

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 43 | Number 1

Article 5

---

September 2014

## Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering (Book Review)

Joel Duff  
*University of Akron*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Duff, Joel (2014) "Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 43: No. 1, 31 - 33.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol43/iss1/5](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol43/iss1/5)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Book Reviews

---

Osborn, Ronald E. *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. 197 pages, paperback. ISBN: 978-0-8308-4046-5. Reviewed by Joel Duff, Professor of Biology, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.

---

A small wasp catches a whiff of a caterpillar and zooms in to lay a few eggs just under the skin of its back. The eggs hatch, and the wasp larvae burrow into the caterpillar. They consume its flesh, killing it, while allowing another generation of wasps to mature.

This gruesome scene is carried out billions of times each day in an intricate system of death, decay, and rebirth. The cycle of life and death is now a natural part of our universe. Yet participation in it can be painful, harsh, and seemingly cruel. Probably most Christians wrestle with tough questions about our participation in the cycle. Why do we get sick, suffer chronic pain, experience psychological problems, and die slowly from infectious disease? Why does a good and loving God allow these things to occur?

Although reformed Christians answer these questions of theodicy by pointing to Adam's fall and human sin, we're still left with more vexing questions about the natural world. Specifically, animals also get sick, suffer terrible pain, and die slow deaths. They eat each other, some kill their own siblings or babies, and even chimpanzees make war on each other and cannibalize their victims. Is the suffering of animals the same as the suffering that mankind experiences? Is the suffering of animals the result of our sin? Are we at fault—did the fall somehow change the natural world—or is nature as we experience it today part of God's original creation and ongoing plan?

While the question of why we suffer has been the subject of innumerable texts, the question of why animals suffer has not received as much attention. To help fill that void, Ronald Osborn, teaching fellow at the Peace and Justice Studies program at Wellesley College, gives us *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*—a book that attempts to address most of the tough questions I've asked in the opening paragraphs of this review.

In the first chapter, Osborn sets the scene for his

discussion of theodicy and animal suffering by helping us read the creation account from Genesis. He observes that it is too easy to say that God said "let it be" and that elements of the natural world just appeared, because the text itself gives us much more information. When God pronounced "let it be," the text says specifically that the "earth," "waters" and "sky" brought forth those things—and not God proper. Though it would be wrong to infer that God is not involved in the process of bringing forth, it may be equally wrong to assume that we know what it means that the "earth" brought something forth.

Within this discussion of the creation account, Osborn drops a hint of how he will solve the problem of animal suffering. One of his central arguments in this book, he says, will revolve around the question of divine action and constraint—that is, what exactly is the extent of the free will of all created creatures. Many theologians have wrestled with the nature of humankind's free will, but Osborn's concern here is one of "free will" for animals and the creation in general. For example, he says that God may not be "simply dominating" the universe; rather, "in the very act of bringing the world into existence God is in a certain sense already withdrawing himself from it—or perhaps better, limiting himself within it—in order for it to be free. God is the sustaining ground of all being so nothing exists apart from God, yet the very fact that things exist that are ontologically other than God implies a simultaneously present/absent Creation from the start" (27).

After Osborn reads Genesis 1-2 and offers this teaser about the creation and free will, he then critiques "biblical literalism" and creation "science" in chapters 2 through 9—all of which were published as a series of essays and collected here. Osborn, trained in the social sciences yet still well versed in theology and the physical sciences, provides us with a valuable perspective on the current tensions in the church

over origins. Unfortunately, his tone is rather polemic at times, the topics he addresses are somewhat disjointed, and his solutions are oversimplified. More importantly, these chapters—comprising two-thirds of the book—are probably not the ones that engaged and thoughtful readers will be interested in (there are far better critiques than Osborn's of the philosophical and observational problems posed by creation science and the young-earth hypothesis).

When Osborn finally returns to the question of death and animal suffering in Chapter 10, he does so by first showing how "literalistic" approaches not only fail to solve the theodicy problem but instead, in his opinion, make it worse. Though it isn't difficult to negatively critique the literalist paradigm as contradictory and unable to solve the difficult riddle of why animals suffer pain and death, the harder task is to produce a positive answer to the problem, one that offers the hope that another research paradigm can better explain all the evidence of both special and general revelation. Osborn makes this attempt in the final three chapters.

For the most part, his ideas are provoking, though the implications of his ideas for theology need to be addressed and explored further. In Chapter 11, Osborn takes a look at the merits and problems of the way that C.S. Lewis attempts to answer the theodicy question (most famously in his book *The Problem of Pain*). Chapter 12 discusses a biblical hero who wrestled with terrible suffering, namely Job. In the biblical book named for him, Job gives a strong objection to pain, sickness and death—he brazenly calls for the creation order to be undone. He ultimately curses creation, but God never cursed all of creation (even after the fall), so He rebukes Job for not appreciating it as it is. Osborn points out that God's answer to Job's "nihilism" is "nothing other than the creation itself in all of its stupendous, intricate, frightening, free and often incomprehensible forms." This answer creates a paradox. While God's response to Job (in Job 38-41) is "not an answer" to the problem of pain and physical suffering, "it is the only answer possible. The creation, with its suffering and death included, is very good because it is God's creation.... Job is right to cry out in protest against his own sufferings; yet in turning his personal experience of suffering into an indictment against the creation in its entirety—against the injustice of existence—he goes too far.

This is why, it seems to me, God both raises and rebukes Job when at last he speaks from out of the whirlwind" (152).

Later, in the same chapter, Osborn rebukes all parties in the origins debate. He argues that both evolutionists and creationists are quick to assume that the natural world, as revealed by science, is "too wild, too finite and too ferocious to be God's very good creation." By making this assumption, they are simply repeating the errors of the humans in Job's drama: both the "nihilism" of Job in his curse on nature and the "false theodicy of Job's friends" (155).

In Chapter 13, Creation and Kenosis, Osborn finally returns to the free-will discussion that he teases us with in his first chapter. Here he argues that "natural evil" and animal suffering is analogous to a theological solution to "human moral evil." Just as God grants humans "free will"—he is "powerful enough and self-giving enough to create beings with the capacity to make meaningful, self-defining choices"—he also grants a certain freedom to the created order. That is, animal suffering seems to "emerg[e] from... free or indeterminate process, which God does not override and [in] which are inherent possibilities in a creation in which the Creator allows the other to be truly other. God grants the creation the freedom of its own being.... And God continues to create in and through these processes while still allowing the creation to be as it is, each element and organism working out its inner principles according to its kind" (161).

Osborn, who it should be noted is a Seventh Day Adventist, admits that there will be some discomfort for all believers with his proposition (one that, it seems to me, brushes up against open theism). He suggests that the modern conception of sovereignty, popular in Reformed circles, has constrained many in respect to finding a resolution to the problem of natural evil because they cannot allow themselves to explore the ramifications of a free will in animals. Despite my own discomfort with Osborn's arguments, I believe it would be profitable for Reformed scholars to continue to test the doctrine of sovereignty against ideas such as these. It may be possible that, while these arguments appear to attack a fundamental tenet of Reformed theology, the theological ship of the Calvinists may be able to accommodate some new ideas by replacing a few planks on

the deck without sinking the entire ship. The reason that Osborn's ideas should be considered is that the theodicy problem is all too real. Osborn adds a worthy challenge to a progressive research problem that could allow our understanding of this Christian doctrine to be refined or even reformed.

The last chapter is a powerful and convicting application of the meaning of the Sabbath in the Old Testament toward the health and well-being of animals. Here Osborn calls upon his own experiences growing up as a Seventh Day Adventist with the doctrine of the Sabbath. Osborn brings the non-Adventist reader into that unfamiliar world and relates his theological convictions about how Sunday Sabbath-keeping has resulted in the loss of elements of "rest," not only for humans but for the rest of creation, including animals. Osborn argues, and I very much agree, that modern evangelicals have an indifference to animal suffering, likely due to our emphasis on all suffering and death as solely the result of the fall. When we sin, we use Adam's sin as an excuse to overlook present needless suffering and thus some-

times ignore the present suffering of creatures other than ourselves. The result has been an abysmal track record of care for God's creation, since in a sense we don't feel that caring for a broken, temporary world is worth it. Osborn's perspective, if accurate, would also affect a Christian's views on biological conservation, global warming, and a host of other important ecological issues of our day.

Osborn packs a lot into the last third of the book and the insights there are well worth waiting for, if you choose to read the entire book. However, you could skip right to Chapter 10 without missing out on the substance of his main topic. You might still feel as I did when you finish: that you still don't know how to answer theological questions about suffering, pain, and death in the natural world. However, you will find enough material here to reflect upon and, agree or not with his central thesis, you will likely feel that you have come one step closer to understanding how the creation reflects the nature and glory of God.

---

Stapert, Calvin. *Playing Before the Lord: The Life and Work of Joseph Haydn*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014. 304 pages. ISBN 978-0802868527. Reviewed by John MacInnis, Assistant Professor of Music, Dordt College.

---

Calvin Stapert's *Playing Before the Lord* serves as both a substantive biography of Franz Joseph Haydn and a listening guide for much of his music. One of this book's strengths is Stapert's narration and explanations, both of which are articulate and forceful; indeed, he excels at communicating ways in which one may listen intelligently and emotively to Haydn's music. In the book's preface, Stapert acknowledges, rightly, that knowledge of Haydn's biography is not necessary to enjoy Haydn's music, but that it helps. This dyad is also invertible: enjoying an artistic creation quite naturally prompts us to consider its creator.

The book is organized chronologically, beginning with some comments about Haydn's ancestry and birth, in 1732, and concluding with his death, in 1809. Several black and white images are included, of Haydn himself, family members, and other people important to Haydn's life. Appended material includes an outline of Haydn's magisterial oratorio, *Creation*, and a glossary of terms. Stapert intends

that the glossary not be comprehensive, but serve as a help when questions of musical terminology arise in the course of his descriptions. In fact, he urges that readers not fear his technical vocabulary, for precise language adds specificity and concreteness to our thinking. Stapert says that "technical matters of form, texture, harmony, rhythm, phrasing, and the like are not merely technical. They usually, if not always, have an effect on the expressive, rhetorical, or dramatic character of the music. The language might seem cold and abstract, but the music it is describing is not. The purpose of the language is to guide the hearing, not to be a substitute for it. And sometimes the best language to guide our hearing is technical" (xii).

At times, *Playing Before the Lord* reads like a manifesto in which Stapert affirms the viability of discussing music in meaningful ways, beyond the merely subjective responses of individual listeners, and he explores various means by which the living, breathing sounds of music may be presented clearly