Noah’s ark was too small to hold all the animals], ‘... the differing kinds of beasts and birds, which unlearned men fancy to be innumerable, are observed by the learned, who have particularly searched into them, and written of them, to be little above three hundred, whereof the far greatest part are but small; and many of these which now are thought to differ in kind, in their first original were but of one sort, though now they be so greatly altered in their shape and qualities, which might easily arise from the diversity of their climate and food, and other circumstances, and from the promiscuous conjunctions of those lawless creatures ...’ Similar allowance for post-Flood evolution was made by Sir Walter Raleigh (1554–1618); see Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church’s Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 57.

sorts of evidence. Whereas Scripture may purport to address a subject *directly*, this will never be the case for Nature.¹⁸ This is particularly so when we consider the past. All that we can see is the present. All we can see is a post-Fall Universe. We have no theological grounds for believing that we can see anything in a pre-Fall state, and we have not been told by God in scientific terms of any changes in the structure of Nature or the Universe that have taken place subsequent to the Fall. We cannot therefore simply factor out some things we presently observe and describe in scientific terms how a pre-Fall world would have been. When Christians therefore discuss something like what things were like before the Fall we must recognise that we have a book that addresses the subject clearly (though limitedly) and a method (Science) that is incapable of knowing anything about the subject with certainty. This does not mean that the No-Agony-Before-Adam position is to be given some special protection from scientific scrutiny. Those who are sceptical have every reason to ask proponents of this view to give an account of any data.

2. Truth and the Academy

The question that will naturally be asked is whether scientists could be so wrong that the No-Agony-Before-Adam view could be possible. In response we may note that this view does not necessitate a rejectionist approach to science or a dismissive attitude towards scientific conclusions—something like what Blocher terms ‘anti-scientism’.¹⁹ It does not necessarily even require scientists to be *that* wrong. Though much Young Earth Creationism has happened to use extremely harsh language in relation to scientific views, we should not conclude that those who seek to support conclusions significantly differing from those of the establishment must necessarily be harsh in their assessment of the way the establishment works.

The level of observational error or of misanalysis of data only needs to be relatively small to allow for very different analyses within a different paradigm. It is unlikely that in any of the major scientific disciplines involved in analysis of the past, the level of error will basically invalidate the basic fact that those disciplines have advanced in measuring something that corresponds to reality.²⁰ However, if humans and pigs can share 97% of the same DNA then even 3% of information can make quite a difference! We need not maintain that most scientists are making gross errors to believe that significant conclusions within academia may need very substantial modification.

In fact in some cases we need not maintain that any scientists are misanalysing data to suppose that their conclusions are wrong. A scientist could propose a perfectly valid and plausible scientific model to explain 10 perfectly collected pieces of data. This, however, does not preclude that another scientist might come along with an 11th piece of data that was previously not considered relevant and produce a model that explains all the

¹⁸ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 25, ‘Even if the “facts” invoked are of God – for scientific opinions grasp these facts in a fallible manner and cannot approach on the authority of God *speaking himself*.’ I agree.

¹⁹ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 20. Nor do we need to follow an approach that fails to admit significant symbolism and non-literal language within the biblical text.

²⁰ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 23, ‘The agreement of thousands of researchers is reached neither by chance nor by conspiracy’. True. But there are other possibilities. First, their agreement may be substantially based on truth, but with enough admixture of error to have paradigm-shifting potential. Secondly, agreement may be reached by socialization: people only consider possibilities within the prevailing paradigm and do not consider possibilities outside it. Thirdly, in many specialties there are not thousands, but rather tens, if that, who have a grasp of the field.

data more simply and makes better predictions. To put it simply, prior commitments to specific scientific models dictate the questions scientists consider relevant. That is why it is unlikely that scientists committed to an Old Earth will ever set aside the financial resources necessary for a widespread programme of radiocarbon dating of diamonds. Their model assures them that it will be a waste of time and money.

We face then the question of *salience* of evidence. Academic discussion can often produce a comprehensive analysis of the issues that have been raised, but be quite blind to relevant issues that have not yet been raised. Thus, before the Gould-Eldridge analysis *stasis* or the absence of morphological change in the fossil record was not considered or taken seriously as a factor relevant for analysis of biological history. I can see a similar thing in my own area of textual-criticism where vast swathes of scholarship emphasise the way biblical texts changed in transmission, but very little research is specifically carried out on ways in which they did not change.

A similar thing may well be the case in academic analysis of indicators of the age of the geological record. Emphasis on particular methods such as radiometric dating that usually produce ages of millions of years *might* take place at the expense of consideration of other factors (e.g. surprising survival of ancient DNA or of soft tissue in dinosaur remains, absence of erosion between geological strata, traces of radiocarbon that should no longer be there) that might point to a younger age. Whether or not this *is* the case I have no expertise to judge. However, as a social observer of academia it seems to me that something like this certainly *could* be the case.

Where conclusions of scientific consensus are particularly vulnerable is when there are only a few experts within the world who understand a technique and even those who are experts within it have not performed an analysis of how the data might be analysed from outside the dominant paradigm. Thus in disciplines like radiometric dating the broad observation that things higher in the Geological Column generally receive younger radiometric dates is unlikely to be overthrown, but few scientists will have sampled more than a tiny fraction of the dates that have been measured and it is therefore quite possible that some systematic divergences and trends have escaped the notice of all.

Another factor in contemporary science is that although there are many experts with decades of experience in a particular field, the expertise of those people rarely passes that of an undergraduate degree in an adjacent academic field. They therefore rely that the scientists in the adjacent field have performed their work correctly, and rely on *opinio communis* for the relationship between those fields. Since the number of professional scientists who are seeking to understand their fields within the No-Agony-Before-Adam framework is so few it is naturally the case that most of the available data has not been analysed.

What we do see, however, is that an increasing handful of Christians within science are adopting this framework and are finding that within their own academic disciplines the No-Agony-Before-Adam framework is not a dead-end, but a fruitful avenue of thought. Scientists of this persuasion, with PhDs from top universities, work within the fields of Geophysics, Geology, and Palaeontology and produce work which matches the best academic standards in peer review and concern for accuracy.²¹ As a suspicious

²¹ Clearly some Young Earth Creationists active within Geology and related disciplines are showing themselves capable of work that is at the very highest level in terms of its contribution to the scientific enterprise. Researching within a Young Earth understanding they are achieving results that are receiving

academic all I can say is that when I consider some of this work and the peer review process it seems to have undergone I see no particular reason to believe that its correspondence to reality is dramatically less than that in the publications produced on a regular basis by academics in top international universities. To be sure, we can expect irresponsible publication to emanate from Young Earth Creationist circles for some time to come, but in assessing the validity of any view we should in general focus on the arguments of the best proponents of that view and the best proponents cannot be held responsible for what others choose to publish.

Despite the advances by Christians in this area, as in the area of Intelligent Design, I do not believe that the basic alternative to consensus opinions in largely secular universities is to hold up small Christian academies working in science as having a better grasp of science than within the secular establishment. Rather it is likely that most of the problems for Christians raised within the secular academy will also be answered within the secular academy. This is certainly the case for my own discipline. Many problems are raised with the Christian position on Scripture, but most of those problems are answered not by Christian answer books but by an eclectic but rational combination of positions that are adopted within the secular academy. Independent Christian educational institutions such as the Institute for Creation Research in California may have their part in highlighting matters within discussion, but it is not yet clear that such centres will ever be in a position to provide the bulk of the reanalysis that is required.

By *reanalysis* it might sound as if I am urging scientists to adopt less obvious rather than more obvious interpretations of data—asking scholars to pursue obscurantist possibilities. This is not the case. The reason that a proper No-Agony-Before-Adam reanalysis of the data is necessary is because the No-Agony-Before-Adam position is not one that has been considered scientifically and then rejected. In a more detailed argument I could make the case that it has in fact never even been tried.

We should likewise recognise that adopting the No-Agony-Before-Adam position as a faith stance from which one conducts science does not compel one to conclude that Creation Science is basically right and Academic Science basically wrong. Since much Creation Science is motivated by popular concerns it is natural that it, like any popular phenomenon, is going to be riddled with misinformation. Yet it is likely that it will also make some pertinent observations by looking at the big picture and highlighting absence of evidence (e.g. in quantity of transitional forms).

secular recognition. For instance, if we may deal just with faculty from the Institute for Creation Research, Steven Austin (PhD, Penn State) has discovered a layer of billions of nautiloids [a type of squid-like marine fossil] within the Grand Canyon (paper October 30, 2003, at the Geological Society of America). Andrew A. Snelling (PhD, Sydney) argued that wood could become fossilized quickly and his conclusions were adopted by an article in the journal *Sedimentary Geology* 169 (July 2004), 219–28. John Baumgardner (PhD, UCLA) has articles on geophysics published in a wide range of top journals including *Science* and *Nature*, and is a recognized world authority on Plate Tectonics. It is noteworthy that these people are making significant discoveries during research inspired by their Young Earth convictions and that their expertise and discoveries are being recognized by secular scientists. I suppose one *might* claim that the ingenuity of Young Earth Creationist scientists rather than the plausibility of their case leads to such discoveries. This may be so, but ingenuity may be on both sides. One could argue that ingenuity is being used to make the standard academic model less vulnerable to attack *despite* its weaknesses. The consensus model of earth history *could* be seen as the most plausible model of explaining without reference to God where we might have come from that hundreds of thousands of scientists working over many generations were able to come up with.

Although I have no scientific training, I can at least offer some relevant reflections from involvement in Academia over 16 years. My vision of what I see needs to be done in areas other than my own is very much consistent with what I see needs to be done within my own. I have first-hand experience within my own research of seeing how the accumulation of small errors can result in a distortion of reality and how the correction of those errors can add up to something of a paradigm shift.²² At least within my speciality of New Testament textual criticism I have seen obvious data literally overlooked by hundreds of intelligent predecessors and have spoken to the top specialists in the world about the subject. It is likely that my conclusion that there has been a 20–25% error rate in modern scholarly use of early Syriac Bible translations within the textual apparatus of editions of the Greek New Testament will be adopted in future scholarship and that these errors will be eliminated in future editions of the main academic edition of the Greek New Testament. Within my academic speciality I can confess how little I know, and see how little others within my speciality know. I can also give testimony that within that speciality I find my faith position to be one that is rewarding and productive. In my experience it usually takes about 10 years' study and specialisation before someone is sufficiently familiar with an area to be able to reach a point where one can critique in a comprehensive way its hidden assumptions and see the extent to which that discipline could have erred. However, by this stage almost everyone is deeply committed to an overarching interpretive paradigm of the world. What we call scientific or scholarly consensus is often not a consensus built upon an exhaustive study of possibilities and the conclusion that X is the only way the data can be interpreted, but rather a conclusion that X is the way data should be interpreted in the light of prior commitments and elimination of alternative interpretations usually carried out when one had only studied the matter for a few years.

If this analysis of the nature of academic knowledge is more or less correct the question arises as to what we should do in the case of the majority of areas of knowledge, since inevitably we have not received specialist training in those areas. Here I would say that we simply need to come to a realistic assessment of what knowledge is. Without developing an intricate theory of knowledge we may say that it is reasonable to suppose that you 'know' that you are reading this essay. On the other hand, unless you are a specialist in ancient history it is unlikely that you 'know' that Jerusalem was conquered in AD 70 in the same sense. It may be something that you have absolutely no reason to doubt (I know of none), and yet it is not impossible for most of us to imagine that some new discovery might modify our knowledge somewhat and alter the date by a year or so. Thus we recognise that we 'know' things with varying degrees of certainty and in fact most things that we 'know' are not things that we could not possibly imagine being wrong. Without giving way to ungrounded scepticism we have to admit that the number of things that we could not possibly imagine being wrong is rather limited.

I want here to address the mindset that I believe that most of us need to adopt in this area, whether we are scientifically trained or not. It seems to me that a great many areas

²² Sometimes academics can commit major errors. In 2000 I was involved in an archaeological dig for two weeks in the site el-Ahwat in Israel. The dig uncovered literally thousands of pieces of pottery which numerous trained archaeologists on site including the dig leader Adam Zertal (University of Haifa) dated to the Iron Age (conventionally around 1200 BC). However, Israel Finkelstein, probably Israel's leading archaeologist, dated the pottery and walls to the time of the Romans, more than one thousand years later.

of scientific consensus do not come under the category of things that we could not possibly imagine being wrong, and certainly not under the category of things that could not possibly be reanalysed sufficiently to allow a new paradigm to be fitted round them. There are a great many variables so that even a very reasonable interpretation (such as the consensus analysis of radiometric dating—which is surely at least *reasonable*) may be overturned by new data.

By contrast when we approach biblical interpretation, though there are many variables, there are certain things that it is very hard indeed to imagine being other than they seem to be. This is because the Bible is direct communication and uses words. Now although much research has been done recently on the openness of interpretive possibility, we may at least say that it is extremely unlikely that any new information is going to come to light that is, for instance, going to influence substantially the view that Genesis presents a situation of perfection without suffering, followed by a situation of imperfection and suffering.

It is likewise very unlikely that some new information is going to come to light which is going to make primate suffering before the Fall less objectionable than it now seems. By contrast in the area of the science of origins it seems to me that in every subdiscipline there are enough variables of interpretation to believe that a fundamentally new paradigm *could* be put together. Now I do not say that I have definite evidence that such a paradigm *can* be put together, only that while I do not see any room for substantial revision in the theological area it seems that such *may* be possible in the scientific sphere.

3. Which Problem Do You Want?

People might be put off embracing the No-Agony-Before-Adam view by believing that it pits them against the intellectual mainstream in a way that, say, Progressive Creationism does not. This is not so. Although the No-Agony-Before-Adam view seems to take more issue with the *scientific* mainstream than, say, the Progressive Creationist view, it does not take more issue with the *intellectual* mainstream. We can see this by considering the position of an apologist, who necessarily has to take a broader view of the whole sweep of arguments than either a scientist or a theologian.

The No-Agony-Before-Adam position has to overcome the problem that the consensus view is that suffering existed long before humans.

The Agony-Before-Adam view has to overcome the equally weighty problem that to posit that a good, omniscient, and omnipotent creator chose to create billions of beings which were going to suffer without any guilt being involved seems unfair. In some ways this is a harder problem than the issue of science because the issues are not esoteric or complex, but rather are within nearly everyone's grasp to comprehend.

Just as those who adopt the Agony-Before-Adam position rightly tell those with the No-Agony-Before-Adam position not to have excessive recourse to the concept of 'apparent age' or to allow themselves the possibility that God arranged radiometric dates to trick scientists,²³ No-Agony-Before-Adam proponents can tell Agony-Before-Adam proponents not to have recourse to 'apparent suffering' or to the view that God created a

²³ We must maintain a balance between affirming Common Grace and rationality as important parts of human existence *and* God's self-revelation as someone who habitually chooses to use human cleverness against those who choose to divorce their rationality from dependence on him. Consider, for instance, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness' (1 Cor. 3:19).

good world that to all intents and purposes looked bad. The suffering is real and requires an explanation just as much as radiometric dating—only the issues are somewhat more perspicuous.²⁴

In consequence of adopting the Agony-Before-Adam position many Christians have begun to take a largely defensive stance in apologetic discussion of the issue of suffering in the world. This is because much Christian apologetics is working within the framework that suffering is simply part of the Universe that we accept and apologetics is not always emphasising that the Creator made a world without suffering and is to take no blame in any way for the suffering that presently exists. The No-Agony-Before-Adam position has more potential to impact a culture because its metanarrative is so different from that of the culture.

The Agony-Before-Adam position seems particularly short-sighted in the context of contemporary concern for animal welfare. Whereas the No-Agony-Before-Adam proponent can maintain that all animal suffering is ultimately to be blamed on humans the Agony-Before-Adam proponent has to admit that there is no personal moral agent outside of God who can be causally responsible for most of the animal suffering in earth history, a quantity of suffering that vastly outweighs all contemporary animal suffering. This will not appeal to many animal rights activists.

Appendix II: The Genre of Genesis

I have so far bypassed the question of the *genre* of Genesis, or the type of literature that it is. This is because I believe that the themes of Genesis can be highlighted without a prior decision as to its genre.

I am at the outset very willing to agree with Prof. Blocher's analysis that the opening of Genesis (Genesis 1–3) should be understood as 'literary'.²⁵ Blocher's analysis brings together many valid observations about literary features within the opening chapters of Genesis. I am, however, concerned that in his presentation 'literary' and 'literal' are pitted against each other. These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor even necessarily in tension. What I will seek to demonstrate below is that if we allow ourselves to conclude from the prevalence of literary features within the narrative sections of the Bible that these are not meant to be taken as a straightforward account of history, then we must know fully what we are letting ourselves in for.

The sorts of literary features that Blocher sees in Genesis 1 are undoubtedly there. He concludes that the author's 'geometrical mastery ... suggests that other thoughts overshadowed in his mind any concern for chronology'.²⁶ While I do not intend to deal in detail with Genesis 1, I do want to highlight that literary patterns are found throughout the narratives of Scripture that have been traditionally taken as historical. This is of

²⁴ Young Earth schemes of course allow some 'apparent age': Adam would have looked older than he was and trees in Eden may have had rings. But Young Earth proponents would be supporting illusionism if they supposed that, for instance, supernovas millions of light years away from the earth did not show us real events. As far as the appearance of the pre-Fall world being deceptive at first glance No-Agony-Before-Adam schemes have slightly more room for manoeuvre than Agony-Before-Adam schemes since whereas the former believe that there is a major discontinuity between what we now see and all that is pre-Fall the latter do not.

²⁵ See Blocher, *In the Beginning*, pp. 49–59.

²⁶ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 51.

relevance since *In the Beginning* also contains a plausible exposition of literary features throughout the opening chapters of Genesis.

The sort of patterning that makes Days 1–3 correspond to Days 4–6 does not strike me as being exceptionally different from features that we can find from Genesis 12 onwards. We must necessarily be selective because the narratives are full of literary features. Events in the biblical narrative are cyclical so that on Abram’s first descent into Egypt Pharaoh is plagued (Gen. 12:17), just as will later happen in Exodus. This narrative, where a patriarch claims that his wife is his sister (Gen. 12:10–20), is carefully set against two other such narratives (Gen. 20:1–18; 26:1–11). The patriarch Jacob tricks his father Isaac that he is his elder brother, events paralleled by the way Jacob’s father-in-law Laban tricks Jacob that the elder sister is the younger (Gen. 29:23).

Sometimes we can see that people’s very words form literary features. In the Balaam incident—which is parallel to Genesis 3 in giving us the only other narrative account in which an animal speaks—we find copious uses of dramatic irony so that the most knowledgeable ‘seer’ on earth does not ‘see’ what the most proverbially stupid animal, the donkey, does. Geography is perfectly moulded to climactic literary structure as the three points of Balaam’s encounter with the angel get successively narrower (Num. 22:22–26). At this point Balaam’s anger is kindled (Num. 22:27, just as God’s was 22:22). Balaam strikes the donkey (contrasting with what the LORD did not do to Balaam), accuses the eloquent donkey of making a fool of him (22:29) and wishes he had a sword in his hand (exactly like the angel he cannot see!) so that he could kill the donkey. The opening of Balaam’s eyes (22:31) parallels the opening of the donkey’s mouth (22:28).

I could find similar features in the book of *Judges*, which emphasises the cyclical nature of history and portrays each judge as less virtuous than the one before. The judges possess things in rather even numbers (e.g. Jair’s 30 sons, 30 donkeys, 30 towns in 10:4; Ibzan’s 30 sons in 12:9 and Abdon’s 40 sons plus 30 grandsons, i.e. 70, in 12:14). The cyclical section of *Judges* ends with Samson for whom Delilah is offered 1,100 pieces of silver (16:5). The next narrative—Micah and the Levite—begins talking about a different 1,100 pieces of silver (17:2). The final five chapters of *Judges*, along with the book that follows it in many manuscripts (*Ruth*) form a trilogy of narratives based on Bethlehem (*Judges* 17–18; cf. 17:9; 19–21; cf. 19:1; *Ruth* 1:1).

We may also consider patterning of time periods involving the number 40 within the Bible. We may note the 40 years in the desert, time periods in the book of *Judges* (40 years in 3:11; 5:31; 8:28; 13:1 and 80 years in 3:30), 40 year appointments for Eli, David, Solomon, Jehoash (1 Sam. 4:18; 2 Sam. 5:4; 1 Ki. 2:11; 2 Ki. 12:1). 40 days was the period that the rain fell (Gen. 7:4), the spies spied (Num. 13:25), Moses, Elijah and Jesus did not eat (Ex. 24:18; 34:28; 1 Ki. 19:8; Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2; cf. Mark 1:13), and Goliath and Jesus presented themselves (1 Sam. 17:16; Acts 1:3).²⁷ These numbers certainly have a literary function, and a question that usually arises for Bible readers is whether one is dealing with a figure of speech. Reader after reader usually rejects this possibility because (a) various time periods such as the time of the Israelites in the desert or of David’s reign receive further, precise subdivision, (b) the same numbers are consistently used for the periods, suggesting that they are not *passing* figures of speech, and (c) the numbers are found within a wide range of literature, dating across too great a

²⁷ See also Jonah 3:4; Acts 7:23, 30; 13:21.

timescale, and written in too many different settings (the culture Samuel was written for is quite different from the culture Luke was written for) for it to be plausible that all, or even most of the occurrences are a figure of speech. One is therefore left with the definite possibility that history itself has fallen into patterns. But why should this be difficult to a Christian who accepts that Christ did not die at just any time of the year, but in fact died on the anniversary of the time when the Israelites had come out of Egypt having each slaughtered a lamb?

Job. Dialogue and numbers in Job 1–2 and 42 show literary patterns.

Esther, replete with literary structures, tells of the fight between Mordecai, a descendant of Kish (2:5), and Haman the Agagite (3:1), which rather reminds us of the way Saul, son of Kish, spared Agag (1 Sam. 15:9).

Jonah likewise parallels the commands to Jonah in 1:2 and 3:2, as it does the time that Jonah was in the whale (1:17) with the time it would take to walk round Nineveh (3:3). Everything is big—the same Hebrew word is used throughout.²⁸ God sends Jonah to the ‘big’ city (1:2), but then sends a ‘big’ wind (1:4), so that there is a ‘big’ storm (1:4). On learning that Jonah is a Hebrew the sailors fear a ‘big’ fear (1:10), but Jonah instructs them on how the ‘big’ storm may stop (1:12). It stops and the sailors fear a ‘big’ fear’ (1:16) and Jonah is swallowed by a ‘big’ fish (1:17). Jonah is sent again to the ‘big’ city (3:2), which really is ‘big’ (3:3), but people repent from the ‘big’ ones to the little ones (3:5). The king and his ‘big’ people get up (3:7) and ordain repentance. Jonah has a ‘big’ huff (4:1) followed by ‘big’ happiness (4:6). God says that Jonah is disproportionately concerned about a bush that he did not make ‘big’ (4:10) and reminds Jonah that Nineveh is ‘big’ (4:11), with the shifted nuance that ‘big’ at the end of the book does not refer simply to physical but also to spiritual importance. Could we then say of this book that it is literary rather than literal (cf. Matt. 12:39–41)?

In the New Testament, our five narrative books, i.e. the Gospels and Acts, can each be seen to have a careful literary structure. Matthew records Jesus’ words in five main groups. The final group beginning with ‘woes’ on the Pharisees (Matt. 23) serves as a counterpart to the beatitudes that open the first group (5:3–10). In line with his emphasis on Jesus as king and on the kingdom (literary features we will not deal with), Matthew portrays Jesus as ‘Son of David’ (1:1). This phrase is not only found on the lips of an angel (1:20), but is also the way two blind people address him (9:27), saying ‘have mercy ... Son of David’, the same way a Canaanite woman addresses him (15:22), and yet two more blind men address him (20:30, and again in 20:31). The crowds even cry ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ (21:9) as the children do later (21:15).

John, often judged to have seven ‘I am’ sayings and seven sign-miracles, an implicit seven-day structure in the opening chapters and a gathering of seven disciples in the final chapter, also has its own literary structures. Particularly striking is its use of ironic dialogue. When characters say things like, ‘Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?’ (7:42), or ‘We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man we do not know where he comes from’ (9:29) or when Caiaphas counsels that ‘it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’ (11:50) there is plenty of irony. The irony is very much like what might be found in a Greek tragedy.

²⁸ As noted by Cristóbal Sevilla Jiménez, *Reseña Bíblica: Jonás* (Editorial Verbo Divino: Estella [Navarra], 2002), p. 19.

Now of course, any skilful author can create literary patterns in a record of historical events. What, however, I have tried to highlight is that the patterns are not just *around* the events, but are in the events themselves. The author of a book like Jonah might of course select certain vocabulary and highlight certain theme words. However, some of these theme words are in dialogue or reported speech. In other words, if taken literally, the events themselves contained the seed of the later literary pattern.

Similar things could be said about the dialogue in the Balaam account, of people's use of 'Son of David' in Matthew and of Caiaphas's words in John. If we start pitting 'literary' over against 'literal' for the whole Bible then it is hard to see how we could resist the conclusion that many narrative portions of the Bible that have traditionally been understood as history are not particularly interested in telling us about what happened in the past.

Rather, however, I believe that we should conclude that we have within the Bible an account of a history which due to God's control often had some remarkable patterning within it. If in fact, as I would be prepared to argue, most of the narrative sections of the Bible show literary patterning then it would be rather surprising *not* to find such patterning in the early chapters of Genesis. If God ordered events in later biblical history to take place according to certain patterns then is there a good reason to believe that such patterning might not occur within creation or earth's early history?

Obviously some of the patterning is in the events and a lot of patterning work can also be done by skilful authors. Ultimately I think that both events and authors produce the patterns. However, we should be careful of opposing 'literal' and 'literary'.

Blocher comments:

But could this extremely careful construction of the narrative [in Genesis 1] not coincide with the chronological reality of the divine work, as certain literalists attempt to plead? Of course, you can always *imagine* anything. But, in the face of what the author shows of his method, there is no reason to suppose it. The hypothesis of the literary procedure gives sufficient explanation of the form of the text; anything further would be superfluous. Occam's razor, the principle of economy which argued against the multiplication of hypotheses, removes ideas of this kind. The suggestion betrays the *a priori* desire to find literal language.²⁹

It seems to me that if this approach were applied to other parts of Scripture it might reach conclusions that Blocher would find hard to embrace. While I have no *a priori* commitment to holding that the early chapters of Genesis are literal rather than literary, I remain to be convinced that Occam's razor should not rather be invoked to restrain the multiplication of literary genres by those who advocate a literary rather than a literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. If we have a literary genre that fits the other narrative portions of the Bible—namely literary patterned historiography whose sentences and phrases can be assigned simple referentiality—it is the task of those who want to argue for another genre in the early chapters of Genesis to prove that this genre is necessary.

²⁹ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 53.