

MIMESIS IN THE BIBLICAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF GEN 1-2:  
RELATING THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF CREATION TO THE  
MODERN SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

In his concluding remarks summarizing the views presented by OT theologians in *Reading Gen 1-2*, Jud Davis describes his struggle to reconcile the “plain-language” meaning of text with scientific consensus. In the end he finds himself in an uncomfortable position because for him, an honest inquirer willing to submit to the evidence, there is no clear way to bring reconciliation to revelation and empirical enquiry. Our best reading of the texts about creation, the “plain-language” reading as Davis says, requires us to take the text literally—“one day” is one day. At the end of his piece he expresses his conviction that “there is a better solution to the antinomy between science and Scripture than is currently being forwarded by the majority of evangelical OT scholars.”<sup>1</sup>

When Davis refers to the views of the majority of evangelical OT scholars he is referring especially to those who interpret the text “non-traditionally,” that is, they find poetic features in the text that allow for non-literal interpretation of the biblical creation account.<sup>2</sup> For Davis, the major problems with these interpretations are that they do not adequately take into consideration NT interpretation of these texts, they are a clear departure from the traditional teaching of the church, and they force unnatural readings on the text.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Daryl Charles, ed., *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013), 6381. (These “page numbers” are locations in the Kindle reader. Unfortunately, I do not own the print version and the nearest library copy is in the Netherlands.)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5899. In *Reading Gen 1-2* those positions were represented by Dick Averbeck, John Collins, Victor Hamilton, Tremper Longman and John Walton.

<sup>3</sup> He specifically gives the problem as the most natural reading of *yom echad* is “one day” as in a literal 24 hour period. Davis lists a total of seven areas where we need to do more research but I perceive that his seven have these three at their root.

Davis' conundrum is the evangelical conundrum. On the one hand, Davis finds literary readings appealing: it would be nice if we could erase the problems between revelation and science by rereading the text. On the other hand, it is hard to believe such dramatically new readings when, according to Davis' assertion, before 1800 almost no interpreter read the text in such a way.<sup>4</sup> The evangelical conundrum remains: how do we read Genesis in an age of science?

Two opposing poles of influence draw the hearts and minds of evangelicals toward resolution. The first pole may be represented by *BioLogos* which does not take a stance on issues like inerrancy but does take a stand on issues like evolution leading some to believe it gives priority to the findings of science over against the historical view of the authority of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> The other pole could be represented by the organization *Answers in Genesis*. For *Answers in Genesis*, even when literary readings claim a high view of Scripture, they unintentionally cede it by compromising what is clearly meant to be "literal history."<sup>6</sup> The pull of these two poles is created by the conundrum which makes it difficult for evangelicals to accept literary readings while still upholding the veracity of the text. Unable to accept this middle ground they are forced to the poles: they must either reject scientific consensus or the historical view of biblical inerrancy.

The issue that I therefore propose to address is why literary interpretations have failed to convince evangelicals. Are they incorrect? Probably not, supported as they are by ANE research and text linguistics. But if they are correct, why are they so slow to be

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<sup>4</sup>Charles, *Reading Genesis 1-2*, 5909.

<sup>5</sup>In its core commitments BioLogos affirms "evolutionary creation." For an example of one who has so criticized BioLogos see and the response of BioLogos see Darrel Falk, "The BioLogos Forum: A Place for Conversation," *BioLogos*, n.d., <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/the-biologos-forum-a-place-for-conversation>. Accessed 2016-01-13.

<sup>6</sup>See Tim Chaffey, "Is Genesis 1–11 Historical Narrative?," *Answers in Genesis*, n.d., <https://answersingenesis.org/hermeneutics/how-should-we-interpret-the-bible-is-genesis-111-historical-narrative/>. Accessed 2016-01-13.

accepted by the evangelical community so novel to historical interpretation? I believe that part, perhaps much, of the answer to this question lies in Davis' use of "plain-language interpretation."<sup>7</sup> This terminology packs both popular appeal and deceptive power. Evangelicals are rightly reluctant to give up what seems obvious and what has always been accepted—and what the NT itself seems to clearly espouse—simply in order to appease materialistic scientific opinion. After all, going against the cultural flow is a spiritual virtue. Scholars such as Sparks give scholarly credence to evangelical intuition when they argue that a historical text cannot also be poetic.<sup>8</sup> The supposed majority OT scholarly view not only lacks popular appeal, it lacks persuasiveness beyond OT scholarship because it goes against this "plain-language interpretation."

To move towards resolution I propose that a more rigorous understanding of mimesis is in order. I believe that by unpacking the concept of mimesis, especially in Aristotle and Ricœur, we set a starting point that can help to reframe our conundrum and thus provide justification for sorting through how a text depicts and how it separates from reality while also explaining how such interpretations have been "lost" on readers throughout Christianity.<sup>9</sup> The literary readings are the plain-language readings of the intended audience.

There are specifically two relevant characteristics of mimesis. The first is that mimesis is an isomorphism of reality. That is to say that mimesis, as a representation of reality in narrative form, is a transfer of historical truth from the domain of space-time to

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<sup>7</sup>Davis uses this expression five times (locations 5927, 5934, 5953, 5979, 6009) in his chapter and at other places uses others such as "most natural reading" (location 6218).

<sup>8</sup>In a response to Wenham, Collins and others, who argued that Gen 1-3 is both historical and poetic, Sparks says that "if the narrative is strictly historical, then the author intends us to embrace the whole of it — talking snakes and all." In Charles Halton, ed., *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?: Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapters*, Counterpoints: Bible and theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 103.

<sup>9</sup>Davis overstates the disjunction between new literary interpretations and ancient but the point is nonetheless true that a relatively sharp distinction exists.

the domain of narrative in such a way that the truth intended to be communicated is accessible to the reader.<sup>10</sup> The fact that isomorphisms map reality onto a new domain suggests the second characteristic of mimesis: while mimesis depicts a world it also creates a new world.<sup>11</sup> Therefore by nature of transferal to the realm of narrative, mimesis necessarily results in some separation from reality. The key is that its separation is controlled by genre where genre is the cultural convention which facilitates the isomorphic transfer from one domain to another and thus controls the separation from reality in such a way that the reader is able to distinguish truth claims from literary convention. We can note that Plato and Aristotle distinguished mimesis from the writing of history, that this distinction was adopted by western culture, and that it was not until Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* that mimesis was reinstated in historical narrative. This helps to explain our reluctance to read Scripture as literature throughout the Christian period until now.<sup>12</sup>

My specific proposal calls for a monograph with supporting research divided into three phases. In the first I would articulate and defend this view of mimesis in order to draw a distinction between the genres of ancient historical narrative and modern or scientific historical narrative specifically with reference to the kind of truth they convey, how they convey truth, and how they distort reality. This discussion should provide the

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<sup>10</sup>Borrowing from Douglas Hofstadter's analogical use of the mathematical concept of isomorphism. He defines an isomorphism as an information preserving transformation. Douglas R Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 49. Key to the concept is that it can go both into another domain and back with the original information intact. This is basically Ricoeur's assertion with his mimesis 1, 2, and 3. Each of these stages of the mimetic process is the preservation of truth in transferring from one realm to another, and back.

<sup>11</sup>In other words, like metaphor, mimesis both 'is' and 'is not.' This assertion is the thesis of Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Halliwell and other more recent interpreters of Plato and Aristotle have significantly advanced our understanding of mimesis, see also Elizabeth Belfiore, "A Theory of Imitation in Plato's Republic," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 114 (1984): 121-46.

<sup>12</sup>Ricoeur's work was the apex of a half century long discussion on the role of narrative in historiography that includes many others who also advocated for mimesis in historiography (including in so-called scientific historiography).

opportunity for evangelicals at both poles to reconsider the literary center. It should help them understand how the NT understands the OT and how literary reading as a method may have been lost and yet not the essential truth claims of the text. Rather, recovering the literary nature of the text is an aid to us living in an age of science because it helps us see how the truth claims arise from the text. In addition, readers pressed by the evangelical conundrum should be able to see that while the text necessarily distorts reality, this need not erode our confidence in the text.

The mimetic nature of the biblical text comes at a cost as it creates a messy task of interpretation. But the cost is outweighed by its gain since only mimesis can bridge Lessing's ugly ditch. By portraying not only what happened but what generally or should happen, mimesis opens the door to a rich theology. Thus the second phase of the project will offer a specific theological interpretation of Gen 1-2 that builds on genre sensitivity and an awareness of literary structure and ANE context in order to identify the primary theological assertions of the text.<sup>13</sup> The exegesis here must transparently explore how the text makes its claims. The theological richness that arises from this reading of Gen 1-2 and the fact that it clearly sets up the theological trajectory of the biblical account should build our confidence in the mimesis of the text.<sup>14</sup>

The first two phases of this project lay the groundwork for the third, major task of this proposal requiring the most new research.<sup>15</sup> Now it will be possible to leverage

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<sup>13</sup>Specifically I will be suggesting that God's purpose in creation was to create a place where humanity dwells in his unmediated holy presence while fully experiencing his blessing and protection (Gen 1). Humanity was to act as God's representative in creation being tasked with maintaining God's original creation order (Gen 2). Together these theological assertions describe the original state of creation and the goal toward which all Scripture points. This second draws on a paper given at the 2015 annual ETS conference. Todd L. Patterson, "The Man-Woman Shaped Hole in Creation: A Mythos-Logical Reading of Gen 2," 2015.

<sup>14</sup>I think it would be beneficial and even necessary to include a discussion on how the theory of mimesis and its historical effects on interpretation interact with our understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture.

<sup>15</sup>In my dissertation I did a significant amount of research on this issue and that research was further advanced as I prepared a revision of the dissertation for submission to publishers (which I will be doing this

what has been gained not just from what the text teaches but how it teaches it in order to think through the primary assertions of the text, the claims on which those assertions rest (what must also be true), and the literary features of the text that create room for non-literal interpretation (and why that is the case). In this way we can explore in detail the nexus of the biblical teaching and the contemporary scientific view of cosmic and human origins. This phase will require a wisdom approach<sup>16</sup> that collaborates with philosophers and scientists from all regions of the evangelical spectrum. One result of this phase will be to identify major challenges where neither current biblical exegesis nor science can bend without breaking in their efforts to harmonize. However, the hope is that the theory of mimesis will give evangelicals the tools they need to harmonize biblical teaching and scientific inquiry into cosmic and human origins.

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month) Todd L. Patterson, "The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed: The Role of Plot in the Exegesis and Theology of Genesis" (Ph.D., Trinity International University, 2012).

<sup>16</sup>Where a wisdom approach encompasses the following values (among others): the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom (we cannot understand the world rightly and fully with a brand of scientific exploration that excludes him), revelation does not enter our minds directly but through interpretation which requires the application of wisdom (in the form of hermeneutical skill, virtue, knowledge, etc.), revelation is a subset of wisdom (revelation and a proper understanding of science must be compatible), scientific inquiry is the legitimate pursuit of wisdom because we are created with the ability (and task) to observe and discover the world around us and thus learn to uphold its order.