

Plants and the Biblical Definition of Life: What is Life – Part II



A plant? from the Voynich manuscript written in the 15th century. The book has defied translation and interpretation since its discovery. Maybe the author was envisioning life on other planets:-)

Are plants alive? Ken Ham seems to think so since he refers to “animal or plant life in outer space.” But what does he mean by alive? I think he has only a secular scientific definition of life in mind when he makes these statements. I wonder if he even knows that his own website has published articles saying that plants are not alive at least in the same way that animals are.

In the previous post ([Ken Ham's Aversion to "Life" on Other Planets](#)) we looked at some of Ken Ham's recent statements concerning extraterrestrial life. Now I want to focus on the definition of life in the context of plants.

Everyone agrees that “intelligent” life is living even if the might not be able to put a specific definition on intelligence or life. I don't know anyone who doesn't believe that most animals are alive in a scientific and biblical sense. But fungi, plants, bacteria, jellyfish, worms, ants and ladybugs – are they alive? More and more frequently creationists are saying NO! They may meet the requirements of an artificial definition of life based on a set of measured physical characteristics. But the Bible does not define life in this way. Ironically, Ken Ham insists that we view the world through biblical glasses but here we find that he views plants in the same category as animals which is a purely scientific way of viewing the world. He has abandoned his biblical goggles for the microscope and has implicitly defined life as being composed on units we call cells or having hereditary material neither of which are criteria for life according to the Bible.

The Scriptural Definition of Life

God reveals through the author of Genesis that He created some things with *nephesh*. This is the Hebrew word usually translated living being in Genesis but also as life, soul or with breath. Things created with *nephesh* are some animals and humans. Nowhere are plants, bacteria or fungi ever referred to as having *nephesh*. Life is also described as being “in the blood” or the “flesh”, or having “breath”. Plants, bacteria, fungi and even insects do not fit into any of these criteria and so are not alive in a biblical sense. There are some verses in the Bible that may appear to refer to plant death but these references usually are in the context of an analogy or parable and aren't necessarily making any statements about the actual status of plants.

Let me share an example from the creationist literature to illustrate what I have just said. Before I do, I should admit that I generally agree with the author's conclusions – a rare event no doubt. Here we have John Morris from the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) in an article entitled: Are Plants Alive? <http://www.icr.org/article/are-plants-alive/>:

The answer to this seeming problem lies in a Biblical understanding of “life,” or “living.” Note that the Bible makes a sharp distinction between plants and animals. During Day Three of Creation Week, God commanded the inanimate earth to “bring forth plants” (Genesis 1:11,12), while on Day Five, He “created...every living creature that moveth” (v. 21). At this point, and on Day Six to follow, He instituted the concept of giving “life” (Hebrew nephesh) to non-living matter—something He did not do for plants. This required supernatural creation, and the resultant living animal kingdom was something new and different from all that had gone on before.

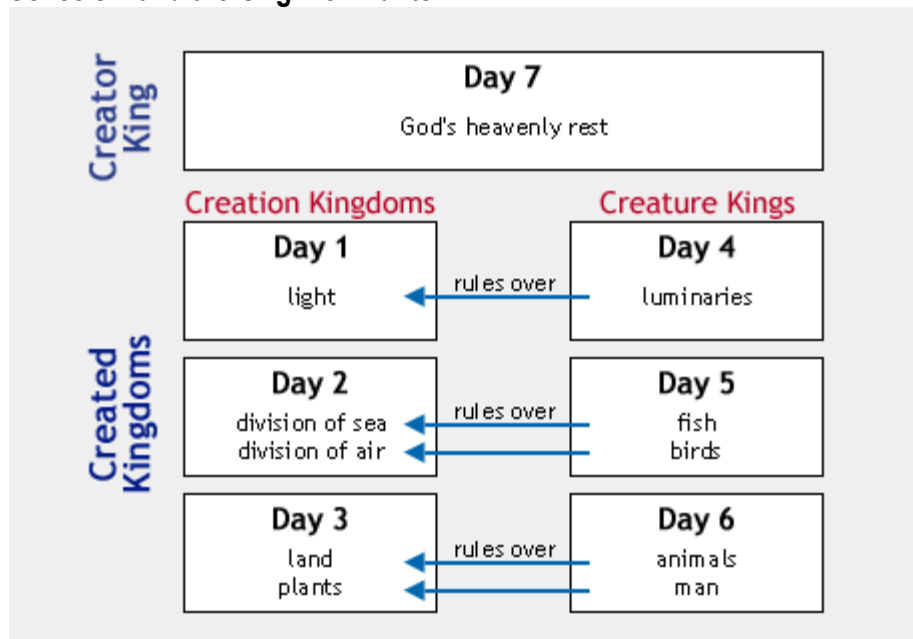
The Bible never refers to plants as living. They may “grow,” or “flourish,” but they do not “live.” Neither do they “die.” The Bible teaches that they may “wither,” or “fade,” but not “die,” since they are not “alive,” having neither “life” (nephesh), nor breath of life” (ruach), nor “blood” (i.e. “the life of the flesh is in the blood” [Leviticus 17:11]). This state may be analogous to lack of consciousness, so that, while biologically alive, plants are therefore not Biblically “living.” A similar argument can be made for some of the “lower” animals (perhaps some types of worms, sponges, etc.), and certainly for protozoans and viruses. Their “death” would not constitute death of truly living organisms.

Morris introduces the idea of being “biologically alive” as a way of distinguishing the scientific definition of life from that of Bible. In the Bible life is much more than just a set of physical properties. This is a good reminder that the Bible and science are asking different questions and thus have different definitions. The term living in the Bible has little to do with having hereditary material, being composed of cells or undergoing metabolism and thus to talk about biblical life is a different subject altogether. I would agree but this raises an interesting point. If plants are just biologically alive then this is just a way of saying they are nothing more than chemical reactions explainable by fundamental properties of chemistry and physics. They are not sentient,

conscious, or spirit-filled and thus are not really different from the rest of the world. We don't wage theological battles over the meaning or even existence of suffering in plants or even insects. Complex chemistry, yes – more than just chemistry – doesn't seem so. What reason then would anyone have to object to other planets having plants or bacteria than they would to other planets having mountains or waterfalls?

If you need a sleeping aid this evening, check out this exploration of the Biblical definition of life where the author tries to make the Bible into a science textbook: [“Life” According to the Bible and the Scientific Evidence](#) by Jim Stambaugh, originally published in 1992 and periodically republished on the AIG website. Here Stambaugh tries to parse out Bible verses to determine what sorts of cell tissues they may be referring to in hopes of finding the dividing line between what is living and non-living. He strongly advocates non-living status for plants and suggest that among animals even insects may not be really alive. Stambaugh concludes his article by saying: *..the Bible never ascribes to plants the attributes of a “living” thing. Since they are not “living”, they could not die when consumed. Death occurred in the world only after man sinned and God cursed His creation.*

Genesis 1 and the Origin of Plants



The two triad construction of Genesis 1. I found this figure on several sites with no attribution. If you know the original source please let me know.

The chart to the right shows one way to understand the structure of the Genesis 1 narrative. This is the basis of what is known as the framework hypothesis but many interpretations of Genesis 1 recognize this pattern in the seven days of creation. What is important to note is that the “creation kingdoms” are established on the first 3 days and then those kingdoms are filled by kings that will rule them on days 4 through 6. Fish fill the sea, birds fill the sky, and animals and man rule over the land and plants. In this framework the plants are objects of creation but not rulers. They don't play an active role in governing or assigning purpose to the world. They have

no “life” in the sense that they are responsible for anything. They are like rocks, waterfalls, oceans, the sky and so forth. They are just another object – the physical stuff – in the creation. The things created with *nephesh* – the breath of life – rule over or use the resources they have been given. They have something more than just physical being but have moral authority and purpose. This understanding of the order of creation lends support to the idea that plants are not considered alive in any sense that animals are alive. Plants are a part of creation like the land, sea and air. The plants were called forth from the ground and it is said that “The land produced vegetation” (NIV). So the land obeyed God’s command. It is unclear that this creation was any different than the land forming mountains, valleys or low places for lakes and seas.

Death, The Fall, and Plants

You might be thinking – what’s the big deal. Why should it matter if plants are considered alive or not? The lack of “life” in plants has become important to young earth creationists because of their insistence that there was *no* death before Adam’s transgression. A classic question regarding the prelapsarian world has always been how could there be no death of any living things in the Garden? Did ants, gnats, mosquitoes, bacteria not die? Wouldn’t some of them have accidentally gotten killed simply by being stepped on by an elephant? Could there have been millions of ants wandering and yet none of them be eaten. Was an anteater created as a plant eater or could they possibly have eaten ants because ants were not part of the “living” or “fleshly” world and thus not off-limits?

I suppose it could be argued that no ant was every killed in the Garden of Eden. After all, *where you there to witness it* as Ken Ham might say. But plant death is not a matter of debate. It is mandated by the scriptures since plants were given to animals and Adam and Eve to eat. In the past some creationists tried to qualify this by saying that plants gave fruit and leaves to animals to eat but the entire plant as a living being did not die just like we shed millions of skin cells each day but we don’t consider cell death the same thing as death of the whole organism. This view of plants ends up being quite nonsensical when it is explored with any depth. Nonetheless, is now more fashionable to say that eating of plants does not entail death in any way because a thing that is not alive cannot die. Similarly, insects may also be non-living – are not *nephesh* – and thus they do not die. They may be used up and remade as part of the ecology of the earth just as water forms a water cycle. They are just a part of the earth that is more animate than other objects like rocks and yet not with true life. They are more complicated chemistry but chemistry nonetheless.

By defining plants as not having life then literalist creationists appear to found an escape hatch to preserve their no-death the fall belief.

Plant Life on Other Planets

Do you see how this is connected with the alien life on other planets question? Ken Ham refers to animal and plant life on other planets but many of his own colleagues believe that plants are not alive. If they aren't alive then what objection could there be to finding a planet with a diverse set of plants on its surface or even insects flying in the air. God has created planets with amazing geological structures including eroded valleys, mountains, volcanoes, ice caps, geysers, etc... If God can create such diversity with materials of his universe then what could He not have created plants, bacteria, insects and fungi on other planets to go with those other creations?



Silurian Sea reconstruction by Richard Bizley: <http://www.bizleyart.com/> Could a planet somewhere look like this? This looks alien to us today but these are plants from our own past.

In the last decade we have already come to realize that the planets of our solar system are not nearly as special as we thought. There are billions of planets. To believe that this planet is the only one that has the right conditions for biological life is quickly

becoming near impossible. But Ham continues to hold to the idea that the physical characteristics of the Earth are absolutely unique in all of the Universe.

What is so special about the Earth is us. I agree with Ham that I don't expect to find humans or any other life created in God's image on other planets. There are no other beings in the Universe that have the same relationship with their maker that we do. But I can't say that God did not create some form of what we call biological life, by whatever means that He may have chosen, in other places.

Ken Ham fears evolution so much that he is afraid to let God be God but rather must put him in a box and say he could not have created plants elsewhere because they would give too much hope to evolutionists that evolution might be true. The evolution question is a topic for another day but right now I would point out that finding life on other planets doesn't automatically necessitate that evolution is the cause. That is one possibility but that isn't the only interpretation. Unfortunately Ken Ham holds out only two choices to his audience: no life or evolution.

Deep down I think that Ken Ham is afraid that if we look too hard we will find evidence of "life" on other planets and so he would rather not look. In fact, he can't look because he has constructed a theology of the Universe that has put such limits on when, where and how God can create. If life, by any definition, is found elsewhere his God will no longer exist.

That would be tragic for Ken Ham as a person but the bigger tragedy is that he is leading many others to believe that all life including plants and presumably bacteria and even viruses on earth

is so special that it can't be found anywhere else in the Universe. If it is found that will cause unnecessary angst for millions of his followers. Ironically, part of his problem is that he isn't even using biblical lenses to understand life, but rather accepting the secular definition of life. I think that some creationists recognize this and have started to tone down their rhetoric and now allow for some form of simple organic life to be part of God's universal creation but Ken Ham doesn't seem to have gotten that message yet and since he speaks as an authority figure it is his word that is transformed into the beliefs of so many that follow him.

What is life?

There isn't any easy answer. Hopefully I've given you a bit of the flavor of some of the difficulties with defining life. Science and the Bible clearly have different definitions. Neither are very precise but the Biblical definition is especially nebulous. This isn't surprising if we come to the scriptures hoping for a precise scientific definition when that is not what the Bible intends to teach. Just like YECs come to the Bible hoping for a scientific description of how God created things. To find such specifics in the Bible is to force it to say much more than it intends to say.

The biblical definition of life is not clear but the scientific definition of life is also murky. Are viruses alive? What about prions? Are cells taken from a human growing in a petri dish in a lab alive? What is death? Is cell death the same as organismal death? What is an organism? Is a parasite that depends on its host for everything a separate organism or really part of another organism? I have bacterial, plant, animal and fungal cells in my -70 Celsius freezer that have been there 15 years. Should we consider something alive during the time it is frozen or only when it is thawed and become active? The questions go on and on and on. The answers to these questions are not easy nor are the answers trivial. But the answers we give do impact many fundamental questions we have about ourselves and the world around us.

Back to the question – are plants alive? You have to tell me what life is before I can answer that question but I will tell you that I have two answers – Yes and No.