METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL REFERENTIALITY IN BIBLICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Deep suspicion surrounds the historical referentiality of the Old Testament historical texts. This suspicion has more than one root. Don Cupitt summarized the general postmodern suspicion about language when he said, "The meaning of sign is always 'sideways' and differential, not referential."[1] In other words, language is ultimately metaphorical, and metaphor is creative association rather than reference to reality. "This, at least, is the postmodern hypothesis," adds Kevin Vanhoozer, "that reality is ultimately a construction of linguistic usage, where pride of place for world-making goes to metaphor. On this view, metaphysics is merely the result of a highly persuasive media campaign."[2] Another root of the suspicion surrounding Old Testament texts comes from the resuscitation of a form of positivistic methodology (a methodology building only on so-called "scientific facts") among historians dealing with biblical Israel. Until a few decades ago only the historical referentiality of the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges had been questioned, but recently a group of historians rejected the historicity even of Iron-Age Israel (the kingdom of David and Solomon), which had earlier been believed, even by the most critical scholars, to be the foundation for the historicity of Old Testament Israel. The positivistic methodology of the "neo-Albrightean" school[3] questions whether biblical literature has any historical reference at all. The popularity of literary-critical methods among biblical scholars is a third root of the suspicion. Certain forms of literary-criticism reaffirmed the unity and the emotive and motivational power of texts, but separated them from their historical referent.[4] According to Iain Provan, "recent work on Hebrew narrative that has tended to emphasize the creative art of the biblical authors… has undermined the confidence of some scholars that the narrative world portrayed in the biblical texts has very much to do with the 'real' world of the

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[1] Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire* (London: SCM, 1987), 100. Quoted by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 131.

[2] Vanhoozer, 131.

[3] This loose group of historians includes such scholars as N. P. Lemche, T. L. Thompson, P. R. Davies, K. W. Whitelam and others. The label is Thompson`s in his essay "A Neo-Albrightean School in History and Biblical Scholarship." JBL 114 (1995): 638-98. On page 696 he says, "If we are to speak of a 'school' at all, the adjective 'neo-Albrightean' might fit our methodology." Thompson is unhappy with the title "positivistic," but Iain Provan makes a strong case to justify its use when referring to the methodology of this school (I. Provan, V. P. Long, T. Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, 3-104).

[4] An example for this trend is David M Gunn`s essay on biblical narrative: "New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative." Pages 566-77 in G. N. Knoppers and J. G. McConville (eds.), *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (SBTS, 8) (Winoma Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

past."[5] According to this trend, the narrative portions of the Bible have poetic and rhetoric force, but as "literature" they are likely a suspension of historical referentiality,[6] as many good fictions and ideologically driven oratory are. The neo-Albrightean school and the kind of literary-criticism that has little or none historical interest, can happily live side by side. Literary critics deal with the power of the texts, while historians search for reality outside the text. As the two disciplines are distinct, so are their subject matters: one is fiction the other is reality.[7]

The general tenet of the new suspicion is that we cannot go beyond the language of the biblical texts. Interestingly, the general postmodern suspicion about the referentiality of texts, and the "pre-postmodern" positivistic methodology of the neo-Albrightean school have one common motif: a *substitutionary* view of biblical language. In the postmodern suspicion language itself is seen as metaphorical, and thus standing in place of reality; in the positivistic methodology the language of the "ideologically driven" biblical texts stand in the place of the "facts" of historical science. Neither the postmodern, nor the "pre-postmodern" assumptions allow biblical language to have historical referentiality, because it is seen as ambiguous, emotive, indeterminate, arbitrary and creative, and therefore incapable for giving us direct access to reality. We either do not have direct access to reality at all, as the postmodern view claims, or our access is through non-literary means (like archeology), as the neo-Albrightean school argues.

THE SUBSTITUTIONARY VIEWS OF (BIBLICAL) LANGUAGE

The idea of *metaphor* is the key to the substitutionary views of biblical language. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle gave the following definition of metaphor: "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy."[8] This has been labeled as the "substitutionary theory" of metaphor. "The metaphorical word takes the place of a non-metaphorical word that one could have used (on condition that it exists); so it is doubly alien, as a present but borrowed word and as substitute for an absent

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[5] Provan, 5.

[6] "The production of discourse as 'literature' signifies very precisely that the relationship of sense to reference is suspended. 'Literature' would be that sort of discourse that has no denotation but only connotation." (Ricoeur, 220)

[7] Davies, for example, makes this distinction: "I am not saying that the literary Israel must be assumed *a priori* to be unhistorical. What I am saying is that it *is* literary and that it *might* be historical." (P. R. Davies, "Searching for 'Ancient Israel'." Pages 21-46 in *In Search of 'Ancient Israel.'* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992.) According to Davies and his "school" historicity must be established by other means (like archeology), not literature.

[8] *Poetics* 1457 b 6-9. Quoted by Paul Ricoeur in *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 13.

word."[9] One name (the figurative) stands for another (the literal) on the basis of a supposed resemblance. There is a transfer of meaning: the metaphor brings (phora) over (meta) a meaning from a piece of reality to denote another piece of reality. For Aristotle it was important that this transfer rests on a perceived resemblance between the metaphor and the reality denoted by it. Medieval and modern nominalists rejected the resemblance view but maintained other elements of the Aristotelian concept. If one accepts the substitutionary understanding of the metaphor, one believes that there exists a non-metaphorical (literal) word that the (figurative) metaphor replaces. "A metaphor is successfully interpreted when it is unpacked, translated into literal speech, and hence reduced to its underlying literal resemblance."[10] The use of metaphor has rhetorical purposes, and thus colors language, but this figurative use of language choice can be translated back into a less colored, literal meaning.

Modern linguistics and postmodern literary-criticism both accepted and modified the substitutionary view of metaphor. The first step was Ferdinand Saussure`s rejection of the idea of resemblance in naming reality. His nominalist approach saw only *arbitrary* signs in language that create sense through differences within the language system. Jacques Derrida further developed Saussure`s linguistics in a new direction. Derrida claimed that arbitrary linguistic signs are not only *different* from other linguistic signs, but they are also *deferred* from the reality they were first denoting. Différance,[11] not only difference is the main issue. All language is metaphorical because words speak about things in a mode of "is and is not."[12] When we say that "the sun sets," we use a metaphor. We bring into the description of a piece of reality a word from the realm of another piece of reality. We know that the sun does set, and yet that it does not "set." According to Derrida language itself, and not just its metaphors, is metaphorical.[13] The word "sun" is also a metaphor: a piece of reality has been arbitrarily given that name (whether based on resemblance or arbitrarily is a secondary question here). The philosophical and scientific language that aims for precision makes the mistake of identifying the name with the reality, using the word "is" instead of the word "as." But when we recognize that all language is metaphorical, we cannot identify the sign with the signified anymore. The concept of iterability (non-identical repetition) supports this thesis. According to Derrida, "A written signs carries with it a force that breaks with its context."[14] The context in which the signs appear again are very different from the context in

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[9] Ricoeur, 19.

[10] Vanhoozer, 128. Vanhoozer explains the substitutionary view here, not his own.

[11] A word coined by Derrida, expressing both Saussurean "difference" and the "deference" of context. The coining of a new word is also a demonstration of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

[12] Vanhoozer, 130. In these pages I follow Vanhoozer`s interpretation of Derrida in his *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*

[13] "It is Derrida`s contention that concepts and texts alike are radically metaphorical and are thus irreducible to literal language." (Vanhoozer, 127)

[14] Derrida, "Signature Event Context", 182. Quoted by Vanhoozer, 79.

which they were first used, and thus the referent cannot be the same. Derrida claims that "there is nothing outside the text," meaning by that that there is no non-metaphorical way of speaking about the world.[15] Even the word metaphor is a metaphor![16] That means that there is no such thing as historical referentiality. We can never refer to a reality that is outside the text.

The growing emphasis on literary-criticism in biblical disciplines, a phenomenon that in some respect is to be welcomed by evangelicals, is also a sign of a growing despair about historical referentiality in language. In light of the above postmodern linguistic theories, language seems to be unable to give us direct access to reality. If linguistic signs are voluntary, and they are always ambiguous and equivocal when they refer to reality, then we are lost in indeterminate texts when we try to rely on literary witnesses. The text closes in itself, or ends up in a closed circle of intertextuality.[17] If language itself is metaphorical, and thus there are no ultimate "literal" words that the metaphors stand for, then we do not have direct access to reality through language. Words are doubly distanced from their referents: by their metaphorical nature and by the fact that they are removed from the original context. Literary texts are self-referential. Ricoeur notes that "the dominant current of literary criticism, European as well as American, does not have split reference in mind, but more radically the destruction of reference."[18] Without recognizing (or articulating) the link between their skepticism and the deconstructionist despair about language, the neo-Albrightean school of Davies, Thompson, and Lemche comes to very similar conclusions. As the old-school positivists did, they still believe in "scientific" language, a language without metaphorical ambiguities and rhetorical motivations, but they do not find that idealized "pure" language in the biblical texts. The neo-Albrightean positivists therefore search for historical referentiality outside the literary world, in silent stones and dumb pottery. This is another form of substitution: the substitution of non-literary memories for literary texts. Seeing the amount and diversity of historical texts in the Bible, it is remarkable that the positivistic school would entirely discard that literature, while embracing silent testimonies instead. But it is logical if you see (biblical) literature as a suspension of historical referentiality.

The suspicion towards biblical historical texts (rooted in a positivistic methodology), and the general postmodern suspicion about the referential nature of language (rooted in a theory of the metaphorical nature of language) meet when historians are face to face with the *poetic* character of many narrative portions of the Bible. Many biblical narratives have rhetorical purposes, expressed

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[15] In Derrida`s linguistic philosophy the question of intertextuality, the idea that there is an infinite web among texts gaining meaning from each other, strengthens the thesis that "there is nothing outside the text."

[16] Paul Ricoeur says the same: "[T]he word *metaphor* itself is metaphorical because it is borrowed from an order other than that of language." (Ricoeur, 17) "It is impossible to talk about metaphor non-metaphorically (in the sense implied by borrowing); in short… the definition of metaphor returns on itself." (Ibid, 18)

[17] Hence Derrida`s famous phrase: "There is nothing outside the text."

[18] Ricoeur, 224.

by the power of equivocal metaphors. (In Aristotle`s system, metaphor was the link between rhetoric and poetics.)[19] The poetic-rhetoric (and thus metaphorical) nature of many biblical narratives is a red flag for those historians who identify rhetoric with ideology, and who reject a literary source when the referent is ambiguous. The modern Jewish exegete Umberto Cassuto frequently emphasizes "the poetics" of the Hebrew narrative.[20] There is of course a difference between poetry and narrative prose, but the difference is not absolute. Ricoeur makes a distinction between the "poetic function" of language and "poem" as a "literary genre."[21] Most Hebrew narratives are not poems, but have some kind of poetic function. Their rhetoric finds expression through repetition, chiastic structure, rhythm, and figures of speech. The Book of Genesis is full of metaphorical images: the serpent, the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a firmament across the sky, a primeval depth, etc. Anthropocentric language is common when the biblical texts refer to God (he is angry, he coops down to hear humans speak, he repents, he has a mouth, ears, eyes, and a hand, he has wings, and a back that Moses can see). Such metaphorical language is proof for the skeptic that the historical referentiality of biblical texts cannot be taken seriously. These pictures certainly have emotive power, but they only substitute for the real signs (unequivocal scientific language or archeological data) that have true historical referents. Postmodern suspicion goes one step further when it denies that there is any linguistic sign with corresponding historical referent. In any case, the metaphorical nature of (biblical) language is seen as an obstacle for historical referentiality.

ANOTHER LOOK AT METAPHOR AND LANGUAGE

In his multi-disciplinary (linguistic, literary, philosophical) masterpiece *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur passionately defends the role of metaphor in denoting reality. Beginning with a study on Aristotle`s rhetoric and poetics, and a study on the decline of rhetoric, Ricoeur travels through the fields of tropology, semantics, semiotics, hermeneutics and philosophy, and attempts to give a more positive view of the role of metaphor in language and reference. Some of his ideas creatively overcome the obstacles created by the view that builds on a substitutionary theory of metaphor. In the next few pages I will use Ricoeur`s arguments in order to clear the way for what I believe are the real issues in determining the historical referentiality of the biblical texts.

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[19] "The split between rhetoric and poetics is of particular interest to us, since for Aristotle metaphor belongs to both domains." (Ricoeur, 12)

[20] E.g. Cassuto, Umberto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1951), 223.

[21] Ricoeur, 222.

One substantial problem with the substitutionary view of the metaphor is that when language itself is seen as essentially metaphorical, there is nothing that we could put in the place of the metaphor. In the substitutionary theory there is always a word that "literally" denotes what the metaphor "figuratively" refers to. However, when we see the "literal" word also as a metaphor, then we only have first-degree metaphors and second-degree metaphors. The classical metaphors, what we normally call metaphors, are metaphors of metaphors. "God is a rock" is a classical metaphor. We can replace the metaphorical word "rock" with the literal words "powerful," "protective," "stable," etc. The image becomes less colorful, but this is only one problem with the transfer. The bigger problem is that instead of a second-degree metaphor we now have a first-degree metaphor, which is nevertheless still a metaphor.[22] "Literal application is simply the one that has been endorsed by usage."[23] Because of common usage and tradition we do not see those words as metaphors, but the adjectives "powerful," "protectice," "stable" still have that ambiguity of referring to what "is" and "is not."[24] The neo-Albrighteans see the danger that metaphor can actually destroy historical referentiality, so they desperately try to make a distinction between scientific language and rhetorical or ideologically driven language. Ricoeur would not go in that direction. His way of dealing with the problem is by questioning the nominalistic substitutionary view of metaphor and by reappraising the role of metaphor in making sense of the world.

Ricoeur first of all questions the nominalism of the Saussurean tradition and returns to Aristotle`s realism. Ricoeur emphasizes that Aristotle was right when he based the theory of metaphor on resemblance (mimesis). "The closeness of metaphor to simile brings to language the relationship that operates in metaphor without being articulated, and confirms that the inspired art of metaphor always consists in the apprehension of resemblances."[25] Aristotle`s mimesis-theory was heavily criticized by modern scholars as a form of naivety (good art does not *copy* reality!). "Most of them see in this concept the original sin of Aristotelian aesthetics."[26] But Ricoeur points out that "It is only since the exclusively modern opposition between figurative and non-figurative art that, ineluctably, we are really approaching the Greek *mimêsis*."[27] But we do not have to accept the disruption of figurative and non-figurative, nor a naïve view of resemblance. "As for *mimêsis*, it stops causing trouble and embarrassment when it

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[22] "For a nominalist perspective, the problem posed by metaphorical application of predicates is no different from that posed by their literal application: 'The question why predicates apply as they do metaphorically is much the same as the question why they apply as they do literally.'" (Ibid, 236)
[23] Ibid, 236-7.
[24] "We cannot say what reality is, only what it seems like to us." (Ibid, 253) "The paradox consists in the fact that there is no other way to do justice to the notion of metaphorical truth than to include the critical incision of the (literal) 'is not" within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) 'is.'" (Ibid, 255)
[25] Ibid, 27.
[26] Ibid, 37.
[27] Ibid.

is understood no longer in terms of `copy` but of redescription."[28] Metaphor redescribes reality on the basis of some resemblance. It is in this mature form that Ricoeur advocates a new form of realism in place of nominalism.[29]

As to how this redescription of reality happens has been generally misunderstood in the past, says Ricoeur. All discussion of metaphor has gradually been moved from the area of rhetoric to the area of tropology (figures of speech). Metaphor was made "an accident in naming," and it was given "a simply ornamental function."[30] In other words, it has been believed that metaphor can be replaced by a literal word, of which metaphor is only an ambiguous, emotive substitute. This movement of restricting metaphor to the area of tropology took the substitutionary theory in a direction that caused major problems in appreciating its role in sense and reference. If on the one hand metaphor has only an ornamental role, and we should be able to replace it by a non-metaphorical word, and on the other hand literal words themselves are metaphorical, we lose historical referentiality. Ricoeur suggests, therefore, that metaphor must be freed from the confines of tropology. Metaphor is not simply an ornament in language use, nor is it simply one type of figurative speech,[31] it is rather a creative and even heuristic tool.

Metaphor is *seeing differently*. "[I]t is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh."[32] But the fresh seeing is the result of more than ornamenting a colorless word. Metaphor is creation *as well as* conforming to reality. There is a double tension in the mimetic use of metaphor: "submission to reality *and* fabulous invention, unaltering representation *and* ennobling elevation."[33] Both the creative element and the element of submission are important. Metaphor is confined by reality, but it also redescribes it in a way that is worthy of that reality. "This double tension constitutes the referential function of metaphor in poetry. Abstracted from this referential function, metaphor plays itself out in substitution and dissipates itself in ornamentation; allowed to run free, it loses itself in language games."[34] The "double tension" of the metaphor is its glory not its shame. A good metaphor is not a figurative substitute of a natural denotation, but a more appropriate, more fitting naming of a piece of reality than other potential words. "If the 'strange' and the 'noble' meet in the 'good metaphor,' is it not because the nobility of such language befits the grandeur of

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[28] Ibid, 245.

[29] Ibid, 243. "Therefore, it is only through a grave misinterpretation that the Aristotelian *mimêsis* can be confused with imitation in the sense of copy. If *mimêsis* involves an initial reference to reality, this reference signifies nothing other than the very rule of nature over all production. But the creative dimension is inseparable from this referential movement. *Mimêsis* is *poiêsis*, *poiêsis* is *mimêsis*." (Ibid, 39)

[30] Ibid, 47.

[31] Ibid, 61. "For Goodman as for Aristotle, metaphor is not one figure of discourse among others, but the transference principle common to all of them." (Ibid, 237)

[32] Ibid, 34.

[33] Ibid, 40.

[34] Ibid.

the actions being depicted?"[35] Metaphor gives the referent a life that we would not see without it. "*Lively* expression is that which expresses existence as *alive*."[36] Because metaphor helps us see reality in a fresh way, it has sometimes been called a "verbal icon."[37] An icon stands for something greater. It has resemblance with the thing it represents, it is a window to a transcendent reality, and it is more powerful than a simple sign.

Ricoeur argues that the metaphor has a positive strategy with a negative counterpart when it plays part in a sentence. The metaphor destroys literal meaning through innovation. The innovation is attained through the 'twist' of the literal meaning. Contrary to the substitutionary theory, however, the metaphor is not replaceable. "It is this innovation in meaning that constitutes the living metaphor."[38] But if there can be an innovation of *meaning*, after the destruction of a supposed literal meaning, can there be an innovation in *reference*, too? At this point Ricoeur establishes one of the most important things about the relationship between metaphor and historical referentiality. "Can one not say that, by drawing a new semantic pertinence out of the ruins of the literal meaning, the metaphorical interpretation also sustains a new referential design, through those same means of abolition of the referent corresponding to the literal interpretation of the statement?"[39] "A metaphorical reference would correspond to the metaphorical meaning, just as an impossible literal reference corresponds to the impossible literal meaning."[40] To put it simply, the metaphor cannot be replaced by a literal word and still have the same reference. The metaphor has its own reference, a lively, ennobled reference. "In the metaphorical discourse of poetry referential power is linked to the eclipse of ordinary reference."[41] The metaphor not simply describes, it redescribes. And this redescription is a movement of submission to reality as well as a creation of a new reference. A simple sign is replaced by a verbal icon.

The creative nature of the metaphor has a *heuristic function*, too. In Ricoeur`s opinion, those who only ascribe historical reference to scientific language are entirely misled by their substitutionary theory. If language has a sense, it also has a reference (unless that reference is suspended, as in many literary/fictional works). The question whether a word or a statement is literal or metaphorical is irrelevant to the question of whether it has a reference or not. "My whole aim is to do away with this restriction of reference to scientific statements."[42] The positivistic approach sees metaphorical statements as emotive, having connotative rather than denotative functions. "Critiques shaped by the

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[35] Ibid, 41.
[36] Ibid, 43. The French title of Ricoeur`s book is *La métaphore vive*.
[37] Ibid, 225.
[38] Ibid, 230.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 239.
[42] Ibid, 221.

school of logical positivism state that all language that is not *descriptive*, in the sense of giving information about *facts*, must be *emotional*. Furthermore, the suggestion is that what is 'emotional' is sensed purely 'within' the subject and is not related in any way whatsoever to anything outside the subject. Emotion is an affect which has only an inside and not an outside."[43] This is a serious misunderstanding of the nature of language, and especially the nature of the metaphor. Rather than being a self-referential, emotive ornament, metaphor is a heuristic tool! "It would seem that the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that it 'invents' in both senses of the word: what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents."[44] Ricoeur compares the metaphor to the scientific *model*: "with respect to the relation to reality, metaphor is to poetic language what the model is to scientific language."[45] The model in scientific language is essentially "a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation."[46] A model is an instrument of redescription, the same way the metaphor redescribes reality. A scientific model does not belong to the category of proof or justification, it is rather a means for discovery. The epistemological significance of these schemes has been powerfully demonstrated and explained by Michael Polanyi in his magnum opus *Personal Knowledge*.[47] Ricoeur emphasizes that there is no substantial difference between the heuristic logic of these models and the role of metaphor. "To remove the model from the logic of discovery, or even to reduce it to a provisional measure as the best substitute available for direct deduction, is ultimately to reduce the logic of discovery itself to a deductive procedure."[48] And this is where Ricoeur`s realism becomes very significant. The good metaphor is that which best captures, and even discovers for us, the piece of reality it denotes. Metaphor, far from being a redundant or ornamental part of language, plays an absolutely crucial role in giving us access to reality.

From this it follows that the ambiguity and equivocality of metaphorical language is not necessarily a weakness, it can also be its strength when it comes to historical reference. Aristotle pointed out that poetry is more philosophic than history. "History recounts what has happened, poetry what could have happened. History is based on the particular, poetry rises towards the universal."[49] This must be modified in light of the above mentioned "double tension" that characterizes the metaphor. Metaphorical language in historical narrative does submit to historical reality, while making also a step into a creative redescription, which can also be a step toward more ambiguity and less

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[43] Ibid, 226-7.

[44] Ibid, 239.

[45] Ibid, 240.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

[48] Ricoeur, 242.

[49] Ibid, 39.

specificity. The image of a firmament on the sky, or a serpent in the garden, or the wing of God, are less specific descriptions than a language that speaks of a troposphere and a stratosphere, a fallen angel called devil (though this is another form of metaphorical speech), or the love, promise and power of God that hides and protects us. But they are also weaker denotations than firmament, serpent and wing. Not simply because they lack the emotive force that the metaphorical words have, but also because they lack some of the vagueness, richness, and some of the semantic fields that the metaphors evoke. "[W]hat happens in poetry is not the suppression of the referential function but its profound alteration by the working of ambiguity."[50] Ricoeur quotes Roman Jakobson: "The supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous."[51] The two must not be confused with each other; ambiguity and a lack of reference are not the same. "The double-sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee, and what is more in a split reference, as is cogently exposed in the preambles to fairy tales of various peoples, for instance, in the usual exordium of the Majorca storytellers: 'Aixo era y no era' (It was and it was not)."[52] According to Ricoeur, this 'It was and it was not' "contains *in nuce* all that can be said about metaphorical truth."[53] It is important that the ambiguity is deliberately created, not to weaken the historical reference but to alter it and make it equivocal, ambiguous, live. The more levels of metaphors a language contains, the more general and ambiguous its reference becomes. The first-degree metaphors of "ordinary" linguistic signs are less ambiguous than the second-degree or even third-degree metaphors of a poetic speech. There is some ambiguity even in so-called "literal" denotations, including proper nouns, but this ambiguity increases as more and more meaning is brought into a fertilizing relationship with the original word. This process opens up more and more options for interpretation, but it also helps us discover pieces of reality that without the heuristic tool of the metaphor would remain in the darkness of unknowing. Equivocality therefore has a generalizing effect and a revelatory power at the same time.

Before I turn to what I believe is the real demarcating line in the question of historical referentiality, I should mention two points that Kevin Vanhoozer makes in connection with rhetoric and the issue of historical referentiality. In his influential book on hermeneutics, he gives a detailed answer to some of the challenges of modern linguistic and literary theories about sense and reference. Vanhoozer emphasizes that the metaphorical nature of language only obliterates reference if we have a perfectionist attitude to metaphor. Derrida`s mistake is not that he identifies the "is" and "is not" dichotomy of each metaphor (and linguistic sign), but that he concludes from this that the indeterminacy of language

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[50] Ibid, 224.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid,
[53] Ibid.

necessarily ends in a relativity of interpretation. According to Vanhoozer, we must "distinguish between the *inexhaustibility* of meaning and its *indeterminacy*."[54] We can have an adequate understanding of the metaphor if we interpret it responsibly. Moreover, "only the premise of adequate literary knowledge can ensure that interpretation will be responsible."[55] "Texts may be determinate enough to convey meaning without being specifiable enough to overcome all ambiguity. Texts may be rough, but they do have edges."[56] The fact that a historical narrative in the Bible has expressions and statements which are ambiguous does not mean that we are totally uncertain with regard to their referents. What we need is not only knowledge but also wisdom and good judgment.[57]

Vanhoozer`s other point is very important. Those historians who are suspicious about narrative texts that have rhetoric force and persuasive aim, do not take into account the fact that language always functions in communicative situations. Vanhoozer utilizes J. L. Austin`s speech-act theory, and demonstrates that texts, as much as oral speech, are partakers of communicative situations. The three speech-acts (locution, illocution, and perlocution) determine the communicative function of texts. This means that rhetoric, poetic force, and the metaphorical nature of language must be appreciated as elements of human communication. The power of persuasion is not in itself a distortion of historical reference. The locution and illocution of the narrative appears in a communicative situation that has a perlocutionary force as well. The positivistic argument that limits trustworthy historical reference to scientific language is completely at odds with how human communication works.

THE REAL ISSUE

In the above discussion I tried to argue that the metaphorical nature of historical discourse does not obliterate reference to reality. Rhetorical, poetic language is rather a heuristic tool in a communicative situation, a way of seeing and showing things freshly. The indeterminacy of the metaphor does affect its referent, but we can still have an adequate access to it if we read it responsibly. The real issue in determining the historical reference of biblical texts lies elsewhere.

Those who identify rhetorical and poetic language with *fictional* (as opposed to *real*) representation make a hasty decision. They have two assumptions. The first assumption is that poetic and rhetoric devices indicate that what we have in our hands is "literature." The second assumption is that "literature" is characterized by a suspension of reference. As Ricoeur summarizes

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[54] Vanhoozer, 139.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid, 140.
[57] Ibid.

it, "The production of discourse as 'literature' signifies very precisely that the relationship of sense to reference is suspended. 'Literature' would be that sort of discourse that has no denotation but only connotation."[58] He of course disagrees with that statement. His counter-arguments go more or less along the lines above described in connection with metaphor. He admits that there are literary works that are fictional, and they suspend *specific* historical referentiality in order to emphasize more general truths about reality. But reference – though it might be distanced from the concrete, specific historical scene – is never entirely suspended. I agree with Ricoeur`s approach, but it is not satisfactory when we come to the question of the historical referentiality of biblical texts. If we say that the literary texts of the Bible are referential, but only in a general sense, we become powerless before the arguments of the neo-Albrightean school. In this case biblical literature can tell us true things about the laws governing our world, about human nature, about religious motivations, but not much about an actual Israel in an actual land in a particular time period. We might agree with Ricoeur that mimesis takes place in "mythos," and "mythos" is referential in a general sense, but if that is all we can say about referentiality, the Goliath of 1 Samuel will only have as much connection with reality as the Cyclopses of Homer`s *Odussey*. A lot of reflection on our world – without much historical value (beside some general moral or existential teaching). We need to go beyond Ricoeur`s otherwise helpful discussion and make one further distinction about literary works. Literary works can be both generally and specifically referential, depending on the purpose of the author. The purpose of the author decides, not the type of language used.

In his *The Art of Biblical History*, V. Philips Long deals with this problem. He quotes Roland Barthes as one who challenges the representational capacity of narrative discourse. "Claims concerning the 'realism' of narrative are therefore to be discounted," says Barthes. "The function of narrative is not to 'represent,' it is to constitute a spectacle… Narrative does not show, does not imitate… 'What takes place' in a narrative is from a referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming."[59] To answer Barthes and others who think similarly, Long takes an illustration from the art world. His former art teacher, Karl Steele, was criticized by abstract (expressionist) artists that his paintings were representational and therefore not artful enough. In reality, his paintings were tiny abstract pictures, which, taken together and watched from the proper vantage point, depicted a scene realistically. His art was representational, though his methods were "fictional," not "literal." Long applies that illustration to how historiography and fictional techniques relate to each other. "The above illustration relates to the issue of historiography in the following manner.

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[58] Ricoeur, 220.

[59] Quoted by Long in V. Philip Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 65.

Common sense suggests that it would be a *reduction ad absurdum* to argue that since Steele`s paintings at one level make use of techniques indistinguishable from those employed by abstract or expressionist painters, they therefore cannot be representational, or make reference to reality outside themselves."[60] This is exactly what Barthes says in the above quotation. Long does not want to discard Barthes`s point altogether, but he does want to make an important distinction. ("Barthes`s statement may be true of some narratives but surely not all.")[61] "If paintings can be broadly divided into representational and nonrepresentational varieties, into those that attempt to depict some aspect of the world outside and those that simply celebrate the potentialities of paint as a medium, then is it possible that narrative can be similarly classified?" Long`s answer is an emphatic yes. "I would contend that a distinction can and should be made between narratives that are essentially representational (historiographical) and those that are not."[62]

The real issue therefore is not whether a literary work that employs metaphorical (poetic and rhetorical) language can have historical reference or not. The question is *how we make the decision* if a particular piece of literature – in our case the biblical narrative texts – do have such reference or not. "[T]he real issue is which evidence is to be taken seriously."[63] I would contend that *the choice of suspension of specific reference is made by the author not the reader*. The question of authorial intent has been hotly debated in the last several decades, but there have been successful attempts by scholars (Vanhoozer`s *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* is a great example) to defend authorial intent from the assaults made by advocates of deconstructionism and reader-response literary-criticism. If the presence or absence of rhetorical devices do not by themselves establish or obliterate reference, it is the authorial intent that must decide if a piece of literature is meant to be read as representational (historically referential in a specific sense) or not. If a narrative text claims to be representational, we should read it as such, unless we have good reasons to doubt the claim. The techniques used by the author or the emotive power of the text are not decisive. What decides is whether the claim of the author is the claim of a trustworthy witness or not. This is exactly Iain Provan`s argument in *A Biblical History of Israel*, to which we lastly turn our attention.

Provan (in general agreement with V. P. Long and T. Longman III) emphasizes that "Testimony lies at the very heart of our access to the past."[64] "We know about the past, to the extent that we know about it at all, *primarily* through the testimony of others."[65] Except for morally collapsing societies, where cynicism and a lack of trust permeate all areas of life, normal, everyday conversation is

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[60] Ibid, 64.
[61] Ibid, 65.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Provan, 9.
[64] Ibid, 37.
[65] Ibid.

based on the principle of falsification rather than verification. "Suspicion, we know, may sometimes be justified. Yet we recognize that healthy people generally place trust in the testimony of others, reserving suspicion for those who have given grounds for it."[66] A thoroughgoing suspicion with regard to testimony would not be considered to be a sensible behavior the same way blind acceptance of every testimony would be seen as unwise. In Provan`s opinion the same attitude should characterize us when we come to testimony about the past. We have to make a choice if we believe the testimony of the witness, but our choice should be guided by the principle of falsification rather than the principle of verification. The "headlong rush to skepticism" is insufficiently critical about "the sacred cow" of the critical tradition: the verification principle itself.[67] "Why should not ancient historical texts rather be given the benefit of the doubt in regard to their statements about the past unless good reasons exist to consider them unreliable in these statements and with due regard (of course) to their literary and ideological features? In short, why would we adopt a verification rather than a falsification principle?"[68] As the hyper-critical scholarship of the neo-Albrightean school shows, we can erase entire countries and nations from the past if we bow down before the "sacred cow" of the verification principle. Provan quotes B. Halpern who says, "[H]istory cannot base itself on predictability… Lacking universal axioms and theorems, it can be based on testimony only."[69] Provan adds, "history is telling and retelling of unverifiable stories."[70] "Only by embracing such epistemological openness to testimony, biblical and otherwise, can we avoid remaking the past entirely in our own image."[71]

CONCLUSION

The "poetic of Hebrew narrative"[72] is a well-known phenomenon. According to Provan, Hebrew historiography is scenic, subtle, and succinct.[73] It has rhetorical and poetic features that fit the communicative functions of the authors` testimonies. "[B]iblical accounts must be appreciated first as narratives before they can be used as historical sources."[74] The use of metaphorical language and language as metaphor must be appreciated and enjoyed. We should use them as verbal icons and see reality (even past reality) with their help. My argument in this paper is simply that "a happy marriage between literary and historical

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[66] Ibid, 48.
[67] Ibid, 55.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 73.
[70] Ibid, 74.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid, 91.
[73] Ibid, 91-3.
[74] Ibid, 93.

concerns is possible, desirable, and necessary."[75] A biblical narrative depicts the past through metaphorical language and language that is essentially metaphorical, neither of which obliterate historical reference. The real issue is not metaphor but whether we can trust the witnesses whose testimonies we are reading. The reliability of the authors of the Old Testament should be the topic of another paper, coupled with the even more fundamental question of the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. My aim in this paper was to clear the way for that other discussion.

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[75] Ibid, 81.

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