



# Reuniting Humanity and the Cosmos in Barth's Theology: Natural Disasters and The Fall

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## Abstract

Using literature, this article argues that Karl Barth's (1886 –1968 CE) concept of an "assumed fall" could be helpful if applied to the cosmos and humanity. Barth's conception of the created order is that it is perfect exactly the way it is, natural disasters included. Further, the fall did not affect the creation. Barth does however argue for fallen humanity. Nevertheless, the fall is assumed in the Election of Jesus Christ. There was never a time in which humans did not need a Saviour. Barth, therefore, places a separation between humanity and the created order. A close reading of Romans 8 and a look at Christian interpretative tradition, argue for an inseparability between humankind and the cosmos. In other words, fallen humans live in a fallen cosmos, and redeemed humans will live in a redeemed universe. If Barth's concept of the assumed fall of humanity could be applied to the cosmos as well, then the concept could fit well within the traditional reading of Romans 8 and could be beneficial for scientific/theological engagement.

**Keywords:** Barth, Theodicy, Darwin, Natural Evil, Romans 8.

## Introduction

### Natural Evil as a Theological Problem

Natural evil, the evil that occurs when no act of moral choice occurs, is the *bête noire* of theologians and philosophers of religion who would construct a theodicy. The logical problems natural evil presents are myriad (Harold, 2013). For example, is natural evil explained by a God who made the world according to the only choices available to Him? Did God create a world with natural evil to cause maturation in humans? Is evolution a cause of natural evil? Is it the consequence of sin, God's partner, or God's instrument of wrath? How should any theistic explanation of natural evil reckon with the suffering of animals and non-sentient beings? At least with moral evil, some rational actors make choices. However, whether those choices are genuinely free merits dubious musings of contemporary philosophers. At least, though, there are individuals other than God to blame.



With natural evil, however, there is no moral actor involved. So, thinking about the issue becomes much more difficult for theists. Nieman (2002:3) states that, natural evil is a problem only for theists. For those committed to naturalism, natural evil can hardly be said to be evil at all. It is only the terrible result of nature doing what nature must do because of natural laws or the chaos implicit in existence. Sometimes, unfortunately, humans get in the way of natural occurrences and great suffering ensues. No moral issue, however, emerges. Those committed to a theistic view of the world, natural evil strikes at the nature of the created world and questions the goodness and power of the God who created it. An explanation for why an omnipotent and loving God would create a world so full of natural evil seems to be in order.

Barth, the great theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argues creation is perfect, exactly as God intended it. The thesis advanced here is that while Barth's argument is difficult to accept considering human and animal suffering from natural evil, reestablishing the link between humans and the natural order in his theology would not only serve as a corrective but could also open new avenues of discussion between faith and science.

### **Methodology**

A literature review of relevant and primary scholarly sources on the topic provided an overview of current knowledge, allowing the authors to identify relevant issues and gaps. Thus, the research method allowed for identifying and critically appraising relevant research and collecting and analyzing information to arrive at a meaningful conclusion on the theme.

### **Where the Christian Reading Emerges**

In two of his most famous and beloved Christmas hymns Isaac Watts (1674 –1748 CE), the "Father of English Hymnody," expresses the traditional understanding of the fallen nature of the cosmos. In a frequently overlooked verse of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" he writes:

Come, Desire of nations, come  
Fix in us Thy humble home;  
Rise the woman's conq'ring Seed,  
Bruise in us the serpent's head.  
Now display Thy saving pow'r  
Ruined nature now restore;  
Now in mystic union join  
Thine to ours, and ours to Thine.

The third verse of Watt's "Joy to the World" expresses a similar sentiment,

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

What Watts is expressing is a traditional Christian theological view of the fall affecting the created order as much as it affects humanity. The concept has been central to Christian proclamation and theodicies for centuries. The thought of creation as fallen is discounted by scientists who find no



evidence of a new previous universe and theologians who find the idea of a fallen world a difficult noncorporate into scientifically aware treatments of creation and the theodicy.

Reading the fall and God's curse of the ground as the cause of natural evil is contingent on a close reading of Romans 8:19-22. Dunn (2006: 100) observes that Paul discusses his hope in God's eschatological future. In this passage, Paul alludes to Genesis 3 to connect the future hope of believers to the redemption of creation (*ibid*). Both believers and the creation to which they are connected groan in suffering.

If this section of Romans is to be theologically decisive for natural evil, one must come to understand what is meant by "creation." As alluded to by Garland (2021:277), some possibilities include believers, unbelievers, all humanity, and non-human creation, both living and inanimate. It is important to note a variety of interpretations of the term "creation" were known early in the history of interpreting this text. Tyra (2014: 267) observes that both Irenaeus and Ambrose took "creation" to mean all the created order, while Origen and Augustine meant believers in Christ. Interestingly, Augustine admits as cited in Tyra (2014:267) that his interpretation is novel, leading to confidence that there was a long tradition of interpretation of the "creation," meaning the whole of the created order for the first centuries of Christian reflection on the text.

From the context, however, the only realistic reading of the text is "creation" refers to the totality of all non-human creation, and most modern interpreters concur as argued by Cranfield (1985: 194). Paul's personified creation groans in suffering and waits in eager longing, a phrase used by those troubled under challenging circumstances, for redemption. Taken positively, Garland (2021:277) posits that Paul's argument in the passage indicates God's design to renew all of creation. To renew creation, however, something must already be amiss in the world. What is wrong with creation? With echoes of Ecclesiastes, Dunn (2006:100) observes that Paul describes creation as "futile" or "vain," meaning not able to accomplish what it was designed to accomplish.

So, how did the good creation of Genesis 1 become the futile creation of Romans 8? In an allusion to Genesis 3, Keck (2005:211) states that Paul argues creation was subjected to futility because of God's curse. The curse of the ground was punishment for the fall of humanity. As Keck (2005:211) writes, Creation's current condition is not natural but a contradiction that requires correction. If humans are limited beings, not angels, demi-gods, powerful inhabitants of the spiritual world, or gods it is difficult to connect human sinfulness and the curse on all creation. Human, sinfulness, however, is directly tied to the break of the cosmic order at least partially because Adam was derived from the ground. The *Adam* was derived from the *Adamah* (Dunn, 2006:100-101). Therefore, creation and humans are inextricably connected (Keck, 2005: 210). Dunn (2006: 100) states, "Creation has been caught up in the futility of human self-deception. For humankind to think it stands in relation to the rest of creation as a creator to creation ('You shall be like God') imposes futility as much on creation as on humankind itself."

Lest one thinks Romans 8 is the only place where the cosmos' fate is connected to humanity's fate. In Romans 5:12 Paul writes, "Just as sin entered the world (*kosmos*) through 1 man, and death came through sin . . ." The same connection can also be seen in Isaiah 24:5-6a, "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth." Because the earth is cursed and futile, the redemption of humanity, therefore, necessitates the redemption of the cosmos. Future humans, redeemed from the power of sin by God, cannot rightly exist in a broken environment. A redeemed humanity requires a redeemed cosmos, as argued by Dunn (2006:471). Pointedly, Revelation 22:3 in describing the glorious future awaiting both humanity and creation states, "And



there shall be no more curse . . ." In connection to sin and redemption, the Bible connects the state of humans and the earth.

In Genesis 3, the narrative uses "thorns and thistles." To read the narrative as only referring to pesky vegetation making farming difficult, however, misses the point. Genesis 3 teaches that the creation itself, once in harmony with humanity, would begin to frustrate the processes necessary for life itself. The once harmonious creation is now an adversary hostile to life. The absence of harmony between creation and humanity does make sense of human experience. The earth is full of resources necessary for human survival but also full of dangers and destructive forces. In the greatest sense, human survival has struggled to carve out an existence from a sometimes-hostile natural order from the beginning.

Not only can creation be hostile to human survival, but creation is also, according to Paul, enslaved to decay and death. Orthodox theologian Hart (2005:50) puts it this way;

The natural world is attended—and indeed preserved—by death. All life feeds on life. Each creature must yield its place in time to another, and at the heart of nature is a perpetual struggle to survive and increase at the expense of other beings. It is as if the entire cosmos were somehow predatory, a single great organism nourishing itself upon the death of everything to which it gives birth, creating and destroying things with a terrible and impressive majesty.

Lions feed on antelope, wolves feed on deer, cows graze on grass, and vines climb, eventually choking the life out of trees. Trees compete for a place in the sun. Even merely cleaning a table or washing a face creates death and mayhem among microscopic creatures. Inanimate black holes feed on the matter and energy emitted from other sources. Light cannot even escape their grasp. In this cosmos, life *requires* death. Paul's phrase for this situation, "enslaved to death," is fitting. Two easily overlooked words in verse 22, "we know" are quite revealing. By using "we know," Paul reminds his readers of his interpretation's commonality. Paul is not claiming a novel reading of the Fall narrative. Cranfield states (1988:198) that Paul would have expected his readers to share it. Cranfield (1988: 276) further argues that his reading was not only shared among believers but was held in the apocalyptic tradition and confirmed by the Gospel. This reading, unsurprising to his readers and normative among Christians of his era, became the standard way Christians have talked about natural disasters.

Talbert (2002:214) states that this reading was shared by Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, and other Patristic fathers, and John Calvin also shared it. Calvin (1989: III, XXV, 2: 261) writes, ". . . all things in heaven and earth struggle for renovation. Since Adam's fall destroyed the proper order of nature, the creatures groan under the servitude to which they have been subjected through his sin; not that they are all endued with sense, but that they naturally long for the state of perfection from which they have fallen."<sup>1</sup>

Imposing the term natural evil on ancient sources runs the risk of anachronism. Judging by the exegesis of Romans 8, the tradition of natural evil emerging from the curse of God seems

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<sup>1</sup> The is reading, however, was not universally shared among the Church Fathers, however. While some of them believed that human choice had terrible consequences for the created order, others argued natural evils were not evils at all because no moral choosing was involved. Still others believed natural evils were punishment for sin, and others held natural evils were caused by a demonic revolt against God. Depending on which Church Father one reads, natural evil is the result of God or of the devil, a wide range of choices indeed. See, Paul Gavriluk, "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, ed. (Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.), 1-6.



straightforward and ancient: Natural evil is the result of the curse of God on the ground in Genesis 3. Care must be taken, however. The separation between natural evil and moral evil is not so ancient. The distinction between them, so central to modern thinking on evil, was born in the Enlightenment in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as observed by (Nieman, 2002:235). Rousseau radically separated natural evil from moral evil. So, he concluded events like earthquakes have no moral meaning (*ibid*). Like other natural disasters, Earthquakes were caused by the rational functioning of nature and natural laws (*ibid*).

Another important factor to consider is Wright's (2013: 192) observation that there is no pre-Christian version of the Fall's effect on creation, even though he holds to the fall and curse affecting creation. While a full discussion of Wright's position is beyond the scope of this article, Paul's reading of Genesis 3 is shared in Apocryphal literature. 4 Ezra 7:11 reads, "For I made the world for their sake, and when Adam transgressed my statues, what had been made was judged." The view is also articulated in 1 Enoch 45:4-5; 51:4-5; 72:1; 4 Ezra 70:30-31; 2 Baruch 29; 32:6; 44:12; and 57:2 (Talbert, 2002:214).

### **Barth's Natural Evil**

From Barth's perspective, Adam and Eve were destined to fall from the beginning. Unlike Calvin who argued the fall was decreed by God, Barth argues the fall was assumed in the election of Jesus Christ. The fall was an event of the "left hand of God," (Reuther, 1968: 12), which is Barth's way of arguing for God not directly causing an event. The consequence of Barth's logic is humanity never had a primordial, perfect existence in a paradise. Humans were never perfect. Barth (2004: 508) writes:

But it is the name of Adam the transgressor which God gives to world history as a whole. The name of Adam sums up this history as the history of the humankind, which God has given up, given up to its pride on account of its pride. It sums up the meaning or meaninglessness of this history. It is Adamic history, the history of Adam. It began in and with his history, and—this is the Word and judgment of God on it, this is the explanation of its staggering monotony, this is the reason why there can never be any progress—it continually corresponds to his history. It is continually like it. With innumerable variations it constantly repeats it. It constantly re-enacts the little scene in the garden of Eden. There never was a golden age. There is no point in looking back to one. The first man was immediately the first sinner.

Barth (2004 297) further elaborates that the earth, on the other hand, is perfect:

How surprised we shall be, and how ashamed of so much improper and unnecessary disquiet and discontent, once we are brought to realize that all creation both as light and shadow. . . and that even though we did not see it. . . it sang the praise of God just as it was, and was, therefore, right and perfect. We aspire to be Christians, and no doubt in some small measure we are, but is it not strange that only in our few better moments can we make anything, either theoretically or practically, of the truth that the creation of God in both its aspects, even the negative, is His good creation?

In effect, there is an imperfect humanity in need of redemption in a location that is perfect the way it is. Note that Barth's perfect creation is not the same as Calvin, who would argue that creation



is good as the theater for the display of God's goodness, power, and justice,<sup>2</sup> even as it is fallen and shares in the punishment of humanity. No, in Barth's (2004) *Church Dogmatics*, creation is perfect the way it is now. As such there is a break between the need for the redemption of humanity and the perfect earth. "According to Barth, the order of creation ought to be understood in that it proceeds not from God's nature, but his will for creation" (Ngwena, 2021: 6),

This starkly contradicts Paul, who could not fathom humans outside their environment any more than he could imagine without their bodies. The bond between humanity and creation is not so easily broken. If one considers the soul's origin, one must be inclined to make a connection between the soul and creation. If a soul emerges from being, if the soul "becomes,"<sup>3</sup> then it "becomes" as a part of a natural process. Therefore, the soul is part of the natural world, the created order. How can one part of the created order be fallen and not the other? Can humans be fallen and not nature?

In a practical sense, Barth's suggestion of a perfect creation is a practice of suspension of disbelief as one views the created world. To conclude that creation is perfect is to fail to see the catastrophic suffering in the created order or consider it significant. For Barth, suffering in the created order is not natural evil but the "shadow side of creation." This shadow includes disease and death. The shadow is not evil, however. It is part of the good creation singing praise to God. God designs the negative part of the created order, and in no sense can creation be anything less than God's will (Reuther, 1968:6; Harold, 2020). Therefore, the great struggles of human disease, suffering, and death are included in God's good design.

In effect, it is hard for such a thing as natural evil to be found in Barth. To conflate evil and nature's shadow side is, "slander" (Barth, 2004: 297). Although natural disasters can be seen as symbols of God's wrath and judgment, they can only be seen as evil if they become expressions of disorder, (Reuther, 1968:15). If natural disasters are evil, then chaos already has the victory. No, disasters are part of the shadow side, part of God's goodness. Barth maintains that the shadow side of creation can make humans sigh, but never gasp in horror (Reuther, 1968:14). The shadow side gives humans no reason to doubt the goodness of the creation of the God who designed it.

### Meeting the Eye Test

In his discussion of the problem of evil, Barth steadfastly argues humans are in no place to judge God. For Barth, there is no standard external standard of behaviour that God must submit to be good or holy. Therefore, God can create a finite and limited world, and those limitations may not be seen as a defect (Reuther, 1968:5). God's will is perfect, simply because God willed it. The logic is straightforward. God's will is perfect. God willed this world. This world is the result of God's will. This world, therefore, is perfect as it is.

Perfect, however, is an odd word to describe creation. Creation is beautiful, to be sure. It is good, to be sure. There seems to be, however, something wrong with it. While Charles Darwin is often considered an adversary of Christianity, he started as a believer. His studies were intended to prove the created order was divinely constructed (Giberson, 2009). What he found in his studies was very different than he expected, leaving him distressed. The *Ichneumonidae* wasp, which

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<sup>2</sup> See 'John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Psalms 119 - 150: Calvin, John, Anderson, James, King, John: 9783849677954: Amazon.Com: Books', 20, accessed 17 September 2022, <https://www.amazon.com/John-Calvins-Bible-Commentaries->

<sup>3</sup> If person becomes a soul, as opposed to pre-existent souls being given at a certain point, then creation of a soul is part of the natural process of human development.



used a living caterpillar as a host for its larvae became symbolic of Darwin's concern. Darwin writes, as cited in Brink and Cook (2020:32): "I cannot persuade myself to think that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding on within the living bodies of caterpillars..."

It was not just the Ichneumonidae wasp that gave Darwin pause about the nature of creation. The suffering of the animal kingdom *in general* offended Darwin's sensibilities (Sterba, 2020: 502). The natural world, as it can be observed, was enough for Darwin to conclude something was wrong with the world. Many theologians would disagree with Darwin on this point. Thomas Aquinas was one of them, and he does not seem bothered by the suffering intrinsic to the natural world (Barczi, 2019:32). In fact, the death of sentient creatures is a requirement in Aquinas' theology as argued by Keltz (2019:490). One, therefore, could conclude the suffering observed in the natural world is acceptable because of the limited nature of animals, and thus they agree with Barth.

Even if one were to grant the argument about non-human creatures, natural disasters are problematic for Barth's view of the created order. They strike at the heart of creation, often causing massive suffering and death. Natural disasters are problematic for Barth's logic because of the suffering they cause to humans. They, however, have the power to crush life on an enormous scale. If natural disasters are only a shadow with the power to make us sigh, Barth's logic will stand.

Consider what Barth's logic would lead one to conclude after the horror of the Vesuvius eruption that destroyed Pompeii. The *Smithsonian* envisions the last moments of the family who were victims of Vesuvius, as cited in Steward (2006: 60):

. . . Under a lurid and sulfurous sky, a family of four struggles down an alley filled with pumice stones, desperately trying to escape the beleaguered city of Pompeii. Leading the way is a middle-aged man carrying gold jewelry a sack of coins and the keys to his house. Racing to keep up are his two small daughters, the younger one with her hair in a braid. Close behind is their mother, scrambling frantically through the rubble with her skirts hiked up. She clutches an amber statuette of a curly-haired boy, perhaps Cupid, and the family silver, including a medallion of Fortune, goddess of luck. But neither amulets nor deities can protect them. Like thousands of others this morning, the four are overtaken and killed by an incandescent cloud of scorching gases and ash from Mount Vesuvius. In the instant before he dies, the man strains to lift himself from the ground with one elbow. With his free hand, he pulls a corner of his cloak over his face as though the thin cloth will save him.

The remains of the family, displayed by the *Smithsonian*, speak to the immense fear they suffered and the horror they endured. Thousands of people shared their fate on that day. Fleeing nature's wrath, they were incinerated by superheated gas, crushed by collapsing buildings, and suffocated by the noxious volcanic emissions in the air. The victims met their end with no warning, escape, or mercy. Taking Barth's comments on the perfection of creation seriously, Barth would have to conclude the shadow side of the perfect creation harmed those who perished in Pompeii.

He would have to say the same about the enormous multitude whose lives were ended in the Christmas Tsunami of 2004, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 CE, the Tangshan earthquake of 1976, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the Tsinghai earthquake of 1927, and the Kwanto earthquake of 1923. While the number of fatalities from these tectonic events is large, this is anything but a



comprehensive list of earthquakes taking large numbers of lives. Earthquakes are dangerous and destructive, and yet, appear to be necessary for life on earth. Earthquakes are essential for life, yet they are destructive to life. That formulation sounds much more like "enslaved to death" or a "closed circle of death" than a shadow on a perfect and right creation.

There is a legion of natural disasters humans face. Famine, pestilence, cancer, malaria, polio, congenital disabilities, hurricanes, typhoons, cyclones, tornadoes, meteor strikes, wildfires, flu, and other naturally occurring events cause destruction. The abridged list of earthquakes cataloged here is but one variety of natural disasters. The number of lives lost, and the number of natural disasters make it very difficult to think of them as a shadow and make it difficult to hold to a perfect creation.

Now it is possible Barth could argue massive natural disasters are part of the *world's disorder* and, therefore, are evil. The problem for Barth, however, is that they seem to be part of the world's *order*. Natural disasters follow natural laws and can positively affect the environment. The hurricanes that cause massive loss of life also distil millions of gallons of salt water and move them inland. The earthquakes that destroy cities also make life on earth possible. Under the constraints of natural laws, creation requires disasters to function in its systems.

Voltaire wrote in the aftermath of the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755 CE, "Does not the Craftsman have unlimited choices. Could He not have thrown us into this world with volcanoes under our feet?" It is tempting to suggest Voltaire's argument is essentially the cosmos as constructed is not the cosmos Voltaire would have constructed if he were God. While Alfonso X, King of Castile, made that argument in the 1500s CE, this is not the force of Voltaire's argument (Nieman, 2002:14). Voltaire's argument is straightforward. The features of the world, so destructive to human life, do not seem like they should have come from a good God with limitless options. Voltaire's critique only makes sense in a cosmos created and coordinated by God with nothing interfering with God's reign. Voltaire's critique only applies to a perfect and right world, an unfallen world. Hart (2005:61-62) writes:

Perhaps no doctrine strikes non-Christians as more insufferably fabulous than the claim that we exist in the long melancholy aftermath of a primordial catastrophe: that this is a broken and wounded world, that cosmic time is a phantom of true time, that we in an umbratile interval between creation in its fullness and the nothingness from which it was called, that the universe languishes in bondage to the "powers" and "principalities" of this age, which never cease in their enmity toward the Kingdom of God.

The idea of creation existing in the long aftermath of a cosmic catastrophe, while offensive to many modern sensibilities, renders' critiques like Voltaire's moot.

## Conclusion

Much could be gained if Barth saw the created order as fallen in the same assumption as the fallen human order. If there never was a time when humans did not need a Savior, then there never was a time when humans were not fallen. If that is the case, and humans are deeply intertwined with creation, there never was a time creation was not fallen either. If there was never a time when humans and the cosmos did not require a saviour, then the connection between a new humanity and a new earth given in the Biblical witness could be maintained.



While Hart argues that nothing may seem more fantastic to unbelievers than a world existing after a cosmic catastrophe, the fall of humanity and the fall of the cosmos makes the most sense of the theological data. The reunification of humanity to its environment combined with an assumed fall would also obviate the critique of Trakakis (2005:35) who argues theism is incapable of accounting for natural evil. If the fall of humanity is assumed and the ruined created order is assumed as well, natural evil is a consequence.

It would also help make sense of scientific data. For example, in human observation of the cosmos, planets without earthquakes are dead planets. There is something about the nature of earthquakes connected to the possibility of life. If that is the case, then at least some natural disasters are required for life. In that case, life is founded on death. The cosmos is a closed circle of death.

Theologians are then relieved from their efforts to find a way to reconcile scientific data and the idea of an introduction of death. Scientists can find no era in Earth's history without death. There is no reason to seek one in an assumed fall of humanity and earth. As it is, the earth is as it has always been. The earth, broken as it is, is the home of humanity and its other species. This reconciliation also makes sense of much Biblical data. Humans are directly tied to the fate of the cosmos. A broken humanity lives in a broken environment. A reconciled humanity will require a reconciled environment healed by the redemptive power of God. Barth's view of salvation was thus Christological, so that it is in Jesus Christ only that the reconciliation of all of mankind to God has occurred and it is through Jesus that we are elect and justified through redemptive grace.

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