

On the origin of death: Paul and Augustine meet Charles Darwin

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Ever since the 4th century, Christian theologians have linked Romans 5:12–21 with Genesis 2–3. Augustine (354–430), one of the Latin fathers of the Church, propagated the idea of 'original sin' according to his reading of these chapters. This idea eventually became a fixed doctrine in Western Christianity and a large number of Christians still believe and proclaim that humans would have lived for ever but for the misconduct of Adam and Eve. They also proclaim that Jesus, through his obedience, death and resurrection, re-established God's original creation plan. Death was conquered and eternal life can be inherited by all who believe in Jesus as saviour and second Adam. However, since both the introduction of the theory of evolution into biology and the paradigm shift in biblical studies (at the end of the 19th century), the view that death was to be linked to 'original sin' came under severe criticism. This article argues that Romans 5:12–21 and Genesis 2–3 do not support the idea of 'original sin' and that death is a normal part of life on earth, as argued by evolutionary biologists and proclaimed by many Old Testament texts.

Avant propos

Whilst working on a Master's dissertation focussing on the Israelite wisdom and wisdom literature (Spangenberg 1979), I discovered, in the library of the University of Stellenbosch, James Alfred Loader's doctoral thesis titled '*Polariteit in die denke van Qohelet*' (1973).¹ Walter Claassen from the Department of Semitic Languages was appointed as supervisor for the MA dissertation and he agreed that it could be worth my while comparing Gerhard von Rad's (1970) approach to the Israelite wisdom and wisdom literature with that of Hans Heinrich Schmid (1966).

It was a rather daunting task for a young student of theology and Semitic languages to try his hand at this type of comparison. Von Rad's approach to Israelite wisdom and wisdom literature was not difficult to understand, as by that stage his major publications had been translated into English and one could consult the English version when the German was difficult. But Schmid's publications were different. They were available only in German and were written in a philosophical idiom. However, Loader's thesis helped me to understand Schmid's approach. Chapter 4 of the thesis (Loader 1973:125–134) contained a short but excellent discussion of Schmid's viewpoints. It was, moreover, written in the most lucid academic Afrikaans I had ever encountered during my student years at the University of Stellenbosch.

I was so impressed by the thesis that I made an appointment to see Loader during a short visit to Pretoria in 1978. At that stage he was a senior lecturer in Semitic languages at the University of Pretoria, but he soon moved to the University of South Africa (UNISA), located in the same city. The discussion with Loader resulted in me setting myself the task of reading everything he and Ferdinand Deist had published. Deist was the other South African Old Testament scholar whose publications made a lasting impression on me and I soon became their disciple. They introduced me to the historical-critical study of the Old Testament and to a new understanding of Scripture (Deist 1976, 1979; Loader 1979b).

During the second year of my academic career at the Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg), I made contact with Ferdinand Deist to discuss the possibility of doing a doctoral thesis under his supervision at UNISA. After listening to my opinions and interests, he recommended that I postpone my studies for six months until Loader moved to UNISA and could be my promoter. He informed me in confidence that Loader had been offered a professorship in Old Testament studies and had accepted it. However, the normal run of the academic mill required his resignation from the University of Pretoria and an official appointment at UNISA before any relationship between us could be established. I thus had to wait for six months before I could commence with my doctoral studies. Loader was, however, willing to

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1.Loader's thesis was later translated into English and published under the title *Polar structures in the Book of Qohelet* (1979a).

meet me unofficially to discuss my research interest. We eventually agreed that I would write a thesis on the theme of death in the book of *Qohelet*. The official title of the thesis is '*Gedigte oor die dood in die boek Prediker*' (Spangenberg 1987).

Since 1980, the themes of life, death, dying and resurrection have remained amongst my interests as an Old Testament scholar and Loader played no mean role in this. I therefore dedicate this article to him in remembrance of his years as Professor at UNISA (1980–1997).

Since the time of Augustine, mainstream Christianity has held that without Adam's sin, there would be no death. But because Adam sinned and left us prey to the power of death, we need a saviour. The 'anthropo-logic' implies, indeed states that we human beings were distinguished from all others by being created by God to live forever. Our salvation by Christ means that God's purpose stands, and that we alone, out of all species, are to be exempt from death. (Primavesi 2000:29)

Introduction

Any reader who is willing to read and study the Old Testament carefully will soon discover that life and death play a prominent role in the three constituent parts, the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings. Concerning the Pentateuch, one may refer to the Book of Deuteronomy which is regarded as the 'Archimedean point' of Pentateuchal studies (Weinfeld 1992:174). The section dealing with the blessings and curses of the covenant ends with the words: 'Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil ...' (Dt 30:15). More than forty years ago, Moshe Weinfeld (1972:244) argued that the book of Deuteronomy reflects wisdom influence, or rather that there exist 'wisdom substrata in Deuteronomy' and that similar wordings can be found in the book of Proverbs. Weinfeld (1972) quoted the following verses from the book of Proverbs as proof of this:

For whoever finds me finds life and wins favour with the Lord, but whoever fails to find me deprives himself, and all who hate me are in love with death (Prov. 8:35–36). (p. 308)

When one reads the Prophets, a similar urgency to seek life and not death can be identified in many of the prophetic books – especially those reflecting wisdom influence. An example can be found in the Book of Amos: 'Seek good, and not evil, that you may live ...' (Am 5:14). Hans Walter Wolff (1964) was the first Old Testament scholar to reflect on this matter and to propose wisdom influence on the prophet Amos.

The theme of life and death thus runs through the wisdom, the prophetic and the judicial literature of ancient Israel.

It is fairly understandable that the issue of life and death would play a prominent role in a society in which people's life expectancy was extremely low and in which people had to struggle for survival under the domination of great empires. Very few people could survive until the age of fifty or sixty years. Klaas Smelik (2003) summarises this:

Meer nog dan voor hun hedendaagse lezers werd het leven van de bijbelschrijvers bepaald door de dood. Dood was in hun leven

veel nadrukkelijker aanwezig dan thans: kinderen stierven vaak jong, vrouwen bezweken in hun kraambed, mannen sneuvelden in de strijd. (p. 20)

People living in the ancient Near East could not but reflect on life and death and this applies also to the early Christians. They were part of a world in which death lurked around every corner. Moreover, Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, who believed in, and worked for the coming of God's kingdom, suffered a violent death at the hands of Roman soldiers under the command of a Roman governor who had the task of keeping peace and order in a rather rebellious part of the empire. Jesus' untimely death impacted not only on his immediate followers' memories and reflections but also on the reflections of later Christian theologians. The immediate followers' memories of Jesus were written down in the Synoptic Gospels and these memories included stories about appearances after his death (Le Donne 2011:90–91). Alongside these stand the letters by the apostle Paul, which were written prior to the Gospels. These letters reflect a different recollection and understanding of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Paul and his convictions

Paul never accompanied Jesus of Nazareth during his lifetime but Luke claimed that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul and that this appearance changed his life forever (Ac 9:1–30). Paul himself does not elaborate on this event in his letters. When he does mention it, as he does in the letter to the Galatians (1:1–2:16), it serves to support his claim to be an apostle tasked with bringing the good news to non-Jews. According to Paula Fredriksen, the event narrated in Acts 9 was not his conversion from early Judaism to early Christianity. It was rather a lateral movement: 'In the year c.34, to join the Jesus movement would have been to effect a lateral movement *within* Judaism, in Paul's case from the Pharisaic party to the Jesus party' (Fredriksen 1986:15).

When reading Paul's letters, one should bear in mind that his understanding of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ entailed differed from that of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. According to their recollections, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God (Mk 1:14–15). This kingdom was meant to be different from the Roman Empire, which focused primarily on the elite Roman citizens and their well-being. Jesus proclaimed a theocracy which would benefit the poor and oppressed Jews in Palestine. His good news was: God will soon erect his kingdom (Horsley 2003:126–128; Cobb 2006:142; Le Donne 2011:69). Paul, on the other hand, was not concerned with the kingdom of God becoming a reality in Palestine. He shared the conviction that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection opened the door for non-Jews to become part of God's chosen people without formally converting to Judaism by being circumcised: 'Paul offered Gentiles the opportunity to enter Judaism without the Law' (Davies 1994:78). That, according to Paul, was the good news. He further believed that the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism was a sign of the end times. By becoming part of God's chosen people, they were also placed in the correct standing before God and would escape his wrath at the final judgement.

Paul's reflections concerning Jesus and Adam

Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans are regarded as the most important he wrote, reflecting best his convictions concerning Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. However, it would be unwise to ignore his first letter to the Corinthians, as this letter introduces readers to his idea of a first and a second Adam. The section in 1 Corinthians comparing Jesus Christ with Adam reads as follows:

But the truth is, Christ was raised to life — the first fruits of the harvest of the dead. For since it was a man who brought death into the world, a man also brought resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be brought to life; but each in proper order: Christ the first fruits, and afterwards, at his coming, those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to God the Father, after deposing every sovereignty, authority, and power. For he is destined to reign until God has put all enemies under his feet; and the last enemy to be deposed is death. (1 Cor 15:20–26)

Paul was convinced that death could be linked to the events narrated in Genesis 2–3. According to his view, death has a starting point: the Garden of Eden. However, death also has a cut-off date: God's preliminary conquest of death when Jesus was raised from the grave and his final conquest on the day Jesus returns. Paul expected Jesus' return within his lifetime and he regarded his missionary work as contributing to these end-time events (Fredriksen 2012:31). His letter to the Thessalonians clearly reflects Paul's apocalyptic worldview.

The letter to the Romans, which communicates ideas similar to those in 1 Corinthians 15, was written shortly after 2 Corinthians and most probably a year after 1 Corinthians. Scholars differ on the exact date, but a date between 55 and 58 CE seems probable. Robert Jewett (2007:18), however, is of the opinion that the letter was most probably 'drafted in the winter of 56–57 CE or the early spring of 57.' Paul once again compares Jesus Christ with Adam when he writes the following:

It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race, inasmuch as all have sinned. (...) But God's act of grace is out of proportions to Adam's wrong doing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. (...) It follows, then, that as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all. For as through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous. (Rm 5:12, 15, 18–19)

In this section of the letter, Paul contrasts Jesus' obedience with Adam's disobedience. John Ziesler (1989:144) summarises Paul's argument succinctly when he says: 'The Adam story is the story of disobedience and death; the Christ story is the story of obedience and life', but he strays from the point when he says that 1 Corinthians 15 focuses more on 'the Adam of Genesis 1 and 2', whereas Romans 5 'concentrates on the Adam of the Fall (Gen. 3)' (p. 144). Both letters recall the story of Genesis 2–3, but nothing is communicated

about a Fall. Paul did not value the idea that there had been a perfect world which collapsed because of Adam's act of disobedience. Adam's sin did not transform nature. This understanding of the story in Genesis 2–3 represents Augustine's ideas rather than Paul's. Paul does not view humans as being 'rooted' in Adam, nor does he think they are consequently a condemned lump, as Augustine described them, *inter alia*, in his *Enchiridion* (section 8–9; cf. Van Bavel 2008:24–32). E.P. Sanders (2001) gives a better exposition of Paul's arguments when he says:

Paul did not come to Christianity with a pre-formed conception of humanity's sinful plight, but rather deduced the plight from the solution. Once he accepted it as revelation that God intended to save the entire world by sending his Son, he naturally had to think that the entire world needed saving, and thus that it was wholly bound over to Sin. His soteriology is more consistent and straightforward than are his conceptions of the human plight. It seems that his fixed view of salvation forced him to go in search of arguments in favour of universal sin. This explains why Romans 1–2 and 5 are so weak as reasoned arguments but led to such a definite conclusion. The conclusion that all need to be saved through Christ, since Paul received it as revelation, could not be questioned; the arguments in favour of universal bondage to Sin, then, are efforts at rationalization. (p. 45)

The conviction that death could be linked to the events narrated in Genesis 2–3 is nowhere to be found in the *Tanakh*. However, the author of the deuterocanonical book *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* accuses Eve as the culprit: 'In a woman was sin's beginning: on her account we all die' (Sir. 25:24). One may speculate whether Paul knew *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* and whether his reflections on this verse could have influenced 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5. If the answer is positive, we may be able to understand why Paul omitted the women witnesses to Christ's resurrection in his account in 1 Corinthians 15:5–7. He could not assign positive acts to women.

According to Bart Ehrman (2008:362–365), Paul uses two models in Romans to explain the effects of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, namely, (1) a judicial model, and (2) a participationist model. According to the judicial model, humans transgressed God's laws, the penalty for which is death. The fact that humans died was proof that they had sinned. They were all disobedient. However, Jesus' death on the cross annulled their disobedience. He was obedient to God and died to pay the penalty for the transgressions of all human beings. Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus' death and resurrection are absolved and enter into a new relationship with God. Moreover, they will not be condemned when Jesus Christ returns.

According to the participationist model, sin and death are regarded as cosmic powers which influence people's lives. Jesus conquered these powers with his death and resurrection. Humans can participate in his conquest by being baptised. When someone is baptised they participate in Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death, the outcome being that the cosmic forces of sin and death cannot influence their life anymore. This can be compared with iron pieces

that become magnetic as soon as they enter the magnet's 'sphere of influence'. Humans can thus live under either the influence of sin and death, or the influence of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. The summary (Table 1) based on Ehrman's exposition (2008:365) compares the two models and highlights the differences.

This is helpful in understanding Paul's arguments concerning sin and how faith and baptism are to be linked with Jesus' death and resurrection. It should, however, be remembered that Paul did not write a philosophical or theological treatise. He made use of both models to convince the gentile readers of his letter that they had been released from the death penalty (Rm 5), that they had entered a new sphere of influence (Rm 6) and that they were now 'grafted into the cultivated olive tree' (Rm 9–11). They were descendants of Abraham, the believer.

Paul's exposition of the good news as he understood it and as he explained it in his letter to the Romans made an enormous impact on Augustine and eventually on Western Christianity (Pagels 1994:102; Otten 2010:33–34). Robert Morgan (1998:121) summarises this aptly when he says: 'Paul and Augustine stand behind all subsequent arguments about justification and fed most theories of atonement from Anselm and Abelard into 17th century Protestant scholasticism and beyond.'

Augustine and Pelagius

It is important to remember that when Augustine (354–430) became Bishop of Hippo (395), Christianity was already the state religion of the Roman Empire, a development to which the Emperors Constantine (275–337) and Theodosius (346–395) contributed. Constantine declared Christianity *a legal religion* and Theodosius made it *the sole official religion* of the Roman Empire. Both Emperors contributed to the development of creeds to establish unity amongst Christians and to keep the empire intact.

Augustine played an influential role as theologian in promoting the well-being of church and empire, especially in North Africa. His theological convictions developed as he engaged 'lesser orthodox' theologians, whose views he regarded as undermining the good faith of the church and as detrimental to the empire. One of these 'lesser orthodox' Christians was Pelagius (Brown 1967:340–352).

Pelagius was born in Britain and went to study law and theology in Rome in 380. During his time in Rome, a

controversy arose concerning death, sin and the purpose of baptism. The conviction that children were baptised to cleanse them from their sinful nature which they inherited from Adam was not acceptable to Christians in that part of the empire. They felt it represented a North African theological tradition. When Rome was attacked in 410, Pelagius and Celestius escaped to Carthage in North Africa, where they soon became embroiled in arguments about original sin, a theological concept propagated by Augustine (Knowles & Penkett 2004:119–126). Augustine argued that, prior to the Fall, the world was in a perfect condition. There were no illnesses, droughts, floods or other pestilences (Pagels 1994:84). Instead there was harmony in nature and death was non-existent, even in the animal world. Pelagius had a more positive outlook on human nature and opined that humans had free will to do either good or bad (Lampe 2003:158–159). In his opinion, human beings did not inherit a sinful nature. They sin when they do wrong and 'wrong-doing takes place through the exercise of free choice' (Lampe 2003:160). Pelagius also denied the idea that 'death is a consequence of Adam's disobedience' (Knowles & Penkett 2004:120) and that there was 'a universal and permanent change in nature' after the Fall (Pagels 1994:88). Pelagius argued that, although Adam committed the primal transgression, his guilt has not been passed on to other generations. Human beings are not intrinsically evil. They are capable of choosing good over evil. Celestius claimed in his arguments that 'Adam was created mortal, and would have died whether or not he sinned; his sin injured himself alone and not the entire human race' (Lampe 2003:161).

The arguments propagated by Pelagius and Celestius were supported by particularly wealthy Christians in Rome and Sicily, but they soon discovered that their theological convictions were not acceptable in North Africa or even in certain parts of Palestine. Jerome (348–420), who lived in Bethlehem, also disputed Pelagius' views. Jerome was thoroughly versed in Hebrew and Greek and challenged Pelagius' interpretations of Scripture. Although he sometimes differed with Augustine, he supported his interpretation of Romans 5:12. Augustine had almost no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. He read only Latin translations of the Old and New Testaments (Fredriksen 2012:113). The Latin translation of Romans 5:12d ('*in whom* all sinned', not '*inasmuch as* all have sinned' which represents the Greek) opened the door for him to develop his ideas of Adam's progeny being 'rooted' in him and thus co-condemned by God. Pelagius argued his case so well that two councils of bishops in Palestine declared his convictions orthodox. However, African bishops under the leadership of Augustine were not in agreement and two councils of African bishops declared his views heretical. They persuaded Pope Innocent I (402–417) to support them by condemning Pelagius and his followers. However, his successor, Pope Zosimus (417–418), turned the tables on them when he declared Pelagius' teaching orthodox. Augustine and other African bishops protested vehemently and Pope Zosimus recalled his first judgement, eventually excommunicating Pelagius. Emperor Honorius (395–423)

TABLE 1: The two models which Paul uses in Romans.

Main features	Judicial model	Participationist model
Sin	Disobedience that brings a death penalty	A cosmic power that enslaves people
Jesus' death	Payment of the penalty of sin	Defeat of the power of sin
Appropriation	Acceptance of the payment through faith, apart from works of the Law	Participation in Christ's victory through baptism
Outcome	Becoming sons of Abraham	Living a spirit-filled life

also stepped in and condemned Pelagius, expelling him from office and exiling him (Pagels 1994:79–80; Knowles & Penkett 2004:125–126).

Augustine might have thought that his views had won the day when Emperor Honorius supported him but Julian of Eclanum, a young Italian bishop and a staunch supporter of Pelagius, took up the cudgels on his behalf (Brown 1967:381–397). The controversy then received new momentum with the publication of Julian's *Four books for Turbantius* (419). In these books, Julian accused Augustine of being influenced by ideas found in Manichaeism but not in orthodox Christianity. Augustine responded with a book called *Against Julian the defender of the Pelagian Heresy* (421). 'For more than twelve years Augustine and Julian debated, shouting back and forth their respective views, until Augustine died' (Pagels 1994:94). The Catholic Church eventually accepted Augustine's exposition of 'original sin' based on his erroneous interpretations of Genesis 2–3 and Romans 5:12–21. For their part, the Protestant reformers also embraced his views. None of them criticised Augustine for not interpreting Scripture accurately. On the contrary, his theological convictions became entrenched in the creeds and confessions of the Reformation (cf. Pelikan & Hotchkiss 2003). Protestant Christianity never severed its ties with the Augustinian paradigm of theology, which Philip Kennedy characterises as 'Fall–Redemption–Judgement' (Kennedy 2006:ix–x, 252). However, with the paradigm change in the study of the Bible towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (Noll 1991:45; Saebø 1995:243–245) there was a radical change.

Genesis 2–3 and 'original sin'

One of the first modern Old Testament scholars who dared to question the traditional interpretation of Genesis 2–3 was the Swiss Old Testament scholar Ludwig Köhler (1880–1956). During 1932–1933 a lively debate took place between Köhler and Emil Brunner (1889–1966) concerning the interpretation of Genesis 2–3 (Reventlow 1985:19–27; Barr 1992:87–93). Köhler was adamant that the narrative did not concern 'original sin'. He classified the narrative as an etiological narrative which tries to answer questions like:

1. Why do snakes not have feet and why do they slough off their skin?
2. Why is there enmity between humans and snakes?
3. Why is farming such a time-consuming and tedious task?
4. Why do women have to suffer during childbirth?

Köhler also emphasised that none of the Old Testament books referred back to the story of Adam and Eve to explain sin and evil. Moreover, Jesus himself never mentioned the story of Adam and Eve to explain his mission. Brunner, on the other hand, referred to Paul's interpretation as reflected in Romans 5. He maintained that he would rather err with Paul than follow the type of interpretation that Köhler was advocating. Köhler's interpretation, according to his judgement, carried overtones of Pelagianism (Barr 1992:89).

In previous centuries, theologians understood Genesis 1–3 to be a single creation narrative consisting of two episodes.

The first episode narrates how a perfect creation came into being. The second narrates how this perfect creation became defective. Nowadays Old Testament scholars agree that Genesis 1–3 consists of two different stories called the P- and the J-narratives and that none of them is a historical account of what happened at the beginning of creation (Westermann 1972:13, 26–27).

The boundaries of the first creation story are defined as Genesis 1:1–2:4a, whilst the boundaries of the second are Genesis 2:4b–3:24 (Harris 2007:103–105). The first story ends with the words: 'Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created' (Gn 2:4a), whilst the second begins with the words: 'When the LORD God made earth and heaven....' (Gn 2:4b). An attentive reader will immediately recognise that the words 'heaven and earth' in the first narrative are reversed in the second one to read 'earth and heaven' (Fokkelman 1989:41).

These stories originated in different contexts and conveyed different messages to their initial readers. The first narrative (Gn 1:1–2:4a) tells the story of how the whole cosmos was created in six days, the seventh day being the most important because God himself rested on that day. This creation story probably originated in Babylonia during the exile (586–539 BCE) and is told primarily to recount the origin of the Sabbath and to legitimise its celebration. It is assigned to the P-document (Bandstra 1995:52–53).

The second creation story (Gn 2:4b–3:24), which forms part of the J-document, explains why human beings possess *divine knowledge*, but not *divine life*, that is, they are able to distinguish between good and bad, but they do not live forever. According to the story a male human being is created for the purpose of tilling the soil (Gn 2:4b–5). He is a co-creator, but a mortal one, since he is created from the soil of the earth (Gn 2:7). Nothing in the narrative suggests that he was created to be immortal, as Augustine would have liked readers to believe. Later in the story, a female human being is created to be a companion for Adam. She ate from the forbidden tree at the instigation of the serpent and gave some of the fruit to the man (Gn 3:1–6). The serpent is not the devil, as some New Testament authors describe him. He is not 'the bad guy', since he assists the human beings in attaining divine knowledge. Contrary to Augustine's interpretation, the story reflects personal growth (Korte 2010:148–153).

When the LORD God arrives on the scene he has to deal with an unexpected situation: the humans suddenly possess divine knowledge (Gn 3:8–11). However, he does not react as if he is angry. Quite on the contrary, he enquires about the source of their realisation that they were naked (Gn 3:11). After getting to the centre of the matter, he makes the different characters pay for their acquisition of wisdom. Gaining divine knowledge (wisdom) comes with a price. The serpent will be forced to crawl on the surface of the earth for the rest of his life because he offered the fruit. Moreover, there will be enmity between him and the woman; between his

progeny and hers (Gn 3:14–15). The price which the female would be obliged to pay for gaining divine knowledge was experiencing the pangs of childbirth and being subservient to her husband (Gn 3:16). The price the male would have to pay was that of working hard to eke out a living (Gn 3:17–19). However, death was not included in the price! The narrator merely stated that the man would pay the price until death.

Genesis 2:4b–3:24 is thus *not* a narrative about original sin and death as punishment as Augustine claimed. How do we know this? First of all, this narrative is a story, not history. There never were a real Adam and Eve. Like the serpent, they are characters in a story. Moreover, the Hebrew word for ‘sin’ is not used anywhere in the narrative (Tucker 1978:119; Primavesi 2000:30) and none of the other biblical books ever refer to this story to explain the origin of sin and mortality. The ancient Israelites were of the opinion that death is a normal event in life. Death is only ‘unnatural’ when it arrives before a person has lived a full life (Smelik 2003:48; Alexander 2008:248–249).

Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution

Scholars often refer to Charles Darwin (1809–1882) as the Nicolaus Copernicus of biology. This is because Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection produced a change in perspective similar to that of Copernicus’ theory of planetary movements (Weinert 2009:93–94). Moreover, both scholars changed the way in which Westerners saw themselves and other people. Whilst most people today accept that the sun is the centre of our solar system and that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun, a great number of them still struggle to come to terms with the idea that humans evolved from lower forms of life. Some Christians are completely unable to accept the theory of evolution because the grand narrative of Christianity assigns a special position to humans. They believe that they alone have been created in the image of God and have eternal souls (Ruse 2009:378–380). They alone are meant to live forever.

During Darwin’s lifetime most Europeans believed that the world had been created in the year 4004 BCE (Bowler 2007:30). They also believed that all the plant and animal species they knew of had been created in their respective forms by God during the early phases of creation. Nothing has changed since then. The conviction that the earth and all the different plant and animal species had been created in 4004 BCE was based on the calculations by Bishop James Ussher (1581–1656). He took the genealogical tables in the Bible, made meticulous mathematical calculations and eventually got to the figure of 4004. His calculations looked so accurate and convincing that the date 4004 BCE was reprinted later in the Authorized Version (also known as the King James Version) of the Bible (Gilmore 2000:26). When it came to the fixity of species, this was a core belief which no one challenged before Darwin entered the scene.

Apart from these convictions, Europeans also believed that there existed a fixed ranking order in creation. People referred to this as ‘The Great Chain of Being.’ ‘The whole chain was seen as a *graded ladder of perfection*, which was complete, continuous, and harmonious. No chasm or gaps existed’ (Weinert 2009:97). The idea of a fixed ranking order was even expressed in spiritual songs like ‘*All things bright and beautiful*’, composed by Cecil Frances Alexander (1823–1895). A verse of this song reads as follows:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

It is not by chance, therefore, that societies have rich and poor people. God created them and assigned them different places in a society. Those who were born slaves should therefore accept their position in society and not rebel against their lowly status. Those who were born into rich families should be thankful to God and not become arrogant. They should, however, care for those who are not as privileged as they are.

Europeans garnered these ideas from the Bible, especially from the first creation narrative. According to that narrative, God created everything that exists within six days, starting with the lower-ranking aspects and ending with the creation of human beings. They are the most perfect entities existing on earth. Above them are only the angels and God himself. The Bible refers to human beings as ‘little less than heavenly beings’ (Ps 8:5). They received the task to rule over the rest of creation (Gn 1:26). It is thus evident that there is a ranking order in creation.

Darwin’s theory of evolution by means of natural selection challenged these ideas. But how did Darwin arrive at his point of view? He first accepted the opinion of the geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875) that the earth was much older than was commonly accepted during his lifetime. He also took leave of the idea that plant and animal species were fixed and had remained fixed throughout the centuries (Waters 2009:121–123). Furthermore, he discarded the idea that there was a linear development or progressive evolution in nature. He propagated the idea of ‘branching evolution’. This viewpoint does not assign human beings a special position and they are not the pinnacle of the evolutionary processes. Darwin also turned his back on the idea of design. Nothing on earth was specifically designed for its task or its place on earth (Brooke 2009:197–201). Plant and animal species changed over the centuries, not because a person or a force had a clear picture of where things were heading or should be heading. Species change in a rather haphazard way that is totally unpredictable (Bowler 2007:195).

It is fully understandable that Bishop Samuel Wilberforce (1805–1873) felt obliged to oppose Darwin’s theory of evolution based on natural selection. Since then, numerous theologians and believers have joined the ranks of Wilberforce, propagating the viewpoint of William Paley (1743–1805). He published a book under the title *Natural*

Theology, in which he argued that the harmony in nature and the way species behave presupposed a creator God (Bowler 2007:102–108). Darwin had to study this book during his years at Cambridge. He was at first very impressed with Paley's arguments but later took leave of them and developed his own opinions (Brooke 2009:207–212).

Over the past one hundred and fifty years the theory of evolution as Darwin conceptualised and explained it in his books *The origin of species by means of natural selection* (1859) and *The descent of man* (1871) has proven itself beyond doubt (Eloff 1975; Sarkar 2008). Conservative Christians still struggle to come to terms with the theory. They may acknowledge that the earth is old and they may accept evolution within the separate species but they vehemently resist the idea of branching evolution and the suggestion that humans evolved from large apes. Some of them still defend the idea that Adam and Eve existed and that their disobedience was detrimental to humans and the rest of creation. Denis Alexander (2008) is frank about this when he says:

In the evangelical circles in which I was raised it was common to believe that there was no pain, disease or suffering of any kind before the Fall, but that all these came into being following Adam and Eve's disobedience. (p. 270)

Studying biology led him to other conclusions:

I started studying biology and learning incontrovertible evidence... that death has been present on the earth since the beginning of life, and that indeed the two go together, we cannot have one without the other. (Alexander 2008:271)

Darwin did not set out to undermine the grand narrative of Christianity, but his theory of evolution through natural selection led to conclusions that were diametrically opposite to those that Christians traditionally believed and proclaimed. The research carried out under the paradigm of evolution brought to light that Augustine's convictions on 'original sin' and death could no longer be held. However, conservative theologians and church members are reluctant to acknowledge this (Bowler 2007:225). Nevertheless, a change in traditional theology is a prerequisite for any meaningful dialogue between religion and science.

A new understanding of death

Jimmie Loader has always taken a keen interest in science and religion, or rather, in ecology and religion. In one of his newspaper articles he argued the case for a different understanding of death (Loader 1988). He did not point out that Christians adhered to an outdated doctrine holding that death was punishment for sin. He merely argued that death is a prerequisite for new life. Life on earth cannot evolve without death. Moreover, there is a mystery in how life was (and still is) able to arise from abiotic material. This mystery, according to Loader, may evoke a religious experience within people. What Loader indirectly communicated was that we, as humans, are not going to be resurrected but will be recycled, like all other forms of life on this planet. We have to die so that other humans and other species may live and survive.

There is nothing special about our existence as a species except that we have acquired knowledge over many centuries about how the earth and all its systems work and how intertwined these systems are. Our knowledge about a supposed heaven and a heavenly Being has stagnated. However, our knowledge of the earth and life on earth has grown exponentially over the past 150 years. Two revolutions contributed to a better understanding of the earth and life on earth. The first revolution was in the biological sciences, with which Charles Darwin will always be associated. The second was the revolution in our understanding of the globe as a 'living organism'. This revolution gained the name 'the Gaia hypothesis' first formulated by James Lovelock in his book *Gaia: A new look at life on earth* ([1979] 2000).

Lovelock's book was originally published in the same year as Loader's thesis (1979). The hypothesis was initially derided, especially by biologists (Gribben & Gribben 2009:139–141). However, as years passed it became more and more evident that Lovelock was far ahead of his peers. His ability to integrate the existing knowledge about the earth's systems contributed to a better understanding of life on earth. Anne Primavesi (2000) was the first theologian to argue that Lovelock's hypothesis should also feed into theology. One of her arguments in the book is that we can never claim that our theological doctrines and convictions are eternally valid:

Even if we confine a certain strand of revelation to the biblical narratives, the Bible as we now have it has evolved over 2–4,000 years; 2,000 years in its original languages and a further 2,000 years in its translations. (...) There is, therefore, no possibility of Christian doctrines having been formulated once and for all. As the universe itself has only reached a provisional state, theology in 'the real world' must recognize that its formulations too are provisional. (p. 46)

That being the case, theologians should be bold enough to abandon the ideas of Paul and Augustine on sin and death and formulate new concepts of death that are in accordance with our current knowledge.

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