



Michael N. Keas

Essay Review

Collins and Dembski Offer Their Views of Theodicy and God's Creative Plan

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GENESIS 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary

by C. John Collins. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006. 318 pages. Paperback; \$17.99. ISBN: 9780875526195.

THE END OF CHRISTIANITY: Finding a Good God in an Evil World

by William A. Dembski. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2009. 254 pages. Hardcover; \$22.99. ISBN: 9780805427431.

CJohn (Jack) Collins and William Dembski have offered exegetical and conceptual tools to build a theodicy embedded within a view of origins that is responsive to both biblical and scientific studies. Each author spoke at the 2009 ASA Annual Meeting, but they did not present their views comparatively as I shall here. Collins, a leading Old Testament scholar, has developed a sophisticated literary and discourse analysis of the early chapters of Genesis. Dembski illuminates Genesis 1-3 by distinguishing between God's logical ordering of creation (*kairos*) and its implementation in natural history (*chronos*), and by applying to Genesis the delightfully simple notion of double creation (conception and realization). Taken together, with a few revisions that I shall suggest, Collins and Dembski give us a clearer

vision of the divine plan of creating a good world in which humans would freely sin with painful cosmic consequences. Individually their books are quite valuable, but each is significantly incomplete without the other.

Collins shows us how to cooperate closely with the divine-human authorial intention of the early chapters of Genesis. Particular Hebrew verb tenses distinguish between story background and main storyline. Genesis 1:1-2 provides the preface ("created" is *bara'* in the perfect tense) to the main creation week account, which begins with "And God said" – the first verb in the *wayyiqtol*, or main narrative tense. Formulaic beginnings ("and God said") and endings ("and there was evening and there was morning"), a climactic peak ("so God created man in his own image"), and other linguistic and literary devices give structure to the first biblical story (pericope).

Collins proposes an analogical workweek model for understanding the seven days of Genesis that is consistent with the linguistic and literary structure of the text. God's creative workweek is the analogical counterpart to our workweek. Because the "week" format is part of the analogy, Collins concludes that at least some of the sequential events in

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the passage may reflect logical, rather than chronological, order. Collins' analogical interpretation of the creation week resembles the "literary framework" view (though he critiques this), which can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Dembski further develops a partially nonchronological interpretation, as we shall see.

Judging from Collins' linguistic and literary observations (p. 101), the Bible's second (Gen. 2:4–25) and third (chap. 3) pericopes are more closely allied to each other than either is to the (first) creation week story. In Gen. 2:4b, midway through a unified chiasmic (mirror image) literary structure (Gen. 2:4) that introduces the second pericope, the Creator reveals himself as *yhwh elohim* (LORD God)—a composite divine name that extends through chapter 3, but that is otherwise rare in the Hebrew Bible. The Garden of Eden provides the common setting for Gen. 2:4–3:24, which unfolds a series of events that Collins identifies as normal prose narrative, in contrast to the exalted prose narrative of the first pericope. The exalted narrative character of the first pericope is generated by expressions such as "the greater light" and "the lesser light"—instead of the ordinary Hebrew words for sun and moon. The creation week comes to us neither as poetry, nor as ordinary prose narrative. It is fashioned as a rare biblical genre that, Collins cautions, requires special interpretive care.

Collins and Dembski disagree about the meaning of "good" in Gen. 1:1–2:3, and they also part ways regarding the precise consequences of humanity's fall. God, the only actor in the first pericope, creates a universe, which includes the millions of years of animal suffering and death prior to human existence, that Collins argues is "good," in the sense of *fulfilling God's purposes*. More details about human origins appear in the second pericope, and humanity's fall from grace is narrated in the third pericope. Human sin is the reason for human (not animal) suffering and death, Collins maintains. Many evangelical scientists have embraced this sort of theodicy. Is there a better way to reconcile God's goodness and omnipotence with a suffering world?

Dembski provides one of the best book-length arguments for the traditional Christian view that human sin is the reason for *all* natural evil in the cosmos, including animal suffering before human existence. He refurbishes a nineteenth-century "old-earth creationist" view that Adam's fall is the reason

for all natural evil, backward and forward in time. This view had acquired much of its justification from the parallel truth that Christ's atonement is efficacious for all believing humans, both before and after his substitutionary work on the cross. Dembski offers additional reasons to accept this theological parallel between the acts of Adam and Jesus.

Dembski develops some important conceptual tools to solve the puzzle of the chronological appearance of natural evil *before* human sin (here he assumes, for the sake of discussion, the standard cosmological-geological assessment of natural history). First, he theorizes that Genesis teaches a double creation: conception and realization. In its original conception in the divine mind, creation is completely good—it entails neither natural evil (suffering and death among creatures capable of experiencing pain) nor personal evil (human or angelic sin). However, in its realization in *this* cosmos (with the exception of the pre-Fall Garden of Eden), creation contains evil (both natural and personal) due to the tragic, but divinely foreknown, decision of humans to rebel against God. Angelic sin plays only a subsidiary role in Dembski's theodicy (for plausible reasons that he outlines). The Creator's original plan was even "very good" in view of its crowning achievement: sinless humans crafted in God's image. This very good creative act (divinely conceptualized in Gen. 1:1–2:3) turned bitter in its realization due to human rebellion against God. For this reason, God rewrote the originally "good" script of history, both backward and forward relative to the foreknown chronological moment of human sin. The resulting world (with the exception of the pre-Fall Garden of Eden)—one appropriate for our fallen condition—would be dominated by suffering, death, and extinction on a colossal scale. For the sake of his plan to redeem humanity, God preemptively judged the cosmos *chronologically prior* (but *logically subsequent*) to human sin.

In addition to double creation (conception-realization), Dembski also develops a parallel *kairos-chronos* distinction that has a strategic function within his theodicy. While Collins takes the creation week to constitute an analogy between God's creative work and our weekly work, Dembski urges a primarily kairological reading of the text—one that rejects "literary device" in favor of "actual (literal) episodes in the divine creative activity" (p. 142). Putting aside whether or not "literal" textual messages

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are communicated primarily by means of "literary devices" inherent within a text (here I lean toward Collins' affirmative answer over Dembski's apparent negation), I think Dembski's *kairos-chronos* distinction helps us understand the early chapters of Genesis. The creation week narrative primarily reveals the unfolding of God's intentional-semantic logic (Greek, *kairos*), rather than the ordinary chronological sequence (Greek, *chronos*) of his creative acts. However, like Collins, Dembski sees *some* broadly chronological teaching in Genesis 1, and even more so in recent reflections (see the statement from Dembski in David Allen, "A Reply to Tom Nettles' Review of Dembski's *End of Christianity*," February 2010, www.baptisttheology.org/papers.cfm).

Dembski outlines the main kairological units of God's creative work (p. 144):

- Day 1: Creation of light. "With all matter and energy ultimately convertible to and from light, day one describes the beginning of physical reality."
- Days 2 and 3: God orders an earthly environment suitable for animal and human life.
- Day 4: "God situates the earth in a wider cosmic context."
- Day 5: Creation of animals that inhabit sea and sky.
- Day 6: Creation of animals that inhabit dry land; creation of humans.

Drawing from Collins' linguistic-literary analysis of Genesis, one would conclude that Gen. 1:1, not day one, communicates the truth that God is the cause of all physical reality (the cosmos). Genesis 1:1, along with 1:2, which describes the earth's initial inhospitable condition, together function as the preface for the main story of God's Earth-focused creation week. I speculate that day one may simply mean that God is the Creator of light (in contrast to darkness), which is one of the most basic logical distinctions (or "separations" as the text expresses it) that humans, functioning according to God's design, are inclined to make in slicing up reality, using phenomenological (observational, nontheoretical) terms. Look everywhere at the world and know that God made it, Genesis affirms. Even the light by which we observe the world is God's creature, the text declares. Days two and three make similar nontheoretical logical divisions in the order of creation. Here God declares the separation of water above (rain clouds) from water below (water on Earth's surface), and then the separation of dry land from land covered by water.

Dembski argues that *kairos* and *chronos* intersected in the Garden of Eden. Here we encounter an evil-free paradise (a perfectly good realization of God's conceptual creation) surrounded by a preemptively set judgmental and redemptive fire (natural evil). Firefighters today operate similarly when they deliberately set backfires in an effort to contain a raging fire. Although humans initially experienced no evil or suffering in the Garden of Eden (there is no mention of such experience in the text of Genesis), Adam and Eve were able to *conceive* of the death penalty that God set as the punishment for ignoring his single moral imperative (God's words connect human minds to reality). Furthermore, the need for God to plant a garden in which to place the newly formed innocent man suggests that the rest of the globe was *not* a suitable testing ground for the exercise of human free will. Put otherwise, Genesis allows for the possibility that the earth was not the global paradise envisioned by young-earth creationists. The local paradise in Eden, which was a perfect instantiation of the originally intended kairological order of creation, was temporarily demarcated (with minimal intersection) from the ordinary domain of natural history (*chronos*). God may have expelled humans from the Garden of Eden for the *dual* purpose of denying them access to the tree of life and fully integrating them into the mainstream chronological flow of natural history, with its millions of suffering animal cries echoing through cosmic time.

Collins' account of the tree of life as a nonmagical sacrament fits well within Dembski's understanding of the Garden of Eden as the fleeting point of intersection between *kairos* and *chronos*. Access to this tree's fruit "would confirm the man in his moral condition: hence the need to gain (or retain) access to it by obedience." Collins continues: "This is why God does not want him to have it after his sin (Gen. 3:22): he would then be confirmed in his sinfulness forever, and this is horrible" (p. 115). If we accept the suggestions of Collins and Dembski, humans were expelled into an evil world for their own ultimate good.

Genesis 2:19 gives a retrospective glance at the earlier creation of animals, which the English Standard Version 2006 text edition, under Collins' editorial guidance, renders as, "Now out of the ground the LORD God *had* formed every beast of the field." Genesis makes no mention of prior animal suffering here because such suffering is logically (in the divine intentional-semantic sense) downstream from human

sin, if we accept Dembski's argument. Furthermore, the animals located in the Garden of Eden would have behaved in a nonpredatory manner chronologically prior to human sin (perhaps similar to animal behavior on Noah's ark). Genesis 2:4 might initiate what Dembski calls the second creation account, which is the chronological realization of key aspects of what was conceived in a particular logical order in God's mind (1:1–2:3). Collins' distinction between the exalted prose narrative of 1:1–2:3 and the normal prose narrative that begins in 2:4 is compatible with Dembski's *kairos-chronos* and conception-realization distinctions. Other scholars need to join this conversation and tease out additional details. There is interesting work to be done.

The creation week is divided into seven episodes (days), each of which ends with "there was evening and there was morning, the *n*th day," except for the seventh day. The absence of this formulaic ending to day seven (along with other exegetical arguments in Collins' book) suggests that day seven of God's creation week is the *analogical* (or *logical* in Dembski's intentional-semantic sense) container for the rest of history since the creation of humans. This understanding of the text is an alternative to the young-earth creationist scenario, namely, that God restructured the cosmos in the brief moments after human sin to create immune systems, predation, and other features associated with a fallen world. Such divine activity would seem to contradict God's creational Sabbath, which several New Testament passages view as continuing into the present (Collins' arguments here are worth noting). While Collins detects *analogy* between God's creative workweek and our repeating workweeks, Dembski offers a compatible *kairos-chronos* relationship. These two views are more plausible when held together, than either is in isolation.

We can fruitfully compare Collins' and Dembski's views of creation in other respects. Collins writes concerning the creation week: "The days are ... of unspecified length; but since this sequence is part of the analogy, it is possible that ... events on a particular day may be grouped for logical rather than chronological reasons." Dembski argues that the creation-week narrative emphasizes the intentional-semantic logic of God's creative work, rather than a chronological story of God's successive acts in the ordinary time experienced by humans. Collins thinks that the Bible's first pericope provides a broadly chronological creation account, with only some

room for nonchronological (logical) sequencing. Collins and Dembski agree (echoing many earlier theologians) that the most decisive evidence for the (at least partially) nonchronological character of the creation week is found in day four, in which the text addresses celestial lights: sun, moon, and stars. Both scholars agree that day four was not intended to teach us about the timing of the origin of these celestial bodies, though they differ in their reasons for this assessment. Collins shows that day four more likely refers to God's *declaration* of the *function* of these luminous heavenly bodies, rather than a statement of their origin or their first visibility on Earth (many old-earth and young-earth creationists have advocated the latter). Collins' exegetical argument is compatible with Dembski's case for the intentional-semantic logical emphasis of the Bible's opening story.

Other valuable points of comparison between Collins and Dembski surface in Collins' review of John H. Walton's *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), despite the fact that Collins was not mindful of Dembski in this somewhat devastating, but respectfully toned, review (reformedacademic.blogspot.com, Nov. 26, 2009). Collins and Dembski agree (in contrast to Walton) that the main point of Genesis is to introduce a *different* origins account than comparable ancient stories (differences overshadow similarities). "Moses sought to *shape* the worldview of Israel, not to *echo* it," Collins notes. Collins and Walton, in contrast to Dembski, declare the utmost interpretive importance of paying attention to the *literary* conventions of the ancient authors and audiences (although the two Old Testament scholars reach drastically different conclusions as to the meaning of Gen. 1:1–2:3). Dembski and Collins end up defending similar (or often complementary) viewpoints, but arrive at their conclusions by means of different disciplinary procedures.

My essay review aims to facilitate fruitful exchange in science and religion studies among scholars in neighboring disciplines. Theologians, like Collins, and philosopher-mathematicians, like Dembski, each benefit from such conversation. Do we not all benefit from such cross-fertilization when we ponder science and religion issues from multiple disciplinary vantage points? Future theodicy studies will need to include an integrated reading of Collins and Dembski. ◇