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IS THE DESTRUCTION OF PLANTS DEATH IN THE BIBLICAL SENSE?

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Some have attacked the historicity of the account in Genesis by disagreeing with St. Paul's statement that death entered the world through sin. They say that death is part of the natural order, that both plants and animals died before man came onto the scene, and that even the consumption of plant matter as food involves the death of the plant, or of cells. The author examines this argument, and suggests that plants are not alive in the same sense that animals are, and that in that case the destruction of parts of a plant need not involve death in the Biblical sense.

Did death enter the world as the result of the fall of our first parents? Or is death part of the natural order of things present in the world from its very beginning? Orthodox Christianity has traditionally accepted the position that death, also the physical death of animals and

man, entered the world with the fall of our first parents. St. Paul writes "Sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so spread to all men because all men sinned" Romans 5:12. Some have argued that these words refer only to spiritual death, the total alienation of man from God. They argue that Adam and Eve did not die physically in the instant in which

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they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

While it is true that physical death did not come immediately the process of dying certainly began with their eating from that tree. In that moment they lost the immortality which God had intended for them from the beginning. Death had entered the world.

Others have argued that physical death must have been present from the beginning. They have argued that the consumption of food itself involves the death of living organisms and on that basis have insisted that death was a part of the natural world which God created. When it is pointed out that God set aside plant matter as food for man and beast, Genesis 1:29f, and when this initial statement is contrasted with Genesis 9:3 where God tells Noah and his sons that they may eat meat, critics point out that even the consumption of plant material involves the death of cells and therefore death itself.

This argument is also the basis for rejecting the historicity of the creation account. It is recognized that the account claims that death was absent prior to the fall; yet death is said to be a part of the natural order of things. So it is reasoned that the creation account must be allegorical, an extended parable, rather than an actual historical account.

But are plants "alive" in the same sense in which animals are alive? When God created plants He spoke "Let the earth bring forth vegetation, plants yielding seed and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind upon the earth and it was so", Genesis 1:11. When it came to the creation of the animals, God not only spoke but He added His blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas and let the birds multiply on the earth" Genesis 1:22. Just as the special creation of man from the dust of the earth described in Genesis 2:7 sets man apart from the animals, so the blessing added in the account of the creation of animals sets them apart from the plants.

It is indeed apparent that there are marked differences between plants and animals. The basic organizational unit, the cell, is different in plants and animals. Plants have a rigid cell wall which animals lack. Because of the presence of a large vacuole the nucleus is crowded against the edge of the cell; in the animal the nucleus typically is in the center of the cell. Plants are able to synthesize amino acids and proteins;

animals must depend on plant proteins. The plant has an extremely complex reproductive cycle with a sporophyte and gametophyte generation. The result is that asexual processes are more common in plant reproduction than are sexual processes. In a recent article, Levin questions the applicability of the species concept to plants for this very reason.¹

Are plants alive then in the same sense as animals are? There seems good evidence from biology that this is not the case, that plant "life" is quite different from animal life. The account of their creation in Genesis suggests that plant "life" is on a different level from animal life. If this is the case the "death" of plant cells as is the case when they are consumed for food may not be death in the same sense that this term is applied to animals and to man.

Once more this raises the question of definitions and categories. The Bible uses an entirely different basis for taxonomy than that which is employed by systematist today. The Bible classified organisms on the basis of the habitat which they occupy. It lumps together organisms living in the air, those living on the ground, and those living in water. Modern systematists base their categories not on habitat but on internal and external structure. There really is no "right" way of classifying organisms. The Biblical system is just as valid and correct as is the system employed by modern taxonomists. Biologists today find the present system of taxonomy workable and satisfactory, and this is certainly acceptable. However, this does not mean that this is the only "right" way of classifying things and that the Bible is scientifically incorrect when it classifies together the bird and the bat or the whale, the fish and the sea monster. Classification is an arbitrary procedure; this may also be true of the definition of living things. Thus, the consumption of plant material by man and animals at the beginning may not indeed have involved "death" in the Biblical sense of that term. "Death" so far as animals and man are concerned may well have entered the world through the fall. It is not so far fetched to believe that in Eden the wolf and the lamb fed together and that the lion ate not flesh but straw like the ox.

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32. The Cain and Abel incident is a myth; we cannot ascribe those events to any known individuals.
33. Early man was quite primitive and technologically immature.

32. Hebrews 11 lists Old Testament persons who are cited as examples of faith. One of these is Abel, who is contrasted with Cain (a negative example). Hebrews 11:4. Jesus verified the historicity of the death of Abel in Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:51; cf. I John 3:12
33. Early civilizations, within only a few hundred years of man's creation, were already building sophisticated musical instruments (Genesis 4:21) and refining alloys in blast furnaces (Genesis 4:22). Consider also the technology involved in building Noah's Ark (Genesis 6:14-16) and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:3-6).

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