

## **The Birth Pangs of Creation: The Eschatological Transformation of the Natural World in Romans 8:19-22**

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Rom. 8:19-22 discusses the present suffering of the natural world due to human sin. Although the natural world is not itself fallen or disobedient to God, Adam's sin brought the created order into bondage to death, decay, corruption and futility. Yet Paul describes this suffering in the context of great eschatological hope both for believers and the natural world: The suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation.<sup>1</sup> The redemption that Christ brings will have cosmic consequences: At the second coming of Christ the natural order will be restored to its proper operation, so that it may fulfill the purpose for which it was created.

Rom. 8:19-22 focuses on two major themes: (1) the present corruption of the subhuman creation as a result of the Fall of Adam; and (2) the eschatological redemption of creation which delivers it from corruption and transforms it to a state of freedom and glory. The birth pangs metaphor is a bipolar metaphor that summarizes both of these themes: As a metaphor of intense suffering it symbolizes the present suffering of creation. As a metaphor of productive pain that brings a positive outcome, it points to the hope of the coming redemption of creation.

### **The Meaning of κτίσις**

The meaning of κτίσις is one of the most critical interpretive issues of this passage.<sup>2</sup> Κτίσις has a broad semantic range in the NT, ranging from "the sum total of everything created," to individual created things, either human or animal, with several other specialized usages.<sup>3</sup>

At a first glance, the reference to "all creation" (πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις) in v. 22 appears to suggest that Paul has the entire created order in mind. For example, Nelson says, "Paul's reference in Romans 8:19 is probably the widest possible, without intention to exclude any category."<sup>4</sup> The reference to "all creation," however, is not

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<sup>1</sup>John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1959), 305.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed argument for κτίσις as the natural world and a discussion of alternative views, see Harry Alan Hahne, "The Corruption and Redemption of Creation. An Exegetical Study of Romans 8:19-22 in Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature" (ThD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1997), 353-61.

<sup>3</sup>Κτίσις can mean (1) "the sum total of everything created" (BAGD, 456; Mk. 10:6; 13:19; Col. 1:15, 23?; Heb. 9:11; 2 Pet. 3:4; Rev. 3:14, possibly the verbal meaning); (2) an individual creature or created thing, either (2a) humans and animals (Rom. 1:25, cf. v. 23), or (2b) any type of created thing (Rom. 8:39; Heb. 4:13); (3) humankind in a collective sense (Mk. 16:15; possibly Col. 1:23); (4) new human creatures created by the transforming work of God through the new birth, which is like a second creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal 6:15); (5) a verbal sense to refer to "the act of creation" (Rom. 1:20; Gal. 6:15, the new creation of God in transforming a believer); (6) an authoritative institution or government created by people (1 Pet. 2:13).

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Lee Nelson, Jr., "The Groaning of Creation: An Exegetical Study of Romans 8:18-27" (ThD Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary of Virginia, 1969), 192, 253; cf. John G. Gibbs, "Pauline Cosmic Christology and Ecological Crisis," *JBL* 90 (1971): 471. Most commentators, however, find it difficult to consistently maintain the universal view, and so tend to drift toward the cosmic view. Nelson, for example, contradicts his generally universal position when he comments on v. 20, "because of the presence of the expression οὐχ ἑκουῶσα the creation in this reference should probably be limited to the non-human order" (p. 195). Similarly Gibbs says "ἡ κτίσις undoubtedly refers to the whole creation," yet later he appears to distinguish "creation" from humanity: "There is a solidarity between man and creation, so that the creation suffers under the pain of man's Fall" (pp. 471-472).

decisive. In both the LXX and the NT, *πάντα ἢ κτίσις* can be less than comprehensive, when a particular class of creature is in focus in the context.<sup>5</sup> Thus the aspect of creation in view in Rom. 8:19-22 can be determined by starting with the broadest view of *κτίσις*, and then by eliminating those aspects of the created order that are incompatible with the context.

Angels are excluded from the meaning of *κτίσις* in this passage since good angels have not been subjected to futility or corruption (vv. 20-21), either because of human sin or their own actions. Demons are excluded since they will not be redeemed (v. 21) and they do not long for the revealing of the sons of God (v. 19).<sup>6</sup> Heaven is excluded since it has not been subjected to futility or decay (vv. 20-21).<sup>7</sup>

Unbelievers<sup>8</sup> are excluded from the meaning of *κτίσις* in this passage because they do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God (v. 19).<sup>9</sup> In addition, if Paul means to include unbelievers, then this would mean that one day all people will be delivered from the consequences of sin (v. 21).<sup>10</sup>

Some argue that Paul is referring to Christians,<sup>11</sup> since the previous section discusses the suffering and

<sup>5</sup>In both the LXX and the NT, the expression "all creation" (*πάντα ἢ κτίσις*) sometimes refers only to a part of the creation of a certain class. It can be limited to animals (Tob. 8:15; Wis. 19:6 (*ὅλη ἢ κτίσις*); Sir. 43:25) or humankind (Mk. 16:15; Col. 1:23; Sir. 49:16, *ὑπὲρ πάντων ζῴων ἐν τῇ κτίσει*). These expressions sometimes indicate comprehensiveness within the scope of the creation that is in focus.

<sup>6</sup>The subjection of demons to the consequences of sin was because of their own disobedience, so "not according to their own will" would not be appropriate (v. 20).

<sup>7</sup>William S. Plumer, Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1870), 404-5.

<sup>8</sup>Hommel argues for unbelievers on the basis of the similarity between Rom. 1:21 and Rom. 8:20 (Hildebrecht Hommel, "Das Harren der Kreatur," in Schöpfer und Erhalter. Studien zum Problem Christentum und Antike, ed. Hildebrecht Hommel (Lettner: Berlin, 1956), 19). In Rom. 1:21 the Gentiles became futile in their thinking because of their refusal to honor God. In Rom. 1:21, however, *κτίσις* is not used, so the verse does not clarify the use of this word.

<sup>9</sup>Murray, 302.

<sup>10</sup>The NT use of *κόσμος* would fit this view better than *κτίσις*, since it is often used in the NT to refer to the world of unbelievers. Ernst Käsemann, Commentary on Romans, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1980), 232; C. E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 411. Nelson, Groaning, 149-51, has an illuminating discussion of the similarities and differences of *κόσμος* and *κτίσις*. "Whereas *κόσμος* participates in the sin and is characterized by it, and thus in its estrangement from God can only be transitory, the *κτίσις* is said by Paul to be under a subjection for which it is not responsible; to which it submitted in hope; and from which it expects to be delivered" (Ibid., 151).

<sup>11</sup>John Reumann, Creation and New Creation (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 98-9; Anton Vögtle, "Röm 8,19-22: Eine Schöpfungs-theologische oder anthropologische-soteriologische Aussage?," in Mélanges Bibliques en hommage au R. P. Béda Rigaux, eds. A. Descamps, and A. Halleux (Gembloux, Belgium: Duculot, 1970), 351-66; Hommel, 7-23; Hans Wilhelm Schmidt, Das Brief des Paulus an die Römer, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament, no. 6 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962), 145; Anton Vögtle, Das Neue Testament und die Zukunft des Kosmos (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1970), 183-207. Reumann and Hommel (p. 101) believe that Paul used an apocalyptic fragment that originally referred to the world awaiting transformation. Paul, however, changes the meaning to refer to believers awaiting the glory that is "not yet" for them (cf. John G. Gager, "Functional Diversity in Paul's Use of End-Time Language," JBL 89 (1970): 337).

glory of Christians (vv. 17-18). Although Paul sometimes uses κτίσις to refer to believers,<sup>12</sup> in Rom. 8:19-23 he frequently contrasts believers and κτίσις. V. 23 contrasts believers with κτίσις as described in v. 22: "Not only so, but we ourselves also" (οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ) shows that believers groan (v. 23) in a similar way to the rest of creation (v. 22). The creation eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons of God (v. 19) and will benefit from the eschatological glory of believers (v. 21).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, since angels, demons, humanity and heaven are excluded from κτίσις by the context, what remains is the subhuman material creation, or roughly the equivalent of the modern term "nature."<sup>14</sup> The LXX uses κτίσις in this sense both collectively (Wis. 2:6; 16:24; 19:6) and of individual creatures in the natural world (Tob. 8:15; Sir. 43:25). Even some references to πάντα ἢ κτίσις refer exclusively to animals (Tob. 8:15; Wis. 19:6; Sir. 43:25).<sup>15</sup>

The personification of the natural world in Rom. 8:19-22 is similar to the frequent personification of nature in the OT and Jewish apocalyptic literature. Various aspects of nature are frequently described with emotions, intellect and will. The earth and other parts of nature have sorrow or pain due to human sin. They rejoice at human righteousness, the display of God's glory, the vindication of God and the presence of the righteous in the messianic kingdom.<sup>16</sup> The OT also refers to the suffering of the natural world due to human sin and the transformation of nature in a future golden age of righteousness.<sup>17</sup> Even though the descriptions of nature are

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<sup>12</sup> Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15. Although on the surface Heb. 4:13, appears to use κτίσις in reference to people, it actually applies to humanity a general principle about the accountability of all creatures to God.

<sup>13</sup> Cranfield, Romans, 411; Murray, 302.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible, no. 33, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 506; Douglas Moo, Romans 1-8, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 551; Francis Bridger, "Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension," Tyndale Bulletin 41 (1990), 299-230; James D. G. Dunn, Romans 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 38A, eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker and Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word, 1988), 469; Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1988), 322; David Francis, "Terrestrial Realities: Their Liberation," Jeevadhara 8 (1978), 150; C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Observations on Romans 8.19-21," in Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology, ed. Robert Banks (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1974), 225; Marcus L. Loane, The Hope of Glory. An Exposition of the Eighth Chapter in the Epistle to the Romans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 81, 90; Murray, 303; Dodd, The Bible and the Greeks (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), 108; E. Gaugler, Römerbrief (Zurich: Zwingli, 1945-1952), 1:299; Patrick Canon Boylan, St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1934), 142; Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 306-8; Theodor Zahn, Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer, Third ed. (Leipzig: Deichert, 1925), 400; Meyer, Romans, 2:374; Frederic Godet, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, trans. A. Cusin, and Talbot W. Chambers (1883; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1956), 102.

<sup>15</sup> Godet, 102; Zahn, 400; H. A. W. Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans, trans. John C. Moore, and Edwin Johnson, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 2:374.

<sup>16</sup> Cry of pain and sorrow due to sin: Gen. 4:11; Isa. 24:4, 7; Jer. 4:28; 12:4. Joy: Ps. 65:12f; 98:4, 7-9; Isa. 14:7-8; 1 Enoch 7:6; 9:2; 87:1; 88:2; 4 Ezra 6:14-16; 7:55-56; 8:2-3; 10:9; 11:46; 12:43; Apoc. Mos. 29:14; fear in God's presence: Ps. 77:16; 97:4-5; 114:3-8; fear about eschatological disasters: 1 Enoch 1:6; 4 Ezra 6:14-16; joy when the righteous are in the messianic kingdom: Isa. 55:12; consciousness, intellectual understanding: Isa. 1:2; cf. Lk. 19:40 (stones cry out Jesus' identity); hope of eschatological deliverance: 4 Ezra 11:46; obedience to God: 1 Enoch 5:2-3; 75:2; 101:6-7; 2 Bar. 21:4; 48:8-10, 46. For an extensive discussion of the Jewish apocalyptic passages, cf. Hahne, Corruption, 340-5.

<sup>17</sup> The suffering of nature because of sin: Gen. 3:17; Isa. 24:4-7; 33:9; Jer. 4:4, 11, 26-28; the eschatological

figurative in Rom. 8:19-22, the message regarding the suffering of the natural world due to human sin should not be demythologized or anthropologized. The present suffering of creation is very real, and God will bring this suffering to an end when Christ returns.<sup>18</sup>

### The Corruption of Creation

#### The Cosmic Consequences of the Fall

Due to the Fall of humanity, the natural world is not in the state that God originally created it. The background for Rom. 8:19-22 is Gen. 3:17-19, which describes the curse on the ground due to the original human sin.<sup>19</sup> In Rom. 5:12-19, Paul explains that Adam's Fall brought sin and death to humanity. Here in Rom. 8:20-22 Paul extends the impact of the Fall to the rest of creation. All of creation is now enslaved to corruption (φθορᾶ) and futility (ματαιότης) due to Adam's sin. In a judicial pronouncement, God cursed the ground as part of the judgment for the Fall (Gen. 3:17-18).<sup>20</sup>

The effect of Adam's sin on nature is connected with the human dominion over nature (Gen. 1:26-28). Since Adam was accountable to God to rule the earth and to tend the garden, his sin affected the natural world that he cared for.<sup>21</sup> The natural world became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be. This suggests a solidarity between humanity and the natural world, so that human sin affects the rest of creation. Similarly, the natural world looks forward to the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21), because when humanity is restored to its proper obedience to God, the rest of creation will benefit.

#### The Present Futility of the Natural World

As a result of the Fall of humanity, creation was subjected to futility (v. 20). BAGD says ματαιότης means "emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness" and in Rom. 8:20 "frustration."<sup>22</sup> It has the sense of being "without result" (μάτην), "ineffective," or "not reaching its end."<sup>23</sup> The underlying idea is "the ineffectiveness of that which does not attain its goal." Thus Paul indicates that creation is not able to fulfil the purpose for which it was made.<sup>24</sup>

This futility refers to the change that the natural order experienced as a result of the Fall.<sup>25</sup> The ground

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transformation of nature: Isa. 11:6-9; 65:17-25; 66:22-23.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Charles Gore, St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. A Practical Exposition (London: John Murray, 1899), 305.

<sup>19</sup>Murray, 330; cf. Eric C. Rust, Nature and Man in Biblical Thought (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), 234-5.

<sup>20</sup>Only God could subject creation with a hope for its future redemption (v. 20, ἐφ' ἐλπίδι). Neither Adam, nor humanity nor evil spirits have this ability (Franz J. Leenhardt, The Epistle to the Romans, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), 226-31; Murray, 303; Francis, 152; Edmund Hill, "The Construction of Three Passages From St. Paul," CBQ 23 (1961): 297). The term ὑποτάσσω suggests an authoritative action, which is not suitable for Satan, Adam or humanity (Cranfield, Romans, 413).

<sup>21</sup>G. W. H. Lampe, "The New Testament Doctrine of Ktisis," SJT 17 (1964): 458.

<sup>22</sup>BAGD, 495.

<sup>23</sup>William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), 208.

<sup>24</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 413-4; Murray, 303; W. David Stacey, "Paul's Certainties. II. God's Purpose in Creation--Romans viii. 22-23," The Expository Times 69 (1957): 179; Sanday and Headlam, 208; E. W. Hunt, Portrait of Paul (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1968), 96.

<sup>0</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 413. By contrast, Giblin argues that Paul does not mean that the physical world was

was cursed and now brings forth weeds more easily than crops and it produces crops only as a result of hard and painful labor (Gen. 3:17-19). Cranfield observes "the subhuman creation has been subjected to the frustration of not being able properly to fulfil the purpose of its existence, God having appointed that without man it should not be made perfect."<sup>26</sup>

### The Enslavement of Creation to Corruption

Creation is also enslaved to corruption (φθορά, v. 21). Φθορά deepens the sense in which the present state of creation is futile.<sup>27</sup> Φθορά has two major meanings: (1) death, decay and destruction (Gal. 6:8; 2 Pet. 2:12); and (2) moral corruption and evil (1 Pet. 1:4; 2:19). There is also a third derivative sense of "that which is perishable" or "corruptibility," in the sense of being subject to death (1 Cor. 15:42, 50).<sup>28</sup>

In Rom. 8:21, φθορά primarily refers to death and decay<sup>29</sup> and perhaps by implication to the transitoriness of life.<sup>30</sup> This is supported by the fact that in Paul's writings the noun φθορά is never used in the sense of moral corruption.<sup>31</sup> Thus "enslaved to corruption" is close to the sense of "perishability" as used in 1 Cor. 15:42, 50, where φθορά refers to the perishability of earthly human bodies. Creation is in bondage (δουλεία) to this state of corruption and has no power to free itself from the cycle of death and decay.

Paul probably has in mind the punishment of death described in Gen. 3:19,<sup>32</sup> which fits the other allusions

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actually different prior to the Fall. He says that the apocalyptic perspective is fundamentally theological, not phenomenological or physical. Paul refers to a certain frustration of the powers of God in creation without presupposing an actual deterioration of creation after the Fall (Charles Homer Giblin, In Hope of God's Glory. Pauline Theological Perspectives (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 394-5). R. H Allaway, "Fall or Fall-Short?," ExpTim 97, no. 4 (1986): 109-10, similarly argues that the world was not created in a state of glory that was lost, but it was always an imperfect world that had hope of eventual glorification (Rom. 8:20-21). This view does not do justice to Paul's strong language about the present state of creation and it implies that Paul does not accept the reality of the curse on the ground in Gen. 3:16-17. Further, the aorist ὑπετάγη suggests that the subjection to futility was a change that took place at a specific time.

<sup>26</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 413-4.

<sup>27</sup>By contrast, Dunn, Romans, 470, says is φθορά "nearly equivalent" to ματαιότης.

<sup>28</sup>Günther Harder, "Φθείρω," TDNT 9.102-4. Even when φθορά is used in the sense of death, in the NT a moral connotation underlies it (e.g. Gal. 6:8, sowing sin results in destruction; 2 Pet. 2:12, evil creatures will be destroyed). Even the sense of the perishability of the body in 1 Cor. 15:42, 50 has the connotation of being unsuitable for heavenly dwelling, because the earthly body has "dishonor" and "weakness" (v. 43), and lacks heavenly "glory" (vv. 40-41, 43).

<sup>29</sup>Dunn, Romans, 38A:471-2; Cranfield, Romans, 414; Moo, 553; M. J. Lagrange, Saint Paul: Épitre aux Romains (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1950), 209; Edwin Lewis, "A Christian Theodicy. An Exposition of Romans 8:18-30," Int 11 (1957): 407; Fitzmyer, Romans, 509. Fitzmyer extends it to include "not only perishability and putrefaction, but also powerlessness, lack of beauty, vitality, and strength that characterize creation's present condition."

<sup>30</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 414; Rust, 234.

<sup>31</sup>However, the cognate verb φθείρω sometimes means "corrupt morally" (1 Cor. 15:33; Eph 4:22), "deceive" (2 Cor. 11:3) or "cheat" (2 Cor. 7:2). The consistent use of the noun in a non-moral sense in Paul's writings supports the interpretation of φθορά as death and decay rather than moral evil. This is reinforced by the fact that in this verse κτίσις refers to the non-human material world, which is not capable of moral evil.

<sup>32</sup>Robert Govett, Govett on Romans (1891; reprint, Miami Springs, Florida: Conley and Schoettle, 1981), 340; Loane, 89.

to Gen. 3 in the context. Although Genesis apparently limits the punishment of death after the Fall to humanity, Paul extends it to all of creation in Rom. 8:21. The Fall of Adam had cosmic consequences.

In the LXX, the noun φθορά and the cognate verb φθείρω are used in a similar sense in Isa. 24:3-4. The earth will be completely corrupted (φθορᾶ φθαρήσεται) due to the sins of the people (v. 5). It is also significant that v. 4 says "the earth mourns" (ἐπένθησεν ἡ γῆ), which associates the corruption (or devastation) with the mourning of the earth. The sense of "mourning" in Isa. 24:4 is similar to the concept that "creation groans" (συστενάζει) in Rom. 8:22. Although a different word for mourning is used in Isa. 24:4 (πενθέω), v. 7 uses the same root (στενάζω) used by Paul in Rom. 8:22 (συστενάζω). The new wine groans in sorrow due to its inability to produce a fruitful harvest due to human sin. Another similarity is that God causes these changes to the earth as a judgment for human sin (vv. 1, 6). Both passages describe the changes that human sin brings to the natural world as a result of God's judgment. However, Rom. 8:20-21 refers to the results of the divine judgment after the Fall and Isa. 24:1-6 refers to the results of divine judgments for human sin at other times in history.

### The Redemption of Creation

Despite its present state of futility and corruption, creation is not without hope. One day creation will be set free (ἐλευθερωθήσεται) from its slavery to corruption (v. 21). Creation eagerly awaits "the revealing of the sons of God" (v. 19), because at that time the natural world will be set free from corruption and will be transformed to share in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21). The revelation of the sons of God refers to the appearing of Christians with Jesus at his second coming (cf. Col. 3:4; 1 Jn. 3:2).<sup>33</sup>

The eschatological freedom (ἐλευθερωθήσεται, ἐλευθερίαν) of creation is sharply contrasted with its present slavery (δουλείας). This freedom will include both a negative and a positive dimension.<sup>34</sup> Negatively, creation will be set free from slavery to corruption. The ongoing cycle of death and decay that characterizes the created world in this age will end. Positively, creation will experience the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ).

The freedom and glorification of the subhuman material world, however, will not be the same as that of redeemed people, but will be appropriate to its non-rational nature.<sup>35</sup> Nature will become all that God intended it to be and will bring glory to God. Cranfield correctly says that creation will have "the freedom fully and perfectly to fulfil its Creator's purpose for it, that freedom which it does not have, so long as man, its lord (Gen. 1.26; Ps. 8:6) is in disgrace."<sup>36</sup> The work of Christ in redemption finishes the work of God in creation, by bringing the creation to its intended state so it may fulfil the purposes for which it was created.<sup>37</sup> Christ's redemption does not merely affect humanity, but it has cosmic consequences that affect the whole creation.

### The Personification of the Present Suffering of Creation

Paul personifies the negative effect of human sin on the natural world: Creation is groaning and suffering the pains of childbirth (v. 22). The introduction of the childbirth metaphor reinforces the hope of the present

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<sup>33</sup>Sanday and Headlam, 207-8; Peter Stuhlmacher, Paul's Letter to the Romans, trans. Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 134. Cf. Col. 3:4; 1 Jn. 3:21; 1 Th. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:23.

<sup>34</sup>Moo, Romans, 553.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Murray, 304.

<sup>36</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 416.

<sup>37</sup>F. R. Tennant, The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 271; Cf. Gwilym O. Griffith, St. Paul's Gospel to the Romans (London: Blackwell, 1949), 115; C. H. Dodd, Bible, 106; Leenhardt, 222.

suffering of creation. The suffering of creation is like birth pangs bringing in a glorious new world. The present state of suffering in creation confirms the future hope of the glory of creation (v. 19-20).

The συν- compound verbs (συστενάζω and συνωδίνω) and the reference to all creation (πάντα ἢ κτίσις) stress that not simply humanity suffers due to the Fall. The entire creation was affected.<sup>48</sup>

### The Groaning of Creation

All of creation is "groaning together" (συστενάζει) throughout the ages. Paul personifies the natural world and says it suffers and groans due to human sin.<sup>49</sup> This anthropopathism stresses the damage that human sin does to the natural world. Creation has been seriously damaged and it was set off course from its original created purpose.

Although συστενάζω is only used here in the NT, the cognate στενάζω occurs 6 times in the NT and 17 times in the LXX. The basic meaning of στενάζω is "to sigh," "to groan" or "to wail." It expresses a deep distress of spirit in response to an undesirable circumstance.<sup>50</sup> Creation groans due to its subjection to futility and corruption, which resulted from the curse of the Fall (vv. 20-21).<sup>51</sup>

The biblical usage of στενάζω often has the positive expectation of an imminent resolution of the cause of distress.<sup>52</sup> Creation eagerly awaits the day when the sons of God will be revealed and creation will be delivered from its bondage (vv. 19, 21). The groaning is not futile, but it is associated with the eager expectation of a glorious future (v. 19), in light of the fact that God gives creation hope of its future deliverance (v. 20). This positive expectation is also suggested by the birth pangs metaphor (v. 22), since birth pangs imply an imminent joy after the travail is complete (cf. Jn. 16:21). The groaning is naturally associated with the birth pangs in a

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<sup>48</sup>The συν- compound verbs (συστενάζω and συνωδίνω) have been understood in two major ways: (1) The subhuman creation groans with believers, in light of v. 23, which describes the believers groaning for the redemption of their bodies (Frederich August Gottreu Tholuck, Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, trans. Robert Menzies (Philadelphia: Sorin and Ball, 1844), 263; Fitzmyer, Romans, 33:509; John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1959), 302-3). However, v. 23 seems to contrast believers with the creation as referred to in v. 22 ("not only this but we also," οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ). (2) The majority of scholars believe that the συν- compounds indicate that creation in its entirety suffers "together" or "in one accord" (e.g. Dunn, Romans, 38A:472; Cranfield, Romans, 417; Moo, Romans, 555; J. Schneider, "Στενάζω," 7.601, n. 5; Boylan, 145; Murray, 305; James Denney, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," in The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, The Expositor's Greek Testament, no. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1970), 650; Käsemann, Romans, 236). This is supported by the subject "all creation" (πάντα ἢ κτίσις). The συν- compound verbs point to the solidarity of creation in its suffering due to human sin and reinforce the universal impact of the Fall.

<sup>49</sup>There are three dimensions to the groaning: (1) All creation groans as it longs for deliverance from slavery to corruption (v. 22). (2) Believers groan as they await the redemption of their bodies (v. 23; cf. 2 Cor. 5:2, 4). (3) The Spirit groans in intercession for believers (v. 26). This structural device stresses the solidarity between believers and the rest of creation. Both groan for complete deliverance from the corruption of the physical world. The Spirit supports the longing of believers as they express in prayer their desire for deliverance.

<sup>50</sup>Schneider, "Στενάζω," TDNT 7:600. Cf. Ex. 6:15; Job. 3:24; Isa. 11:6; 51:11.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 601-2. Barth, Romans, 310, misses the point of the passage when he says the groaning is due to "createdness" and the temporal nature of things. Cf. Clarence J. Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore. Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 163, who says the groaning is part of God's design for nature and is not related to sin.

<sup>52</sup>Nelson, Groaning, 222, 255. E.g. Ps. 38:9 (expects God to deliver him from the crisis); Ex. 6:5; Ps. 11:6; Isa. 51:11 (redemption is about to be accomplished); Jn. 16:21 (childbirth); 2 Cor. 5:2, 4 (believer's groaning to be clothed with the heavenly body; cf. v. 5 for the guarantee).

hendiadys which suggests the cries of a woman in labor. Thus the groaning has a two-way focus: It expresses the cry of creation for release from its present corruption. It also looks forward to the deliverance of creation as a positive hope. This transforms the significance of the groaning so it does not indicate despair.<sup>53</sup>

As has been noted, Isa. 24:4-7 expresses a similar concept about the groaning of the natural order due to human sin. The earth mourns (πενθέω, LXX) due to human sin (vv. 4, 7), which "pollutes" the earth (vv. 4-5) and the natural order groans due to the devastation of sin (v. 7). The new wine groans in sorrow (στενάζουσιν) due to its inability to produce a fruitful harvest. "Groan" in the LXX is στενάζω, which is the root for συστενάζω used in Rom. 8:22.

### The Birth Pangs of Creation

Paul also says that creation suffers the pains of childbirth (συνωδίνει). Although this compound form with συν- is unique in the NT, the root verb ὠδίνω (Gal. 4:19, 27; Rev. 12:2) and the cognate noun ὠδίν (Mt. 24:8; Mk. 13:8; Acts 2:24; 1 Th. 5:3) are used several times in the NT.

The metaphor of birth pangs points to intense and prolonged pain that leads to a joyous and positive outcome.<sup>54</sup> It is a bipolar metaphor that combines both pain and a positive future outcome. These two dimensions each have several aspects that are emphasized in various degrees in particular passages: The pain side can refer to (1) an intense pain, struggle and suffering; and (2) suffering that continues for an extended period. The positive outcome side can stress: (1) future joy, often sharply contrasted to the sorrow and pain; and (2) the development of a new life or a new state of affairs that is better and more glorious than the present.

The following table shows that the birth pangs metaphor can stress either or both aspects of the bipolar metaphor in the NT:

**Table 1: Birth Pangs in the New Testament**

Passage:	Pain:		Positive Outcome:		Literal Birth:	Summary:
	Intense Pain:	Extended Pain:	Future Joy:	New, Better Future State:		
<b>ὠδίνω</b>						
Gal. 4:19	X	X		X		Paul's intense labor in bringing his disciples to Christlike maturity.
Gal. 4:27			X	X		Barren woman brings forth more children than married woman as a metaphor of the Church and Israel.
Rev. 12:2	X			v. 5		Symbolic woman gives birth to the Messiah and the Church.
<b>συνωδίνω</b>						
Rom. 8:22	X	X		X		Suffering of creation due to sin, which anticipates the liberated creation.

<sup>53</sup>John Paul Heil, Paul's Letter to the Romans. A Reader-Response Commentary (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 86-7; Nelson, Groaning, 256-7.

<sup>54</sup>Leenhardt, 222.

Passage:	Pain:		Positive Outcome:		Literal Birth:	Summary:
	Intense Pain:	Extended Pain:	Future Joy:	New, Better Future State:		
<b>ὠδίνω</b>						
Mt. 24:8	(Primary)			(Secondary)		Cosmic disasters as signs of the second coming of Christ.
Mk. 13:8	(Primary)			(Secondary)		Cosmic disasters as signs of the second coming of Christ.
Acts 2:24	X					Agony of Jesus' death.
1 Th. 5:3	Sudden pain					Sudden coming of the day of the Lord and destruction of the wicked.
<b>τίκτω</b>						
Jn. 16:21	X		X	X		Jesus' death and resurrection.
Gal. 4:27			X	X		Barren woman brings forth more children than married woman as a metaphor of the Church and Israel.
Heb. 6:7				X		Ground produces a crop.
Jam. 1:15				natural outcome		Lust gives birth to sin.
All other (13)					give birth, be born	

Τίκτω is included in this chart because it semantically overlaps with ὠδίνω. In most cases (13 times) this word is used literally to mean "give birth" or "be born." However, when τίκτω is used metaphorically, its function is very similar to ὠδίνω. In Gal. 4:27 (a quotation of Isa. 54:1), τίκτω is in poetic parallelism to ὠδίνω, showing the close similarity of the two words.

In Rom. 8:22 the birth pangs metaphor shows that the groaning and suffering of creation will not be in vain. From one vantage point, the creation suffers as a consequence of the divine curse due to the Fall. Yet this subjection of creation was not in vain or without hope (v. 20). The birth pangs metaphor interprets the pain and groaning of creation as a hopeful sign that glorious changes are soon coming to the world. Birth pangs are a productive pain that result in new life.<sup>55</sup>

The birth pangs metaphor, however, does not necessarily imply that a new earth will be created from scratch.<sup>56</sup> Rom. 8:19-22 points to the transformation of the present material creation, which "eagerly awaits" (v. 19) and "hopes" for (v. 20) the time when it will be "set free" from its present "enslavement to corruption" (v. 21). The birth pangs metaphor is flexible enough to include a positive future outcome without necessarily implying the

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Gore, 306; Loane, 87; Murray, 305.

<sup>56</sup>Contra G. Bertram, "Ὠδίνω," 9.673. Cf. Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New About the New Heavens and New Earth? A Theology of Creation From Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *JETS* 40, no. 1 (March 1997): 46-55, who shows that even 2 Pet. 3:10-13 does not necessarily require a new creation *ex nihilo*.

creation of something new (e.g. Gal. 4:19).

Gempf argues that the birth pangs metaphor in Scripture only refers to intense pain and does not allude to the rebirth or transformation of the world. The metaphor often refers to helpless pain, frustration and futility. He believes that even though Rom. 8:19-22 as a whole speaks of hope, the birth pangs metaphor only refers to the present pain of the world.<sup>57</sup>

Gempf correctly demonstrates that birth pangs often focus on great pain, particularly in the LXX, where the outcome of the pain is frequently not in view.<sup>58</sup> He overstates his case, however, since the birth pangs metaphor inherently has nuances of expectation and orientation to the future.<sup>59</sup> Birth pangs passages in the LXX can focus on any phase of the process or outcome of birth.<sup>60</sup> In many passages Gempf cites, the outcome of the pain is in fact of major interest.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, in the NT ὠδίνω and ὠδίν are usually concerned with the outcome of the pain, with two exceptions that focus on the pain itself (Acts 2:24; 1 Th. 5:3). Τίκτω also always focuses on the outcome, when it is used metaphorically. In each case the context determines which aspect of this bipolar metaphor is emphasized. The context of Rom. 8:22 focuses on eschatological hope (vv. 20, 24-25), which suggests that the birth pangs metaphor also points to the future glory of creation. In vv. 17-18 the suffering-glory theme is applied to believers, whereas in vv. 19 and 21 the focus is on the future glorious state of creation and its deliverance from bondage to corruption. V. 19 also has the theme of waiting for an extended period for a positive future outcome.

The birth pangs metaphor ties together these images of extended suffering and final glory. The birth pangs metaphor is ideally suited for this purpose since it naturally combines both aspects. It also implies that although the present suffering of creation is intense and prolonged, it will not continue forever. This too reinforces the theme of hope.

Tsumura argues that the reference to birth pangs alludes to Gen. 3:16, in which pain in childbearing is part of the punishment for the Fall.<sup>62</sup> There is a verbal parallel to Gen 3:17, where the word "groaning" has the same root in the LXX (στεναγμόν) as Rom. 8:22 (συστενάξει). Keesmaat argues that Paul uses the language of the curse to show that creation suffers the anguish of the Fall.<sup>63</sup> If this is true, it strengthens the link between Rom. 8:19-22 and Gen. 3, since both the curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17-19) and the pain of childbearing (Gen. 3:16) are in view. Although the LXX uses λύπη rather than ὠδίν for the pains of childbirth, Paul may have thought of this metaphor for the pains of the earth because Gen. 3 was in his mind. Nevertheless, the birth pangs in Rom. 8:22 are clearly metaphorical rather than the literal pains of childbirth as described in Gen. 3:16.

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<sup>57</sup>Conrad Gempf, "The Imagery of Birth Pangs in the New Testament," *TynBul* 45, no. 1 (1994): 123-4.

<sup>58</sup>Gempf argues for several uses of the metaphor in the Bible: (1) intense pain (Jer. 4:21; 30:4-7; 1 Enoch 62:4-6; Mk. 13); (2) helpless pain (Isa. 13:4-8; Jer. 48:41; Ps. 48:4; Isa. 42:13-14; cf. 1QH 5) (124-126); (3) productive pain (Jn. 16:21; Isa. 66:6-9; Mic. 4:10; 5:3-4; cf. 1QH 3; bSanh. 97-98); (3a) frustration of an unproductive birth process (Isa. 26:17-18; Hos. 13:13); (3b) the birth rather than the process (Rev. 12:1-6; Gal. 4:19); (4) pain that must run its course, related to helplessness (Mic. 4:9-10; 5:3; Mk. 13:8; Mt. 24).

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Heil, 87.

<sup>60</sup>Bertram, "Ὠδίν," TDNT 9:668-70.

<sup>61</sup>Gempf's category 3, productive pain: Isa. 66:6-9; Mi 4:10; 5:3-4; Jn. 16:21; cf. 1QH 3; bSanh. 97-98; and, category 3b, focus on the birth rather than the process: Rev. 12:1-6; Gal. 4:19.

<sup>62</sup>D. T. Tsumura, "An OT Background to Rom 8:22," *NTS* 40, no. 4 (1994): 620-1; cf. Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Exodus and the Intertextual Transformation of Tradition in Romans 8:14-30," *JSNT* 54 (1994): 392.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid. Keesmaat also sees a similarity to the Exodus accounts of Israel's groaning in bondage (Ex. 2:23-24; 6:5; cf. Jer. 38:19).

### The Eschatological Birth Pangs of the Messiah

Birth pangs are often used as an eschatological symbol in the Bible and non-canonical early Jewish literature. In the OT, eschatological suffering is often compared to the pains of childbirth (Isa. 13:8; 21:3; 26:17-18; 66:7-8; Jer. 4:31; 22:23; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9-10). In the NT, Mk. 13 and Mt. 24 refer to such cosmic disasters as earthquakes and famines that will precede Christ's second coming (cf. 1 Th. 5:3). Some Jewish writings refer to the "birth pangs of the Messiah," a period of cosmic disasters and suffering at the end of the age that will serve as a prelude to the coming of the Messiah.<sup>64</sup>

Many scholars believe that Paul's concept of cosmic suffering in Rom. 8:20-22 is similar to the "birth pangs of the Messiah" (BPM) concept in the OT and Jewish literature.<sup>65</sup> Both Rom. 8:20-22 and the BPM passages refer to eschatological cosmic disasters that precede the coming of the glorious new age. In many BPM passages the cosmic disasters are a consequence of an increase in human sin.

The differences, however, are significant enough that Rom. 8:20-22 cannot be used as an example of BPM: (1) In the BPM passages, the intense cosmic tribulation occurs over a short period just prior to the coming of the Messiah. By contrast, in Rom. 8:20-22 the creation suffers throughout the age from the Fall to the end times.<sup>66</sup> The phrase ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν (v. 22) indicates that the suffering and groaning of creation has been existence continuously for a long time, presumably since the Fall.<sup>67</sup> The only other NT usage of the phrase is in Phil. 1:5, where

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<sup>64</sup>The concept is found in Qumran and Jewish apocalyptic; e.g. 1QH 3:7-18; 1 Enoch 62:4; cf. the Christian addition to 4 Ezra in 16:37-39. However, it is more fully developed in rabbinic literature; e.g. Tg. Ps. 18:4; Tg. 2 Sam. 22:5; Midr. Ps. 18:4; bKet. 111a; bSanh. 98b; 118a. Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (München: C. H. Beck, 1922-1928), 1:950, 4:564, 1042, 1067).

<sup>65</sup>E.g. Käsemann, Romans, 232; Francis, 155; Cranfield, Romans, 416; Horst R. Balz, Heilsvertrauen und Welterfahrung: Strukturen der paulinischen Eschatologie nach Römer 8.18-39, Beiträge zur evangelische Theologie, no. 59 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1971), 52; Vögtle, "Röm 8,19-22," 191, 198, 206; Richard Batey, The Letter of Paul to the Romans (Austin, Texas: R. B. Sweet, 1969), 114; Ernest Best, The Letter of Paul to the Romans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 98; Uwe Gerber, "Röm viii.18ff als exegetisches Problem der Dogmatik," NovT 8 (1966): 61, 75; Heinrich Schlier, "Das, worauf alles wartet. Eine Auslegung von Römer 8, 13-30," in Interpretation der Welt. Festschrift für Romano Guardini zum achtzigsten Geburtstag, ed. Helmut Kuhn (Würzburg: Echter, 1965), 600, 606; F. F. Bruce, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans. An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1963), 173; Otto Michel, Der Brief an die Römer, übersetzt und erklärt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1955), 175.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Bernard Weiss, Der Brief an die Römer, 9th ed., Kommentar über das Neue Testament, no. 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1899), 366; J. P. Lange, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, Revised ed., eds. P. Schaff, and M. B. Riddle, trans. J. F. Hurst (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 273; Meyer, Romans, 2:326.

<sup>67</sup>Cranfield, Romans, 417. The expression refers to the "uninterrupted nature of the process" (G. Stählin, "Nov," 4.1007). By contrast, Käsemann sees an eschatological meaning in νῦν: it refers to "the eschatological moment which precedes the parousia," when the suffering of creation will end (Käsemann, Romans, 236; cf. C. K. Barrett, The Epistle to the Romans (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 166; Balz, 59:52; Dunn, Romans, 38A:473). It is true that the eschatological context in Rom. 8 suggests an eschatological nuance in this word. There is an undertone that the promised redemption of creation is imminent. However, the new world order has not arrived, so this eschatological dimension must not be overplayed. Believers (v. 23) along with all creation are still part of the suffering, corrupted state of affairs and are looking forward to the cosmic transformation. The phrase ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν stresses that the long anticipated transformation of creation has not yet come, even though there is a basis for hoping that it will come soon. It is the "not yet" aspect of the present rather than the fulfillment that is in view both here and in v. 18.

it means "right up to the present time." This expression shows that the suffering of creation is not an eschatological increase in trials just prior to the end of the age (unlike Mt. 24:6-8, 29 and other BPM passages). Rather the suffering is a characteristic of this age and will continue until believers are glorified (v. 21).

(2) In most of the OT and rabbinic BPM passages, the focus is the suffering of humans rather than the natural world.<sup>68</sup> Jewish apocalyptic goes further in looking at the eschatological sufferings of nature, but the emphasis is still on how this leads to human suffering. (3) In later Jewish passages, the tribulations are part of a process of ushering in the Messianic age, a concept that is less clear in Rom. 8 and not at all developed in the OT.<sup>69</sup> Thus, although Paul's idea of cosmic groaning and birth pangs is not exactly the same as BPM, it is a closely related concept of cosmic travail.

### Conclusion

The birth pangs metaphor is a bipolar metaphor indicating an intense, prolonged pain that leads to a positive and joyful outcome. In most passages in the NT, both aspects are in view to some degree, although one aspect may be emphasized in a particular context.

The birth pangs metaphor ties together both major themes of Rom. 8:19-22: (1) the present suffering of the natural world due to the human Fall; and (2) the eschatological hope for the transformation of the natural world. The groaning and suffering of creation are not in vain. Although the present suffering of creation is due to the Fall, it is also a hopeful sign that glorious changes are coming to the world.

In contrast to the concept of the "birth pangs of the Messiah" in the OT and non-canonical early Jewish literature, the birth pangs in Rom. 8 are not eschatological cosmic disasters preceding the coming of the Messiah. Rather they refer to the corruption of nature due to human sin that has been present since the Fall. To the eyes of faith, this suffering of creation points in hope to the eschatological work of God that will bring about the redemption and glorious transformation of the created order.

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<sup>68</sup>E.g. Isa. 26:17; 66:8; Jer. 4:31; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9-10; 1 Enoch 62:4; bKet. 111a; bSanh. 98b; 118a; Tg. Ps. 18:4. Bertram, "Ωδῖν," TDNT 9:672; Joseph Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah, 3rd ed., trans. W. F. Stinespring (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 440-50.

<sup>69</sup>E.g. R. Eliezer (c. A.D. 90) says the goal is preservation through the sorrows and afflictions of the last time. Loane, 88; Bertram, "Ωδῖν," TDNT 9:672.