

***De Natura*: The Church Fathers on Creation’s Fallenness**

MATTHEW T. WARNEZ, B.H.

Saint Paul Seminary

Saint Paul, MN

Introduction

“WHO GAVE THE MOSQUITO its stinger for sucking blood? How narrow is the tube by which it sucks! Who has arranged this? Who has made this?”¹ These modern-seeming questions were in fact those of Augustine’s fifth-century congregation. Augustine plied his usual rhetorical vigor to dismiss the “the problem of natural evil”—as we call it today—and yet his hearers’ doubts have persisted down to our own times. Indeed, pace Augustine, it would seem the problem of natural evil has become only more vexing to Christians in the post-Darwinian era. If the animal kingdom was made through a cruel, evolutionary process, and if the wrath of God fails to justify (at least in modern minds) the woes of—say—pandemics, then, should we not suppose that *lower creation is fallen*? But if it is, *how* did it happen? Or, if it is not, why does it so often *seem* fallen?²

Many conservative Christians today, when pressed on such questions, will suppose that lower creation was somehow soiled by the Fall of man. In addition to ostensibly reifying the literal sense of Genesis 3:17–19 (or Romans 8:19–22), this “negative” view of lower creation carries the advantage of a winsome theodicy. For, if all creation was vitiated by Adam’s sin,

¹ Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 148.8; “Quis dedit aculeum culici, quo sanguinem sugat? Quam tenuis fistula est qua sorbet! Quis disposuit ista? Quis fecit ista?” (translation mine).

² Here and throughout, “lower creation” refers to all the non-human occupants of the material universe, animate or otherwise: fish, trees, rocks, planets, etc. For our purposes it suffices to define an “unfallen lower creation” as a lower creation which was not directly affected by the fall of man. We assume throughout that, at minimum, man has fallen.

then God is not to be blamed for natural disasters, mass extinctions, or animal suffering—though presently “thorns infest the ground,” the whole world was originally free from pain and death.³ In pastoral settings of all denominations, this tends to be the “received view,” not usually requiring explication nor apology.

Attractive as this theodicy may be, however, it flies in the face of an evolutionary reckoning of natural history. According to modern biology, life on earth predated man’s existence by some four billion years. The fossil record, in addition to revealing that prehistoric creatures regularly died, also suggests that almost every species that ever existed is now extinct. Lest the Fall of man be pushed back into some preembodied epoch, animal death would not seem to be a consequence of the Fall at all. Indeed, some evolutionary theists would go further, holding that man’s Fall had *no* direct effects on nature. According to this “positive” view, both before the Fall and after, animals persisted in their natural behaviors: killing, dying, and gradually evolving.

Thus, only the former view offers a happy theodicy, and only the latter harmonizes with modern science. But what is the *Catholic* view? Although the fallen version is sometimes presumed in modern Catholic theology,⁴ the magisterium has never authoritatively addressed the question. Thus, and since the meaning of the Bible is often contested on this point, it becomes important to establish the opinions of the Church Fathers.⁵

Unfortunately, recent decades have seen the publication of only a few, partial surveys of patristic eco-theology with respect to the Fall,⁶ most of which have been all-too-obviously prejudiced, whether by creationist,⁷

³ Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World” (1719).

⁴ For example, in the well-balanced Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture series, Jesuit Dennis Hamm has this to say about Col 1:20: “As the whole created world shares in estrangement and disorder caused by human sin, so will it share in Christ’s redemption and be restored to its full beauty, harmony, and magnificence (see Rom 8:20–21)” (*Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013], 179).

⁵ In a forthcoming work, however, I will examine the biblical theology of lower creation’s postlapsarian integrity.

⁶ For general studies of patristic views on nature (considered apart from the fall), see: David Sutherland Wallace-Hadrill, *The Greek Patristic View of Nature* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1968); Chris Fritter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 84–155; Robert M. Grant, *Early Christians and Animals* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷ Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man: The Orthodox Christian Vision* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000). Rose argues that “the

evolutionary,⁸ or conservationist⁹ ideals. Admittedly, an incomplete and prejudiced survey is one of the few ways to make sense of the data: the Fathers had a surprising amount to say on this question, and their opinions, which varied considerably, are scattered haphazardly throughout their writings. To make matters worse, in the patristic age, the subject rarely received a sustained treatment, and even more rarely did the Fathers comment on each other's views. While I have attempted to set my own biases aside (let the reader be the judge), I can hardly boast, in light of such difficulties, to have produced an exhaustive study of the Fathers. Nevertheless, I do believe this essay constitutes the most comprehensive such study to date, and I do believe my conclusions, though not exceptionless, are adequately representative.

In the course of my analysis there emerged two predominant opinions, opinions it seemed right to title by their most influential exponents: Irenaeus and Augustine. Irenaeus took the negative stance (i.e., that Adam's Fall had certain immediate and negative effect upon lower creation), and Augustine the positive (i.e., that lower creation retained the fullness of its original goodness despite Adam's Fall). I have thus attempted to classify the position of every Christian writer up to the ninth century according to these two schools. Of course, many patristic voices who, in my estimation, were either insufficiently clear or entirely silent on the matter were omitted. The first part of the paper deals with the Irenaean view, canvassing its proponents chronologically. After similarly treating the Augustinian view, I present my conclusions.

Before setting out, however, two preliminary remarks are in order. First, I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Jon Garvey and his book *God's Good Earth*. Following a chapter on biblical interpretation, Garvey surveys the Fathers, determining that Theophilus of Antioch held the negative view, with all of the following opposing him: Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and John of Damascus. Having added Anselm and Thomas Aquinas to the latter school, Garvey surmises that "for three quarters of the church's history the doctrine of a fallen creation

[Eastern] Holy Fathers believed that the whole creation fell with Adam" (409).

⁸ Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009).

⁹ Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009); Christina Nellist, "Saints and Sinners," in *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering: Ancient Voices in Modern Theology* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2018).

was either unknown, or very much a minority view.”¹⁰ While his assessment is on the whole correct, the present paper will render a conclusion which is much more precise and founded on considerably more evidence.

Secondly, I ought to address the problem of terminology. Unfortunately, there are not yet any clear terms for the question I wish to study, so I am forced to invent my own, or repeat *ad nauseam* “the question of lower creation’s fallenness.” For the sake of variation, I will frequently take “integrity” or “original goodness” to be the inverse of “fallenness.” These two terms are, in fact, more precise, for, in this study, by “fallenness” I do not mean to suggest that lower creation is necessarily (or even could be) *complicit* in its Fall, but only that it *has* (or could have) fallen from some better condition. Similarly, I will refer to the positive/Augustinian and negative/Irenaeian views of lower creation as the “unvitiating” and “vitiating” views, respectively.

The Irenaeian View: Vitiating Lower Creation

In this part we shall explore those Church Fathers who most likely held the vitiating view of lower creation. These Fathers taught that, up until the Fall of Adam, lower creation had been irenic and deathless, and hence creation as it appears now is drastically different from its original design. Only a few proponents of the vitiating view held creation to be vitiating *morally* at the Fall (e.g., rarely was creation held responsible, or considered to be in a state of revolt), but they all agreed that creation was directly cursed. As noted above, Irenaeus’s treatment of the subject, though cursory, was probably the most influential.

Ante-Nicene Fathers

Irenaeus was not himself the progenitor of the vitiating view, for it appears occasionally in ancient nonbiblical Jewish literature, including two Jewish apocalypses.¹¹ The first apocalypse endorsing the vitiating view is the *Reve-*

¹⁰ Jon Garvey, *God’s Good Earth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 71.

¹¹ The case has been made that *4 Ezra* 7:11 and *2 Baruch* 56:6 imply that lower creation was affected by man’s fall (see, e.g., Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8:19–22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 113–14, 129–32; Jonathan Moo, “Romans 8:19–22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies* 54 [2008]: 74–89, at 78–79). In my reading of the text, these passages only have in mind the inauguration of human suffering, and do not say anything certain about a change to lower creation itself. It should also be noted that other Jewish apocalypses sometimes support the unvitiating view. For details, see Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, 153–59.

lation of Moses (ca. first century AD), where, in an important passage, the nature of animals is said to have changed as a consequence of the Fall.

Seth and Eve went into the regions of paradise. And as they were going along, Eve saw her son, and a wild beast fighting with him. . . . Eve cried out to the wild beast, saying, "O you evil wild beast, will you not be afraid to fight with the image of God? How has your mouth been opened? How have your teeth been strengthened? How have you not been mindful of your subjection, that you were formerly subject to the image of God?" Then the wild beast cried out, saying, "O Eve, not against us your upbraiding nor your weeping, but against yourself, *since the beginning of the wild beasts was from you*. How was your mouth opened to eat of the tree about which God had commanded you not to eat of it? *For this reason also our nature has been changed.*"¹²

The second Jewish apocalypse clearly favoring the vitiated view is the *Book of Jubilees*. According to its second-century-BC author, the Fall caused the luminaries to lose their refulgence and the animals to lose their speaking ability.¹³ Man's antediluvian wickedness had such power over nature that, during the era of the Nephilim (Gen 6:4), "lawlessness increased on the earth and all flesh corrupted its way, alike men and cattle and beasts and birds and everything that walk on the earth . . . began to devour each other."¹⁴ How the beasts had survived before devouring each other is unclear. Outside of the apocalyptic genre, ancient Jewish witnesses to the vitiated view survive in a few passages from the *Genesis Rabbah*. On account of the Fall the luminaries were darkened,¹⁵ the trees became less fruitful,¹⁶

¹² *Revelation of Moses* 10.1–11.2; trans. found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), which will henceforth be given as *ANF*. The first and second series of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* from the same publication set of volumes will likewise be given simply as *NPNF* (meaning simply whichever volume of the two series contains the work cited). *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948–) will be cited as *FC*, and *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1946–) will be cited as *ACW*. Translators and editors are understood to be those stated in those collections.

¹³ *Book of Jubilees* 1: 29, 3:28.

¹⁴ *Book of Jubilees* 5:2 (trans. R. H. Charles [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902], 43).

¹⁵ *Genesis Rabbah* 11:2.

¹⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 12:6.

and the curse on the ground produced “gnats, midges, and fleas.”¹⁷

Irenaeus was also not the *Christian* progenitor of the vitiated view, which can be described in works as early as the *Epistle of Barnabas*.¹⁸ But Theophilus of Antioch († ca. 184), in addition to being the earliest Church Father to set forth a theology of lower creation, was the first to expressly develop the negative position. His outlook, which was advanced in a single chapter of his only extant treatise *To Autolycus*, seems to be the *most* negative stance toward nature that can be found within the patristic corpus. Theophilus not only held that creation was cursed, but also deserving of its curse:

The animals are named wild beasts, from their being hunted, not as if they had been made evil or venomous from the first—for nothing was made evil by God, but all things good, yea, very good—but *the sin in which man was concerned brought evil upon them. For when man transgressed, they also transgressed with him.* For as, if the master of the house himself acts rightly, the domestics also of necessity conduct themselves well; but if the master sins, the servants also sin with him; so in like manner it came to pass, that in the case of man’s sin, he being master, all that was subject to him sinned with him.¹⁹

Just as later theologians would explain the propagation of original sin by seeing the whole human race in Adam “as one body of one man,”²⁰ so Theophilus saw Adam’s guilt imputed to the whole animal kingdom. Nevertheless, the animals—or at least “the fish and the fowls”—are personally guilty, for while some “abide in their natural state, and do no harm to those weaker than themselves, but keep the law of God, and eat of the seeds of the earth,” yet others “transgress the law of God, and eat flesh, and injure those weaker than themselves.”²¹ For Theophilus, then, carnivorous

¹⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 20:8 (*Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah [London: Soncino Press, 1939], 167).

¹⁸ The author calls predatory birds “nothing more than pests in their wickedness”; he describes certain sea creatures as “cursed . . . in the mud beneath the depths”; and he claims that Moses “also hated the weasel, and with good reason . . . for this animal conceives through its mouth” (*Epistle of Barnabas* 10; cited in *The Apostolic Fathers in English*; ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006], 188).

¹⁹ Theophilus of Antioch, *Autolycus* 2.17 (ANF; emphasis added).

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §404, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 4, a. 1.

²¹ Theophilus of Antioch, *Autolycus* 2.16.

was clearly a consequence of the Fall. Nevertheless, when “man again shall have made his way back to his natural condition, and no longer does evil, [the wild animals] also shall be restored to their original gentleness.”²² Indeed, since Theophilus believed that the eschatological Paradise would be a *return* to Adam’s Paradise, Eden must have been devoid of animal pain and death.

Irenaeus of Lyons († ca. 202), like Theophilus, envisioned a strong parallelism between Eden and Heaven. While on at least one occasion Irenaeus recognized the beauty of creation,²³ the Eden–Heaven equivalence ultimately demands the fallen view. In his *Against Heresies* he writes: “When the creation is restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God (for they had been originally subjected in obedience to Adam), that is, the productions of the earth.”²⁴ Although most (or all) animals still obey God, they no longer obey man.²⁵ And yet, for Irenaeus, their disobedience did not merely change animals’ relation to humanity; it also changed the natures of animals themselves, if indeed vegetarians became carnivores. Obviously this requires one to maintain a rather fantastic vision of Eden,²⁶ which Irenaeus calls “better than this earth.”²⁷ Unlike Theophilus, however, Irenaeus proposed that the earth was cursed, not because of man, but *instead* of man. Commenting on Genesis 3:17–18, he writes:

²² Theophilus of Antioch, *Autolycus* 2.17.

²³ The animals are “all adorned with beauty” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.30.3 [ANF]). More frequently, however, Irenaeus expresses contempt for animals. Consider, for example, *Demonstration* 61, where Irenaeus compares fallen man to the present, discordant state of the animal kingdom, bearing “the likeness of wolves and lions, ravaging the weaker and waging war on their kind, [or the likeness of] leopards and vipers, who used deadly poison to kill perhaps even loved ones because of desire” (cited in Matthew C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* [Koninklijke, Netherlands: Brill, 2008], 95).

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

²⁵ Most (or all?) animals “persevered, and do still persevere, in [willing] subjection to Him who formed them” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.28.7).

²⁶ He writes, for example: “In like manner [the Lord declared] that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, and that every ear should have ten thousand grains, and every grain would yield ten pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and that all other fruit-bearing trees, and seeds and grass, would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man” (*Against Heresies* 5.33.3). While he speaks here of heaven, one may apply it to Eden in light of *Against Heresies* 5.32.1.

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 61, cited in Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 139.

Immediately after Adam had transgressed, as the Scripture relates, [God] pronounced no curse against Adam personally, but against the ground, in reference to his works, as a certain person among the ancients has observed: “God did indeed transfer the curse to the earth, that it might not remain in man.”²⁸

Man does not go entirely unpunished, as Irenaeus goes on to explain, but the “curse in all its fullness” was redirected toward the serpent, so that humanity might be salvaged.²⁹ In fact, according to Irenaeus’s theodicy, the curse upon the earth was not a pointless display of wrath; rather, God allowed for evil’s existence in order that man might be “disciplined beforehand for incorruption and prepared for salvation.”³⁰ Adam sinned because he was spiritually immature;³¹ now the cursed earth was to render remedial education. Accordingly, Irenaeus interprets creation’s “bondage to corruption” (Rom 8:19–22) as applying to the whole created order.³² In sum, if “the creation itself” will one day be “restored to its primeval condition,”³³ as Irenaeus supposed, then creation’s present condition must not only be worse than what it will someday become, but also worse than what it originally was.

Origen († ca. 253) also had a relatively low view of lower creation, although he did not (to my knowledge) expressly ascribe carnivorousness to the Fall. Origen’s interpretations of Genesis 1–3 were generally allegorical, and he attributed evil to two preterrestrial events: the fall of the angels and the negligence of rational minds.³⁴ This twofold origin of evil gradually led to the embodiment of human souls, and thus, for Origen, corporeality was part and parcel of man’s curse.³⁵ Nevertheless, in his apologetic *Against*

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23.3.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23.3.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.35.2.

³¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1. Adam and Eve’s spiritual infantilism also has implications for moral theodicy in an evolutionary setting. See John Schneider, “The Fall of ‘Augustinian Adam’: Original Fragility and Supralapsarian Purpose,” *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 949–69.

³² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.32.1.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.32.1.

³⁴ See Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61–66.

³⁵ “All rational creatures who are incorporeal and invisible, if they become negligent, gradually sink to a lower level and take to themselves bodies suitable to the regions into which they descend” (Origen, *On the First Principles* 1.4.1, quoted in Scott, *Journey Back to God*, 64). Consider also Origen’s exegesis of Rom 8:22: “The whole of creation . . . groans along with [mankind], and patiently suffers with them,

Celsus, Origen interpreted Genesis 3:17–18 quite literally, suggesting that the earth was condemned *on top of* the curse of corporeality:

However good it may be, [Judea] still forms part of the earth, which was originally cursed for the transgression of Adam. For these words, “Cursed shall the ground be for what you have done; with grief, that is, with labor, shall you eat of the fruit of it all the days of your life,” were spoken of the whole earth, the fruit of which every man who died in Adam eats with sorrow or labor all the days of his life. *And as all the earth has been cursed, it brings forth thorns and briers all the days of the life of those who in Adam were driven out of paradise.* . . . If, then, the whole earth has been cursed in the deeds of Adam and of those who died in him, it is plain that all parts of the earth share in the curse, and among others the land of Judea.³⁶

For Origen, “however good” the earth might seem at present, it was to some extent vitiated by the Fall of man. In his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, Origen followed Theophilus, speculating that the earth itself was culpable,³⁷ and, as such, “on the day of judgment not only man but also all creation will be judged.”³⁸ Origen, however, seemed unwilling to specify creation’s faults, and he typically held that all animals have some good purpose: each species

hoping for the fulfilment of the promises. . . . For I think that the sun might say [like Paul], ‘I would desire to be dissolved,’ or ‘to return and be with Christ, which is far better.’ Paul indeed adds, ‘Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you;’ while the sun may say, ‘To abide in this bright and heavenly body is more necessary, on account of the manifestation of the sons of God.’ The same views are to be believed and expressed regarding the moon and stars” (*On the First Principles* 1.7.5 [ANF]). Cf. Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 7.4, and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 47, a. 2. The view that sees embodiment as a curse or “fall” was not Origen’s own invention; it was taught, for example, by Numenius the Pythagorean, as well as by Plotinus (Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1 [New York: Image, 1985], 448, 468).

³⁶ Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.28–29 (ANF; emphasis added). Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 2.3 (FC): only Christ can remove “the curse which the Lord had placed on the earth.”

³⁷ See Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 4.1, especially 4.1.7 (ACW), where Origen suggested that the earth “is capable, I say, as a living being, in accordance with the characteristic of its portions, of both good and evil actions for which it earns either praise or punishment. . . . Why is the heaven passing away, why is the earth passing away, unless they committed certain acts that made them worthy of passing away? And in another passage it says: ‘The whole earth is corrupt.’ [Gen 6:11] When did it become corrupt? Before the flood.”

³⁸ Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 4.1.5.

is either man's servant or his teacher,³⁹ for God "created all things for the sake of rational beings."⁴⁰ In at least one place, Origen even blamed demons for natural disasters.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in Origen's mind, the unseemly "diversity" of the once-uniform cosmos derives "its origin not from the will or judgment of the Creator, but from the freedom of the individual will,"⁴² and, notwithstanding demonic activity, the earth is not to be excuplated, for it is "scourged by God for its sins."⁴³

Other early Fathers might also be associated with the fallen view. According to certain modern authors, Clement of Alexandria († ca. 215) believed the Fall to have had deleterious effects on lower creation, but in my estimation there seems to be insufficient direct evidence.⁴⁴ At best, one could *presume* that Clement took the Irenaeian view, either on the basis of his predilection for Gnosticism, or because his own stance was reflected by Origen. The evidence is also scant for Tertullian († ca. 240), whose interpretation of Genesis 3:18 hardly went beyond the text.⁴⁵ Likewise for Cyprian († 258), although he was certainly aware of cruelty in the natural

³⁹ See, for example, Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.78 and 4.81.

⁴⁰ Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.81. Elsewhere, however, Origen was at a loss to justify "the creation of scorpions or other venomous beasts" (Origen, *Philokalia* 2; cited in Wallace-Hadrill, *Greek Patristic View of Nature*, 114).

⁴¹ "And if we might speak boldly, we would say that if demons have any share at all in these things, to them belong famine, blasting of the vine and fruit trees, pestilence among men and beasts: all these are the proper occupations of demons" (Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.31). Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 10.6.

⁴² Origen, *On the First Principles* 2.9.6.

⁴³ Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 4.3.

⁴⁴ For example, William E. G. Floyd sees Clement as believing that, "on the cosmic level, the original harmony was dissolved [by the fall]" (*Clement of Alexandria's Treatment of the Problem of Evil* [London: Oxford University Press, 1971], 53). Peter Karavites, writes that "war, many diseases, famine, and similar disasters Clement perceives as man-induced" (*Evil, Freedom, and the Road to Perfection in Clement of Alexandria* [Koninklijke, Netherlands: Brill, 1998], 85). In both cases, however, the claims are made without suitable justification from Clement's own writing. Floyd relies heavily on Clement's *Stromata* 6, which, although mentioning natural disasters, fails to associate those disasters with the fall, and Garvey too cites *Stromata* 6.16, which presents insufficient evidence (*God's Good Earth*, 75).

⁴⁵ See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.11 (*ANF*): "[After Adam's sin,] immediately spring up briars and thorns, where once had grown grass, and herbs, and fruitful trees." For Tertullian, even the microscopic organs of ants and gnats are a testament to God's wisdom: "If, however, you suppose that God's wisdom has no capacity for forming such infinitesimal corpuscles, you can still recognize His greatness, in that He has furnished even to the smallest animals the functions of life" (*Treatise on the Soul* 10 [*ANF*]).

order.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, these early Fathers had a relative disinterest in this subject, and thus we are prevented from assessing their views with greater confidence.

Post-Nicene Fathers

Ephrem the Syrian († 373), the great Eastern hymnographer, was an important of the Irenaeus view in the fourth century. Though Ephrem never systemically catalogued the effects of the Fall on lower creation, he was clear that lower creation had been literally cursed.⁴⁷ At minimum, the earth's cursing made thorns and thistles appear,⁴⁸ inaugurated animal predation,⁴⁹ and caused the wild beasts to rebel from beneath man's rule.⁵⁰ With respect to Irenaeus, however, Ephrem's protology included two significant developments. First, although Ephrem shared Irenaeus's belief that the earth had been cursed for the sake of man, Ephrem was quick to add that the earth's cursing did not entail the earth's suffering:

Although the earth, which had committed no folly, was struck on account of Adam, [God] still made Adam, who could suffer, suffer by the curse of [the earth], *which could not suffer*. For it was in that earth, which received the curse, that he, who did not receive the curse, was, in fact, cursed.⁵¹

In other words, in Ephrem's reckoning, since the earth could not sin, it could not suffer. Secondly, Ephrem's prelapsarian cosmology suggests that

⁴⁶ See Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 9 (ANF): "What does the fierceness of wolves do in the Christian breast? What the savageness of dogs, and the deadly venom of serpents, and the sanguinary cruelty of wild beasts? However, when Cyprian addressed Gen 3:17–19 directly, he hardly went beyond the text itself (*On the Unity of the Church* 9.11).

⁴⁷ See Ephrem, Hymn 9, no. 1: "At our resurrection, both earth and heaven will God renew / liberating all creatures, granting them paschal joy, along with us. / Upon our mother Earth, along with us, did he lay disgrace / when he placed on her, with the sinner, the curse; / so, together with the just, he will bless her too" (trans. Sebastian Brock in *Hymns on Paradise* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990], 136; quoted in Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 38). See also Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 1, and Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 11.10–13. At the same time, Ephrem did not regard lower creation to be entirely depraved; see, for example, his esteem for creation in *Letter to Publius* 6.

⁴⁸ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.31.2 (FC).

⁴⁹ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.9.3.

⁵⁰ Ephrem, *Letter to Publius* 17 (cf. *Commentary on Genesis* 2.29.2).

⁵¹ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.31.1 (emphasis added).

the earth (as distinct from the Garden of Eden) was designed in anticipation of man's Fall, *even before the earth was cursed*.⁵² For example, in order to prepare for Adam's expulsion, God had planted corn external to Eden,⁵³ and had placed cattle "along the border of Paradise."⁵⁴ Ephrem may have even held that prelapsarian animals were mortal prior to earth's cursing.⁵⁵ For, in Ephrem's estimation, the dying of animals was not a punishment, but a postlapsarian consolation: namely that, by animal flesh, "Adam and Eve might nourish their own persons, and that with the skins they might cover their nakedness, and also so that by the death [of animals] Adam and Eve might see the death of their own bodies."⁵⁶ Thus, in Ephrem's worldview, when Adam and Eve stepped out of Paradise, they stepped onto an earth which was already primed for death and decay,⁵⁷ irrespective of earth's cursing. As we shall see, these two ideas, in the hands of other writers, would become lynchpins for the positive view of lower creation.

Like Ephrem, John Chrysostom († 407) adopted the Irenaeian view in an attenuated form, or rather, he adopted a kind of centrist position. Nevertheless, I shall treat him in this section because of the emphasis he puts on the earth's cursing. According to Chrysostom, God "made the earth also to share in the curse" which was applied to the serpent.⁵⁸ In fact, for Chrysostom, the earth was directly cursed a second time, because of Abel's murder: God rebuked "the earth with the murderer, turning His wrath off to it, and saying, 'Cursed be the earth.'"⁵⁹ As with Irenaeus, the curse on the earth was considered a mercy toward man,⁶⁰ and its ultimate

⁵² See Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 87.

⁵³ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 1.22.2.

⁵⁴ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 1.27.1.

⁵⁵ Since Ephrem held that man's mortality or immortality was to be a consequence of his decisions (*Commentary on Genesis* 2.17.3), it seems unlikely that he would have believed animals to have been created immortal. Nevertheless, Ephrem did not expressly admit to animal death before the fall, and he seemed unwilling to comment on the issue directly. He did, at minimum, allow the possibility of prelapsarian animal procreation (*Commentary on Genesis* 2.4). Cf. Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 13.5.

⁵⁶ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.33.

⁵⁷ See Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 13.5.

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 23.10 (NPNF). See also John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 19.11 (FC). Elsewhere, in a patristically rare discussion of Gen 5:28–29, he describes the curse as causing "the condition of distress and difficulty affecting the earth" (*Homilies on Genesis* 21.17).

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 23.10.

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 19.11.

purpose was to discipline man (by making nature uncooperative).⁶¹ Unlike Irenaeus, however, Chrysostom limited the scope of the curse to the soil: although thorns sprouted forth,⁶² the animals were sent to *alleviate* man's punishment.⁶³ This allowed Chrysostom to maintain a strong sense of creation's goodness.⁶⁴ He writes: "Through the creation the wise and the ignorant, the Scythians and the barbarians, are able to climb up to God, learning of God through the beauty of visible things."⁶⁵ The golden-mouthed archbishop extolled the glory of God in animals, plants, and "other things," even when the creature's utility escaped comprehension.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Chrysostom granted that wild beasts were no less dreadful before the Fall than after, although they were once subservient to Adam.⁶⁷ In his exegesis of Romans 8:22, he denies that lower creation groans on account of its present condition.⁶⁸ And for Chrysostom, natural disasters were not the works of Satan, but of God, and in fact were the "greatest form of his providence."⁶⁹ Thus, although Chrysostom consistently held that the earth was literally and directly cursed by God, he retained a remarkably exalted view of nature.

⁶¹ See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 17.39: "The curse on [the soil] impairs in turn the human being's relaxation and tranquility." Later, speaking as God: "I curse the ground so that it will not in future yield its harvest as before without tilling and ploughing; instead, I invest you with great labor, toil and difficulty, and with unremitting pain and despair . . . so that under pressure from these you may have continual guidance in keeping to limits and recognizing your own make-up" (17.41). See also John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 8.2.5.

⁶² John Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving* 5.2.3.

⁶³ See John Chrysostom, *Sermons on Genesis* 3: God "lightened the weight and the burden of the sweat with the great number of animals that take part with us in this toil" (quoted in Hanneke Reuling, *After Eden: Church Fathers and Rabbis on Genesis 3:16–21* [Leiden: Brill, 2006]), 130). Cf. *Homilies on Genesis* 22.17.

⁶⁴ See Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 5.14: "If created things are of such a kind that they overwhelm human beings, and no one could adequately praise them, what could anyone say about the Creator himself?" (see also 4.12).

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 3.19 (here as found in *Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, ed. J. Patout Burns Jr. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012], 29).

⁶⁶ See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statutes* 12.7 (NPNF): "Although you see many of the animals, and of the herbs, and plants, and other things, of which you know not the use, admire the variety of these; and feel astonishment for this reason at the perfect workmanship of God." See also John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 7.13–15.

⁶⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 14.19–21, 16.4.

⁶⁸ See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statutes* 5.5: "And [Paul] spoke thus, not as condemning the things present, but longing for the things to come."

⁶⁹ John Chrysostom, *Three Homilies on the Devil* 1.4 (NPNF).

The challenge for Chrysostom was, of course, to explain in what sense the practically unvitiated creation was literally cursed. His solution was to borrow from the eschatology of Methodius of Olympus († ca. 311):

The creation, then, after being restored to a better and more seemly state, remains, rejoicing and exulting over the children of God at the resurrection; . . . when we have risen and shaken off the mortality of the flesh, . . . *it also shall be freed from corruption and be subject no longer to vanity*. . . . Its earlier form is lost in the change of all things to a state of greater splendor. . . . For in reality God did not establish the universe in vain, or to no purpose but destruction, as those weak-minded men say, but to exist, and be inhabited, and continue.⁷⁰

What was the effect of creation's curse, according to Methodius? Corruptibility. Impermanence. Creation groans, not because it is defective, but because it is deficient—because it will one day attain to an existence of even greater splendor. And “if the creation [groans], much more ought you,” added Chrysostom, “not as finding fault with the present system, but through a desire of those *greater things*.”⁷¹ Just as the Christian waits for his final adoption, so does creation await the coming Kingdom, according to Chrysostom.⁷²

Nevertheless, was not creation wronged, for having been made corruptible? And if God caused creation to become corruptible, is not God to be faulted? Chrysostom answers in the negative, following the reasoning of Ephrem the Syrian: even if creation was once incorruptible and had its incorruptibility taken away, creation *qua* creation cannot be wronged.⁷³

⁷⁰ Methodius of Olympus, *Discourse on the Resurrection* 1.8–9 (ANF; emphasis added).

⁷¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 14.8.22–23 (NPNF; emphasis added). The passage is worth quoting more completely: “For if the creation [groans], much more ought thou to do so, honored with reason as you are. . . . And if the creation, devoid as it is of mind and reason, and though in ignorance of these things, yet groans, much more should we. Next, that he may give the heretics no handle, or seem to be disparaging our present world, we groan, he says, not as finding fault with the present system, but through a desire of those *greater things*.”

⁷² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 14.21.

⁷³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 14.20. In the succeeding paragraph (14.21), Chrysostom explains the mechanism by which corruptibility and incorruptibility are conferred upon creation: “For ‘it shall be freed,’ [Paul] says, ‘from the bondage of corruption,’ that is, it shall no longer be corruptible, but shall go along with the beauty given to your body; just as when this became corruptible,

Having handled this objection, Chrysostom rounds out his theology of creation, which we find magnificently captured in his exegesis of Romans 8:19–20:

What is the meaning of, “the creation was made subject to vanity?” Why *that it became corruptible*. For what cause, and on what account? On account of you, O man. For since you have taken a body mortal and liable to suffering, the earth too has received a curse, and brought forth thorns and thistles. . . . Now you see in what sense the creation is “in bondage to vanity,” and how it is to be freed from the ruined state. . . . They are [to be] changed into an incorruptible state, and so therefore will the creature be. . . . At present, however, [Paul] speaks about the bondage itself, and shows for what reason it became such, and gives ourselves as the cause of it. What then? Was it harshly treated on another’s account? By no means, for *it was on my account that it was made*. What wrong then is done it, which was made for my sake, when it suffers these things for my correction? Or, indeed, one has no need to moot the question of right and wrong at all in the case of things void of soul and feeling. . . . [Evil entered] for your sake, and [creation] became corruptible; yet it has had no wrong done it. *For incorruptible will it be for your sake again.*⁷⁴

This is likely Chrysostom’s most developed articulation of creation’s moral status, suggesting how lower creation might be simultaneously accursed and yet unharmed. Chrysostom seems to have been the only Church Father to unequivocally interpret Genesis 3:17 as the conferring of impermanence (although Methodius is a possible exception⁷⁵). Origen had seen

that became corruptible also; so now it is made incorruptible, that also shall follow it too. . . . For as a nurse who is bringing up a king’s child, when he has come to his Father’s power, does herself enjoy the good things along with him, thus also is the creation . . . In all respects man takes the lead, and that it is for his sake that all things are made.”

⁷⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 14.19–20 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Beyond the association of cursing with corruptibility, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Methodius would have shared Chrysostom’s protology. At minimum, it should be noted that Methodius had a generally high view of lower creation. In his dialogue *Concerning Free Will* (ANF), one of the parties says, “I began to praise the Creator, as I saw the earth fast fixed, and living creatures in such variety, and the blossoms of plants with their many hues.” See also Methodius, *Discourse on the Resurrection* 1.1–2.

the bestowal of materiality as an evil, but an evil which antedated the Fall. And while Ephrem's protology did not exclude the possibility that the earth's cursing conferred animal impermanence, Chrysostom alone interpreted the curse in such a way as to keep creation's original goodness mostly intact.⁷⁶

As the following section will make clear, the Irenaeian view had lost its currency by the height of the patristic era. Nevertheless, the vestiges of Irenaeus's theology can be detected in writers as late as Jerome († 420). According to Jerome, we live on an earth "over which hangs a curse *which brings forth for us thistles and thorns*."⁷⁷ Like Origen, Jerome restricted the goodness of creation either to its utility for man (whether alimentary or medicinal⁷⁸) or to its moralizing value (whether by positive or negative example⁷⁹). Though the Psalms frequently praise God for the works of creation, Jerome's extant homilies on the Psalms seem to eschew honoring creation except in connection to man.⁸⁰ In one homily, Jerome argued that

⁷⁶ Ambrose and Augustine identified creation's "futility" (Rom 8:20) with its impermanence, but associated this impermanence with the curse of Genesis 3, as we shall see.

⁷⁷ Jerome, Homily 16 (*FC*; emphasis added). Jerome uses a very similar expression in his *Commentary on Matthew* 5.4. Compare, however, his homily 17 (*FC*): "Even though [the land] has brought forth thistles and thorns, it is, nevertheless, Your creature and for that reason has been restored." Only what was once cursed is in need of restoration. (All citations from Jerome's homilies will be from *FC*).

⁷⁸ See Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 2.6 (*NPNF*): "And as the ox was created for ploughing, the horse for riding, dogs for watching, goats for milk, sheep for their wool: so it was with swine and stags, and roes and hares, and other animals: but the immediate purpose of their creation was not that they might serve for food, but for other uses of men. For if everything that moves and lives was made for food, and prepared for the stomach, let my opponents tell me why elephants, lions, leopards, and wolves were created; why vipers, scorpions, bugs, lice, and fleas; why the vulture, the eagle, the crow, the hawk; why whales, dolphins, seals, and small snails were created. Which of us ever eats the flesh of a lion, a viper, a vulture, a stork, a kite, or the worms that crawl upon our shores? As then these have their proper uses, so may we say that other beasts, fishes, birds, were created not for eating, but for medicine."

⁷⁹ For example, Jerome takes the poise of the deer as a symbol for saintliness (Homily 51), and he uses the macabre conduct of the hyena to illustrate the wickedness of Jesus's opponents (Homily 83).

⁸⁰ The following passage from Jerome's Homily 21 is typical: "All creatures serve God as He ordains. Heaven obeys, and earth obeys, and I, unhappy man, do not obey. . . I look at a tree and I reflect upon the bark that clothes it like a garment; I notice how the tree is ready to burst into flower just like a bud. . . I meditate on how gradually, day by day, in every season, *nature works for me and becomes my food*" (emphasis added). Cf. Homily 58: "Blush with shame, O man, creeping things and

animals' *raison d'être* was the service of mankind: "God made them to serve you; He made you to serve Him."⁸¹ Since creation was a useful model for obedience, yet it apparently lacked intrinsic goodness, Jerome could be rather harsh in his descriptions of nature.⁸² He was not afraid to castigate celestial bodies, let alone thorns,⁸³ and the raven fared particularly poorly in Jerome's rhetoric: "I think," he said, that "the black ravens that always prey upon the carcasses of the dead, that always stir up quarrels with their raucous voice, are demons."⁸⁴ Though Jerome usually held that "all creatures keep their order," he occasionally countenanced that lower creation could sin.⁸⁵ Finally, in his translation of Genesis 3:17, Jerome opted to use *terra* ("earth") to translate the Hebrew *ʾădāmāh* ("ground"), though he was aware that Aquila of Sinope had used the more limited term *humus* ("soil").⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it would be too hasty, on this basis, to associate Jerome with the vitiated view in the full, Irenaeian sense. Indeed, in his commentary on Isaiah 11:6–9, Jerome condemns those who believe that, in the new age, "all beasts will become gentle and the wolf will put aside its *original* ferocity and feed together with the lamb."⁸⁷ The term "original" is

depths, snow, rain, and storms obey the word of God, and you do not."

⁸¹ Jerome, Homily 58.

⁸² Even in his commentary on the Canticle of Daniel (Dan 3:57–88), which would have afforded Jerome many opportunities to endorse creation's goodness, he went no further than restating his unadorned eco-theology: "Inasmuch as the Creator is logically apprehended on the basis of His creatures . . . the grandeur of God is made manifest" (*Jerome's Commentary on Daniel*, trans. Gleason L. Archer, Jr. [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009], 43).

⁸³ Jerome, Letter 125, no. 7 (*FC*; all further citations of Jerome's letters will be from *FC*).

⁸⁴ Jerome, Homily 56.

⁸⁵ See Jerome, Homily 58: "All creatures keep their order, except man alone to whom all are subject." Earlier in the same homily, he wrote: "Do not despair, O You who were a sea monster, you who were full of darkness, and did not dare to praise God; repent of your sins and be converted to God." In connection to animal culpability, it should be noted that Jerome, loathe to render undeserved praise, claimed Theophilus's *To Autolycus* to be "well fitted for the edification of the Church" (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 25; cited in Rick Rogers, "Theophilus of Antioch," in *Early Christian Thinkers*, ed. Paul Foster [London: SPCK, 2010], 53). On the other hand, Jerome also praised Basil's *Hexameron* (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 116), a work which supports the Augustinian view, as we shall see.

⁸⁶ Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on the Book of Genesis* 3.17. For speculation on the consequences of Jerome's decision, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 84–96. See also Reuling, *After Eden*, 38.

⁸⁷ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 4.14 (*ACW*; emphasis added).

very significant here—suggesting, as it does, prelapsarian predation—but the main reason Jerome opposes their literalism is as follows:

If they respond that these things will happen in view of the blessedness of the times, so that men may enjoy all good things without harm coming to anyone, let them hear from us *that nothing is good except virtue and nothing is evil except vice*. . . . Even among worldly philosophers, wealth, the health of the body, the abundance of all things, and the things opposite to these, such as poverty, infirmity, and scarcity, are reckoned neither as “good” nor as “evil,” but they are called “indifferent matters.” And this is why the Stoics, who agree with our teaching in many particulars, call nothing good except moral uprightness and virtue. They call nothing evil but baseness.⁸⁸

In other words, on the question of lower creation’s integrity, Jerome is a Stoic. Lower creation has little value in his eyes, but unlike Irenaeus, whose view was derived from the Fall, Jerome’s was derived, at least in part, from philosophy. So much for the legend of Jerome healing a lion’s paw.

The Augustinian View: Unvitiating Lower Creation

In the Nicene and post-Nicene Church, a school of thought emerged which denied that creation had been directly cursed and which thereby often held nature in a much more positive light. The adherents of this school taught that lower creation was not affected by the Fall whatsoever, or else they strictly limited the natural effects of the fall to the creation of thorns. In either case, since *man* was affected by the Fall, these Fathers often allowed that ecological phenomena could sometimes *appear* evil from man’s perspective (e.g., animal violence, natural disasters). Though numerous Fathers developed the unfallen view of lower creation, its most complete exposition was due to Augustine. On account of Augustine’s influence, it seems right to organize this part around him. I will begin by studying Augustine’s forebears, followed by Augustine himself, and will conclude by investigating the inheritors of his theology.

Ante-Augustinian Fathers

In the age of the Fathers, a high view of lower creation finds its earliest expression in the letter of *First Clement*. In a memorable passage, the

⁸⁸ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 4.14 (emphasis added). Jerome, likewise, takes only the allegorical meaning of Isa 65:25 (*Commentary on Isaiah* 18.17).

author proclaims the manifest harmony existing between God and the created world:

Let us note how free from anger [God] is toward all his creation. The heavens move at his direction and obey him in peace. Day and night complete the course assigned by him, neither hindering the other. The sun and the moon and the choirs of stars circle in harmony within the courses assigned to them, according to his direction, *without any deviation at all*. The earth, bearing fruit in the proper seasons in fulfillment of his will, brings forth *food in full abundance for both humans and beast and all living things that swell upon it without dissension and without altering anything he has decreed*. Moreover, the incomprehensible depths of the abysses and the indescribable judgments of the underworld are constrained by the same ordinances. The basin of the boundless sea, gathered by his creative action into its reservoirs, does not flow beyond the barriers surrounding it; instead *it behaves just as he ordered it*.⁸⁹

Here, several deviations from the Irenaeian view are immediately obvious: carnivorousness appears to be God's original intention; all living things exist in harmony; the abysses and seas, frightful as they appear, are God's obedient servants. The passage even suggests that, despite the Fall, God has not altered "*anything he has decreed*." Furthermore, later in the letter, the author took death and decay to be providential signs of the general resurrection, for the degeneration of seeds enables their sprouting, and the immolation of the phoenix leads to its rebirth.⁹⁰

Surprisingly, *First Clement's* insinuation of an unvitiated creation seem not to have resurfaced until the fourth century. Conceivably, before the Edict of Milan, the persecuted Church was simply more inclined to regard the world—including natural forces—as hostile to Christianity. Nevertheless, as early as Lactantius († ca. 325), the unvitiated view began to gain momentum. Lactantius had read Theophilus's *To Autolycus*,⁹¹ and, like Irenaeus, he held that lower creation existed for the sake of man.⁹² But Lactantius ran in a different direction. Rather than say, with Irenaeus, that lower creation had been cursed because of man, Lactantius suggested that

⁸⁹ *First Clement* 19:3–20:6 (cited in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 52; emphasis added).

⁹⁰ *First Clement* 24.2–26.1.

⁹¹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 1.23.

⁹² See Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 2.9 [ANF]: "It was necessary that man should be [the] last made, . . . for all things were made on his account."

evil was *originally* part of creation.⁹³ God had placed both goods and evils in the natural world so that man might acquire wisdom, and ultimately find God.⁹⁴ Had God not created evils, goods would be unrecognizable as such.⁹⁵ Furthermore, for Lactantius, natural evils were God's means of exercising divine retribution.⁹⁶ Of course, the attribution of evils to God quickly leads to heterodoxy. But, perhaps for the first time in the history of Christian thought, the so-called "evils" of lower creation were re-envisioned, albeit inadequately, as higher-order goods. Thus, though Lactantius refrained from praising creation *en masse*, he could still honor the design of animals, "in whose bodies we see nothing formed without plan, without arrangement, without utility, without beauty."⁹⁷ Furthermore, for Lactantius, God's design for creation exists now as it did in the beginning, a message central to his letter *On the Workmanship of God*. For example, he writes:

For [how could one say] that birds were not made to fly, nor wild beasts to rage, nor fishes to swim, nor men to be wise, *when it is evident that living creatures are subject to that natural disposition and office to which each was created?* . . . But since all the races of animals, and all the limbs, observe their own laws and arrangements, and the uses assigned to them, it is plain that nothing is made by chance, since *a perpetual arrangement of the divine plan is preserved*.⁹⁸

Elsewhere, Lactantius is explicit that God's divine plan included the "natural weapons" and "peculiar defense[s]" proper to predator-prey relationships.⁹⁹ But again, though Lactantius was happy to attribute the current natural order to God's original design, he did so at the expense of

⁹³ Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 13.

⁹⁴ See Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 13: "All things, both evils and goods, were proposed for the sake of man" (translation mine). In terms of "evils," Lactantius had in mind vipers and beetles.

⁹⁵ Joseph F. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), 45.

⁹⁶ Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 17. Note, however, that Lactantius's theology also has a place for fallen angels (e.g., *Divine Institutes* 2.15), but perhaps only as a cause of moral evil.

⁹⁷ Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 10. Lactantius goes on to conclude "that the most skillful and careful marking out of all the parts and members repels the idea of accident and chance."

⁹⁸ Lactantius, *On the Workmanship of God* 6 (ANF; emphasis added). See also Garvey, *God's Good Earth*, 77.

⁹⁹ Lactantius, *On the Workmanship of God* 2.

an orthodox doctrine of the Fall.¹⁰⁰ For Lactantius, good and evil somehow predated Adam's sin, and thus nothing in creation, not even evils, "ought to have been otherwise."¹⁰¹

By the end of the fourth century, it became clear that Lactantius's stance could be theologically legitimized. For one, the Fathers began to argue that the "evils" of lower creation were strictly *apparent* evils. Athanasius of Alexandria († 373) was among the first to adopt this approach. Like Lactantius, however, Athanasius did not connect his theology of lower creation to the doctrine of the Fall. This task devolved upon Basil, Ambrose, and Augustine. In particular, these Fathers, with increasing lucidity, began to defend the existence of prelapsarian animal predation and hence the unconditional praiseworthiness of lower creation. We shall study each Father in turn.

The Christology of Athanasius lent itself to a high view of creation. By emphasizing Christ's divinity, Athanasius understood him as the ordering principle of the universe. Since Christ sustains all things in existence, "the nature of created things, inasmuch as [they are] brought into being out of nothing, is of a fleeting sort, and weak and mortal."¹⁰² In this way Athanasius argued that creation's corruptibility long predated the sin of Adam: the universe was corruptible *by nature*. But this corruptibility made creation no less praiseworthy, no less ordered, as Athanasius was at great pains to attest in his *Against the Heathen*:

For by a nod and by the power of the Divine Word of the Father that governs and presides over all, the heaven revolves [*sic*], the stars move, the sun shines, the moon goes her circuit, and the air receives the sun's light and the ether his heat, and the winds blow: the mountains are reared on high, the sea is rough with waves, and the living things in it grow, the earth abides fixed, and bears fruit, and man is formed and lives and dies again, and all things whatever have their life and movement; fire burns, water cools, fountains spring forth, rivers flow, seasons and hours come round, rains descend, clouds are filled, hail is formed, snow and ice congeal, birds fly, creeping things

¹⁰⁰ See Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 7.5.

¹⁰¹ Lactantius, *On the Workmanship of God* 3. This passage deserves a fuller quotation: "[Some] complain that man is born in a more feeble and frail condition than that in which the other animals are born. . . . [But] when I consider the condition of things, I understand that nothing ought to have been otherwise than it is—not to say could have been otherwise, for God is able to do all things: but it must be, that that most provident majesty made that which was better and more right."

¹⁰² Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 41 (NPNF).

go along, water-animals swim, the sea is navigated, the earth is sown and grows crops in due season, plants grow, and some are young, some ripening, others in their growth become old and decay, and while some things are vanishing others are being engendered and are coming to light. But all these things, and more, which for their number we cannot mention, the worker of wonders and marvels, the Word of God, giving light and life, moves and orders by His own nod, making the universe one.¹⁰³

In this remarkably wide-ranging litany, Athanasius explicitly included death and decay as part of God's original plan. Hence he seems to have allowed that animal death occurred alongside Paradise: for, if Adam and Eve had sinned, they were to come under "the corruption of death *according to nature*, and [to] no longer live in paradise, but thereafter dying outside of it, would remain in death and in corruption."¹⁰⁴

Such a claim corresponds with Athanasius's insistence that man, and only man, was changed by the Fall. After all, why did Christ not appear as something more noble than a man? Because

*nothing in creation had gone astray in its notions of God, save the human being only. Why, neither sun nor moon nor heaven nor stars nor water nor air altered their course; but knowing their Creator and King, the Word, they remained as they were made. But human beings alone, having rejected the good, henceforth . . . ascribed the honor due to God, and the knowledge of him, to demons and human beings fabricated in stone.*¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, Athanasius held that the production of thorns in Genesis 3:18 should be understood spiritually, for, indeed, it had already been reversed through Christ.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, lower creation's "bondage" (Romans

¹⁰³ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 44.

¹⁰⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 3.4 (cited in *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr [Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011], 52; emphasis added). Earlier in the same paragraph, Athanasius wrote that, "of all things upon the earth [God] had mercy upon the human race, and seeing that by the principle of its own coming into being it would not be able to endure eternally, he granted them a further gift, creating human beings not simply like all the irrational animals upon the earth but making them according to his own image." It would have been strange for him to think that man had once been impermanent, and yet that the animals had not.

¹⁰⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 43.3 (p. 95; emphasis added).

¹⁰⁶ Athanasius, *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27* 2 (NPNF): "Since then all things

8:22) is merely its distinctiveness from the Father.¹⁰⁷ In summary, for Athanasius, all creation “points to God as its Maker and Artificer . . . by *the unbroken law* of [its] obedience to Him.”¹⁰⁸

Basil of Caesarea († 379), like Athanasius, was eager to acknowledge the goodness of nature. In his famous series of Lenten homilies on the six days of creation, the *Hexameron*, he wrote: “I want creation to penetrate you with so much admiration that everywhere, wherever you may be, the least plant may bring to you the clear remembrance of the Creator.”¹⁰⁹ Basil taught that “nature, receiving the impulse of this first command,” would remain obedient “without interruption . . . until the consummation of all things.”¹¹⁰ Did Basil then admit the existence of prelapsarian pain and death? He did, though he refused to call pain and death “evil.” “Recognize that evil, rightly so called,” he explained, “has no other origin than our voluntary falls. . . . Sickness, poverty, obscurity, death, finally all human afflictions, *ought not to be ranked as evils*. . . . [And] among these afflictions, some are the effect of nature.”¹¹¹ Therefore, in Basil’s theodicy, God could not be faulted for making poisonous plants, even *prelapsarian* poisonous plants:

[God said,] “Let the earth bring forth grass;” and instantly, with useful plants, appear noxious plants; with corn, hemlock; with the other nutritious plants, hellebore, monkshood, mandrake and the juice of the poppy. What then? Shall we show no gratitude for so many beneficial gifts, and reproach the Creator for those which may be harmful to our life? And shall we not reflect that not all has been created in view of the wants of our bellies? . . . [In] creation, nothing exists without a reason [and] all this was before the sin which condemned us.¹¹²

‘were delivered’ to Him, and He is made Man, straightway all things were set right and perfected. Earth receives blessing instead of a curse.”

¹⁰⁷ See Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.64 (NPNF): “Creation is all in bondage, [simply] since it is external to the Oneness of the Father, and, whereas it once was not [in existence], [it] was brought to be.” Therefore, Athanasius argued, our Savior could never have been a non-human creature, not because such creatures are sinful, but “since every creature is liable to change” (Athanasius, Letter 61, no. 3 [NPNF]).

¹⁰⁸ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 27.3–4 (NPNF; emphasis added).

¹⁰⁹ Basil, *Hexameron* 5.2 (NPNF).

¹¹⁰ Basil, *Hexameron* 5.10. He makes this claim with respect to the fruit-bearing trees.

¹¹¹ Basil, *Hexameron* 2.5 (emphasis added).

¹¹² Basil, *Hexameron* 5.4–5.

Basil likewise seemed to grant the existence of prelapsarian animal death and carnivorousness.¹¹³ But even then, according to Basil, there could be nothing evil in nature, simply because lower creation was not “endowed with the power of choice.”¹¹⁴

The other Cappadocian Fathers shared Basil’s opinions on lower creation, and were only slightly less preoccupied by the subject. In a eulogy of the late Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus († 390) praised the *Hexameron*, saying: “Whenever I handle [it] I am brought into the presence of the Creator, and understand the words of creation, and admire the Creator more than before.”¹¹⁵ Although Gregory did not produce a *Hexameron* of his own, his preaching was often punctuated by protracted ecological encomiums.¹¹⁶ On one particular occasion, his florid excursus on the “luxuriant gifts” of lower creation exceeded three thousand words.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere he explains, “All creation sings the glory of God in wordless strain, for it is through me that God is thanked for all his works.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, admiration for creation’s parts typically led Gregory to admiration of the whole:

[We have] an admirable creation indeed, when we look at the fair form of every part, but yet [it is even] *more worthy of admiration when we consider the harmony and the unison of the whole*, and how each part fits in with every other, in fair order, and all with the whole, tending to the perfect completion of the world as a Unit.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ See Basil, *Hexameron* 9.2 (NPNF): “Nature, once put in motion by the Divine command, traverses creation with an equal step, through birth and death, and keeps up the succession of kinds through resemblance, to the last. Nature always makes a horse succeed to a horse, a lion to a lion, an eagle to an eagle, and preserving each animal by these uninterrupted successions she transmits it to the end of all things. . . . [An animal’s] nature, as though it had been just constituted, follows the course of ages, for ever young.” Then later, “Bears, lions, tigers, all animals of this sort, have short necks buried in their shoulders; it is because they do not live upon grass and have no need to bend down to the earth; they are carnivorous and eat the animals upon whom they prey.”

¹¹⁴ Basil, *Hexameron* 6.7.

¹¹⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 43, no. 67 (unless otherwise noted, all orations by Gregory of Nazianzus are cited from NPNF).

¹¹⁶ E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 6, nos. 14–16 and Oration 44, nos. 10–12.

¹¹⁷ E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 28, nos. 23–30, here at no. 27.

¹¹⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 44, no. 11 (FC). He continues: “In this way their hymn becomes our own, since it is from them that I take my song. Now the whole of the animal kingdom is smiling and all our senses are at feast.”

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 38, no. 10 (emphasis added). In the same oration, Gregory refers to the “immortal plants” of Eden (no. 12), but this should be understood in light of his spiritualized model of paradise. He reckons that the aforemen-

In other words, the aesthetic summit of creation is not located in a particular species, but in creation's wholesale "harmony [and] unity," or its "stability and progress."¹²⁰ For Gregory, the existence of God is to be inferred from the beautiful organization of "such a great and wonderful world."¹²¹ In 373, however, after the citizens of Nazianzus had suffered a trio of natural disasters—a cattle plague, a drought, and a ruinous hailstorm—Gregory's congregation questioned whether "creation, once ordered for the enjoyment of men, [had] changed?"¹²² Gregory, however, refused to attribute the recent calamities to a defect of lower creation. Rather, he interpreted the events as a "loving-kindness and gentle reproof, and the first elements of a scourge to train our tender years," a scourge sent by God on account of the peoples' sins.¹²³ In fact, according to Gregory, God employs natural disasters "*in the excess of His goodness*" in order to awaken man to his impending judgment, the "final scourge."¹²⁴ Nature, meanwhile, remains obedient to God, despite its unseemly elements.¹²⁵ Like Basil, therefore, Gregory of Nazianzus probably would have accepted animal death before the Fall: "This world of ours . . . was established as mortal for mortal beings."¹²⁶ Indeed, for Gregory, animal behaviors (let alone seasons, celestial bodies, tides, and floods) are "guided and directed in accordance with the first causes of harmony"—and "what else could they ever be seen to be but proclamations of love and concord?"¹²⁷

Gregory of Nyssa († ca. 395), Basil's brother, was also impressed by

tioned plants were "Divine Conceptions" and that the Tree of Knowledge was "Contemplation."

¹²⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 28, no. 6.

¹²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Arcane Poems* 5 (*Poemata Arcana*, trans. D. A. Sykes [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997], 23). See also Oration 28, no. 6.

¹²² Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 16, no. 5.

¹²³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 16, no. 6, and Oration 16, no. 14.

¹²⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 16, no. 6 (emphasis added).

¹²⁵ See Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 16, no. 12: "We acknowledge Your goodness, though we are without understanding: we have been scourged for but few of our faults. You are terrible, and who will resist You? The mountains will tremble before You, and who will strive against the might of Your arm? If Thou shut the heaven, who will open it? And if Thou let loose Your torrents, who will restrain them?" (punctuation adjusted). In another oration, Gregory confirmed this teaching: the universe remains obedient even when God "disturbs a measure of the harmony in order to terrify and punish sinners" (Oration 6, no. 16).

¹²⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Arcane Poems* 4 (p. 21). In the succeeding poem, Gregory says similarly, again without mention of the fall: "To the lower world he has assigned a life of change which involves many varying forms" (*Arcane Poems* 5 [p. 25]).

¹²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 6, no. 15.

the *Hexameron*.¹²⁸ Unlike Gregory of Nazianzus, however, Gregory of Nyssa supplemented his brother's work with an entire treatise dedicated to lower creation.¹²⁹ In his *Apology on the Hexameron*, written after Basil's death, Gregory of Nyssa reasserted the view that the inherent beauty of nature was not always outwardly perceptible. For "neither the centipede, nor the toad, nor those things that spawn from rotting matter are particularly beautiful animals."¹³⁰ But Basil's answer to the problem of natural evil—"nothing exists without a reason"—failed to satisfy his brother. Rather than take recourse to Gregory of Nazianzus's holism, Gregory of Nyssa claimed all creation to be good in all its parts, simply because "each thing in and of itself has a perfect nature [*naturam perfectam*]."¹³¹ Unlike fallen man, God fully appreciates each species' perfection—that is, the problem of natural evil is a problem of perspective. Consequently, Gregory did not need to differentiate between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian condition of nature. In fact, according to Gregory's *On the Making of Man*, prelapsarian animals must have always possessed their unsavory qualities, for those qualities, when imported into a rational being, became the basis of sin.¹³² In a similar way, Gregory elsewhere held death to be a limitation integral to prelapsarian animal life, seeing as this limitation had

¹²⁸ In the introduction of his *On the Making of Man*, Gregory of Nyssa praised his brother's theology of creation as follows: "[Basil] alone has worthily considered the creation of God . . . who by his own speculation made the sublime ordering of the universe generally intelligible, making the world as established by God in the true Wisdom known to those who by means of his understanding are led to such contemplation" (*NPNF*). Then he generously added, "but we, who fall short even of worthily admiring him [Basil], yet intend to add to the great writer's speculations that which is lacking in them."

¹²⁹ The *Apology on the Hexameron* is often regarded as Gregory's attempt to address the philosophical shortcomings of his brother's *Hexameron*. However, Doru Costache contends that Gregory's *Apology* is firstly an independent study in cosmology, intended to show Christianity's compatibility with contemporary science (Doru Costache, "Approaching *An Apology for the Hexameron*: Its Aims, Method and Discourse," *Phronema* 27, no. 2 [2012]: 53–81). In particular, Gregory expatiated on the theory of water cycles at such length that one wry commentator proposed that the second half of the treatise be entitled, "On Fire, Light, and Especially Water" (58).

¹³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Apology on the Hexameron* (translation mine from *PG*, 44:91b).

¹³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Apology on the Hexameron*, cited in Robert Louis Wilken, "The Beauty of Centipedes and Toads," in *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Cultivating a Contemporary Theology of Creation*, ed. David Vincent Meconi (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 17–26, at 24.

¹³² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 18.1–4.

been extended to man on account of Adam's sin.¹³³ Even so, from God's perspective, whatever spawns on earth fulfills the "perfection of beauty with respect to created things."¹³⁴ Furthermore, for Gregory, the goodness of creation was originally intended to be apparent to man as well: God prepared the world and "the wonders therein" specifically for man, that "by the beauty and majesty of the things he saw [he] might trace out that power of the Maker which is beyond speech and language."¹³⁵

By way of Ambrose of Milan († 397), the Cappadocian view of lower creation was enthusiastically carried to the West. Heavily influenced by Basil's *Hexameron*, Ambrose granted prelapsarian existence to plagues of locusts,¹³⁶ poisonous plants,¹³⁷ and animal brutality.¹³⁸ For Ambrose, every creature, however savage it may be, has a God-given purpose: "nothing

¹³³ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism* 8 (NPNF): "[God] invested man subsequently with that capacity of dying which had been the special attribute of the brute creation. Not that it was to last forever; for a coat is something external put on us, lending itself to the body for a time, but not indigenous to its nature. This liability to death, then, taken from the brute creation, was, provisionally, made to envelope the nature created for immortality." As another example, consider Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 8.3 (NPNF): "Before the animals there was made their food, and before man [there was made] that which was to minister to human life."

¹³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Apology on the Hexameron* (cited in Wilken, "Beauty of Centipedes and Toads," 24).

¹³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 2.1. This is an important theme of Gregory's *Apology* as well.

¹³⁶ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 5.83–84 (FC): "Divine grace has penetrated even into the life of a locust. . . . The locust as minister of divine vengeance inflicts punishment for an offense against heaven."

¹³⁷ See Ambrose, *Hexameron* 3.38–39: "But some perhaps may say: how do you account for the fact that deadly poisonous plants grow along with those that are of use, for example, there is found along with wheat the poisonous hemlock, a plant discoverable among those that support life. Unless you are on your guard against it, this plant can injure your health . . . But would you find fault with the earth because not all men are good? . . . Some people act as if everything has to be created for our gourmandizing or as if there was just a trifling amount left by the kindness of God to minister to our appetites. . . . Each and every thing which is produced from the earth has its own reason for existence, which, as far as it can, fulfills the general plan of creation. . . . There is nothing without a purpose; there is nothing superfluous in what germinates from the earth."

¹³⁸ See Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.30: "The Lord formed some beasts, such as lions, tigers, and bears, with shorter necks, whereas other animals, such as elephants and camels, were created with longer necks. Do we not find clear reason for this in the fact that animals which are carnivorous do not need long necks?"

is created superfluous.”¹³⁹ Furthermore, echoing Basil, Ambrose believed that the smallest part of every creature exists to manifest God’s “admirable design,” even down to the talons of flesh-eating birds.¹⁴⁰ In fact, a clearer window into divine wisdom “is the testimony given by nature than is the proof presented by doctrine.”¹⁴¹ In a remarkable passage from Ambrose’s own *Hexameron*, he confronts Basil’s opponents directly:

I am not unaware of the fact that certain men treat of the race of beasts and cattle and crawling creatures as symbolical of the heinousness of sin, the stupidity of sinners, and the wickedness of their designs. I adhere, however, to the belief that each and every species is uncompounded by nature [*simplices naturas*].¹⁴²

Apparently Irenaeus’s theory of a corrupted creation was present in Ambrose’s church. But Ambrose rejected Irenaeus’s opinion in favor of Gregory of Nyssa’s: lower creation is, by nature, *simplices*, perhaps better translated “pure.”

To maintain this position, however, Ambrose needed to explain what was meant by Romans 8:19–22 and Genesis 3:17–18. His interpretation of the former passage plays itself out in several letters composed to a fellow priest, Horontianus. While the “futility” of rational creatures could be ascribed to sin, Ambrose had to explain the source of lower creation’s futility in some other manner. Perhaps drawing from Ambrosiaster’s contemporaneous commentary on Romans,¹⁴³ Ambrose’s solution was to identify lower creation’s futility with its transitoriness. His majestic defense of this position deserves to be reproduced at length:

Consider that the sun, the moon, and the stars, the lights of the sky which, though they shine with brilliant splendor, are yet creatures, and, whether they rise or fall in their daily performance of duty, they serve the will of the eternal Creator, bringing forth the beauty with which they are clothed and shining by day and by night. How often is the sun covered by clouds or taken from the gaze of the earth when the ray of its light is dispelled in the sky or an eclipse occurs The stars, which are engaged in service to this world’s advantage,

¹³⁹ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.35.

¹⁴⁰ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 5.74.

¹⁴¹ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.21.

¹⁴² Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.4.

¹⁴³ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans* 8.22.

disappear when they are covered by clouds, not willingly, surely, but in hope, because they hope for gratitude for their labor from Him who made them subject. Thus, they persevere for His sake, that is, for His will. It is not strange that they persevere with patience, since they know that their Lord and the Creator of all that is in heaven or on earth has taken upon Himself the frailty of our body, the slavery of our state. Why should they not persevere patiently in the servitude of their corruption when the Lord of all humbled Himself to death for the whole world, and took the form of a servant, and was made the sin of the world and a curse for our sakes? . . . To conclude, the sun, great as it is and such as it is, and the moon, which the shades of night do not cover, and the stars, which adorn the sky, *all now endure the slavery of corruption because every body is a corruptible thing*. Indeed, even the skies will perish and heaven and earth will pass. At length the sun and the moon and the other lights of the stars will rest in the glory of the sons of God, since God will be all in all, and will be in you and in us by His plenitude and mercy.¹⁴⁴

Hence lower creation, though perfectly good as it exists now, is destined for something even better: permanence and unity.¹⁴⁵ Lower creation is enslaved to corruption, not as a punishment, but by the very fact of its materiality. But lest Horontianus believe anything else, Ambrose sent a follow-up letter to “fulfill” his earlier answer.¹⁴⁶ Here, Ambrose conjectured that, in Romans 8, Paul was not in fact referring to *lower* creation, for “why should that be set free which is unacquainted with and free from subjection to vanity and from slavery to corruption?”¹⁴⁷ As Ambrose explained, if lower creation indeed groans, perhaps it does so out of sympathy for the human condition, rather than on account of its own experience of corruptibility.¹⁴⁸ Ambrose admitted that this exegesis was speculative (and by doing so further revealed his allegiance to the unfallen view), and hence he

¹⁴⁴ Ambrose, Letter 51 (34) (*FC*; emphasis added; all further letters of Ambrose will be from *FC*).

¹⁴⁵ See Ambrose, Letter 8 (18). In fact, Ambrose held that the original order of creation could be advanced even in this age: in the beginning, “the earth did not know how to be worked for her fruits. Later, when the careful farmer began to rule the fields and to clothe the shapeless soil with vines, she put away her wild dispositions, being softened by domestic cultivation.”

¹⁴⁶ Ambrose, Letter 52 (35).

¹⁴⁷ Ambrose, Letter 52 (35).

¹⁴⁸ See Ambrose, Letter 52 (35): “Let [each creature] groan, not over his own labor but over ours.”

did not dismiss his former approach, which he in fact employed elsewhere to great effect.¹⁴⁹

Regardless of whether Ambrose preferred one interpretation of Romans 8:19–22 over the other, the bishop of Milan refused to locate the origin of creation’s “groaning” or “futility” at the reckoning of Adam. Contrary to John Chrysostom, Ambrose insisted that Genesis 3:17–18 was to be understood spiritually:

The earth is not cursed in itself but is “cursed in your work.” This is said in reference to the soul. The earth is cursed if your works are earthly, that is, of this world. *It is not cursed as a whole.* It will merely bring forth thorns and thistles, if it is not diligently cared for by the labor of human hands. . . . We must labor and sweat so as to chastise the body and bring it into subjection and sow the seeds of spiritual things.¹⁵⁰

In other words, for Ambrose, the repercussions recounted in Genesis 3:17–18 pertain strictly to mankind. Accordingly, before the Fall, wild beasts were no less savage than they are now,¹⁵¹ but only following the Fall did they become “scourges for those whose pronounced character is immature and infantile.”¹⁵² Indeed, potentially harmful creatures were created in anticipation of man’s Fall: “Serpents [and] all other kinds of poisons, either animal or vegetable, . . . have come into being for our correction.”¹⁵³ Lactantius would have agreed to this latter point. But Ambrose had gone much further: “Would you find fault with the earth because not all men are good?”¹⁵⁴ Creation seems fallen only to fallen man. And although it may

¹⁴⁹ To explain why man, first above all creatures, was created last of all, Ambrose argued that the transitoriness of the world was a most suitable environment for the unfolding of man’s supreme vocation: “What is the world but an arena full of fighting?... Like an athlete, then, [man] comes last into the arena; he lifts his eyes to heaven; he sees that the heavenly creation was made subject to vanity not by its own will, but by reason of Him who made it subject in hope. He sees that all creation groaned awaiting redemption. He sees that his whole task awaits him” (Letter 49 [43]).

¹⁵⁰ Ambrose, *On Paradise* 77 (FC; emphasis added).

¹⁵¹ See Ambrose, *On Paradise* 49 (FC): “How can we explain [that man named all the animals] other than by saying that the untamed beasts and the birds of the air were brought [near] to man by divine power?”

¹⁵² Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.38.

¹⁵³ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 6.38. Furthermore, “paradise cannot be considered earthly, nor planted in any particular spot” (Letter 25 [47]).

¹⁵⁴ Ambrose, *Hexameron* 3.38.

seem fallen (either according to its appearance, as Gregory of Nyssa taught, or also by lived experience of its “scourges”), in reality, lower creation is *simplices naturas*—pure by nature.

Augustine

The position which was framed by Athanasius, expanded by the Cappadocians, and defended by Ambrose, finally reached its apogee under Augustine († 430). Augustine’s conversion to Christianity was provoked, in part, by his recognition of nature’s goodness, its impermanence notwithstanding.¹⁵⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that his writings consistently support the unvitiated view of lower creation. Here we shall attempt to distinguish three aspects of Augustine’s protology: the impossibility of “natural evils,” the continuity between prelapsarian and postlapsarian biology, and the unqualified praiseworthiness of lower creation.

Ever since his conversion from Manichaeism, Augustine labored continuously to exculpate God from every imputation of evil-doing: since God’s creation was “good,” evil could not be “natural.”¹⁵⁶ Thus “natural evil” is simply a figment of humanity’s limited perspective.¹⁵⁷ Natural disasters, for example—“fire, frost, [attacks from] wild beasts, and so forth”—are “excellent in their own natures” and “beautifully adjusted to the rest of creation [i.e., lower creation].”¹⁵⁸ In other words, though natural disasters are evil to man, they are good in themselves, and man would not have experienced them “had our nature continued upright as it was created.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10–17.

¹⁵⁶ See, e.g., Augustine, *On the Nature of Good* 1 (NPNF): “every nature, so far as it is nature, is good.” For a fuller account of Augustine on natural evil, see Donald X. Burt, *Augustine’s World: An Introduction to His Speculative Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 18–25.

¹⁵⁷ See, e.g.: Augustine, *Confessions* 7.19 and *City of God* 11.22. See also, Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Norwich, England: Canterbury, 2002), 210–211.

¹⁵⁸ Augustine, *City of God* 11.22 (NPNF). Augustine continues: “Thus divine providence admonishes us not foolishly to vituperate things, but to investigate their utility with care; and, where our mental capacity or infirmity is at fault, to believe that there is a utility, though hidden, as we have experienced that there were other things which we all but failed to discover. For this concealment of the use of things is itself either an exercise of our humility or a leveling of our pride; for no nature at all is evil, and this is a name for nothing but the want of good. But from things earthly to things heavenly, from the visible to the invisible, there are some things better than others; and for this purpose are they unequal, in order that they might all exist.”

¹⁵⁹ Augustine, *City of God* 22.23; cf. 22.22 and 22.24.

But since the destructive forces of nature obediently enact God's will, they are also good in their *effects*, whether they elicit man's conversion or, in the case of lethal phenomena, they hasten his judgment.¹⁶⁰ Augustine argued similarly with respect to irritating creatures, such as flies.¹⁶¹ But what about lower creation itself? Is it not evil that innocent creatures should themselves suffer and die? For Augustine, the death of animals and plants was, at worst, superficially evil: "It is ridiculous to condemn the faults of beasts and trees, . . . for these creatures received, at their Creator's will, an existence fitting them, by passing away and giving place to others."¹⁶² In fact, animal death and decay is proper to the "peace of the universe."¹⁶³ In

¹⁶⁰ Augustine's magnificent defense of this point deserves an extended citation: "Where God wills, there the fire spreads, there the cloud hurries, whether it carry in it rain, or snow, or hail. And why does the lightning sometimes strike the mountain, yet strikes not the robber? . . . Perhaps He yet seeks the robber's conversion, and therefore is the mountain which fears not smitten, that the man who fears may be changed. He also sometimes, when maintaining discipline, smites the ground to terrify a child. Sometimes too He smites a man, whom He will. But you say to me, 'Behold, He smites the more innocent, and passes over the more guilty.' Wonder not; *death, whenever it comes, is good to the good man*. And whence do you know what punishment is reserved in secret for that more guilty man, if he be unwilling to be converted? Would not they rather be scorched by lightning? . . . The needful thing is, that you be guileless. Why so? Is it an evil thing to die by shipwreck, and a good thing to die by fever? Whether he die in this way or in that, ask what sort of man he is who dies; ask where he will go after death, not how he is to depart from life. . . . Whatever then happens here contrary to our wish, you will know that it happens not, save by the will of God, by His providence, by His ordering, by His nod, by His laws: and if we understand not why anything is done, let us grant to His providence that it is not done without reason: so shall we not be blasphemers. For when we begin to argue concerning the works of God, 'why is this?' 'why is that?' and, 'He ought not to have done this,' 'He did this ill'; where is the praise of God? You have lost your 'Alleluia.' . . . In the shop [a foolish man] dares not to find fault with the smith, yet in the universe he dares to find fault with God. Therefore just as 'fire, hail, snow, ice, wind of storms, which do His word,' so all things in nature, which seem to foolish persons to be made at random, simply "do His word," because they are not made [except] by His command" (Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 148.9 [NPNF]; emphasis added and archaisms emended).

¹⁶¹ "On account of our pride, God appointed that tiny and contemptible creature [i.e., the fly] to torment us" (Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 1.14–15 [NPNF]).

¹⁶² Augustine, *City of God* 12.4. In the same paragraph, Augustine writes: "If we attentively consider even these faults of earthly things, which are neither voluntary nor penal, they seem to illustrate the excellence of the natures themselves, which are all originated and created by God."

¹⁶³ Augustine, *City of God* 19.12. Augustine continued: "Although the flesh of dead animals be eaten by others, no matter where it be carried, nor what it be brought

The City of God, Augustine explained himself as follows:

*All natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good. And when they are in the places assigned to them by the order of their nature, they preserve such being as they have received. . . . Though the corruption of transitory and perishable things brings them to utter destruction, it does not prevent their producing that which was designed to be their result. And this being so, God . . . is not to be found fault with on account of the creature's faults, but is to be praised in view of the natures He has made.*¹⁶⁴

In other words, impermanent beings fulfill God's will by being impermanent, and the "problem of [animal] pain" is not a problem at all.¹⁶⁵ As for genuine evils, Augustine held that their origin could only be the will.¹⁶⁶ The unsavory behavior of animals, for example, is not evil, "because in them it does not war against reason, which they lack."¹⁶⁷ Rational wills can indeed be evil, but since "no substance is evil," Adam could not have been expelled

into contact with, nor what it be converted and changed into, it still is ruled by the same laws which pervade all things for the conservation of every mortal race, and which bring things that fit one another into harmony."

¹⁶⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 12.4 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁵ Augustine, *Free Choice of the Will* 3.23.69 (FC): "These carping critics, who neglect to study such questions carefully but go about airing their opinions garrulously, usually try to shake the faith of those less instructed on the problem of pain and hardships also suffered by animals. What evil have even these deserved, they ask, or what can they hope for in the way of good that they should suffer such distress? They speak or think this way because they take a very unfair view of things and, incapable as they are of understanding the nature and excellence of the highest good, they would have everything conform to their own idea of what it is. . . . Hence, without any regard for order, they make the unreasonable demand that animals should suffer neither death nor corruption in their bodies, as if they were not mortal, though they are on the lowest plane, or as if they were evil, just because the heavenly bodies are better."

¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Augustine denied that "natural evils," as opposed to moral evils, could be attributed to the will of fallen angels: "If the demons have any power in [physical] matters, they have only that power which the secret decree of the Almighty allots to them" (*City of God* 2.23; cf. 7.35 and 10.21). "Earthquakes," for example, do not take place "without the will of God" (Augustine, *On the Trinity* 3.2.7 [NPNF]). Cf. Augustine, Sermon 80, no. 8. See also G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 106.

¹⁶⁷ Augustine, *Against Julian* 4.5.35 (FC).

from Paradise into a cursed world.¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, Augustine refused to interpret Genesis 3:17–18 as proof of lower creation's vitiation. Sinfulness was the source of man's toil (not the earth),¹⁶⁹ hence the ostensible sentencing of the earth was actually just a sentencing of man.¹⁷⁰ Thus the curse upon the earth (i.e., Adam's Fall) disturbed man's *relationship* to nature, not nature itself.¹⁷¹ But even the discord thereby introduced between lower creation and man somehow contributed to the "measured beauty and arrangement of all things."¹⁷²

But rather than claim, with John Chrysostom, that lower creation had been affected by the Fall, yet was no worse for it, Augustine denied that lower creation had changed *whatsoever*. This is the second keynote of Augustine's protology. Though man's relationship to nature was certainly frustrated by the Fall, it was only man who had changed: nature was unaffected, not only morally, but biologically. For instance, Augustine avoided a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:28 ("have dominion . . . over every living thing"), supposing instead that the wild beasts were flesh-eating before the Fall,¹⁷³ and yet only after the Fall did man find beasts harmful.¹⁷⁴ In fact,

¹⁶⁸ Augustine, *On True Religion* 20.38: "Man was expelled from paradise . . . [but he was] not expelled from substantial good to substantial evil, for no substance is evil; rather from eternal good to temporal good, from spiritual good to carnal good" (translation mine).

¹⁶⁹ In connection to Gen 3:17, Augustine writes, "we [should] not suppose that [the] tranquility and ineffable light of God brings forth from Itself the means of punishing sin" (*Expositions on the Psalms* 7.16).

¹⁷⁰ See Augustine, *On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants* 2.53 (NPNF): "The primeval man and woman heard these sentences pronounced by God, and [they] deserved them."

¹⁷¹ In his exegesis on the cursing of Cain, Augustine writes: "[The Scriptures say] not 'Cursed is the earth,' but, 'Cursed *are you* from the earth,' which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood" (Augustine, *Against Faustus* 12.11 [NPNF]; emphasis added).

¹⁷² Augustine, *The Magnitude of the Soul* 36.80 (FC). God "has judged [the soul] to be the most beautiful, so that it is the exemplar of all reality, and all reality is so arranged in a hierarchy that anyone who considers the totality of things may not be offended by the lack of conformity in any part, and that every punishment and every reward of the soul should contribute something corresponding to the measured beauty and arrangement of all things."

¹⁷³ Augustine, *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 1.31. However, in his *Retractions*, Augustine reopened the possibility that prelapsarian animals "could have been fed by men on the fruits of the earth" (*Retractions* 1.9.2 [FC]).

¹⁷⁴ Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.15.24. Here, Augustine did not reject the possibility that savage beasts were created after the fall, though he still preferred the contrary position.

Augustine held that the wild animals were probably no less brutish before the Fall than after.¹⁷⁵ He granted that animals experience pain in childbirth by nature (not by punishment), and he suggested that the same might be true of *human* labor pains.¹⁷⁶ Augustine even took it upon himself to address a specious objection to his stance—how could thorns and thistles, useless as they are, have been part of the original creation? He answered by locating the goodness of thorns in their beauty, rather than their utility:

Who is so foolish as to think a creature of God, especially one planted in Paradise, blameworthy; when indeed not even thorns and thistles, which the earth brought forth, according to the judiciary judgment of God, for wearing out the sinner in labor, should be blamed? For even such herbs have their measure and form and order, which whoever considers soberly will find praiseworthy; but they are evil to that nature which ought thus to be restrained as a recompense for sin.¹⁷⁷

In other words, thorns are not a hindrance to humanity per se, but only to *fallen* humanity. Elsewhere, Augustine is clearer: prior to the Fall, “these plants had a place on earth without afflicting man in any way.”¹⁷⁸ With the possible exception of the serpent, the animals also continued to “live their life in the nature that they received.”¹⁷⁹ In other words, for Augustine, lower creation had never departed from its blissful, primordial agenda.

¹⁷⁵ Augustine, *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 1.29.

¹⁷⁶ See Augustine, *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 2.29 (FC): “In animals the females bear offspring with pain, and this is in their case the condition of mortality rather than the punishment of sin. Hence, it is possible that this be the condition of mortal bodies even in the females of humans.”

¹⁷⁷ Augustine, *On the Nature of the Good* 36 (NPNF).

¹⁷⁸ Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.18.28 (ACW). Augustine goes on to explain: “The earth in producing [thistles] before the fall did not do so to afflict man but rather to provide proper nourishment for certain animals, since some animals find soft dry thistles a pleasant and nourishing food. . . . They were in the same place before and after [the fall]: formerly not for man, afterwards for man.” However, Augustine’s earliest interpretation of Gen 3:18 seemed to be that, before the fall, plants harmful to man did not yet exist (Augustine, *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 1.19; although, in the same work [2.30], he also interprets the verse allegorically). See Karla Pollmann, “Human Sin and Natural Environment: Augustine’s Two Positions on Genesis 3:18,” *Augustinian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 69–85.

¹⁷⁹ Augustine *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 2.17.26. Aquinas invokes this passage in *ST* II–II, q. 165, a. 2.

The third mark of Augustine's eco-theology is the categorical ascription of beauty to lower creation. His compliment of thorns and thistles just mentioned is but one instance of his innumerable environmental panegyrics, which often rivaled his predecessors' exuberance.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps the most celebrated example comes from his Easter sermon on Romans 1:18–21:

How did [the pagan] philosophers know God? *From the things which He had made!* Question the beautiful earth; question the beautiful sea; question the beautiful air, diffused and spread abroad; question the beautiful heavens; question the arrangement of the constellations; . . . question the living creatures that move about in the water, those that remain on land, and those that flit through the air; . . . question all these things and all will answer: *Behold and see! We are beautiful.* Their beauty is their confession.¹⁸¹

All creation is beautiful, says Augustine, and insofar as each creature is praiseworthy, it in turn praises God. Indeed, the "whole creation ceases not, nor is it silent in Your praises—neither the spirit of man, . . . nor animal nor corporeal things."¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ E.g., Augustine, *City of God* 22.24: "How can I tell of the rest of creation, with all its beauty and utility, which the divine goodness has given to man to please his eye and serve his purposes, condemned though he is, and hurled into these labors and miseries? Shall I speak of the manifold and various loveliness of sky, and earth, and sea; of the plentiful supply and wonderful qualities of the light; of sun, moon, and stars; of the shade of trees; of the colors and perfume of flowers; of the multitude of birds, all differing in plumage and in song; of the variety of animals, of which the smallest in size are often the most wonderful—the works of ants and bees astonishing us more than the huge bodies of whales? Shall I speak of the sea, which itself is so grand a spectacle, when it arrays itself as it were in vestures of various colors, now running through every shade of green, and again becoming purple or blue? Is it not delightful to look at it in storm, and experience the soothing complacency which it inspires, by suggesting that we ourselves are not tossed and shipwrecked?"

¹⁸¹ Augustine, Sermon 241, no. 2 (*FC*; emphasis added and punctuated adjusted; I have substituted the word "confession" for the translator's term "acknowledgement" [*confessio*]).

¹⁸² Augustine, *Confessions* 5.1 (*NPNF*). Elsewhere, in more detail, Augustine explains: "Never have things on earth ceased to praise God. But it is manifest that there are certain things which have breath to praise God in that disposition wherein God pleases them. . . . And there are other things which have not breath of life and understanding to praise God, but yet, because they also are good, and duly arranged in their proper order, and form part of the beauty of the universe, which God created, though they themselves with voice and heart praise not God, yet when they are considered by those who have understanding, God is praised in

With Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine held that creation's beauty was even further magnified when considered as a whole.¹⁸³ But Augustine was not blind to creation's unseemly features. Nevertheless, he maintained that all "things are beautiful in their kind, though on account of our sins many things seem to us disadvantageous."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, whatever might *seem* disadvantageous—whether to us or to the animals themselves—ultimately discloses God's goodness:

If you reflect upon this matter reverently and carefully, you will see that all the beauty and movement of those creatures which come to man's attention speak words of instruction for us. . . . Among creatures that experience the anguish of pain or the delight of pleasure, there is none whose aversion to pain and desire for pleasure does not thereby attest to the fact that it shuns disintegration and seeks unity. . . . Accordingly, it is now evident that *whether they cause or suffer harm, whether they give or receive pleasure, they all suggest and proclaim the unity of the Creator.*¹⁸⁵

Augustine was aware, however, that one could confute his position on the basis of Romans 8:22, where Paul claimed that "every creature," far from praising its Creator, was "groaning in travail." But Augustine met this objection head-on: "We should not think that [Rom 8:22] implies a sorrowing and sighing of trees and vegetables and stones and other suchlike creatures. . . . Rather, and without any false interpretation, *we take 'every creature' to mean humanity itself.*"¹⁸⁶ Irrespective of its exegetical validity, Augustine's stance here reveals his desire to protect lower creation's goodness against Manichean dualism.¹⁸⁷ At other times, however, Augustine

them" (Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 148.3).

¹⁸³ "Individually they are good, and altogether very good" (Augustine, *Confessions* 7.12).

¹⁸⁴ Augustine, *On Genesis, Against the Manichees* 1.26.

¹⁸⁵ Augustine, *Free Choice of the Will* 3.23.70 (emphasis added). In the previous paragraph, Augustine had answered the problem of animal pain as follows: "Except for pain in the animal, we would have no evidence of the intense desire for unity in the lower living things. Without such evidence, we would not be made sufficiently aware that all these have been constituted by the supreme, sublime, and unspeakable unity of their Creator."

¹⁸⁶ Augustine, *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans* 53 (cited in Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 217; emphasis added). The same approach is to be found in Augustine, *Eighty-three Diverse Questions* 67.5–6.

¹⁸⁷ For a detailed discussion of Augustine's reckoning of "every creature" in Rom 8,

adopted Ambrosiaster's approach, understanding creation's "futility" to be its mutability.¹⁸⁸ In any event, Augustine refused to imagine that lower creation was owed something more than a (perfectly good) temporal nature.¹⁸⁹ Each creature, simply by behaving "in the way suited to its kind," imitates Christ's adherence to the Father, and as such becomes a "perfect, complete creature."¹⁹⁰ Thus, "since every creature has a special beauty proper to its nature, . . . when a man ponders the matter well, these creatures are a cause of intense admiration and enthusiastic praise of their all-powerful Maker."¹⁹¹

In summary, by rejecting the possibility of natural evil, by supposing the prelapsarian biosphere to be exactly like our own, and by unconditionally attributing beauty and praiseworthiness to lower creation, Augustine cogently recapitulated the central elements of his predecessors' pro-creation *Weltanschauung*. But in addition to fortifying his precursors' positions, Augustine had effectively grounded the whole defense of lower creation's goodness, not in its utility or appearance, but in each creature's capacity to flourish according to its God-given nature. The crea-

see Mamerto Alfeche, "Groaning Creation in the Theology of Augustine," *Augustiniana* 34, no. 1 (1984): 5–52. Left wanting, however, is Alfeche's treatment of Augustine on Gen 3:17. See also Steven W. Tyra, "When Considering Creation, Simply Follow the Rule (of Faith): Patristic Exegesis of Romans 8:19–22 and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8, no. 2 (2014): 251–73, at 263–69. Tyra summarizes Augustine's motivations as follows: "Reading Rom 8, he heard in the 'groaning' and 'liberated' creation perilous echoes of the heretical universe in which he himself had once lived. Accordingly, he headed off potential Manichee appeals to the text simply by removing it from discussions of the cosmos altogether" (269).

¹⁸⁸ Augustine, Letter 55.20. Cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 143.11.

¹⁸⁹ E.g., Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 148.8: "He who made the Angel in heaven, the Same also made the worm upon earth: the Angel in heaven to dwell in heaven, the worm upon earth to abide on earth. He made not the Angel to creep in the mud, nor the worm to move in heaven. He has assigned dwellers to their different abodes; incorruption He assigned to incorruptible abodes, corruptible things to corruptible abodes."

¹⁹⁰ In full: whenever each creature "turns, everything in the way suited to its kind, to that which truly and always is, to the creator that is to say of its own being, that it really imitates the form of the Word which always and unchangingly adheres to the Father, and receives its own form, and becomes a perfect, complete [*perfecta*] creature" (Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1.4.9, trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2002], 171; cited in David Vincent Meconi, "Establishing an I–Thou Relationship between Creator and Creature," in Meconi, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*, 273–94, at 283).

¹⁹¹ Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.14.22 (ACW).

turely nature which Gregory of Nyssa had predicated with *perfectam* and Ambrose with *simplicem*, Augustine simply called “nature.” He insisted that “every nature, so far as it is nature, is good.”¹⁹² And he did so as if anticipating post-Darwinian skepticism, as in this passage, which serves as a valuable synopsis of Augustine’s tripart protology:

One might ask why brute beasts inflict injury on one another, for there is no sin in them for which this could be a punishment, and they [unlike man] cannot acquire any virtue by such a trial. The answer, of course, is that one animal is the nourishment of another. To wish that it were otherwise would not be reasonable. . . . Rightly considered, they are all praiseworthy, and all the changes that occur in them, even when one passes into another, are governed by a hidden plan that rules the beauty of the world *and regulates each according to its kind*.¹⁹³

Post-Augustinian Fathers

Before the close of the patristic age, at least two additional Church Fathers explicitly approved the unfallen view of lower creation. If there are others, I could not find them, but I think it likely that the views of these three alone adequately capture the spirit of the times.

Fulgentius of Ruspe († ca. 530), the anti-Arian North African bishop, is known for his commitment to Augustine’s theology. Nevertheless, his stance on the moral status of lower creation can be established in its own right. Like Augustine, Fulgentius did not consider animal mortality evil, but rather something which God preordained.¹⁹⁴ In fact, “the diversity of corporeal natures demonstrates that each one of them is . . . what it has received from the plan and working of the omnipotent, unchangeable, and all-wise Creator.”¹⁹⁵ Far from disobeying God, “animals accomplish their life and purpose in this world according to the incomprehensible will of the Creator, [and] render no account for their deeds because they are not rational.”¹⁹⁶ The bishop of Ruspe was once asked by an acquaintance,

¹⁹² Augustine, *On the Nature of Good* 1.

¹⁹³ Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.16.25 (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁴ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Peter on the Faith* 3.31 (FC). Cf. Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.53 (FC).

¹⁹⁵ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Peter on the Faith* 3.26.

¹⁹⁶ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Peter on the Faith* 3.42. In this connection, Fulgentius explicitly rejected the possibility of animal resurrection (3.41), a possibility which, at least in modern times, is frequently granted by those who hold the fallen view of lower creation (e.g., Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolu-*

named Scarila, whether God himself made “flies, fleas, scorpions, and bedbugs, [or whether] after the fall of the angel, the unworthy Devil, all these things were made by the Devil himself.”¹⁹⁷ To answer this question, which had apparently arisen at a dinner party, Fulgentius set out what is probably the longest patristic discussion of the Fall’s connection to natural evil.¹⁹⁸ Following Augustine,¹⁹⁹ Fulgentius began by explaining how vermin are included in the biblical creation accounts, despite that flies and scorpions are not named explicitly.²⁰⁰ Then, to uphold these creatures’ goodness, he turned to an argument from sublimity, which quickly devolved into an argument from justice. He is amusingly blunt:

What, I ask you, is so displeasing about scorpions that anyone should think that they are not made by God? For there is nothing in the body of a scorpion which does not suggest the praise of the Creator. First of all, that bodily structure of members, put together and arranged harmoniously, the symmetry and equality of the parts, then the soul giving life and feeling to the body; who would dispute that these are all good things? Without question, that power of poison, which is found to be harmful to human beings, is regarded as something to be dreaded in the body of the scorpion. [But] would that from it human beings might learn to pay attention to the punishment for transgression and cease [falsely] assigning the good works of God to the Devil.²⁰¹

Thus, for Fulgentius, God had wisely designed lower creation to be both a consolation and a scourge—and nevertheless intrinsically good—since God had foreknowledge of Adam’s sin.²⁰²

But this solution raised a new question: if fleas and scorpions were in

tion, and the Problem of Evil [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008]).

¹⁹⁷ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.24.

¹⁹⁸ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.24–56. The text of the English translation in *FC* is just shy of ten thousand words. Compare Gregory of Nazianzus’s three-thousand-word excursus at note 120 above.

¹⁹⁹ Augustine answered a similar question on the basis of John 1:3 (see note 161 above).

²⁰⁰ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.25–27.

²⁰¹ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.28 (punctuation adjusted).

²⁰² See Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.52: “[God] finished all these things on the sixth day in which nothing could be missing which he made afterwards. Because God, foreknowing . . . that human beings would sin, so, of all the things which he made, he salutarily prepared not only consolations but also scourges for him” (cf. 10.30).

themselves good creatures, why were they not harmful to humans before the Fall? Unfortunately, Fulgentius's answer, though prolix, was not entirely clear. He held that the Fall, rather than generating evil natures, induced a "dysfunction [*inconvenientia*] of good natures."²⁰³ This "dysfunction" was not adequately defined by Fulgentius, but it is probably best understood circumstantially, rather than biologically.²⁰⁴ After all, "every nature-*qua*-nature is good," he says.²⁰⁵ Thus it seems that nature's deleterious effects, though originally present *in potentia*, were somehow held at bay by Adam's rule—only Adam's *relationship* to creation was vitiated at the Fall.²⁰⁶ "Whenever we are harmed it is not nature that ought to be declared evil . . . [instead, nature is] found unpleasant to us because of our weakness."²⁰⁷ Though his explanation is wanting for details, Fulgentius was clearly at pains to deny any intimation of Manichean dualism: the Christian should "praise God the Creator in the maggot [just] as he praises him in the elephant."²⁰⁸

John of Damascus († 749), the great opponent of Byzantine iconoclasm and "the last of the Greek Fathers," was generally a follower of the Cappadocians' protology. John believed that "the very harmony of creation, its preservation and governing, teach us that there is a God who has put all this together and keeps it together, ever maintaining it and providing for it."²⁰⁹ "All created things" worship God,²¹⁰ he writes, and we ourselves "must thank God for all created things, and show Him perpetual worship,

²⁰³ See Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.29: "That a flea bother a person and a scorpion kill, this is the result, not of the creation of evil beings, but of the dysfunction of good natures, which followed from the justice of the judge."

²⁰⁴ See Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.55.

²⁰⁵ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.30 (emphasis added).

²⁰⁶ See, e.g., Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.54: all "things, born either from the waters or from the earth, were established when God created them at the very beginning, by the Creator who not only knew the nature of the human being which he made but also marvelously foreknew that the same human beings would sin. Nor did he make those things in such a way that before sin, the human being would either recognize them as harmful or fear them. So no touch of an earthly creature could harm him since, by divine gift, he had been set up as lord of all things. The transgression of the human being himself, not the work of the Creator, made these things harmful and ruinous for a human being." Cf. Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Peter on the Faith* 25.68.

²⁰⁷ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.47.

²⁰⁸ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *To Scarila* 10.53 (cf. 10.45).

²⁰⁹ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 1.3 (FC).

²¹⁰ "All created things worship Him, as servants their master" (John of Damascus, *On Divine Images*; cited in *St John Damascene on Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies [London, UK: Thomas Baker, 1898], 104).

as from Him and through Him all creation takes its being and subsists.”²¹¹ In light of the Incarnation, John even calls attention to the goodness which inheres in matter itself.²¹²

When it came to the problem of natural evil, John was particularly indebted to Basil’s notion of creation’s universal usefulness. John classified the animals by their utility, admitting that some were to become useful only after the fall:

At the Creator’s command there came forth every sort of animal: creeping things, and wild beasts, and cattle. *Everything was for the suitable use of man.* Of the animals, some were for food, such as deer, sheep, gazelles, and the like; some for work, such as camels, oxen, horses, asses, and the like; still others for diversion, such as monkeys and such birds as magpies, parrots, and the like. Of the plants and herbs, some were fruit-bearing and some edible, and some, such as the rose and the like, were fragrant and flowering and were given us for our enjoyment; and still others were given us for the curing of diseases. For there is no animal or plant in which the Creator has not put some virtue that is of use for the needs of man. He knew all things before they were made and He saw that man in his freedom would fall and be given over to corruption; *yet for man’s suitable use He made all the things that are in the sky and on the earth and in the water.*²¹³

In other words, there was no need for animals to change their nature at the fall—they were proleptically constituted for postlapsarian life.²¹⁴ But this raises a question: how was *prelapsarian* man supposed to find usefulness in tapeworms or mosquitoes? John does not address this difficulty directly, but he says enough for us to reconstruct two of his probably responses. In the first place, “Before the fall, all things were subject to the control of man, because God had made him ruler over all the things on the

²¹¹ John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* (p. 105).

²¹² See John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* 1.16: “I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation!” (*John of Damascus on the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980], 23; quoted in Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation*, 43).

²¹³ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10 (emphasis added).

²¹⁴ Elsewhere John clearly grants prelapsarian corruptibility: “It is impossible to find in creation any image which exactly portrays the manner of the Holy Trinity in Itself. For that which is created is also compounded, variable, changeable, circumscribed, having shape, and corruptible. . . . It is evident that all creation is subject to these several conditions and that it is of its own nature subject to corruption” (John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 1.8).

earth and in the water.”²¹⁵ Perhaps, then, since man had complete authority over the animals, he could have easily kept mosquitoes away. On the other hand, no irrational animals were even allowed within the bounds of the garden, “but only man.”²¹⁶ That is, prelapsarian man coexisted with natural evils simply because he remained in the garden, while the evils remained outside.

When Adam fell, however, John says that “the creation subject to him rose up against this ruler appointed by the Creator.”²¹⁷ Here we need to interpret John carefully, lest we on this basis accidentally assign him the vitiated view. While those holding the fallen view of lower creation say that creation itself was changed, John is saying that only *creation's relationship to man* had changed, and that, only because man himself had changed. After all, in John's view, the basis for creation's goodness remains just as it had before: “the usefulness of the wild beasts is not even now past, because by exciting fear they bring man to recognize the God who made them and to call upon Him for help.”²¹⁸

Admittedly, John is somewhat inconsistent on this point, for he cites two natural effects of the fall: inclement weather (“violent rains” and “wintry storms”²¹⁹) as well as the production of thorns (“thorns grew out of the earth, as the Lord had declared.”²²⁰). John grants the latter on the authority of Scripture, but then, as if to defend creation's goodness, he writes, “the thorn was joined to sweetness of the rose.”²²¹ John's attribution of inclement weather to the fall, having no Scriptural basis, is more perplexing. Two explanations present themselves. First, perhaps John judged that weather patterns were originally under Adam's rule, so that, when he fell, they returned to their natural state. Alternatively, we should note that John is here following an apocryphal homily of Basil.²²² In that homily, Pseudo-Basil does not say that the prelapsarian earth was free from inclement

²¹⁵ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10.

²¹⁶ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.11.

²¹⁷ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10 (emphasis added).

²¹⁸ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10. Elsewhere, John wrote “God provides for all creation, and through all creation He does good and instructs” (*On the Orthodox Faith* 2.29).

²¹⁹ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10.

²²⁰ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10.

²²¹ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10.

²²² “Paradise . . . was a spot where no tempest raged, where there was no confusion of seasons, no inclement hail, no desolating whirlwind . . . no wintry frost was known” (Pseudo-Basil, *Homily on Paradise*; cited in *The Fathers Not Papists: Or, Six Discourses by the Most Eloquent Fathers of the Church*, trans. Hugh Stuart Boyd [Sidmouth, UK: J. Harvey, 1834], 72.)

weather, but only Paradise was. So while John used “earth” instead of “Paradise,” he may have done so absentmindedly, unaware that it introduced a contradiction into his protology.

If we accept this argument, then we can confidently place John of Damascus on the side of Augustine. In sum, John seems to have held that the earth was in no way marked by the fall, except that it was “condemned to bring forth thorns and thistles *for us*.”²²³ After all, a highly positive view of lower creation was the cornerstone of John’s defense of iconography: “I do not adore creation more than the Creator,” he wrote, “but I adore the creature created as I am.”²²⁴

Conclusions

In summary, from the Church Fathers’ scattered references to the moral status of lower creation, two main schools of thought can be identified. The first, which we have called the Irenaeian view, held that lower creation was immediately marred by the Fall of man. The Fathers subscribing to this view included Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch, Origen, Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, and perhaps Jerome. Although these Fathers held diverse opinions as to the extent of nature’s degradation, they all shared Irenaeus’s underlying conviction: the present structure of lower creation is, because of the Fall, not how it was meant to be.

The second school of thought held the contrary: that lower creation was not changed at the Fall, although the sentence upon Adam frustrated his *relationship* to nature. This unvitiated view of lower creation was advanced by Fathers such as Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Augustine, Fulgentius, and John of Damascus. Since this position reached its most perfect form under Augustine—including the denial of natural evil, the recognition of prelapsarian predation, and the unconditional approbation of the created order—I have called it the Augustinian view. Again, it must be noted that I have not endeavored to categorize the many Fathers whose treatment of this subject was found wanting or nonexistent.

Throughout the preceding analysis, I mentioned points at which individual Fathers seemed to have made novel contributions to the theology of lower creation. It will serve to review the most salient developments here. With respect to the Irenaeian view, Theophilus of Antioch is owed the startling explanation that lower creation *deserved* the curse of Genesis 3:17–18. Irenaeus, on the other hand, was the first to argue that the earth’s cursing

²²³ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.10 (emphasis added).

²²⁴ John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* (p. 5).

was an act of mercy, a rerouting of the punishment owed to man. Ephrem, lastly, suggested that lower creation, lacking the capacity to sin, could not suffer under the curse, although that curse was nonetheless real.

On the other side, Lactantius seems to have initiated the theological movement toward the Augustinian view, claiming that natural evils were a kind of necessary, higher-order good. Athanasius went further, discounting “evil” in nature as utterly superficial. Basil, however, was the first to apply Athanasius’s theory in the concrete: for Basil, poisonous plants and savage beasts had a prelapsarian existence. While Basil’s theology was further developed by the other Cappadocian Fathers as well as Ambrose, it was under Augustine’s care that the unvitiated view received its most thoroughgoing exposition, as just mentioned.

In addition to this most basic discovery—that the Church Fathers were not unanimous as to the fallenness of lower creation—several other ancillary observations should be noted. In the first place, the Fathers’ writings betray a marked temporal development. Most of the exponents of the Irenaeian view occupied the first three centuries of Christianity, while their critics flourished in the post-Nicene era. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the Augustinian view emerged during the very century that Christian persecution subsided, a period which afforded the Church greater optimism with respect to outside forces, or in which a receding paganism diminished the risk that nature-veneration would devolve into pantheism. Second, the issue of creation’s fallenness seems not to have been polarized by political or geographical divides. Subscribers of both views were to be found in the East just as well as the West. Third, it is apparent that, though the effects of the fall were understood variously, the Church Fathers unanimously upheld the historicity of an original, primeval sin. Some Fathers were willing to interpret Genesis 3:17–18 metaphorically, but none went so far as to demythologize the fall itself. Fourth, a proleptic reckoning of lower creation pervaded the patristic era. Many of the Fathers held that lower creation, whether fallen or unfallen, was *intended* to exist in the state it does now, in order to provide for fallen man both physically and spiritually, as a gift and as a punishment. In all creation, “nothing exists without a reason,” says Basil.²²⁵

Nevertheless, for our purposes, the conclusion of greatest import is as follows. Despite that the Church Fathers were not unanimous on the fallenness of lower creation, *by the end of the patristic age, a consensus had emerged in support of the unvitiated view*. Not only that, but those who supported the unvitiated view generally set out their positions with greater

²²⁵ Basil, *Hexameron* 5.5.

confidence and they defended those positions with greater cogency, arguing by way of the goodness of God, the volitional nature of evil, and the beauty of the creation.

A final, cautionary note is in order. Though many of the Fathers held a remarkably high view of lower creation, they, unlike moderns, were unabashedly anthropocentric, never equating the dignity of man with that of animals, nor even daring to study animals (let alone love them) for their own sake. Augustine warns his readers as follows: “In the study of creatures we must not exercise an empty and futile curiosity, but should make them the stepping-stone to things unperishable and everlasting.”²²⁶ Lower creation is good, but the *reason* for its goodness is that man might find his Creator. So when we ask about the problem of natural evil, say, with the words of Augustine’s congregation—“Who gave the mosquito its stinger for sucking blood?”—we should still find much wisdom in Augustine’s reply: “You are amazed at the smallest things; *praise Him that is great.*”²²⁷

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²²⁶ Augustine, *On True Religion* 29.52 (cited in Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4).

²²⁷ Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 148.8 (emphasis added; the first part is my translation [see note 1 above]).