CHAPTER 2

On Reading Genesis 1–11

Before we consider the theological meaning and significance of the early chapters of Genesis, whose use within Christian faith has been enormous, it will be appropriate to say something about the genre of the material. For one cannot put good questions to and expect fruitful answers from a text without a grasp of the kind of material that it is. If one misjudges the genre, then one may produce poor and misguided interpretations.[1]

One initial difficulty, however, concerns the problem of finding a good classificatory term. All the common terms – myth, folktale, legend, saga – tend to be used in a wide variety of ways. Especially with usage of "myth," there is something of a chasm between scholarly understandings and popular pejorative uses. Thus, unless any term is carefully defined, it is unlikely to be helpful. Moreover, argument about the appropriateness of particular terms can easily displace attention to those features of the text that give rise to the use of the term in the first place. I propose, therefore, to eschew the use of any particular classificatory label and to focus

[1] See, e.g., John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

rather on an inductive study of indicative features within selected texts.[2]

BUILDING ON THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

At the outset it is worth noting something of the history of interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. Among other things, this history can dispel facile assumptions, especially the assumption that difficulties with the genre of the text are solely the result of the development of modern historical and scientific awareness.

The first giant in the history of Christian biblical interpretation – Origen, in the third century – already addressed this issue. In the course of a general discussion of biblical interpretation, and in support of his thesis that "spiritual" interpretation could be hidden in the text and might be indicated by a narrative of events that could not have happened, Origen cites, among other texts, the early chapters of Genesis:

> For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? and again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from the tree? And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that any one doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and

[2] I draw on my "How Should One Read the Early Chapters of Genesis?" in *Reading Genesis after Darwin*, ed. Stephen Barton and David Wilkinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

> not "literally."[3] Cain also, when going forth from the presence of God, certainly appears to thoughtful men as likely to lead the reader to inquire what is the presence of God, and what is the meaning of going out from Him. And what need is there to say more, since those who are not altogether blind can collect countless instances of a similar kind recorded as having occurred, but which did not "literally"[4] take place?[5]

One does not need to follow Origen's distinctive construal of the way in which surface difficulties in the biblical text give rise to a deeper spiritual reading to appreciate the basic force of his observations as to the difficulties in a certain kind of face-value reading of the text.

More specifically, the value of reception history can be seen in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The problem posed by this narrative is simple. Its internal details are in significant ways at odds with its present context at the outset of human life on earth. The problem has tended to be expressed popularly as the question, "Whence Cain's wife?" St. Augustine, for example, famously discussed this question, and his approach provided a conceptuality that was long influential; in essence, he argued that the problems of the text are to be explained in terms of omission because of selection and compression. Adam and Eve had many

[3] The Greek at this point (*ou sōmatikōs*) needs careful rendering so as not to skew it through categories that are eloquent of subsequent debates but not of Origen's frame of reference. I think "not 'literally' " is infelicitous in this regard, for Origen is indeed attentive to the letter of the text. It is the fact that the meaning of what the words say resists comprehension in terms of the familiar categories of action in space and time that moves him to read on a spiritual level.

[4] The Greek here (*kata tēn lexin*) seems to signify "in the terms of the wording of the text."

[5] *De Principiis* 4.1.16. The translation is Frederick Crombie's in *The Writings of Origen*, vol. 1, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 10 (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 315–17.

other children, details about whom are omitted in the biblical text, in its selectivity, even while it recognizes their existence (Gen 5:4b).[6] So, Cain and Abel married their sisters, and the world's early population expanded rapidly even though few details are given in the biblical text.

One major drawback with focusing on Cain's wife is that it can give the impression that the wife is the only detail of the narrative that is problematic within the wider context; this is clearly not the case.[7] For although the story does not mention any specific human characters other than Cain and Abel, it nonetheless presupposes throughout that the earth is populated. First, at the outset (4:2), Abel is said to be "a keeper of sheep" while Cain is "a tiller of the ground." Such divisions of labor with their particular categorizations would not be meaningful if there were only a handful of people on the earth; rather, they presuppose a regular population with its familiar tasks. Second, it is when Cain and Abel are in the open countryside that Cain kills Abel (4:8). The point of being in the open countryside is that one is away from other people in their settlements[8] – which is why most, though not all, manuscript traditions have Cain make a specific proposal for going out to the countryside; murder is best committed without an audience (cf. Deut 21:1–9), though Cain discovers that one cannot so easily escape YHWH as audience. Third, Cain complains to YHWH that if he has to become a "restless wanderer," then anyone who

[6] See *Questions on the Heptateuch* 1.1. The more general issue of the necessary marriage of brothers and sisters in early times is discussed in *City of God* 15.16.

[7] As Augustine himself recognized. He clearly saw that the reference to a "city" was the substantive problem needing discussion (*Questions on the Heptateuch* 1.1; *City of God* 15.8).

[8] The Hebrew term for open territory, *śādeh*, can be a kind of opposite to *'ir*, settled space (see, e.g., Lev 14:53).

finds him may kill him (4:14). Why? If the world were populated only by a few offspring of Adam and Eve, then they would naturally occupy a limited space, and so the more Cain wandered, the farther away he would be from these other people.[9] Rather, the implicit logic appears to be that someone constantly on the move, in the familiar populated world, lacks the protective support systems that go with one's belonging to a regular community; such an unprotected person is easily "picked off" by anyone in a merciless frame of mind.[10] Fourth, in the immediate aftermath of the main story, in the same context as the mention of Cain's wife, there is reference to the building of a "city" (*'îr*; 4:17). This familiar translation of the most common Hebrew word for a human settlement is potentially misleading because it can encourage the contemporary reader to imagine far larger populations and settlements than were in fact characteristic of the ancient world; with a few exceptions, most cities within the Old Testament would be comparable in population size to villages in the medieval and modern world. Nevertheless, this still presupposes the kind of population density and organization that is also presupposed at the outset by the roles of shepherd and farmer (4:2) and is at odds with the story's own location at the very beginnings of human life on earth.

How is this mismatch between the story's own assumptions and its present context best explained? The points I have raised, and

[9] Peoples are scattered far and wide only after Babel (Gen 11:9).

[10] One may compare the regular legal injunctions to care for the *gêr*, the "resident alien," that is, someone on foreign territory away from his or her own clan or tribe, who, like the orphan and widow, was a particularly vulnerable person because he or she lacked regular support and protection (e.g., Lev 19:33; Deut 10:17–19).

many others also, were fascinatingly discussed by a now-forgotten writer of the seventeenth century, who in his time had great influence, Isaac La Peyrère.[11] La Peyrère saw the consistent intrinsic problems of the text much more clearly than did his predecessors (such as St. Augustine, who only discussed Cain's city and Cain's wife). However, the conceptuality of La Peyrère's resolution remained in principle within Augustine's frame of reference – namely, that the difficulties within the text are the result of selective omission. Nonetheless, although in principle La Peyrère differed from St. Augustine in degree rather than in kind, he in fact stretched the conceptuality of selective omission to the breaking point. His key move was to argue that the Genesis text, in its selectivity, tells only the history of the Jews and not of humanity as a whole – and thus there were humans before Adam, "pre-Adamites" (a proposal that generated a huge debate for the best part of two centuries until a Darwinian frame of reference changed the shape of the debate); the details of the Cain and Abel story show that the Bible is aware of a larger human history that it chooses not to tell. Thereby La Peyrère was able to accommodate the recent European discoveries of a geography (especially the Americas) and a history (from the texts of the Chaldeans and Egyptians) that apparently did not fit within a biblical view of the world. According to La Peyrère's thesis, the apparent conflict between Genesis and new knowledge was thereby reconciled – a motivation that did not prevent his book being burnt in public and subjected to numerous rebuttals on the

[11] A convenient introduction to La Peyrère is Heikki Räisänen, "The Bible and the Traditions of the Nations: Isaac La Peyrère as a Precursor of Biblical Criticism," in Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma* (London: SCM, 1997), 137–52.

part of the affronted faithful, both in his own day and for many years subsequently.[12]

On its own terms, the approach of St. Augustine or La Peyrère makes some sense and may still commend itself in one form or other to those for whom it still appeals to engage in a certain kind of reconciling of conflicts between the Bible and other forms of knowledge; the phenomenon of creationism attests, among other things, the enduring attraction of such an approach (however much creationists might – and no doubt do – dislike La Peyrère's particular proposals). However, the approach has been generally abandoned for the reason that its narrowly conceived view of how to handle problems does justice neither to the Bible nor to other forms of knowledge. For the present I would simply note that, if the story in itself presupposes a regularly populated earth, while its present context requires an almost entirely unpopulated earth, then there is a hypothesis that readily commends itself. This hypothesis is that the story itself has a history, and in the course of that history, it has changed location, moving from an original context within the regular parameters of human history – presumably the world of ancient Israel, familiar to the narrator[13] – to its present context at the very outset of human history. Such movement of stories is in fact a common phenomenon within the history of literature.

The basic point is simple: A story whose narrative assumptions apparently originate from the world familiar to the time of the biblical narrator has been set in a context long antecedent to that

[12] There was, of course, much else in La Peyrère's work that was provocative.

[13] For the purposes of the argument here, it makes no difference whether the story is ascribed to Moses in the fifteenth or thirteenth century BCE, the Yahwist in the tenth or sixth century BCE, or anyone else within the general historical context of ancient Israel.

world – the very beginnings of life on earth. From this it follows, *not* that one should not take the narrative sequence from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel with imaginative seriousness as part of the developing storyline, but that in analytical terms one should recognize that the narrative is, in a very real and important sense, artificial and constructed out of originally diverse material.[14] The purpose of the literary construction would appear to be to juxtapose certain archetypal portrayals of life under God so that an interpretative lens is provided for reading God's call of Abraham and Israel that follows.

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

The story of Noah and the Flood also has numerous indicators as to its genre. On internal grounds, the story is clearly uninterested in those issues that have fascinated many interpreters who have sought to construe it as realistic or historical. To be sure, one or two of its details may appear to be so. If, for example, one takes the all-too-brief instructions in Genesis 6:14–16 to indicate that a transverse section of the ark would be virtually triangular – so that the ark should be envisaged "like a giant Toblerone bar," as one of my students nicely put it – then such a vessel would apparently be stable in floating, which is all that it would be required to do.[15] However, the instructions in 6:14–16 are open to widely differing construals

[14] Comparable is the way in which, when watching a movie, one can both imaginatively follow the storyline on its own terms and also reflect analytically, should one wish, on how the special effects are likely to have been produced.

[15] The contention that the design of the ark would give it stability is an ancient one. Cf. Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., ArtScroll Tanach (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1986), 1:231.

of the shape and seaworthiness of the vessel; the numerous picture-book depictions of the ark as some kind of houseboat derive entirely from modern artists' imaginative sense of what looks appropriate.

In any case, it is the consistent perspective of the story throughout that is most revealing of its genre. The omniscient narrator reports even the inner thoughts and words of YHWH (6:5–8, 8:20–21). But he says nothing whatever about Noah's thoughts or words – Noah says precisely nothing throughout. Further, the narrator shows no interest in practicalities such as the following: Which animals? What living conditions? or What sort of food, how much, and how to preserve it as edible? Admittedly, the narrator's disinterest in such details has not deterred countless interpreters across the centuries; and these questions are still amenable to ingenious resolution today, as in the work of the American Institute for Creation Research.[16]

As for the nature of the ark itself, humans and animals within it appear to live in darkness. For, as far as we are told, the ark has only one openable hatch in addition to the door. The so-called window (*ḥallôn*) out of which Noah sends the birds (8:6) is probably not a window in the sense that one might readily imagine because it does not allow Noah to see out. If he could see out, then it is not obvious why he would need to dispatch the dove "to see whether the waters had receded from the earth"; and the text implies that Noah does not see what is going on outside the ark until he removes the covering of the grounded ark in 8:13.[17] Most likely, the text in 8:6

[16] See, for example, John Woodmorappe, *Noah's Ark: A Feasibility Study* (San Diego, CA: Institute for Creation Research, 1996).

[17] The use of *wĕhinnēh* (behold; NRSV: and saw) after *wayyar'* (he looked) is a common Hebrew idiom for shifting the perspective from the narrator to the character within the text. It is analogous to differing camera perspectives, specifically a shift from a general onlooker perspective to seeing with the eyes of one of the characters.

envisages an openable hatch in the roof, made of wood to keep the rain out. Noah reaches up his hand through this hatch to dispatch and receive the birds.

There is also the memorable moment when the dove returns with a freshly plucked olive leaf, which shows that the waters had subsided. Within the general storyline, this makes perfect sense. But the narrator appears to assume that, when the waters go down, growing things reappear in the same condition they were in before the waters came. The realistic condition of any part of a tree after a year under the sea, even when newly emerged from the waters, would presumably be indistinguishable from flotsam or seaweed. It would not show fresh life, and so it would fail to make the point within the story, that the leaf shows the return of regular conditions for life on earth; thereafter, the dove no longer returns to the ark because, implicitly, it is able to nest in a tree.

In addition to these internal clues as to the nature of the text, the Flood story also raises problems in relation to its wider narrative context. These problems are not dissimilar to those raised by the Cain and Abel story, for again there is a tension between the internal logic of the story and its present narrative setting.

First, we must note that the Flood is unambiguously envisaged as a universal flood, wiping out all life on earth, other than that preserved with Noah in the ark. Although sometimes it has been argued, for apologetic reasons,[18] that the Flood was a local flood within the Middle East, such a reading goes clearly contrary to both the specific detail and the general thrust of the biblical text. The universality of the perishing of animal and human life is explicit in Genesis 7:21–23. Nor would it be imaginable that the floodwaters

[18] So, for example, Bernard L. Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1955), of which there is a sharp discussion by James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), 94–96.

should cover the highest mountains, as is explicit in 7:19–20, if the Flood was local rather than universal. More generally, within the overall narrative sequence, the Flood represents a reversal of the initial creation. In Genesis 1, as the initially all-covering waters are restrained and removed, dry land appears, and life on earth is created. But in Genesis 7, all is undone, as the waters above and below are let out, land disappears, and life is extinguished by the again all-covering waters.[19] Thus, within the Flood narrative itself, the sole continuity of life between pre-Flood and post-Flood is represented by Noah and the others in the ark.

Beyond the Flood narrative proper, however, there are pointers in a different direction. One issue is the presence of the Nephilim both before the Flood (Gen 6:4) and subsequently in the land of Canaan as reported by Israel's spies (Num 13:33). Indeed, there is a note within the text of Genesis 6:4 that explicitly points to the continuity of Nephilim pre- and post-Flood: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days – and also afterwards – when . . . " To be sure, the apparent problem can without undue difficulty be circumvented, as is proposed by a thoughtful commentator such as Nahum Sarna:

> It is contrary to the understanding of the biblical narrative that they [the Nephilim] should have survived the Flood. Hence, the reference in Numbers is not to the supposedly continued existence of Nephilim into Israelite times; rather, it is used simply for oratorical effect, much as "Huns" was used to designate Germans during the two world wars.[20]

[19] Admittedly, sea life would not be adversely affected by the floodwaters, but this is of no interest to the narrator. In a later context, certain rabbis, in an attempt to rationalize this apparent inconsistency within the logic of the narrative, argued that the fish must have been sinless (cf. Zlotowitz and Scherman, *Bereishis*, 1:257)!

[20] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 46.

Some rabbis, with rather less sophistication, sought to account for the continuity by the delightful, even if narratively implausible, expedient of having Og (the king of Bashan), as one of the Nephilim, riding on the roof of the ark and so surviving the Flood![21] But whether the harmonizing instincts of the rabbis, or of Sarna, represent the best kind of explanation should not be decided in isolation from the wider narrative portrayal.

And how should one understand the account of Cain's descendants in Genesis 4:17–24? Some of these descendants are said to be the ancestors of those engaged in certain well-known pursuits: Jabal is the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock (4:20), Jubal is the ancestor of those who play the lyre and pipe (4:21). The natural implication of the text is that it refers to peoples known in the time of the narrator: The living in tents and the musical playing are depicted with an active participle; and moreover why bother to mention the ancestors here if the descendants are not familiar? In other words, this account of Cain's descendants seems unaware of a Flood that wiped them all out.[22]

Thus we have another tension between the implication of a particular narrative in its own right (that Cain's descendants endure in the time of the narrator) and the wider narrative context in which that particular story is set (a subsequent Flood in which only Noah and his family, descendants of Seth and not Cain, survived).[23] As with the story of Cain and Abel, a comparable solution suggests itself, in terms of the individual narratives having a history of their

[21] See Zlotowitz and Scherman, *Bereishis*, 1:187.

[22] The note in Genesis 2:14 about the river Hiddeqel/Tigris flowing "east of Assyria" likewise presupposes geography familiar to the author and intended audience.

[23] Of course, a harmonizing instinct can "solve" the problem by postulating that daughters of Cain were the wives of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

own, in the course of which they have been transposed from their original context and relocated in their present context. In this way, one both can do justice to the implications of the particular units in their own right and still appreciate the use to which they have been put in their present narrative setting. But again it indicates that the genre of the text needs careful handling.

An analogy may perhaps help. In certain ways the early chapters of Genesis are rather like many pre-Victorian churches and cathedrals in the United Kingdom. Although each building is a unity as it now stands, careful inspection (and a helpful guidebook) reveals an internal history – differing kinds of stone, and differing architectural styles, from differing periods of history. Sometimes the additions are obvious as additions – most obviously graves in the floor and monuments on the walls; the textual equivalent to these is the note or gloss that has been incorporated into the text.[24] However, one is sometimes confronted by marked differences within the fabric of the building. Almost always the correct way of understanding a marked difference of architectural style is not to hypothesize one architect who changed his mind and his materials, but rather to recognize that the building is composite and has a history. Thus, for example, the present east end of Durham Cathedral (which is a few yards away from where I am writing) has displaced an original east end that no longer remains, since it fell down centuries ago; and even to the untrained eye, the style of the east end, with its narrower multiple columns and greater height, differs from that of the nave, with the massive solidity of its shorter columns.

[24] Many notes give currently familiar place names to clarify the older place names contained within the narrative; thus, for example, the place named in the story as Luz is subsequently known as Bethel (Gen 35:6); cf. Genesis 14:2, 3, 7, 17.

Once there was a time when biblical interpreters felt constrained to account for everything in the Genesis text in terms of the sole authorship of Moses as a kind of a priori – even though Genesis as it stands is anonymous and nowhere makes any claim to authorship. But one of the lasting benefits of biblical scholarship is the recognition that traditional ascriptions of authorship do not (and indeed probably were not originally intended to) function as guides to composition in the kind of way that has been of concern to an ancient historian in the modern world. This frees one up to work inductively with the evidence that the text itself provides. In many contexts, the supposition that differences in content and style are best explained in terms of the construction of a whole out of originally diverse parts has widely commended itself. To be sure, such an approach by no means solves all problems. But at least, with regard to the specific problems posed by the texts we have been considering, this approach does enable us to make sense of what otherwise is either inexplicable or can lead to rather forced harmonized readings of the text that look like special pleading.

THE PERSPECTIVE AND CONVENTION EMBODIED IN THE USE OF HEBREW LANGUAGE

One final indicative feature is the use of the Hebrew language by all the speaking characters throughout the early chapters of Genesis. First and foremost, God, who is the prime speaker in this material, speaks in Hebrew, not only when in conversation with humans such as Adam or Cain (Gen 3:9–19, 4:6–15), but also when making pronouncements inaccessible to the human ear – such as the speaking into being of creation throughout Genesis 1, or the soliloquies that portray the divine will before and after the Flood

(Gen 6:6–7, 8:21–22). Correspondingly, all the human characters speak in Hebrew.

How should this phenomenon be understood? The time-honored premodern approach was to appeal to Genesis 11:1, "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words," and to construe this in a historicizing way: All the early inhabitants of earth, pre-Babel, spoke Hebrew, the language of God Himself.[25] A historical claim, however, that Hebrew is the oldest, indeed original, language on earth runs into a barrage of general historical and philological difficulties.[26] The root of the problem is the assumption that Genesis's portrayal of speech in Hebrew must be historicized. But there is an obvious alternative. One can construe the biblical depiction in terms of the general convention of all storytellers, ancient and modern, which is to depict one's characters as speaking in the language of the storyteller and of the target audience. When Shakespeare depicts all the characters in *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus* as speaking Tudor English in the context of ancient Rome, one would be unwise to assume that Shakespeare was making a historical claim about the language of ancient Rome rather than making the scenario accessible to his contemporaries. Or when a film producer, such as Franco Zeffirelli in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, has inhabitants of the Holy Land in antiquity speak in English, one would again be unwise to historicize the linguistic depiction, whatever the historical accuracy of other aspects of the general portrayal (where historical homework has

[25] So, for example, Rashi in the eleventh century glosses "one language" in Genesis 11:1 with "the holy tongue," that is, Hebrew (see M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, eds., *The Pentateuch with the Commentary of Rashi: Genesis* [Jerusalem: Silbermann, 1972], 44).

[26] This issue was debated extensively in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the context of the emergence of a more sharply focused sense of the nature of ancient history and of appropriate scholarly approaches to such history.

been done to try to ensure verisimilitude of setting).[27] Similarly, when God soliloquizes in Hebrew, or when Adam makes a word-play in Hebrew (2:23), one can make good sense in terms of the imaginative convention of the language being that of the narrator and the implied audience, but no real sense if one feels constrained to argue that these Hebrew words are what was "really" said in a frame of reference of ancient history rather than of dramatic narrative portrayal.

Thus the portrayal of characters speaking in Hebrew poses an issue not dissimilar to our previous examples – the content of the text in an important respect stands in tension with the context at the beginnings of the world in which it is now set. Or, to put it differently, all my examples underline the need to take seriously the biblical text as a crafted literary phenomenon, whose conventions must be understood and respected on their own terms and not prejudged in terms of their conformity (or otherwise) to a modern reader's possible initial expectations.

LITERARY CONVENTIONS AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

The recognition that the narrative sequence in the early chapters of Genesis is constructed out of originally disparate material that is not historical in modern terms is, of course, open to be taken in more than one way. Not uncommonly, it has led to a reductive

[27] So prevalent and recognized is the convention of accessible language that attempts at linguistic "realism," such as the characters speaking ancient languages in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, do not, I think, always succeed in their purpose. Realism is attained by (a) a quality of acting and filming that so engages the imagination that any kind of self-distancing or suspension of disbelief is removed for the duration of the film and (b) the ability of the film to inform thought and practice subsequent to its viewing.

debunking: The material is, at best, a merely human construct, eloquent of the ancient Hebrew imagination but not of God or the true nature of life in the world; while at worst it is a farrago of misguided stories about the world, myths and legends in the popular pejorative sense, whose only good location is in histories of human error. Polemical rhetoric along these lines featured, for example, in the influential late eighteenth-century writings of Thomas Paine: "Take away from Genesis the belief that Moses was the author, on which only the strange belief that it is the word of God has stood, and there remains nothing of Genesis, but an anonymous book of stories, fables and traditionary or invented absurdities or downright lies."[28] More recently, one of Paine's intellectual descendants, Richard Dawkins, expresses himself in comparable terms:

> To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and "improved" by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other.[29]

Such polemic has often produced defensive responses that have too readily accepted the questionable categories within which the critique is articulated. But none of this follows from the basic recognition of the text's constructed nature. For what comes into play at this point is one's understanding of revelation: that is, whether it is theologically responsible to recognize God's self-communication and enduring truth about humanity and the world in variegated texts that bear the hallmarks of regular literary conventions

[28] Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason, Part the Second, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (London: H.D. Symonds, 1795), 4.

[29] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 237.

and historical processes. Thus, for example, over against Paine and Dawkins, one might note the no-less-stringent tones of Karl Barth:

> We must dismiss and resist to the very last any idea of the inferiority or untrustworthiness or even worthlessness of a "non-historical" depiction and narration of history. This is in fact only a ridiculous and middle-class habit of the modern Western mind which is supremely phantastic in its chronic lack of imaginative phantasy, and hopes to rid itself of its complexes through suppression. This habit has really no claim to the dignity and validity which it pretends.[30]

The basic issue for the theological interpreter is the relationship between the human and the divine. The human dimensions of the biblical text have been extensively studied in the modern period; and interpreters sometimes conclude, or at least imply, that to take seriously this human element is somehow to eliminate the divine. But although this might have some force against simplistic views of the text, as though it were some sort of direct transcription of divine discourse,[31] it does not really touch the key issue, which is how the divine is mediated by the human – unless it is assumed

[30] Karl Barth, *CD* 3.1:81. Barth is the most notable proponent in recent times of an understanding of biblical revelation in terms of ordinary and fallible human language as the vehicle for God's self-communication. The passage cited is taken from a larger discussion of the genre and significance of the creation narratives in *CD* 3.1:61–94.

[31] For some of the wider issues, see the suggestive discussion in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and, among responses to Wolterstorff, Ben C. Ollenburger, "Pursuing the Truth of Scripture: Reflections on Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse*," in *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth*, ed. Alan Padgett and Patrick Keifert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 44–65.

a priori that the human cannot mediate the divine.[32] Indeed, the potentially problematic dynamics of the depiction of God as an acting and speaking character in a human narrative is in no way a modern recognition. The difficult questions revolve around the nature of the relationship between literary artifact and reality. On what grounds should one really trust the omniscient narrator, rather than just grant imaginative credence for the duration of one's reading?

In literary and historical terms, it is of course true that, for example, the words that God speaks in the early chapters of Genesis (and elsewhere) are human words, part of the Hebrew language of ancient Israel, and that they have been set on God's lips by the author of the text at a time long subsequent to the context within which the words are set. In general terms, however, it is hard to improve on the pithy formulation of Jon D. Levenson: "The relationship of compositional history to religious faith is not a simple one. If Moses is the human author of Genesis, nothing ensures that God is its ultimate Author. If J, E, P, and various equally anonymous redactors are its human authors, nothing ensures that God is not its ultimate Author."[33]

In theological terms, the issue for Jews and Christians is *not* somehow to narrow the range of "acceptable" human mediations of the divine – as though individual authors composing narratives of historical factuality should be acceptable in a way that editors and scribes reworking traditional material preserved by a community are unacceptable. For surely *any* significant mode of human

[32] Some of the general issues at stake here are discussed in my *Prophecy and Discernment*, CSCD 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. 32–38, 227–29.

[33] Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8–101 (11).

communication should in principle be acceptable as a vehicle for the divine word, unless and until it can be clearly shown that it is problematic in the kind of way that might disqualify it. Rather, the theological issue revolves around probing the classic understanding that one should conceive the human and the divine roles in creating the biblical text as complementary rather than competitive. One should avoid easy polarities between divine revelation and human imagination, or between that which is divinely given and that which is humanly constructed, or between divine sovereignty and human freedom, when the real challenge is to grasp *how these belong together.* Or, in other terms, it is clear that the early chapters of Genesis – like the Bible as a whole – is a work of human construction. The question becomes whether this human construction is itself a response to antecedent divine initiative, and so mediates a reality beyond itself, and, if so, how fidelity in mediation should be understood, evaluated, and appropriated; or whether it is human construction "all the way down," with no reality beyond itself. Such a question is, of course, not easily answered!

The approach adopted here is what has become known as a "canonical approach" (though the label may or may not be helpful).[34] Among other things, this involves working with the text in its "received form,"[35] while recognizing that this received

[34] Amid the extensive literature, a succinct introduction is Christopher R. Seitz, "Canonical Approach," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK, 2005), 100–2.

[35] There are difficulties over whatever terminology one chooses to use. Early advocates of a canonical approach tended to speak of working with the final form of the text, because the concern was to articulate an alternative to inquiries into the sources and tradition-history behind the text. Yet, of course, in relation to text-critical issues and the ancient versions, final form is a less comprehensible or useful notion. The terminology of received form encounters some of the same difficulties, but remains preferable, I think, because it shifts the focus to the role of the biblical text in relation to Jewish and Christian communities that have received it.

form may be the outcome of a long and complex process of religio-historical development – and so one is *not* trying to put the clock back by arguing for compositional simplicity or straightforward historicity.[36] From Jewish and Christian perspectives, the heart of the matter revolves around a willingness to trust the continuing religious traditions, in their various forms, of which the Genesis narratives form a part. That is, the Genesis parts are to be read in relation to a canonical whole – where what is canonical is not just the biblical corpus but also the continuing frames of reference within which its meaning is probed and appropriated. Such a trust is intrinsically related to a sense of the past and present fruitfulness of those traditions in their various Christian and/or Jewish forms. Within such contexts there is a commitment to *think with* the biblical text and its historic appropriations. Searching and critical questions are put to both text and tradition as a corollary of allowing text and tradition, received as mediators of a divine reality, to put searching and critical questions to the reader. In such a frame of reference, theological interpretation can begin to realize its potential.

[36] To be sure, one may still argue either way on any particular text or issue. The point is that there is no in-principle commitment to conservative positions as these have been developed within modern scholarship.