

Interpreting Science and Scripture: Genesis 1-3

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SUMMARY

The early chapters of Genesis continue to be the subject of important debates among theologians and scientists. Our aim in this paper is to briefly explore three inter-related issues that, taken together, can point us toward a general configuration that best represents Genesis 1-3 in the science and Scripture discussion. The key issues

considered are the contextual setting of the story of creation, its narrative beginnings as a creation story and its narrative trajectories. The concerted force of these investigations, aided by insights drawn from the work of Paul Ricoeur, will allow us to propose that Genesis 1-3 is a semantic innovation that has the attributes of a poetic historiography.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die ersten Kapitel des Buches Genesis sind weiterhin Gegenstand wichtiger Debatten von Theologen und Naturwissenschaftlern. Mit diesem Artikel beabsichtigen wir, kurz drei miteinander verbundene Themenkreise zu untersuchen. Zusammengefasst können uns diese Themenkreise auf eine allgemeine Struktur hinweisen, die Genesis 1-3 am besten in der Diskussion von Natur-

wissenschaft und Schrift repräsentiert. Die behandelten Schlüsselthemen sind: die kontextuelle Verortung der Schöpfungsgeschichte, ihre narrativen Anfänge als Schöpfungsgeschichte sowie ihre narrativen Verlaufslinien. Die konzentrierte Kraft dieser Untersuchungen, unterstützt von Einsichten aus dem Werk Paul Ricoeurs, erlaubt uns vorzuschlagen, dass Genesis 1-3 eine semantische Innovation ist, die die Merkmale einer poetischen Historiographie trägt.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les premiers chapitres de la Genèse continuent de faire l'objet de débats importants entre théologiens et scientifiques. Cet article aborde trois problèmes interdépendants qui, considérés ensemble, donnent une bonne idée des débats sur le rapport entre la science et l'Écriture occa-

sionnés par ces textes bibliques. Les auteurs examinent donc le contexte dans lequel le récit de la création a été rédigé, les débuts de ce récit et sa trajectoire narrative, en s'appuyant sur l'apport de l'œuvre de Paul Ricoeur. Ils en concluent que ces chapitres sont une innovation sémantique présentant les caractéristiques d'une historiographie poétique.

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Introduction

What is Life?

Resembles Life what once was held of Light,
Too ample in itself for human sight?
An absolute Self – an element ungrounded-
All, that we see, all colours of all shade
By encroach of darkness made?-

Is very life by consciousness unbounded?
And all the thoughts, pains, joys of mortal breath,
A war-embrace of wrestling Life and Death?¹

These words, penned in the nineteenth century by the famous poet and author Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poetically capture the human quest to understand and explain life. Reflecting on this passage raises a host of questions. What is life, how

do we perceive it, what does it mean, and what is the nature and character of the world around us? Prior to the nineteenth century there was widespread agreement in the West, particularly in Protestant Christian circles, that resolution to these questions could be achieved by combining insights from both science and Scripture in a unified field of knowledge. If such an integrated view on the level of method and reference was established, it would become the focal point on which the understanding of life depended. Consequently, science and the Christian faith were presumed to be on the same side, mutually compatible, and dealing with the discovery of truth through a uniform epistemology. Today, many scholars find this approach untenable and aim to keep the two portrayals of life entirely separate.

In our eyes, one of the key problems in the science and Scripture discussion is that it is frequently characterized by a rigid double polarization. This polarization is often expressed as either a complete *distinction* that barricades exchange between them, or a comprehensive synthesis that collapses them together to create a tight and seamless *relation*. The hallmark of these approaches, represented in a variety of forms, is that the complexity of non-resolution is avoided at all cost. One of the major drawbacks of such double polarizations is the diminishment of tension, which in our judgment should remain rooted in the vital configuration of the relation *and* distinction between these two informers.

We highlighted, in a previous article, our view that both science and Scripture are informers that contribute to the interpretation of life.² In their role as informers, we began to make a case for a more candid dialogue between the two. We maintained that as we live in and work with the natural world and the biblical text, it is crucial to acknowledge that world and text are informers and therefore hermeneutical factors that have to contend with each other's stories. This challenging formulation, we argued, shatters any notion of a reductionistic monologue that embraces one voice at the cost of the other, and suggests that a dynamic dialogical interaction is the way forward, allowing each informer to have a fecund role in a configuration of beginnings.

What are we to make of Scripture's contribution, in particular its Genesis 1-3 recounting, to the explanation and understanding of the world around us? Does science have a legitimate claim in conceiving itself to be an all encompassing story of

beginnings in the face of and opposed to the early chapters of Genesis? Discussions in theological and scientific circles concerning these issues often occur without a clear sense of the general trajectory and orchestration of Genesis 1-3. There are some who engage with these chapters in a highly literalistic manner, while others ignore them completely. Our wager is that neither of these polarizations is an adequate orientation if we wish to have a better picture of our world. Paying close attention to the beats and rhythms of the text is essential for raising an awareness of its unfolding meaning and for challenging both literalist and disregarder.

Traditionally, there has been a diversity of approaches to Genesis 1-3. Form, source, historical, redaction and narrative criticism identify themselves either by seeking ways behind the text, detecting its structure, being able to decode and delimit its parts and pieces, or working with the unity or whole of the text. The revelatory, literary, theological, and historical context of Genesis 1-3 clearly fits into the whole of the Genesis narrative, the Pentateuch, and the megastory of the Scriptures. Although this narrative network opens up a myriad of directions that could be explored, our interest is in the more specific concern of how Genesis 1-3 is still able to speak into our scientifically informed, technologically advanced culture. We contend that a stronger articulation of the overall character, function, and genre of these chapters will contribute to our assessment of how the text can inform our ability to comprehend the natural world today.

Our aim in this paper is to briefly explore three vital issues that, taken together, can point us toward a general configuration that best represents Genesis 1-3 in the science and Scripture discussion. These include the contextual setting of the story of creation, its narrative beginnings as a creation story; and finally, its narrative trajectories. Drawing from the concerted force of these investigations, we will then propose what we think is the most hermeneutically sound approach to the textual material. In conclusion, we will offer a provisional suggestion as to how Genesis 1-3 speaks as a valid and credible informer in our current context.

1) Interpretive Signals

Hermeneutical studies have emphasized the important role context should play in our interpretive strategies. In deciphering a text, what is being communicated and how it is being communicated

is strongly shaped by the intellectual and literary environment of a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic context. This implies that the originating context, within which a text was composed, will be a limiting factor in determining how far we can stretch the text to speak into our context. In other words, recognition of context can give off interpretive signals that direct our thinking about how to configure and appropriate the text.

The early chapters of Genesis were framed within the literary conventions and conceptual world of the ancient Near East. A glimpse into this world can be gained by examining the literature and artifacts of the ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite cultures. Although there were cultural differences, we intend to minimize these and synthesize a general picture of what the encounter with the world was like in this environment.³

When it came to nature, Conrad Hyers notes, "For most peoples in the ancient world, all the various regions of nature were divine."⁴ Thus, natural phenomena were interpreted as and associated with the activities of an assortment of gods. Nature became endowed and saturated with the powers of deities. What was material, the sky or the sea for example, was personalized into the spiritual or ideal.⁵ This personalization and deification of the natural world often carried over into the animal kingdom. Animals could function as representatives or forms of various divine beings.⁶ The result of this blending of nature and religion is that explanations about how the natural world worked became embedded in a mythological dimension. Ancient Egyptians, for example, connected the alterations in the seasonal elevations of the sun and the ripening and rotting of crops with the power of heaven, the sky god.⁷ Since the encounter with nature was intensely personal, the observation of nature and its orderly rhythms was aligned with human life through religious ritual and ceremony. Not surprisingly, early astronomers were also priests since the observation of the heavens was primarily a religious exercise.⁸

It seems safe to conclude that in this ancient context, conceptual partitions between natural and divine causation would have been difficult to comprehend. Consequently, this ancient "cognitive environment"⁹ did not lend itself to either purely material explanations about the natural world or to the empirical exploration of that world. Thus, any correlation between our scientific understanding and this ancient understanding of the world must be viewed cautiously. The common experience and

description of the appearance of things should not be mistaken for an accurate statement as to their material properties and causes. The natural phenomena that these ancient people experienced were the same ones we experience, but how they were encountered and described was different in these ancient cultures.

Differences between the ancient context and ours can also be detected when we examine the ontological dimension. In the ancient Near East, something came into existence when it was separated out, named, and given a function.¹⁰ The act of separation was associated with the process of creation and the establishment of order. The use of the separation motif is evident in both the ancient creation myths and the biblical text. The issuance of a name to an entity also had special significance in the ancient Near East, particularly in light of the deification of nature. It signified the entity's very essence and assigned a function or destiny to it.¹¹ For example, fifty names are conferred on Marduk in the *Enuma Elish* to declare his destiny and role as head of the gods.¹² This ancient ontological perspective stands in stark contrast to our scientific discussions about existence, which are dominated by more materialistic descriptions that focus on the physical properties of the world.

Another feature that plays prominently in the mythology of the ancient Near East is that the gods had origins. Not only was the world polytheistic, but there were family relationships between the gods. Separation and/or procreation were common procedures for the birth of the gods. The origin and existence of diverse gods would then be connected to their operational roles in bringing about the natural phenomena in the world.¹³ Explanations were hence overlaid with this mythical ordering of the world.

Frequently, the state of affairs before the creation of the cosmos is depicted as one that is unordered and uniform in character. These precosmic conditions were represented by water and darkness, which continued to lurk in the background of the created world in the form of the sea, dark night sky, and desert.¹⁴ In this context, the creation of the cosmos involved bringing order and differentiation to the world out of this primordial state. In Mesopotamian mythology, the creation of the world included an element of conflict. The prime example of this can be found in the *Enuma Elish* where Marduk slays Tiamat and from her corpse the world is made. Tiamat's body is divided, again an act of separation, and boundaries are laid down

for the waters to establish order. Sometimes, the pending forces of disorder were personalized. In Ugaritic myth, the chaotic forces could be represented in the form of the mythical sea monster *Lothan* or *Leviathan*, a seven-headed serpent that had to be overcome by the creator god to establish order.¹⁵

In summary, the composite perspective of the world in the ancient Near East was highly personalized, deified, and rooted in mythical stories and symbols of beginnings. Natural phenomena were described as they appeared and were explained within this mythical framework. In a nutshell this is the cultural milieu that forms the backdrop for Genesis' alternative story of beginnings.

What disruptive effect did this alternative story have? If we focus at the outset solely on the first creation story in Genesis 1-2:4a, we can conclude that it deftly empties the natural world of meddling deities. In other words, it "clears the cosmic stage of its mythical scenes and polytheistic dramas, making way for different scenes and dramas, both monotheistic and naturalistic."¹⁶ There is no theogony in this recounting. The Hebrew God stands alone as the Creator, without a beginning, related to and distinct from His creation. The story pictures one Divine Being who establishes creative authority over the entire natural order.

Thus, the Genesis creation story conceptually reorganizes the entire known world so that the cosmos and all that is in it are placed in creaturely status. For example, why are the sun and moon referred to as the greater and lesser light, respectively? There were certainly names in the Hebrew language to apply to these entities. Since the sun and moon were important deities in the ancient Near Eastern setting, this non-naming of them in Genesis seems to be a strategic move to forcefully remove them as deities in the world. From a functional point of view, the sun and the moon are to serve human existence not vice versa, suggesting a contextual reversal of roles in Genesis. Even the formulation of reproducing after its kind emphasizes the natural flow and order of things. No living creatures are divine or will transform into deity. The cosmic order "is now defined as nature."¹⁷

This first strike creation story is polemical in nature in that it uses the thought forms and symbols common to the ancient Near East and fills them with radically new meaning. Common literary and conceptual conventions like separation, differentiation, precosmic conditions,¹⁸ and possibly allusions to chaos beasts¹⁹ are deployed in a well

orchestrated and structured assault on the deification of nature with the result that the true Creator is identified. For example, the first three days of creation consist of strong acts of separation setting the boundaries of the cosmos in place so that it can be filled with diverse occupants. The world offers no resistance to the authority of the true Creator. One might even infer that the separation motif was extended into the third chapter where the Creator exits the scene and is thereby separated from the act of disobedience. With this twist in the story line, the identity and character of the Creator, as well as humanity's relationship with Him, is further exposed. Many other examples of conceptual correspondence between the biblical text and its cultural setting can be found.²⁰

Nowhere is this correspondence more germane than when the subject of human origins is broached. Again, there are both parallels and differences between the biblical story of human origins and those from other contiguous cultures. Suffice it to say, however, the biblical description of human beginnings shares a degree of concordism with its cultural setting.²¹

It is important to note that there is no indication that the biblical text breaks with the cosmic geography of its time. The biblical reconfiguration of the world offered by the Genesis story of beginnings did not negate the prevailing notions of the structure of the world. There are ample Old Testament references that confirm the observation that the biblical authors deployed context-laden features of cosmic architecture in their understanding.²²

Furthermore, there is no sign that the story of beginnings in Genesis led to any immediate paradigm breaking-thoughts about the architecture of the cosmos. What is altered by the Genesis story is not new thinking about the structure and form of the natural world; but rather, the theological perspective of the world. The natural world, no matter what form it took, was structurally decoupled from its Creator and "naturalized" as a creation. Accordingly, humanity's role was freed from the false religious service to the deified components of the world.

The inevitable conclusion is that the delivery system of the biblical informer is packaged with the conceptual and literary features of its context. As we have seen, in many ways the early chapters of Genesis share a common understanding about the architectural features of the world that were widely held at the time; while in other ways, they offer a radically unique theological interpretation

that explains the origin and existence of the natural world in a revolutionary manner. Therefore, the configuration and interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis is strongly influenced by, yet not reduced to, its ancient Near East context.

2) Interpreting Beginnings

In the beginning there was God: then came humans, hermeneutics, narrative, and later, Genesis 1-3. As we have highlighted in the previous section, these chapters portray God as the unrivalled Creator who has authority over the world and humanity. The God of the Hebrews is declared to be the God of the story of beginnings. Early Genesis then is scripted from the ancient Hebrew perspective that God had revealed Himself in and acted through nature and nation to make Himself known.

Several notions of hermeneutics permeate the landscape of the science and theology discussion today.²³ Our position is that hermeneutics, at the outset of the revealing Genesis narrative, plays a key role as the biblical writer offers a reflective interpretation of the world and God. That is, interpretation is neither fault nor detriment, but has been present from the beginning of creation.²⁴ Being hermeneutical then is partially constitutive of what it means to be human, whether biblical author or contemporary “reader” of the text and/or world. The force of this ontological reality highlights our finitude and translates into the recognition that all, including both biblical interpreters and scientists, are “situated” interpreters that operate from within context-laden environments. This negates any pretense of naïve idealism or neutral realism.

Consequently, the lens through which we are configuring this paper is that of being hermeneutical realists. There are at least two points that emerge from this acknowledgment. First, as realists we believe that a world exists that can be known, and our knowledge of the world informs our interpretation of reality. Therefore, the world is far more than a mere projection or construction of our mind. Second, being hermeneutical means that we are always pre-involved interpreters of the world. Interpretation initially unfolds from inside a gender, place, time, culture, and so forth, not outside it. This interpretive reality encompasses who we are as knowers and needs to be plainly in view in contending with scientific, theological, or any other issues.

While in our contemporary context hermeneutics is deeply connected to human understanding, one

of its previous considerations and no doubt an equally valid concern today is the interpretation of texts, particularly biblical texts.²⁵ As we approach Genesis 1-3, it is important to recognize that, hermeneutically speaking, biblical texts have the capacity to inform and shape our understanding and explanation of God, ourselves and the world leading to new understanding.²⁶ More specifically, biblical stories reveal God and open up new ways of seeing, knowing, and being in the world, which is vital to the hermeneutical enterprise. This trajectory implies that we are not left alone to be our own referents, and that the epistemological horizon of the biblical text cannot be ignored when it comes to a proper consideration of hermeneutics.

Building on the previous paragraphs, we suggest that a detour through the Genesis 1-3 world will provide us with three significant vectors that are hermeneutically relevant. First, we have a text that still vies for a place in our general interpretation of the world. Second, the text informs and expands our ontological understanding as being is “called out” and spoken to from beyond the realms of self indulgence, entrapment, or containment. Third, there is an action-oriented, unfolding representation of the natural world presented in the text vector

Having clarified our hermeneutical stance, we now turn to focus more closely on Genesis 1-3. Genesis, as story, functions at a number of levels and our task is to listen to the text and its orchestration. How do we hear the text? First, Genesis 1-3 is *revelatory*. As noted in the previous section, the story gives readers a unique revelation referenced portrait of beginnings, related to but distinct from other ancient Near Eastern perspectives. This is not a present day story, yet the text maintains the capacity to speak from its own time into ours. Second, Genesis 1-3 is a *historical* text. The term historical is not to be understood as referring to a detailed and precise account of beginnings, but rather as a mega-recounting using bold and broad brush strokes, thereby leaving behind a substantial number of unresolved questions. Third, Genesis 1-3 is *literature*. Written as narrative, it is a literary act laced with drama and saturated with symbolic artistry that engages the imagination of the reader. And finally, Genesis 1-3 is a *theological* text. That is, it informs readers about God and the truth that Israel’s God created nature and humanity.

Thus, these early chapters of Genesis combine the revelatory, historical, literary, and theological levels of orchestration into an interwoven organic

whole that creates a polyphonic recounting of beginnings. To take the musical analogy further, listening to Genesis 1-3 is like hearing a symphony perform wherein a number of different instruments, rhythms, and notes coalesce to produce an emerging sound offered to interpretation.

While there may be general agreement as to what parts make up the total orchestration of the text as traced out in the previous paragraphs, debates and polarizations often flare up over which part best defines these chapters. This leads to a tendency to interpret Genesis 1-3 solely and conclusively in terms of its revelatory, historical, literary, or theological dimension, and thereby loses the overall polyphonic discourse of the text. Returning to our musical analogy, this is like listening to a solo instrument playing when the score calls for the concerted action of the whole orchestra. To finally single out one part of the score at the exclusion of others results in a divide and conquer type of hermeneutical strategy that has more in common with a modernist critical paradigm than it does with the configuration of an ancient text.²⁷

Attentive to this ancient backdrop for Genesis 1-3 and in full view of the symphonic orchestration of the text that consists of revelatory, literary, theological, and historical rhythms, we readily acknowledge that there is a *provisional* place for drawing out and listening to each rhythmic part of the text. However, each part must eventually be reinserted into a tensional web of the interactive whole where it contributes to the overall function and configuration of Genesis 1-3, and where each part's meaning and purpose is more fully discovered. With this caveat in mind, we intend to momentarily break the historical part out for closer inspection since it has been a source of considerable controversy.²⁸ Furthermore, by identifying the kind of historical rhythms that play through the text, we will be in a better position to determine what general configuration best suits Genesis 1-3. But again, these historical rhythms must ultimately re-connect into the harmonics of the whole textual orchestration in a compatible way. Later, we will pursue the task of re-connection, but for now, what does it mean to call Genesis 1-3 historical?

Discussions concerning the truth value of history have had a long tradition and more recently postmodern ideas have broken onto the scene, creating and arguing for new ways of viewing history and historiography.²⁹ Disagreements flourish on this issue: however, we shall not respond here to the wide diversity of views represented.³⁰ Rather,

we wish to briefly address an important, though frequently neglected question which arises on this register and applies to all disciplines, especially biblical interpretation:³¹ What is history? An answer may appear obvious, until someone asks us to clarify and elucidate.

Elaboration of the historical rhythm of the text can be aided by considering the relation and distinction between history and historiography. The word history, from our perspective, has the capacity to refer to actual past events in time, while historiography is defined as the complex matter of interpreting and recounting a selection of these events thematically and configuring them into a written narrative.³² Consequently, event and textual representation of the past never have a one to one correspondence, yet this does not undermine the capacity of historiography to have historical credibility. Based on these distinctions, the wide-ranging genre of Genesis 1-3 can be identified as historiography. But, if the first three chapters of Genesis carry a historical rhythm, how should we configure this part of the text in a manner that keeps it tuned into its context, yet does not reduce it to merely its context?

Paul Ricoeur has given us an interesting perspective that may contribute to this controversial aporia.³³ According to Ricoeur, the philosophy of history has moved away from the grand schemes of Hegel or Marx and their notions of universal history to more modest aims of reflecting on the work and critical engagement of the historian. One of the advantages of this trajectory is that the historian is understood to be situated in, as opposed to being viewed as located outside the work of writing history.

Ricoeur maintains that there are three types of historiography, or written interpretive accounts of events in time, and each have a link to the other. In order to illustrate the point, we shall use the metaphor of a battle to distinguish different kinds of historical writing. First, the documentary type of historiography seeks to establish what battle was fought and won, by whom and when. Second, the explicative type aims to recount the results of the battle from a social, political, or economic angle. And third, the poetic type takes the reality of the past, interprets why the battle was won, and then shapes it into a narrative through which a community of readers understands itself in the present. One of the outstanding values of Ricoeur's taxonomy is that it alerts us to the possibility that there are several legitimate ways of writing history, not

just one credible way.³⁴

Returning to Genesis 1-3, we would argue that the text displays the more prominent features of a poetic historiography, while not completely excluding the cumulative character of the other historiographical aims. That is, the text incorporates a number of levels of historiography in order to reveal a larger portrait of God and life than a straight documentary historiography with its factual selectivity (although such selectivity is not entirely irrelevant to the informing nature of the text). The Genesis story, for example, is not centered on giving a list of empirically verifiable historical or scientific facts, but it actually interprets and redescribes the world from within and beyond the boundaries of space and time, naming Israel's God as the one and only God – the great Creator in the unfolding drama of beginnings. In this narrative portrayal God is powerfully at work, among other things, creating, speaking, commenting, blessing, and providing. The genius of Genesis 1-3 rests in its magnificent panoply of operative layers of contentful subversive convergence, interconnected on the register of imagination (writer and reader), but disconnected at the level of revelatory reference (God). Thus, the chapters reveal, convey, and represent a selection of God actions and sayings, various occurrences, people, situations and contexts that have left traces in the world which evoke the reality of the past and interpret it so that God's people will have an explanation and new understanding of something of who the creator God is, who they are, and what the natural world is like.

The historiography of Genesis 1-3 on this register is a cumulative poetic historiography and a meeting place for the relation and distinction between imaginative literary art and thematic eventful interpretive recounting. In this case, recounting imaginatively in symbolic formulations is not the same thing as imaginary recounting.³⁵ The former refers to creative artistry in interpreting and vividly representing an understanding of God and the world in a manner connected to its time, while the latter concerns escape and fantasy that becomes a referent for itself.³⁶ Biblical authors, as Sailhamer contends in an essay on Genesis, were attempting to connect their stories to the world that was really there. He puts it this way:

By representing reality in their narratives, they were defining its essential characteristics. This is surely not to say they were making it up. There is every reason to maintain that the world we

find depicted in these narratives was, in fact, intended by them to be identified as the real world.³⁷

As a cumulative poetic historiography, the early chapters of Genesis are not a straight-telling of history, but rather a skillfully recounted story of beginnings precipitated by the action's of the divine Creator and based on the Hebrews' encounter with the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This founding narrative, a poetic historiography, is attested to by the way God speaks, acts, engages, and intervenes in a symbolic scenario that recounts according to its goals and purposes that this God, as the God of Israel, is the only true God. The detection and recognition of the historiographical character and quality of the text heightens our awareness that forlorn attempts to interpret it in a reductionistic manner, by imposing contemporary standards of history writing, is unwarranted and superfluous. Exclusionary strategies act as a catalyst for historiographical confusion and fail to be attuned to the complex poetic filaments which make up the ancient Genesis narrative.³⁸

Retaining and building on the Ricoeurian notion of poetic historiography, we would like to take this configuration a step further. Thus, we propose the notion that Genesis 1-3 is a *poetic* text and offer this as a constructive way forward for its interpretation. Poetic, in our eyes, is the act and art – a creative mimesis rolled into the verb *poiesis* – of making *saturated phenomena*.³⁹ By saturated phenomena, we mean that this story of beginnings is divinely-driven and imaginatively pre-loaded with a demonstration of God's creative action, guidance, and organization that results in meaningful layers of explanation and new understanding about God, humanity, and the world. This poetic rendition of the text allows it to function as a symbiotic community, where the different downloads into the story perform a mutually enhancing, yet tensional dialogue. For example, whatever differences exist between the two biblical creation accounts may not merely reflect different traditions in the Hebrew community,⁴⁰ but may be part of a larger symbiosis as strands of relevant thought converge into an organic whole that is not unduly burdened by the need to rig the material for complete correspondence between the accounts.⁴¹

In summary, these early chapters in Genesis comprise a twofold convergence. First, the revelatory, historical, theological, and literary rhythms that God is the Creator are configured and inseparably

interlinked in this story of beginnings. While each of these rhythms can be explored and developed on their own, as we have done with the historical (and could have done with others), the text's trajectory cannot finally be reduced to any one of them. Second, operative levels of historiography are skillfully, artistically, and symbolically interwoven into a poetic recounting that God the Creator has acted in creating the world. Consequently, these chapters defy a *strip mining* approach so prevalent today which endeavours to merely embrace one of the parts.⁴² The veins run too deep and are so intimately intertwined into an organic whole that any ultimate textual dissection which disregards this unity will underplay the provocative nature of the text. As Gudas points out:

In contemporary criticism 'organic,' though widely used, has all but lost its metaphoric significance. The term is claimed by or attributed to critical systems which hold that the chief concern of criticism should be with the unity of the literary work. Thus it follows that the parts of an artistic whole have qualities, meanings, or effects which they would not have separately and that the most important excellence that can be attributed to any of the parts is to show that it is a necessary element of that whole.⁴³

In that there is no absolute object or subject, at least on the level of knowledge, an organic poetic configuration may rightly offer interpreters a greater flexibility when engaging text and world, and therefore counter various forms of reductionism. Hence, we suggest that Genesis 1-3 is a poetic text that re-describes reality in a story of beginnings, which deftly and artistically brings us into God's world.

While in one sense Genesis 1-3 is deeply embedded in its context and therefore should not be viewed as a precise scientific-like informer, in another sense it transcends and cannot be reduced to a scientific categorization.⁴⁴ For example, this text tells us nothing about DNA, cells, and molecules; yet, it has the capacity to capture an accurate, innovative, enduring, and always avant-garde portrayal of nature as a general category and place of contact between God, humanity, and other creatures.

3) Interpreting Trajectories

Today more than ever interpreters are drawing on the knowledge of histories, societies, cultures,

natural sciences and texts to explain the world. A noteworthy feature of this orientation has been a rediscovery of the relevance of narrative. Dramatic fascination with stories and the worlds they create, represent, and signify has now become a prominent feature in the quest for the meaning of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This interest in narrative has clearly marked our times in a surprising way. When it seemed as if the unquestionable merits of a mechanical, technological, and scientifically-driven world would have explained the entirety of life, stories have again released and captured the attention of imaginations, hearts, and minds. From this strong contemporary interest in narrative, a basic question arises: What is narrative? While a full answer to this question, which David Carr has identified as the battle ground for the disciplines,⁴⁵ lies beyond the scope of this paper,⁴⁶ it is nevertheless important to highlight key elements in the discussion as they will apply to Genesis 1-3.

We again turn to the work of Ricoeur, who addressed the 'what is narrative' question in his three volume work *Temps et récit* (*Time and Narrative*).⁴⁷ To be sure, narrative is a story with a narrator, plot, characters, action, time, intrigue, conflict, point of view, and mystery. Yet according to Ricoeur, narrative is not merely a traditional story of representation. Ricoeur's notion of narrative is that it creates a world – something new is created that did not previously exist. This narrative world is meant to be entered, inhabited, and appropriated by the reader. As the reader dwells in the created world of the story, new possibilities are opened up for articulating and conveying truth and meaning. Hence, on this understanding, narrative is a semantic innovation in that it configures a world that has the potential power to refigure the reader's world.

To take the discussion of narrative a step further, we turn to a brief description of Ricoeur's notion of a three-fold mimesis.⁴⁸ Mimesis I operates as a *pre-figurative* capacity to detect action versus mere motion. Actions are connected to motives and goals, symbols, and time, and to the questions of "who" and "why." Mimesis II is a specific literary act that creates a world and *configures* actions into a structured timeframe of beginning, middle, and end. Mimesis III occurs when the reader's world is connected to the story world and through entering that world, taking possession of it, and being possessed by it, their own world is *refigured*.⁴⁹

Emplotment is a key for understanding mimesis II. To *make* a plot, for Ricoeur, is a synthesis

of the heterogeneous in the following ways. First, it makes one story out of a multiplicity of incidents. Second, plot organizes unintended circumstances, relationships between actors, and planned or unplanned encounters, drawing them together into a single story. And third, a plot provides a time totality in the story, which can be understood as a creative act of configuration out of a succession of events.⁵⁰ This Ricoeurian notion of plot making, coupled with the poetic historiography of Genesis 1-3, has the power to weld together interpreted actions and thematic events into an organic narrative whole.

Written from the vantage point of the sacred experience of God over many years, the Genesis story of beginnings opens up a new way for the Hebrew writer to testify to that which was already known in Israel.⁵¹ God, nature, and humanity were not the “who” and the “why” that other ancient Near Eastern stories had configured them to be (Mimesis I & II). Thus, these early chapters of Genesis are a product of sedimentation and innovation culminating in a revealing narrative of God’s story (Mimesis I & II). Like a transfusion, the life of God’s people flows into this narrative recounting of beginnings, while in turn the story flows back out into the life of Israel, the prophets, the apostles and the churches, surging right through and having the capacity to powerfully refigure the lives of readers today and in the future (Mimesis III).

As we have observed in the previous paragraph, Genesis 1-3 presents an unfolding drama of creation. This story of beginnings, written for God’s people, narrates a point of arrival where God, nature, and humanity appear, and it also marks a point of departure from which life can unfold. The saturated revelatory story of beginnings dynamically transforms and continually radicalizes our understanding of God, nature, and humanity and functions as a catalyst for all that follows in its wake. In our judgment, one of the chief aims of this creation semantic innovation is to draw the reader into God’s “sacred world” of beginnings and to illuminate the path ahead for the people of God. Consequently, there is a significant forward moving trajectory in the narrative concerning the nature of the world, the relation and distinction of God to it, and the life of the people of God. Several examples can be highlighted: land, blessings, Sabbath, family, covenant, nation, sacrifice, and sanctuary-temple are noteworthy connecting filaments that electrify this early recounting of the times.⁵² Therefore, in reading Genesis 1-3 readers’ lives are

refigured in line with the truth of the revelation of the Creator as they become part of the intricate web of connections that stream in, out, and ripple through the biblical story and its relation and distinction to the world. In this sense, the Genesis 1-3 narrative is a “living” text.

Narrative, Carr suggests, is a form of life before it is a form of discourse.⁵³ From this perspective, Genesis 1-3 represents a form of life that is translated into a story. While this story is a revelatory semantic innovation, it is prefigured by and configured from a lived life in the world. Consequently, the narrative point of view is made up of a constellation of complex interactions flowing from God, author, narrator, character, audience, and world, and then back through world, audience, character, narrator, author, and God. This spherical refraction alters, yet imaginatively represents reality by narrating it as a story of beginnings.

Conclusion

We began this paper with the provocative words of Coleridge, who poetically probed the fascinating question: What is Life? Answers to this enigmatic mystery today, whether coming from Scriptural or scientific quarters, are understood to be complex and diverse. As we have seen, discussions on this topic are often marked by strong polarizations that tend to negate the contribution of either the scriptural or scientific informer.

In our view, this situation may be alleviated to some extent by reconsidering and identifying the proper configuration of the early chapters of Genesis. While it is clear that Genesis 1-3 lends itself to closer examination at several levels, our objective was to listen to the various rhythms of its orchestration, and to provisionally hear the controversial historical rhythm of the text, before re-integrating it into its symphonic whole.

Our critique of mutually exclusive hermeneutical strategies that in the final analysis atomize the text into revelatory, historical, literary, or theological hegemony (though each plays a part in the whole), brought us to the conclusion that the biblical story of beginnings can best be seen as a cumulative historiographical poetic narrative. Drawing from Ricoeur’s helpful insights lends credence to the idea that the story of beginnings in Genesis is an imaginative and revelatory semantic innovation – a *founding narrative*, framed by Israel’s illuminating encounter with the Creator and the world of the time. Thereby, this founding narrative is enabled

to form links with the unfolding realities of Israel's unique identity and covenantal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Furthermore, the narrative trajectory functions in a historical sense as an identifiable location of God's arrival and as the point of departure for the whole biblical story. As a revelatory, historical, theological, and literary-oriented orchestration, it can be deployed as both reference and backdrop for God's continuing and future actions in the world.

So, where does Genesis 1-3's credibility lie for both science and Scripture? It lies in the "power of story" where imagination and the revelatory realities of God, and the world He created meet. The biblical story of beginnings brings together the meaningful structure of reality without wedding itself to a static architectural statement about the world. Through our engagement with God's story, our vision of the world is changed and placed within the same trajectory that the ancient Hebrews experienced. Consequently, these early chapters of Genesis are best understood as an organic poetic text that re-describes reality placing it in a sacred and destiny oriented context that invites the reader into a world – God's unfolding world. In this sense, the text is a living text that recycles our interpretive trajectory through a poetic network of divine and creaturely actions, purposes, and goals.

Notes

- 1 S. T. Coleridge, *What is Life?* This poem is believed to have been written around 1805 and only published in 1829.
- 2 G. J. Laughery and G. R. Diepstra, "Scripture, Science and Hermeneutics," *European Journal of Theology* XV (2006), 35-49.
- 3 J. H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, 32.
- 4 C. Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984, 44.
- 5 Anthony Alioto, *A History of Western Science*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993, 6.
- 6 For example: the bull-god Baal, the falcon-god Horus, the golden calf, etc. This divination could extend into the human realm as pharaohs, kings, and heroes were depicted as sons of god or mediators between the divine and human realm. See Hyers, 44.
- 7 Alioto, 8.
- 8 Ibid. 8.
- 9 We borrowed this term from J. H. Walton, *Ancient*

Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006, 21.

- 10 Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 88.
- 11 Ibid. 188.
- 12 Ibid. 90.
- 13 H. J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 32-33.
- 14 Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 186.
- 15 B. W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987, 134-135. However, R.A. Simkins in *Creator & Creation*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994, notes that "the conflict myth is a secondary development, a personification, of [the] primary creation metaphors of separation and differentiation." See p. 78.
- 16 Hyers, 47.
- 17 Ibid., 47.
- 18 Echoes from the ancient Near East context may be heard in Genesis 1:2 and 2:5 where water and darkness, and desert-like conditions, respectively, may recall common conceptualizations of precosmic conditions.
- 19 On the fifth day of creation (verse 21), sea monsters are singled out for special treatment. The verb *bara*, reserved exclusively for God's creative action, is applied and may hearken back to the importance of such creatures in Mesopotamian myth. The existence of such creatures is not negated, but simply placed under the creative authority of God. No conflict here, just submission. See E. Lucas, *Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century* published by the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, April 2007.
- 20 See Simkins, *Creator & Creation*, and Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*.
- 21 The ancient Near Eastern setting encourages the view that Adam and Eve be understood in archetypal terms. See Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 208-209.
- 22 There is good reason to believe that the 3-tiered cosmic architecture of the ancient Near East was presupposed by the ancient Hebrews. Basically, the architecture consisted of a flat, disk-like earth floating on water that was supported by pillars with the heavens above and the netherworld beneath. The dome-like sky, which the sun and stars tracked through, was relatively solid and held back the cosmic waters. References to the features of this cosmic structure can be found in a number of biblical references. See, for example, Genesis 1:20, Job 9:6-7, Job 22:14, Psalm 24:2, Psalm 104:2-3, Isaiah 40:22.
- 23 Laughery and Diepstra, 35-49.
- 24 J. K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2000.
- 25 Laughery and Diepstra, esp. 36-37.
- 26 Ibid., 37-40.

- 27 We would agree with the assessment of many authors who note that early Genesis is not a scientific text and that context-dependent theological issues are of utmost importance to the text's communicative purposes. See E. Lucas, "Science and the Bible: Are They Incompatible?" *Science and Christian Belief* 17 (2005), 137-154 and *Interpreting Genesis*. However, we would argue that the proper contrast is not between a theological text and a scientific one, but between a scientific text and an ancient one that is imaginatively and poetically formatted within the framework of the Hebrews existence and their attending knowledge of God and the world. On this register, the early chapters of Genesis would function as more than merely a theological or historical text inasmuch as they are expressly connected to the larger meganarrative picture of God's unfolding interaction with humanity in general, and Israel in particular.
- 28 No doubt any of the four rhythms could be explored and listened to more carefully.
- 29 K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991; *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed., London: Routledge, 1997. A. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, London: Routledge, 1997. P. Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative Reflections on Postmodernism Now," *History and Theory* 38, (1999), 1-24.
- 30 Laughery, "Ricoeur on History, Fiction and Biblical Hermeneutics," in: *'Behind' the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Zondervan/Paternoster, 2003, 339-362.
- 31 B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- 32 Following P. R. Davies and J. Rogerson, *The Old Testament World*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989, 218. See also, G. J. Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics in Motion: An Analysis and Evaluation of Paul Ricoeur's Contribution to Biblical Hermeneutics*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2002.
- 33 P. Ricoeur has been a formidable force in a diversity of discussions, including those related to interpreting Scripture and science. See "Sur l'exégèse de Genèse 1,1-2,4a," in: *Exégèse et herméneutique*, X. Leon Dufour, ed., Paris: Seuil, 1971, 57-97; *Philosophie de la volonté. Finitude et culpabilité II, La symbolique du mal*, Paris: Aubier, 1960 (*The Symbolism of Evil*, English Translation, E. Buchanan, New York: Harper & Row, 1967); *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, L. S. Mudge, ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980; *Ce qui nous fait penser? La nature et la règle*, avec Jean-Pierre Changeux, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000 (*What Makes us Think? A Neuroscientist and A Philosopher Argue About Ethics, Human Nature and the Brain*, English Translation, M. B. DeBevoise, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); *Penser la bible*, avec A. LaCocque, Paris: Seuil, 1998 (*Thinking Biblically*, English Translation, D. Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 34 Ricoeur, "Philosophies critiques de l'histoire: Recherche, explication, écriture," in: *Philosophical problems today*, G. Fløistad, ed., vol 1, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994, 139-201. D. Marguerat, *Le première histoire du christianisme*, Paris: Cerf, 1999, (*The First Christian Historian*, English Translation, G. J. Laughery, K. McKinney, R. Bauckham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 5-25).
- 35 E. A. Speiser, "The Rivers of Paradise," in: J. J. Finkelstein and M. Greenberg, eds., *Oriental and Biblical Studies: Collected Writings of E. A. Speiser*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967, 23-34.
- 36 A biblical worldview maintains that there is a real world which is related to and distinct from God and the cultural constructions and productions of science or theology. How could there be an imaginary if there was no real world from which to evaluate and measure? In other words, a necessary presupposition for the imaginary is the real, and it could not exist without it. On this register, imaginary is parasitic, as it must presuppose that which it is not in the attempt to have a theatre of its own.
- 37 J. H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 290.
- 38 For insights on biblical narrative see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 1987. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York: Basic Books, 1981. V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
- 39 See J-L. Marion, *Etant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997. (*Being Given: Toward A Phenomenology of Givenness*, English Translation J. L. Kosky, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 199-220, for somewhat similar terminology – saturated phenomenon, although with a different meaning).
- 40 Hyers, 41.
- 41 Due to lack of space here, further elaboration of this perspective will have to await a future paper.
- 42 J. B. Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure*, Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1978, who refers to these early chapters of Genesis as a profound unity, characterized by a conscious literary act.
- 43 See *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, A. Preminger, ed., London: Macmillan, 1975, 593-594.
- 44 Laughery and Diepstra, 'Scripture', 35-49.
- 45 D. Carr, "Ricoeur on Narrative," in: D. Wood, ed., *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London: Routledge, 1991, 160-187, esp. 160-173. Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 113.
- 46 See Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, for a fuller treat-

- ment of this vital issue.
- 47 Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 tomes, Paris: Seuil, 1983-1985. (*Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, English Translation, K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, vols. 1-2; K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, vol. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1987).
- 48 Mimesis is a creative imitation of action – “the dynamic sense of making a representation, a transposition into representative works,” resulting in the art of composition. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 31-37.
- 49 Ibid., 52-87. Also see Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 131-162, for a fuller discussion.
- 50 See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 38-50.
- 51 Doukhan, *Genesis*, 246, states: “Revelation implies Reality and both imply a real existential engagement with the One who revealed.”
- 52 G. J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in: R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura, eds., *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994, 399-404. Wenham helpfully focuses on the Eden portrait as “sanctuary symbolism.” We believe the other filaments in the story are connected and can be developed in a similar fashion.
- 53 Carr, “Ricoeur,” 160-173.

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