

TOM AMBROSE

Death through Adam – William Horst

In writing about Paul's understanding of death through Adam, Horst judges Paul's words with reference to the evangelist's own epistles. The analysis only deals with shades of meaning in Paul, which, Horst tells us, are not shared either by Jews of Jesus' day or modern Judaism. Horst does not address the larger issue, vital in a journal which relates science to faith, of whether Paul's ideas about death through Adam's sin have any validity today.

Darwin's theory of evolution demonstrated that death is as old as life, and part of the way the world has always been, so Paul's use of the creation story is mistaken. Death, whether moral or physical, is not God's punishment for 'Adam's sin'. There was no original perfection, and no Garden of Eden from which to be expelled.

Instead, there is evidence that with evolution, a growing awareness of the creator has arisen. If the gospels are read in this light we see that Jesus did not find it difficult to forgive, and indeed, his greatest evangelists readily confess themselves to be sinners.

It is unfortunate that in a journal which relates science to faith, William Horst opens by saying, 'If we claim that humanity came about through evolution' as though the issue were in doubt. He adds, 'If Christians claim...that the New Testament texts are authoritative, a difficulty appears.'

This presents a simplistic view of Christian belief, as though the choice were just between accepting a somewhat literal reading of Scripture or scientific evidence. The way Christians traditionally read Scripture is not literal. Christians don't have to believe the world was made in six days or woman was created out of Adam's rib just because the Bible says so. A general principle is to say that the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Faith is based on Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Where the claims of science are demonstrable, they should help to distinguish between unverifiable myth and real evidence of the way the world is.

Horst acknowledges that there is a real problem with Paul's interpretation of the creation story in Genesis: Jews, neither in Paul's day, nor today, agree with the views about death which are present in his letters. One could add that the gospels do not provide evidence to support Paul's view. But the way Paul presents his views does not invite criticism. He writes as though his opinions are irrefutable dogma. His style is quite unlike that of the narrative of the creation story on which he bases his arguments. All of this is of little importance in comparison with the central issue. Death did not come through Adam.

The creation story in Genesis is incorrect in asserting that an act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden has produced death, whether moral or physical. Paul's use of the story is entirely legitimate in the knowledge of his day. But that understanding was mistaken. He has, moreover, presented his view not as a story, but as dogma; 'As in Adam all die... Since by man came death' (in the familiar language of Handel's 'Messiah').

Darwin's theory of evolution became common knowledge in Britain quite quickly. It was sufficiently familiar within a generation to be used as a joke in W. S. Gilbert's opera *The Mikado*. Pooh-Bah says, 'I am, in point of fact, a particularly haughty and exclusive person, of pre-Adamite ancestral descent. You will understand this when I tell you that I can trace my ancestry back to a protoplasmal primordial atomic globule.' This flippant remark conveys the fact that without death, and random, error-filled reproduction of countless generations, we would not have evolved. Death is as old as life, and is not caused by the sin of a human ancestor.

If the ordinary person in the nineteenth century could understand the concept, and enjoy the joke, then it is not appropriate to continue to use the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden in making theological arguments. What Paul says about death, and in particular, the notion of 'Adam's sin' is incompatible with what science has revealed about creation. With this information it is worth examining Jesus's attitude to sin. Errors can be forgiven, as in the healing of the paralytic, Mark 2:8-11, and parallels.

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the paralytic – 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.'

God does not find forgiveness difficult. It is legitimate to ask whether Jesus perceives that the paralysed man is bound by his perception of his own sinfulness more than by any physical problem. In the language of the day the understanding about any infirmity could have been that he must have sinned. There is evidence of this kind of attitude in John 9:2. When asked about sin and disability Jesus rejects the notion that there might be any association. Illness or disability is not God's punishment for sin.

To Jesus, no one is beyond forgiveness; a tax collector becomes a disciple (Mark 2:14), a woman caught in the very act of adultery is not condemned (John 8), and a thief on the cross is told (Luke 23:43), 'You will be with me in paradise.' What is more, we know a great deal about the sins of the greatest missionaries, Peter and Paul. Their sins did not bar them from becoming apostles. As Jesus said, he came to call sinners.

The starting point for any Christian assessment of the meaning of death must take account of the fact that the story of the biblical Fall is a myth, like the story that Eve was made from Adam's rib. The assumption Paul makes from it, and in particular the association of sin and death is therefore without foundation.

Not everyone has followed Paul's view of death. St Francis's 'Canticle of the Sun' which praises God for all creation includes, in English translation,

And thou most kind and gentle death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Thou ledest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

Death is not a punishment, but a natural consequence of life coming into being. And evolution, which has led to beings aware of the existence of their creator, has only arisen through the randomness of the behaviour of what would otherwise only have been cosmic dust. We exist only because of mistakes in reproduction. The astonishing truth is that mistakes have been vital, which is quite the opposite to the notion that a single fault led to 'the Fall'. The idea that there was an original perfection is incorrect.

It does not require an understanding of modern science to appreciate that the way we learn is by making mistakes and correcting them. This is how a child learns to walk, then ride a bike, and in some cases, become an acclaimed dancer, skater, or gymnast. Realising that something is a mistake is the first step to putting it right next time. Consider Jesus's famous rebuke to Peter in Mark 8:33, 'Get behind me, Satan.' Peter was not expelled from the twelve for saying what he did. Rather, he learned from his mistake. In a world with randomness at the heart of creation, mistakes are inevitable and have to be corrected all the time.

A lecture by Russell Cowburn at an online conference of the Faraday Institute last summer described features of evolution by natural selection. Cowburn did this from the point of view of an engineer who uses an understanding of quantum mechanics, and of randomness, in solving complex problems. His talk is available at <https://www.faraday.cam.ac.uk/resources/multimedia/making-sense-of-randomness-in-the-physical-world/>

In this, Russell Cowburn's assessment of the beauty of creation through natural selection reveals surprising features of the creator. He describes random processes as:

Self-healing
Adaptable

Understandable

Predictable when viewed correctly

Possessing hidden order

Rich

Useful

Emergent

Creative

Merciful

Another Cambridge contributor to that conference, Simon Conway Morris, has argued – in *Life's Solution, Inevitable Humans in the Lonely Universe*, Cambridge (2003) and *The Runes of Evolution. How the universe became self-aware*; Templeton Press (2015) – that the emergence of life through natural selection leads inevitably to intelligence and self-awareness. Evolution allows for a growing awareness of God, rather than imagining the opposite; an original perfect relationship destroyed by Adam's sin.

The very fact that creation has proceeded through 'mistakes'; through failures to reproduce exact copies of the previous generation, should make us wary of the instant condemnation of a kind of 'banished from Eden' attitude to fault. Cowburn and Conway Morris come closer to understanding God's work in creation than what we gain from the story of the Garden of Eden.

What Paul says about 'Adam's fault' has prevented generations of Christians from having a better appreciation of creation. The idea that death results from Adam's sin inevitably leads to the mistaken idea that such wrongdoing, causing all of humanity to die, must surely be a most serious sin that will not easily be forgiven. At worst, it leads to the idea condemned by Steve Chalk as 'cosmic child abuse' – in *'The atonement debate'*, Zondervan (2008) – that the Father requires the death of his only Son in order to forgive. If Paul's views on death can be set aside, it is possible to appreciate more readily the evidence in the gospels of how eager Jesus is to forgive, and that God is a God of love.

It will not be easy. Almost everything Christians have written about atonement is based on Paul's assumption that death resulted from Adam's sin and expulsion from Eden. People have imagined as a result that God would find it difficult to forgive 'Adam's sin'. This includes Anselm, Milton in *Paradise Lost* through to Dillistone's *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (SCM Press (1968, 1984)) and to Stephen Sykes' *The Story of Atonement* (DLT (1997)). Theories of the atonement have been based on Paul's views about death. Dillistone and Sykes did not consider the possibility that the notion of being expelled from the Garden of Eden was incompatible with science. Discussion of the meaning of Paul's writing on death, without any recognition of how life arose

on earth prevents any proper engagement with the reality that there never was an Eden from which humanity might be expelled.

Taking Paul's views literally means imagining that this is not God's creation, but a creation ruined by Adam's sin. Accepting the scientific view of the evolution of life through natural selection is compatible with the conclusion that this is God's world as the creator intended it to be, and that the divine purpose can be discerned in all that we see.

Most Christians have moved beyond a belief that God in wrath destroyed everyone on earth apart from Noah and his family. There was no universal flood and no ark holding all the animals. Similarly, science asserts that there never was a 'Fall'. Death is as old as life, and not a sign that God is angry. Indeed, as Russell Cowburn concludes from his work based on quantum mechanics, God who uses randomness is both truly creative and merciful.

In the light of this, it is worth looking afresh at the gospels, to see mercy in action in Jesus. The conclusion might then be to find, with the hymn writer F.W. Faber, that:

We make his love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own

Revd Dr Tom Ambrose carried out geological research in the Cantabrian Mountains of northern Spain and contributed to the 1:50,000 official geological maps of the area. He studied theology at Cambridge University before ordination, and working as a parish priest. He is now retired.
