

If there is God, he is the devil!" So said the 19th-century French art historian and poet Charles Baudelaire.¹ He believed that God created nature and human beings to be both good and evil, resulting in what seems to be a hopeless mix of the two.

Some would agree with Baudelaire. But what should be the Christian response? How do we account for God who is touched by a sparrow's fall (Matthew 10:29) and the existence of disease, suffering, and death? What about puzzling realities like predation? Were packs of hyenas originally intended by God to chase down young impalas and eat them alive? How shall we understand the action of the emerald boa, which surprises an Amazon parakeet and constricts it, "causing its rapid death by shock, [and] hangs from a branch while embarking on the lengthy process of swallowing" its victim.²

This article considers seven biblical themes which help to answer the questions raised above.

1. To understand nature correctly, we need divine illumination.

The philosopher David Hume once said that one cannot prove that a loving God exists from the "present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone."³ However, Hebrews 11:3 tells us, "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God."⁴ And Paul states, "Ever since the creation of the world his [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20). This is an important hermeneutical principle applicable to the interpretation of nature. The rose speaks of a God who loves beauty, but what do the thorns suggest? Does nature speak in a forked tongue? The wonders and the mysteries of heaven and earth can be understood only "as God by His Holy Spirit sanctifies the observation."⁴

2. God's original creation was a predation-free habitat filled with creatures serving one another.

Genesis 1:30 specifies the divinely intended diet for the animals in Eden: "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. And it was so." According to Ellen White, these words indicate that "one animal was not to destroy another animal for food."⁵ This means that originally, from the simplest creature up to Adam and Eve, there were no carnivores in Eden. God thus created a predation-free habitat—a bombshell

God, the sparrow, and the emerald boa

Does nature speak with a forked tongue?

by
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concept for conventional biology because of today's need for some predation to keep nature in balance. By faith we believe that God had a method, not revealed in Scripture, for keeping this balance that did not entail the death of His creatures in Eden.

This predation-free habitat filled with creatures serving one another constitutes the basis for Isaiah's vision of the new earth where the "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7).

3. Sin and its accompanying curses affected life on earth.

The Fall as recorded in Genesis 3 addresses the question of the presence of evil, suffering, predation and their relationship to God's character. God warned Adam and Eve of the causal connection between sin and death (Genesis 2:17)—a fact that was immediately denied by Satan (Genesis 3:4, 5).

The relationship between the first human sin and death on earth is pro-

found: "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). This causal connection does not apply only to human mortality but also to the death of every living creature, as Paul affirms: "For the creation was subjected to futility, ["corruption"—implying death], not of its own will, but by the will of him who subjected it in hope" (Romans 8:20). Thus, a primary effect of human sin was the immediate change in the original order—from a death-free habitat to one ruled by the life-death cycle, as illustrated almost immediately by Cain's murder of Abel (see Genesis 4:8).

The effects of sin also produced a change in atmospheric temperature ("The atmosphere, once so mild and uniform in temperature, was now subject to marked changes....[with] extremes of heat and cold"⁶); in the "drooping flower and falling leaf,"⁷ leading our first parents to mourn "more deeply than men now mourn over their dead"⁸ and altered the nature of animals ("The spirit of rebellion, to which he [Adam] himself had given entrance, extended throughout the animal creation."⁹)

With these significant psycho-biological insights, let us now turn to the three divine curses that sin brought upon this world. First, God cursed the snake: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle... upon your belly shall you go" (Genesis 3:14). Second, God cursed the vegetal world because of Adam's disobedience: "Cursed is the ground because of you... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you" (Genesis 3:17, 18). Third, God cursed later the entire earth or mineral kingdom through a global flood, which ripped up the crust of the earth (Genesis 6-9).

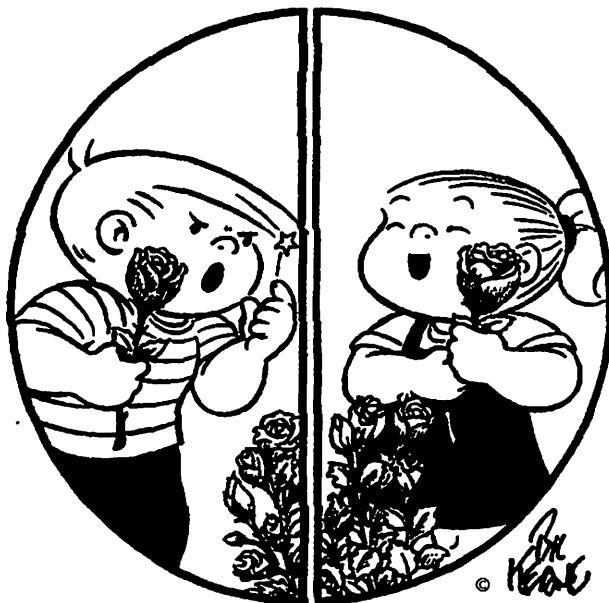
Whether the curses are causative or descriptive, they suggest some important effects of sin upon nature. Can we observe a pattern in which all three kingdoms are touched by the effects of sin? In other words, might the curse upon the snake represent a general change in the animal kingdom, the thorns represent some universal changes to develop in the vegetable kingdom, and the Flood represent a universal disruption in the mineral kingdom?

Could the words, "above all cattle and above all wild animals" in the first

curse suggest that the animal kingdom was immediately involved in a kingdom-wide curse? In other words, just as God spoke to create the world, He now speaks creatively again but with a different and temporary intent. If so, could the curse upon the serpent mean that a loving God is miraculously activating an already programmed plan B? Is he reprogramming portions of the genetic codes within His good animal kingdom, permitting the natural habitat to be temporarily balanced by the life and death cycle, predation, and decay?¹⁰ On the positive side, this implies that God is responsible for creatively programming the marvelous restorative systems in nature such as the immune systems, blood clotting, reverse peristalsis (the vomiting mechanism), et cetera, and perhaps the balance in nature achieved in part by ingenious escape mechanisms such as protective coloration, mimicry,¹¹ and so on, in a world temporarily dominated by the life-death cycle.

The balance in nature is a remarkable achievement of animal and plant relationships that requires at least two profound, intelligently tuned biological and psychical relationships. First, both a specific animal mind and its body parts must match. Fangs on a rabbit are a mismatch. An escape defense temperament in a lion would be ludicrous—imagine the king of the beasts fleeing in terror at the approach of a rabbit. Second, both predator and prey must be equally clever at either capture or escape, otherwise no natural balance would result. These requirements of predation are so intelligibly complex and finely tuned that for a predation-free habitat to evolve slowly and accidentally seems biologically impossible. Some form of miraculous permission and or intervention seems necessary. Thus, for example, God may have wisely equipped the post-Fall creatures with an amazing ability to adapt, as evidenced by recent biological studies indicated by James L. Hayward.¹²

Concerning the vegetable kingdom, Ellen White states: "He [God] never made a thorn, a thistle, or a tare. These are Satan's work, the result of degeneration, introduced by him among the precious things."¹³ What this beautiful insight means is that God's curse on the ground did not miraculously reprogram the vegetable kingdom to produce thorns. Thus, the development of thorns is the



"I wish roses didn't have thorns."

"I'm glad thorns have roses."

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work of Satan, allowed by God so that we may understand Satan's true character.

4. Satan has a responsibility in the disfigurement of nature.

To begin with, let us remember that the powers of Satan are limited. Of God, the psalmist says, "With thee is the fountain of life" (Psalm 36:9). This implies that no one else, including Satan, has life-giving power. Although limited, Satan's active powers are remarkable indeed: "The working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:9,10, KJV). Revelation suggests that this power extends even to the transemperical or miraculous level (see Revelation 13:14). Thus Satan has miraculous power, but this does not include the capacity to give life or to create new living biological entities.

However, Satan "has studied the secrets of the laboratories of nature."¹⁴ This knowledge, combined with his transemperical abilities, makes Satan a supernatural chemist, biologist, and botanist. Equipped with such power, Satan "has introduced confusion and deformity into the creation of God."¹⁵ For example, "not one noxious plant was placed in the Lord's great garden, but after Adam and Eve sinned, poisonous herbs sprang up. . . . Every noxious herb is of his [Satan's] sowing, and by his ingenious methods of amalgamation [hybridization; genetic manipulation?] he has corrupted the earth with tares."¹⁶ Perhaps if Satan had his way, thorns and poisonous plants would cover the earth, but God in His mercy permits the enemy to have his way only in a limited fashion, just enough to show Satan's true nature.

In view of the important fact that not one poisonous plant was made by God, one wonders about the origin of the poison and poison apparatus in some insects and reptiles in the animal kingdom. Could these particular aspects of these "noxious" biological forms also be expressions of the cruel miraculous work of the enemy? Perhaps God exercises the positive role, adjusting the fallen world to the sin problem, while Satan exercises a destructive role as the enemy, for example, by plaguing and deforming the balance of nature beyond

its designed boundaries.

Could it be that Satan's wicked use of his power of genetic manipulation and hybridization had something important to do with shaping what could be termed "confused species," which God did not create, and which God did not see fit to preserve through the Flood?¹⁷ Perhaps some of the extinct, seemingly bizarre and hideous fossils in the geologic column may represent these confused species, constituting a category of biological transformations in which a good God had no part. In fact God's compassion is evidenced by the permanent destruction of these animals: "There was a class of very large animals which perished at the flood. God knew that the strength of man would decrease, and these mammoth animals could not be controlled by feeble man."¹⁸

5. The principle of cause and effect produces its own dynamic with regard to sin and suffering.

The powerful principle of cause and effect is like a two-edged sword working either for bad or for good depending upon individual choices. For example, we are told that "the continual transgression of man for over six thousand years has brought sickness, pain, and death as its fruit,"¹⁹ with the result that "the race [has] been decreasing in size and physical strength, and deteriorating in moral worth."²⁰

These results are self-imposed natural consequences. "The world today is full of pain and suffering and agony. But is it the will of God that such a condition shall exist?—No. . . . Every misuse of any part of our organism is a violation of the law which God designs shall govern us. . . . and by violating this law human beings corrupt themselves; sickness and disease of every kind, ruined constitutions, premature decay, untimely deaths, these are the results of a violation of nature's laws."²¹

While the causal law may result in human suffering due to sinful choices, the same law leads to human blessing and happiness, when right choices are made.

6. God's mercy is still discernable in nature.

The goodness of God reveals itself not only in transparent and beautiful aspects of life, but also in moments of devastation, pain, and loss.

I watched helplessly as my mother slowly died of mesothelioma, a painful cancer involving the lining of the lung. During her last months she was on strong pain medication, and finally on a continual morphine drip that could not prevent painful seizures and loss of ability to communicate. Finally, she lapsed into a peaceful coma from which she never recovered. Three days later she died. I saw divine mercy in the form of a coma. The painful consequences of sin, even though at times not brought on by one's own doings, can be laced with grace.

The physiological and psychosomatic effect of physical shock is a great blessing to victims of severe physical accidents involving major bodily damage. David Livingston recalls a personal experience: "I saw the lion just in the act of springing upon me. . . . He caught my shoulder as he sprang, and we both came to the ground below together. Growling horribly close to my ear, he shook me as a terrier dog does a rat. The shock produced a stupor. . . . It caused a sort of dreaminess, in which there was no sense of pain nor feeling of terror. . . . This peculiar state is probably produced in all animals killed by the carnivora; and if so, is a merciful provision by our benevolent Creator for lessening the pain of death."²²

Thus even in the unhappy phenomena of nature, we can see the grace of God.

7. The Sabbath provides an opportunity for discerning God's creative power in nature.

"God gave men the memorial of His creative power [the seventh-day Sabbath], that they might discern Him in the works of His hand."²³ The Sabbath is a special day in which we can step out into nature and closely observe the woods, streams, lakes, or seas and discover there the evidence of the craftsmanship of the Creator. Thus we can experience the miracle of divine enlightenment as we allow God to interpret to the otherwise contradictory tongue of nature so that we can differentiate the hand of God from the hand of the enemy in nature, and then stand up cheering for God's creative power and continuing care of all His creatures.

The Sabbath also points to the future restoration of the entire universe to its pristine condition, as part of God's plan (see Hebrews chapter 4): "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; and the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... And death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:1, 4).

Conclusion

The seven biblical principles discussed here regarding the effect of sin on nature show how the Christian may discern God's loving character in nature and also the marks of Satan's activity. In sum, "the Lord is good to all" (Psalm 145:9)—not only to all rational beings, but also to the sparrow and the emerald boa. And so, Charles Baudelaire, there is a God, and He is very good, making originally only that which is like Himself. ☸

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Notes and references

* Except as otherwise noted, all Scripture passages in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

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- "The confused species which God did not create, which were the result of amalgamation, were destroyed by the flood" (Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945], vol. 3, p. 75).
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