

*Death Before the Fall: Biblical
Literalism and the Problem of
Animal Suffering*

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Ronald E. Osborn (Ph.D., University of Southern California) was a Bannerman Fellow with the Program in Politics and International Relations at the University of Southern California. He has published articles in numerous journals and magazines and is the author of *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence, and Theodicy* (Wipf & Stock, 2010).

The Problem of Animal Suffering

Mana Pools is a remote wildlife preserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site with some of the most spectacular game viewing anywhere in Africa's southern hemisphere. It was one of my family's favorite retreats during the years we lived in Zimbabwe. After passing the final tsetse fly control station on the main road—a low mud hut from which a man in a crumpled khaki uniform would sleepily emerge armed with a rusty tin canister to spray the undercarriage of our car with a noxious-smelling liquid intended to prevent the deadly insect from returning with us—we were truly into the wild, or into the *bundu*, as it is called in bantu slang. (One of my prized possessions during my elementary school years was a worn copy of the 1967 classic survival manual *Don't Die in the Bundu* by Col. D. H. Grainger of the Rhodesian Army. I never had any reason to put into practice the lessons in this book, but they provided rich fodder for fantasies of heroic feats of a young boy alone against Africa's elements armed with nothing more than his trusty Swiss Army knife.) . . .

Before dawn, my parents would already be waking my sisters and me for a new safari, since the early hours of the day when the air was still cool and crisp were the best time to spot rare animals. All around us was a world that was deeply mysterious, untamed, dangerous, beautiful and good, waiting to be explored. And the danger was part of its goodness and its beauty.

Herein lies the central riddle of this book. One might, of course, imagine other worlds in other universes without predatory creatures such as crocodiles and lions, and these might be very good and very beautiful worlds as well. But the particular goodness and beauty of Africa's wild places that were such an important part of my childhood were inextricably linked to cycles of birth and death, as well as suffering, ferocity and animal predation. . . . Mana Pools was *very good*—its lions, jackals, leopards, fish eagles and cobras included. Yet Mana Pools, as a microcosm of nature as a whole, was also an untamed and even unremittingly harsh world, a sealed economy in which all of life was, in the final analysis, sustained by the deaths—often in spectacular and prolonged ways—of other creatures. There is a doubleness to all of animal existence, extending right back to the very beginning as far as we can tell, with birth and death, comedy and tragedy, suffering and grandeur, appearing as the interwoven and inseparable aspects of a single reality that defies easy moral categorization.

For believers in the God of Jewish and Christian Scripture, this poses a grave theological and moral dilemma that is different in kind from the problem of evil arising from the exercise of human free will. It is also distinct from (if perhaps related to) the problem of “natural evil” posed by geological upheavals that take human lives, such as the earthquake in Haiti and the tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan. Simply stated, the trouble is this: Animals, as far as we know, do not have the capacity for anything approaching human moral reasoning and will

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Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com

Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com

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BOOK EXCERPT

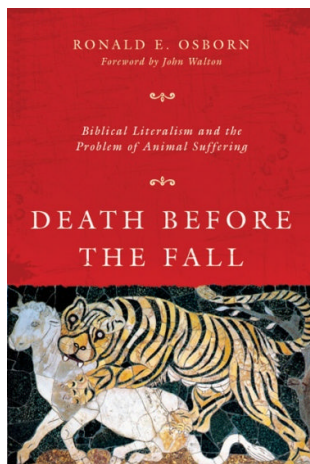
never be able to comprehend their own suffering in metaphysical or theological terms that might give that suffering meaning *for them*. Why, then, would a just and loving God – not the impersonal Spirit of Hegelian idealism that achieves its final ends through the violent dialectics of “history as slaughter-bench,” nor the divinity of Hindu belief who is at once Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer of worlds, but the undivided and good Creator God of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament – require or permit such a world to exist?

“Why, then, would a just and loving God require or permit such a world to exist?”

This world is one in which the harrowing suffering of innocent creatures through the violence of other creatures appears at once fraught with terrible savageness and at the same time part of an order that is delicately balanced, achingly beautiful and finely tuned to sustain tremendous diversity of life. If there is a rationally discernible “intelligent design” to the natural world as some believers claim, should we not conclude that the design reveals a pitilessly indifferent if not malevolent intelligence? Why is it that creationists who read “design” from the surface of nature never rhapsodize about the wondrous, irreducible complexity of AIDS viruses, or tapeworms, or serrated shark teeth tiered five rows deep?

– *Adapted from the introduction*





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“A beautifully written book! . . . Brought tears to my eyes.”

"As religious communities struggle to make sense of their faith traditions after Darwin, they rely on thoughtful and sensitive seers to lead them beyond the shallows of literalism to a deeper encounter with new scientific discoveries. Ronald Osborn's sophisticated reflections on literalism and animal suffering will be helpful to Christians of all denominations who are troubled by the wild ways of evolution."

– **John F. Haight, senior research fellow, Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University**

"Ronald Osborn, with an agile mind and a well-informed intellect, throws down the gauntlet concerning misreading of the Genesis narratives. Taking aim at literalists and fundamentalists, he probes the ways in which one-dimensional reading distorts. Along the way he takes up issues of theodicy as they pertain to all of creation and to the animal realm in particular. Readers can expect to be jolted, surprised and challenged by this forthright statement."

– **Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary**

"Ronald Osborn draws together a variety of sources and addresses key issues in this rich project. His analysis of literalism and biblical interpretation is sorely needed in many circles today. And his insights on animal suffering should prove helpful as believers wrestle with the central issues of God's grace in a world of both pleasure and pain, holiness and harrowing abuse."

– **Thomas Jay Oord, Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, Idaho**

"Many Christians believe that theistic evolution is incompatible with the Bible because the former requires animal death before the Fall, while the Bible teaches that death began only with the first sin (Romans 5:12). Osborn successfully addresses this issue with a wealth of exegetical and theological insight. He further exposes the intellectual weakness and devastating spiritual consequences of the kind of literalism that leads to 'creation science.' This book is a must-read for all Christians (but particularly for pastors and other Christian leaders), especially for those who insist on a rigid literalistic approach to Genesis 1-2. It will also be an eye-opening introduction to religious ways of thinking about evolution for those nonbelievers who have assumed that the only alternative to 'scientific creationism' is the ultra-Darwinism of the so-called New Atheists."

– **Tremper Longman III, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College**

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ENDORSEMENTS

"*Death Before the Fall* is a frank, honest and wide-ranging critique of young-earth creationism, intelligent design and other science-denying movements. Sure-footed, informed and avoiding 'tidy answers,' it shines a sober spotlight on the intellectual crises within evangelicalism--crises responsible for the enduring popularity of viewpoints dismantled by science more than a century ago. Drawing on a broad range of sources, *Death Before the Fall* looks to the sacrificial and self-emptying death of Christ, rather than simplistic interpretations of the fall, to understand our troubled natural history, with its unimaginable reservoirs of suffering and death."

– **Karl W. Giberson**, author of *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*

"A beautifully written book! Ron Osborn writes not with spite and ire but with wisdom and generosity of spirit. Where literalism once ruled as the only way to honor Scripture, here the deeper dimensions of God's compassion and Sabbath rest come to light. This is the first book I've read on the evolution-and-creation debate that brought tears to my eyes."

– **Philip Clayton**, Claremont School of Theology, author of *Transforming Christian Theology*

"In this book the author invites his readers to share his own profound journey arising out of melding his formative early experience of wildlife in Africa, contemporary evolutionary accounts and creationist biblical literalism. In clear, coherent and well-argued narratives he takes apart the assumptions common to scientism and creationism and draws on the Christian tradition and biblical sources in order to construct an alternative. This is an intelligently argued yet pastorally sensitive exploration of the challenges faced by evolutionary theists and creationists alike, but its implications go much further than this. For Osborn succeeds in achieving something that few authors manage, namely, a self-critical but compassionate and sometimes humorous account of the difficulties for theists in coming to terms with suffering in the animal world. It deserves to be read and appreciated not just in student courses on God and evolution, but more widely from different ecclesial traditions."

– **Celia Deane-Drummond**, professor of theology, University of Notre Dame

"*Death Before the Fall* deals with the really big issues of what to make of Scripture in discussions of creation and evolution, and with the really tough challenge animal suffering brings to those discussions. But Ron Osborn shows that big issues and tough challenges can be addressed respectfully, insightfully, and with uncommon readability and humility. Irrespective of our views on the issues, this book represents the kind of informed and gracious conversation partners we want, and that we want to be."

– **Joel B. Green**, Fuller Theological Seminary