

On literary theorists' approach to Genesis 1: Part 2

Marc Kay

Part one of this paper set out the philosophy and history that lay behind a new trend in conservative Christian efforts to dehistoricize Genesis 1. Part two will examine in detail the literary devices that Genesis 1 is mooted to contain and see if their presence perfunctorily rules out its being historical prose.

At the end of the first part of this paper¹ it was noted how one academic and theologian challenged the historico-grammatical approach to Scripture by claiming that Genesis 1 is replete with literary devices and that these, in and of themselves, negate any possibility that Genesis is historical prose.² What follows is a detailed examination of this claim.

Intricate structure

This is arguably the most perplexing of all devices putatively forming an integral part of Genesis 1 and is confounding for no other reason than vagueness. It is tempting to respond to this rather jejune assertion by asking, 'Just how long is that intricate piece of string?' Attention is drawn to its clear subjective nature by the omission of any formal calculus of the assumed necessary connection between intricateness and ahistoricity. And with regard to this relationship, how does one assess the degree to which history is undermined by complexity, and at what point does a passage move from historicity to ahistoricity based on an objective calculator of intricateness? Is it an all or nothing measure or does one invest some historical truth depending on degrees of intricateness? In other words, what exactly constitutes intricate structure? How and why does this indicate ahistorical material, and to what extent?

Another indication that intricateness is in the eye of its beholder is the conflicting conclusions that different commentators arrive at when assessing Genesis' structure. For example, one author judged Genesis 1 as both primitive and naive with its language 'unornate, its method ... stiff and precise and ... repetitious.'³

In his address of the Bible's requisite incorporation of chronology Meir Sternberg's analysis of the complexity of biblical narratives dispels any possibility that intricateness is a semaphore for non-history. While pursuing an ultimate chronological meaningfulness, the biblical authors frequently made use of the most rich and artful arrangement of their historical material. Among those cited and explored throughout the entire range of biblical historical books, Sternberg lists the following devices: parallel plotting with its ostensible appearance of simultaneity, delayed action and outcomes, asymmetrical and ironic juxtapositioning, convergence and retrospective alignment, sequential twists, temporal shifts, the omitting or ambiguating of causal links, temporal gaps and blanks, analogous or repetitive themes and incidents, alternation whereby the narrative sequence

zig-zags between objective simultaneities, suspense-driven episodes, deep interlinear polarities of theme, foreclosure or premature curtain-dropping which 'jumps ahead' in absolute time in order to synchronize effects, the establishment of contextual hierarchies of importance, shifts in focus, complex word plays, parataxis and interepisodic suspense.⁴ If consistency is a valued commodity, then conservative literary theorists would have to reject *all* of the Bible's historiography if complexity connotes ahistoricity.

Rhythm

In contradistinction to 'meter', which is both regular and predictable and thus has a pattern, 'rhythm' is defined as 'the unsystematic alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables'.⁵ Watson adds that rhythm is also marked out 'by loudness, by pitch (a syllable pronounced in a tone higher or lower than the norm) and by length (drawing out a syllable)'.^{6,7}

Harrison proposes that the manner in which words were accented in Hebrew made it an ideal language for poetry. He points out, however, that this accentuation is found in both prose and poetry, and so even if a rhythm is present, it doesn't implicate non-prose.⁸ Others call the enterprise entirely misplaced due to its being a procrustean imposition of classic criteria upon a different cultural expression, a project that even ancient Jewish commentators, such as Josephus, were guilty of.⁹ In any case, as Longman states, 'prose and everyday speech are rhythmical'.¹⁰

Parallelism

At once controversial and integral to the poetry/prose nomenclature divide, the standard account is that parallelism is identified by 'the same language and style elements ... repeated in the two parts of the literary unit ... matching ... in terms of their position relative to each other: the elements in the second part repeat those in the first in the same order—first matching first and last matching last'.¹¹

However, a far-more adventurous understanding of the device's nature, apparently to the person overlooked by literary theorists, is given particular attention by James Kugel. Turning the standard definition on its head, Kugel has argued quite convincingly that parallelism has been completely misunderstood. The history of parallelism's identification in biblical writings began on the wrong foot because commentators were looking for something that

really wasn't there. It was a project doomed from the beginning because parallelism had been, and continues to be, erroneously redefined to be synonymous with classic rhythm and meter, in particular Greek poetic techniques. In the process it did not allow Hebraic culture to speak for itself.¹² Parallelism, Kugel maintains, was

'... on everyone's lips, commoners' and kings'; rumours and facts, cures, rules of conduct, rules of thumb, things one heard and things one might make up spontaneously ... it was an extraordinarily versatile and popular form of expression, one that almost anyone could use almost anywhere. Parallelistic lines appear throughout the Bible, not only in "poetic" parts but in the midst of narratives (especially in direct discourse), in detailed legal material concerning the sanctuary and the rules of sacrifices, in genealogies, and so forth.¹³

Kugel's definition of parallelism is as much ingeniously uncomplicated as it is insightfully unique. He labels the first line of a parallelistic line A, the second, B, arguing that "A is so, and *what's more*, B is so" ... B typically *supports* A, carries it further, backs it up, completes it, goes beyond it ... B was connected to A, had something in common with it, but was not expected to be (nor regarded as), mere restatement.¹⁴ Elsewhere, he sententiously depicts it the "I'll go you one better" mentality of parallelism.¹⁵ This approach opposes the usual understanding that B somehow mimics or reflects the syntactic, morphological or phonetic similarity of A. His definition also disengages itself from the special pleading that characterised previous critics' attempts, including the 18th century 'discoverer' of parallelism, Robert Lowth, when faced with a correspondence between lines which was 'so slight as to disappear entirely'.¹³

Notwithstanding Kugel's less than orthodox definition, even Blocher noted the absence in Genesis 1 of 'the rhythms of Hebrew poetry, [and] its more or less synonymous parallelism'.¹⁶

If it were conceded that two lines' parallelism indicates non-prose, a critic would be entirely unwarranted to classify the whole passage as non-prose. This would be a clear example of the fallacy of composition in which one reasons 'improperly from a property of a member of a group to a property of the group itself'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, by whatever criterion it is defined, the presence of parallelism does not perfunctorily render a passage non-prose, and certainly does not reduce it to ahistoricity. For example, Exodus 2:1–10, Leviticus 5:6, Ruth 1:8–9; 2:21–22 and Deuteronomy 21:10–11 are passages which contain gender-matched parallelism where the 'genders of the nouns in each colon match—masculine and feminine genders occurring in parallel lines',¹⁸ yet are universally classified as prose. Kugel points out that 'the Pentateuch is full of [parallelistic] lines—not only single verses here and there (especially in direct discourses), but whole sections ... [including

the account of the birth of Moses.¹⁸ This point has been supported by George Gray who cogently stated,

'The validity of parallelism as a test to distinguish between prose and poetry in Hebrew literature might be, and has been either actually or virtually, challenged on [the ground] ... that parallelism actually occurs in prose.'²⁰

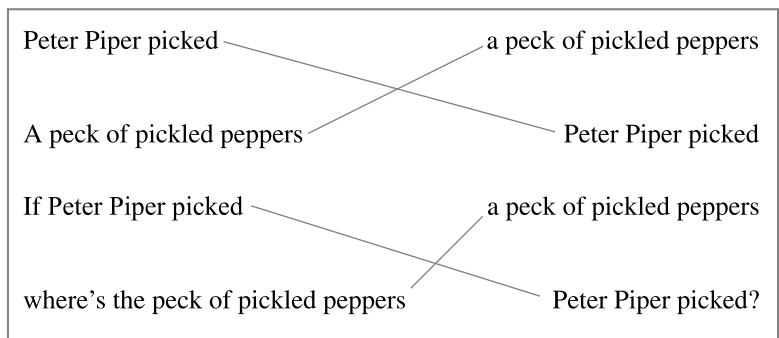
Gray characterises the use of parallelism as a widespread technique in many diverse ancient literatures. In particular he looks at Arabic culture and says that,

'... the use of parallelism [here] is such as to give some, at least apparent, justification to the claim that parallelism is no true differentia between prose and poetry ... according to the general opinion of Arabian grammarians.'²¹

Outside of the biblical prose/poetry polemic, parallelism is discovered in a number of clearly non-poetic sources. For example, Stanley Gevirtz has noted that some administrative correspondence in the Amarna letters employ parallel verbal forms that would be 'familiar from Ugaritic and biblical Hebrew poetry'.²²

Chiasmus

Chiasmus is identified because 'the same language and style elements are repeated in the second part in reverse order—last matching first and first matching last'.²³ In more lengthy passages chiasmus can be recognised because 'the narrator begins the tale a second time from the point where he ended the first telling ... repeat[ing] the last first and the first last'.²⁴ The term itself comes from the Greek verb *chiazō* and means 'to mark with two lines crossing like a χ [*chi*].'²⁵ To illustrate the *chi*-factor one writer splendidly sets out a well-known tongue-twister thus:²⁶



The pickled pepper chiastic structure.

Literary theorists' proposition that chiasmus signifies ahistoricity overlooks three key aspects of this literary device. First, is its almost ubiquitous employment in ancient non-poetic writing. Brad McCoy states that 'Chiasmus ... is an important structural device/form commonly found in ancient literature and oratory, both secular and sacred'.²⁷ He further underscores the extent of chiasmus, at the same time reproaching the modern critic's lack of awareness, by noting that 'The common usage of chiasmus in much of the

literature of antiquity (at both a micro and a macro level) has often been overlooked by contemporary interpreters.²⁸ Combining his and others' evidence he establishes that chiasmus is a genuine technique of ancient Near East prose and isn't necessarily limited to poetry. He lists a quite disparate collection of documents that regularly contained chiasmus: Sumero-Akkadian literature, Ugaritic writings, Aramaic contracts and letters and Talmudic-Aggadic narratives.²⁹ McCoy points out, for example, that Herodotus used this device in his *Histories* to record some of Xerxes' words concerning Artemisia's bravery at the Battle of Salamis.^{28,30}

John Welch writes that 'The literally thousands of examples of chiasmus which are observed in available commentaries on the classical Latin authors demonstrate the extensiveness of chiasmus throughout this body of literature.'³¹ Citing an article by R.B. Steele, Welch says that there are 1257 examples of chiasmus in Livy, 211 in Sallust, 365 in Caesar and 1088 in Tacitus.^{31,32}

This anachronistic transferring of present literary norms—the lack of chiasmus in contemporary historiography—to the past by literary theorists only serves to show the importance of heeding Aristotle's counsel of allowing ancient records to speak for themselves.

The second aspect is the natural flexibility that Hebrew and some other languages possess, *vis-à-vis*, for example, modern English, that facilitates incorporation of chiasmus into their writing. As Mary Schertz and Perry Yoder point out, 'an inflected language³³ such as Hebrew or Greek has greater flexibility than English, making it easier to invert the order of semantic, grammatical, and syntactical components.'³⁴ Others have elevated chiasmus to a level where it has virtually become the *sine qua non* of Hebraic cultural identity. Nils Lund, for example, states that 'chiasmus as a literary form is not any more characteristic of poetry than it is of prose ... chiasmus seems to be part of Hebrew thought itself.'³⁵

Yehuda Radday held that scholars are reluctant to accept chiasmus as a well-utilised device in ancient literature, particularly the Bible, because their attitude is that 'prose lacks the artistic sophistication of drama and poetry.'³⁵ By doing so, theorists—and this is the third element—fail to grasp that chiasmus functions as 'a key to meaning'³⁶ and that 'Chiastic structure ... is more than an artificial or artistic device ... biblical authors and/or editors placed the main idea, the thesis, or the turning point of each literary unit, at its center.'³⁷

Yitzhak Avishur details, diagrammatically and in words, the extensive use of chiasmus throughout the Old Testament: 'Chiasmus in an entire prose work ... [is] common in the Bible.'³⁸ Radday goes even further by claiming that 'chiasm was *de rigueur* in biblical times.'^{37,39} Again, Avishur brings together not only his own voluminous investigations but also draws upon the work of others who have likewise recognised the apparent commonplace use of this device in biblical historical accounts.⁴⁰ Avishur identifies chiastic structure in, *inter alia*, the following incidents:

- The Flood narrative of Genesis 7:19–24; 9:1–7,18–29
- The circumcision accounts of Genesis 17:10–14, 23–27
- The record of the blasphemer's punishment in Leviticus 24:10–23
- God's promise of a son to the elderly Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:1–16
- The sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1–19
- God's revelation at Sinai in Exodus 19–24.⁴¹

In addition, David Dorsey proposes that Genesis through Joshua forms an extended chiasmus, centred on the covenant at Sinai.⁴²

Liberal theology aside, it would be extremely difficult for all but the most recalcitrant to argue that these important passages are anything but historical, notwithstanding their being framed within a chiastic structure. Accordingly, literary theorists display an arrant lack of soundness concerning their conclusion that the presence of chiasmus renders a passage ahistorical.

As well as the obvious aesthetic purpose, the application of chiasmus has utilitarian function. John Breck notes that these served both the writer and reader. He notes that,

'Ancient writing made no use of paragraphs, punctuation, capitalization or spacing. These are late conventions ... Ancient authors were obliged to organise the internal format of their works by other means ... [Chiasmus] served to focus the reader's attention on the core of the author's message. By reading the passage concentrically, the reader was drawn into its circular flow, as an object is drawn toward the center of a vortex ... [Also i]mportant was the *mnemonic* benefit ... The ancients learned by rote ... Chiasmus facilitated this process by repetition and by focusing on a central theme. Once the student had in mind the first half of a simple bicolon or a complicated chiastic structure, it was a relatively easy matter to recall the rest.'⁴³

This effort to collocate chiasmus with ahistoricity raises a far more serious problem for its conservative adherents. Consistently running with this formula puts an advocate squarely on the horns of a dilemma. The Christian message to the world stands or falls upon the historicity of the trial, death and resurrection of Christ. McCoy, citing, *inter alios*, Raymond Brown, shows that these pivotal events from Christ's life, as recorded in the Matthean and Johannine gospels, are given expression through a chiastic structure.⁴⁴ The irony here cannot be over-exaggerated. Creationists have long argued, on entirely different grounds, that the denial of Genesis 1's plain historicity undermines the Gospel,⁴⁵ yet, the putative identification of merely one literary device as an indication of a lack of historicity would, for literary theorists, necessarily 'white-ant' the historicity of the zenith of God's entry into the time-space continuum.

Repetition

Literary theorists' claim that repetition attests to ahistoricity is noteworthy for its absence of formal criteria.

It suggests nothing more than, ‘Repetition is always evidence of ahistoricity, and so Genesis 1 is unequivocally ahistorical because it contains repetition.’ Such is more indicative of circular reasoning in which an argument’s conclusion is identical to its own premiss rather than a fallacy-free and empirical demonstration that repetition signifies ahistoricity.

Jerome Walsh commences his seemingly exhaustive work on biblical Hebrew narrative by stating that repetition ‘is the most common formal device for organising a literary unit in biblical Hebrew prose’; he ends it by writing that it ‘occurs in prose narratives that ... appear to date from every period of biblical Hebrew. This supports the conclusion that the device is an inherent and enduring feature of biblical Hebrew style ... it is native to biblical Hebrew prose.’⁴⁶ Repetition has also been called ‘the hallmark of Hebrew rhetoric.’⁴⁷ It can be incorporated into a narrative in order to centre the thought, provide unity and continuity to the writing, mark out the beginning and end of subunits, offer clues to understanding meaning and degree of importance, for emphasis, didacticism and mnemonic effect, to invite comparison, delay action and create suspense and interest.⁴⁸ ‘The purpose of repetition’, Revell argues, ‘is to draw the item repeated to the attention of the hearer or reader, to mark it as significant. The reader or hearer is left to determine the reason why it is so marked.’⁴⁹

Both the envelope figure, in which a statement is repeated, but separated by several non-repetitious lines, the two serving to ‘frame’ the passage, and straight or immediate repetition, are far from exclusive to poetry. The former ‘can occur in prose’, while the latter ‘is frequent enough in prose texts’.⁵⁰ The Noachian covenant of Genesis 9 in which ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ is repeated in verses 1 and 7 is an example of the envelope type, while Leviticus 19 with its frequent consecutive ‘I am the LORD’ or ‘I am the LORD your God’ exemplifies immediate repetition.⁵¹

In any case, the type of repetition in Genesis 1 contains none of the recognisable poetic forms.⁵² In fact, it takes the form one would expect from a list in an historical narrative in which a person states his intended action, does it—all shown by God’s saying, seeing, blessing, calling etc.—and then assesses the result. The question here really is, if God did create over a six-day period, and he completed a number of actions, would the most accurate, logical and succinct historical record of this not be such a list that Genesis 1 possesses which addresses the what, how and when?⁵³ Furthermore, with regard to Genesis’ repetitive affirmation that at the end of each day God’s creative acts were ‘good’, William Brown makes the very reasonable point that this ‘suggests an overriding concern regarding the *manner* by which creation was achieved.’⁵⁴ Given the importance

Repetition in Genesis 1:9–19 (KJV)

⁹ *And God said*, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: **and it was so.**

¹⁰ And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: **and God saw that it was good.**

¹¹ *And God said*, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: **and it was so.**

¹² And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: **and God saw that it was good.**

¹³ And the evening and the morning were the third day.

¹⁴ *And God said*, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

¹⁵ And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: **and it was so.**

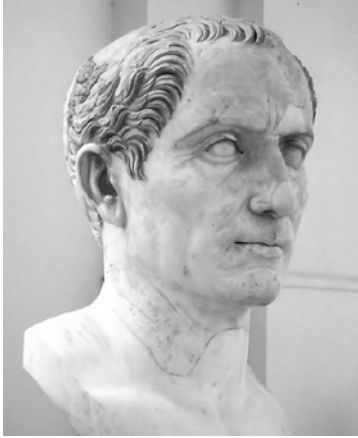
¹⁶ And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

¹⁷ And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,

¹⁸ And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: **and God saw that it was good.**

¹⁹ And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

Repetition has also been called ‘the hallmark of Hebrew rhetoric’.



Julius Caesar, author of *The Gallic Wars*, extensively used chiasmus in his historical writings.

to a contemporary creationist theodicy of an original perfect creation this point perhaps underscores the intentionality and purpose behind the repetition.

Revell also emphasises that repetition is ‘a common feature of Biblical Hebrew [and i]t cannot have aroused, in the users of that language, the sort of aversion that it does in speakers of English or other European languages ... The structure of Semitic

languages is conducive to some forms of repetition.’⁵⁵

Number symbolism

Subjecting Genesis 1 to intense numerical dissection is not unique to this contemporary period.⁵⁶ Augustine, for example, had an almost obsessive attraction to mystical mathematical calculation, being especially fond of the putative importance of numbers that relate to verses, words and the like: ‘We must not overlook the science of number, therefore, which, in many passages of Holy Scripture, is found to be of great value to the diligent student.’⁵⁷

Of modern commentators, perhaps Henri Blocher has been the most willing to advance the concept that Genesis primarily purposes an artful numerical overlay. He writes that Genesis’ author is ‘a wise man, supremely able in the art of arranging material and very fond of manipulating numbers, particularly the number seven. From such a writer the plain, straightforward meaning, as in two-dimensional prose, would be most surprising when he is setting out the pattern of seven days.’⁵⁸ Dickson, too, after pointing out, *inter alia*, how many words there are in the first sentence and the frequency ‘God’ is used in the chapter, summarises by claiming

‘... the artistry throughout the chapter is stunning and, to ancient readers, unmistakable. It casts the creation as a work of art, sharing in the perfection of God ... [and] short of including a prescript for the benefit of modern readers the original author could hardly have made it clearer that his message is conveyed in a *literary*, rather than prosaic, form.’⁵⁹

Although conveniently overlooked by literary theorists, a number of difficulties immediately present themselves: How can such arguments be tested and is it possible for any literary theorist to scrutinise the mind of an ancient reader to ascertain if the propositions are sound? And how is it that such definitive conclusions concerning a person’s attitude toward Genesis 1, several millennia

removed from the present, can be articulated without a single document offered as support? That many of the earliest Christian theologians did not subscribe to a non-literal reading of Genesis only underscores the inadequacy of these theorists’ scholarship.⁶⁰ This in itself throws the onus of proof back onto literary theorists who are yet to provide an explanation as to why a wealth of numerical patterning perfunctorily rules out historicity. If men like, for example, Theophilus of Antioch, Methodius and Basil read Genesis 1 as ordinary, historical days then it is incumbent upon the modern commentator to do much more than assert that theirs is the correct reading.⁶¹

Arguably, of all putative literary devices that are put forward as evincing the non-historicity of Genesis 1, number symbolism suffers most from a question-begging fallacy. The assertion that an apparent pattern of numbers necessarily indicates complete evacuation of historical content rests only upon itself. In other words, it is concluded to be a fact by recirculating the premiss as the argument’s conclusion. Andrew Sloane, for example, first assumes that there is ‘[no necessary] direct correspondence between the words of the text and what the writer is affirming by way of those words’,⁶² and then begs the question by positing that the ‘pattern of days serves a literary function [by] ordering the account into sets of three days ... Thus the framework has a clear *literary* function, and tells us important things about God and his creation.’⁶³ Sloan’s subsequent ‘justification’ to deny the passage’s historicity is a sophistical and, once again, question-begging tour de force:

‘Of course this does not mean that it *cannot* also serve to assert that the cosmos was made in six 24-hour periods. It does mean it *need not*; it may serve to mark the writer’s assertion that this is an orderly cosmos ... and questions of temporal ordering and duration are not of interest to him. To assert that an ancient author must share our concerns is anachronistic and fails to do justice to the historical context of the text and its significance for understanding the author’s intentions.’⁶³

Patterns unaccompanied by supporting realities are vain parodies of themselves. Thus, Sloan fails to notice that an ascription of creative orderliness by a pattern, without the cosmos’ earliest history first being orderly, is meaningless.

This belief that the concern of Genesis’ author is atemporal is one replete with irony. It is ironic because such a misunderstanding opens the door to nothing less than a full revisitation by a pagan worldview. As several authors have extensively indicated, the removal of real time or chronological history is a marker for paganism.⁶⁴ It cannot be an outlook informed by Jewish concerns because a biblical, Hebraic mindset was deeply and inextricably attached to ‘the march of time.’ Indeed, God himself was ‘in time’, so the writer of Genesis could not but reflect this also. Meir Sternberg calls this the ‘grand chronology’ and says that this interest with orderly sequence pervades the Bible and is Jewish to the core:

‘... chronological sequence is the backbone of the bible’s narrative books, their most salient and continuous organizing principle. It figures not as a time-line that we reconstruct from some entangled discourse to make sense of what happens ... [but is] an unfolding of events from prior to posterior, from cause to effect. So for the Bible to communicate is to chronologize the surface itself, the narrative as well as the narrated sequence of events ... the order of presentation in the biblical text follows the order of occurrence in the biblical world. In this the Bible contrasts with the entire tradition of large-scale temporal disordering, fathered by Homer’s plunge *in medias res* and widely elevated ever since into the repository of artful arrangement ... what could be more *ab ovo* than beginning with the very beginning of the world, hence of time, indeed with the word “beginning” (*bereshit*) itself? What could make (and herald) a more orderly sequel than the march of Creation from the first day to the climactic sixth, then to the seventh with its sense of rest and arrest, fulfillment and closure? Beginning, middle, end—each finds its proper place and value in this paradigm of order. Indeed, the books from Genesis to Kings, all likewise conceiving of story as divine history, follow suit both individually and in canonical series.’⁶⁵

Other literary commentators imagine the writer of Genesis as some sort of numerologist by claiming his main concern was that ‘the right numbers [added up] symbolically’.⁶⁶ Sounding far more consonant with New Age than Christian deliberations, Hyers, commenting on Genesis 1, writes:

‘Both the numbers 3 and 4 in themselves often function as symbols of totality ... Geometrically speaking, 3 is the triangular symbol of totality, and 4 is the rectangular symbol in its perfect form as the square. But what would be more “total” would be to combine the vertical and horizontal planes. Thus the number 7 (adding 3 and 4) and the number 12 are recurrent biblical symbols of fullness and perfection.’⁶⁷

Efforts to successfully secure a case for the days of Genesis 1 being a symbolic literary device fail because some sort of special pleading is involved. In other words, the numbers just do not add up!⁶⁸ The line of least resistance, one removing the need for violently making facts fit theory, is to take the narrative as a week of days because ‘The temporal structure of the plot is established by means of dates and other indications of time, stating when the action

took place and how long it lasted. Those indications of time are not at all uncommon in biblical narrative.’⁶⁹

Conclusion

At the epistemological and ontological heart of literary theorists’ take on Genesis 1 lie two fundamental attitudes to language. There is a belief that language constructs the world rather than conceding that it is within the scope of language itself to be able to reflect the objective world. The postmodernist Jacques Derrida most famously and succinctly reflected this belief by opining, ‘There is no outside-of-text’.⁷⁰ In respect of origins, the Genesis text, for the literary theorist, does not truly refer to the objects named in it and cannot contain, as Francis Schaeffer termed it, ‘true truth’ or ‘propositional, factual communication’.⁷¹

Second, language is unable to provide an internal coherence for propositions that are expressed within the Genesis text. In effect, this tacitly concludes that the text is ultimately contradictory or at odds with itself.⁷²

A disinterested review of literary theorists’ take on Genesis 1 also can not help but notice the enthymematic nature of the argument: the epistemological jigsaw piece that should bridge the syllogistic gap between the inclusion of literary techniques and Genesis 1’s ahistoricity is never provided. That ‘what’, which seems so complete in the mind, appears markedly incomplete in expression. Quite possibly the whole of the literary theorists’ exercise suffers from question begging.

Nevertheless, the literary devices that the theory’s proponents moot as being included in Genesis 1 serially fail to support their argument that this passage is ahistorical: they are either absent or, if present, do not entail non-prose and ahistoricity. In the minds of its adherents,

this apotheosis of beauty and an elevation of form over content have proved an extremely effective device to attenuate the nexus between the written and the actual. However, as Tamara Eskenazi strongly warned, ‘The historical veracity of a text or of the events recounted therein is not slandered by the use of literary tools.’⁷³

Sternberg has argued that this problem of elevating literary features began with Aristotle and has continued until today. Concurring with Eskenazi, he cautions that, ‘Sooner or later, [it is] discovered that their presence does not suffice to confer literariness, nor their absence to deny it.’⁷⁴ Among the reasons he gives for this position are that unadorned history-writing contains them and the protean nature of communication over time and within and between cultures.

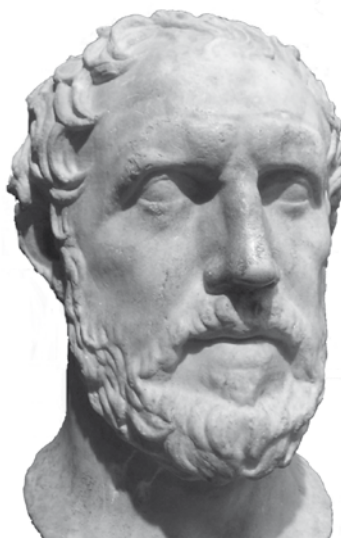


Photo from wikipedia.org - Royal Ontario Museum

Thucydides was the author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He was a contemporary of Herodotus, who was regarded by some as ‘the Father of history’, used chiasmus to narrate Xerxes’ words at the battle of Salamis.

For all their talk of genre and devices, literary theorists pay significantly less attention to the historical milieu of Genesis 1's origin than would be expected. That is, they frequently read back into the text alien and irrelevant contemporary expectations and ideas rather than acquainting themselves with the cultural, linguistic and literary factors that have moulded and shaped Genesis 1. In other words, they have ignored the type of literature that it really is representative of, namely historiography.

Theorists' perception that the words of Genesis amount to nothing more serious than *belles-lettres*, albeit a work that stands in unique distinction to the surrounding cultures' similar cosmogonic stories,⁷⁵ is ironic. In insisting that Genesis 1, because of the assumed presence of literary techniques, is literature and nothing else, they fail to appreciate that these same techniques are the historiographic nuts and bolts that knit and weld historical accounts in both ancient secular and biblical writing.⁷⁶

The identification of structure within biblical writing does have its place in understanding something of the biblical writers' enterprise. This should never be, however, produced at the expense or devaluation of content. The monolithic application of literary theory to Genesis 1's structure lends an air of pseudo-academic respectability to an exercise that masks an *a priori* bias toward ahistoricity. As Bar-Efrat cautioned, 'It should be borne in mind, however, that the interpretation of structure is much more prone to subjectivity than its mere description. In order to endow the proposed interpretation with a high degree of probability and convincing power it is recommendable to look for data in the text, apart from the structure, that confirm or support it.'⁷⁷

By shying away from these issues of truth and historicity, literary critics commit one further anachronistic error. John Barton comments:

To ask, then, whether the events recorded ... occurred is not necessarily to reveal oneself as a hopeless philistine, insensitive to the questions proper to literary criticism; it is rather, to recognize that modern literary criticism has excessively narrowed the range of questions deemed allowable, in a way that causes no serious distortions when modern literature is under examination, but is less appropriate in an ancient context. ... those of a more 'literary' turn of mind need to remember that 'literature' has not always been the tightly-defined thing it is now.⁷⁸

In denouncing literary theory's undermining of his own discipline, the objectivist historian G.R. Elton observed: 'In battling against people who would subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics we historians are, in a way, fighting for our lives. Certainly, we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights—the intellectual equivalent of crack.'⁷⁹ Elton's recognition of the dangers of allowing literary theory unfettered access to history's records is all the more apposite today when scholars and theologians routinely dismiss Genesis 1 as history on grounds other than the account's semantic content.

Acknowledgment

In assisting me to prepare this paper I owe many heartfelt thanks to Grace Yuwono, Brian and Christine Austin, Noel Weeks, David Green and Wayne Olling.

References

1. Kay, M., On literary theorists' approach to Genesis 1: Part 1, *Journal of Creation* 21(2):71–76.
2. Dickson, J., 'The Genesis of Everything: The thought-world of the Bible's account of creation', 2004, page numbers as they appear on website. Downloaded from the Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education at <www.case.edu.au>, August 2004.
3. Peters, J.P., Literary Aspects of Genesis; in: Moulton, R.G. (Ed.), *The Bible as Literature*, University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 26–27, 1896.
4. Sternberg, M., *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985.
Alignment concerns perspectives or points of view of the narrative communication. It involves 'the author who fashions the story, the narrator who tells it, the audience or reader who receives it, and the characters who enact it' (Sternberg, p. 130). It is the rule in the Bible, rather than the exception, to have multiple perspectives operating at once, not only differing spatially, but also temporally. As the narrative evolves some or all of these perspectives will re-align themselves, either by coming together or converging in the 'present', or at some time antecedent to the 'present'. For a thorough elaboration of this technique see Sternberg pp. 129–185 and *passim*.
Parataxis (literally 'arrangement side by side') occurs when clauses or phrases follow one another without any connecting words to indicate the subordinate or coordinate relation between them e.g. Oxford, city of dreaming spires. However, sometimes coordinating conjunctions are included, such as 'and'. Parataxis can be seen very clearly in Genesis 1 and 3 where there is a superabundant use of the waw consecutive i.e. 'then' or 'and'.
5. Longman III, T., *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 132, 1987.
6. Watson, W.G.E., *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 26, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, p. 87, 1984.
7. Note that there is much debate and no consensus as to what constitutes Hebrew rhythm and meter. See Osborne, G.R., *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Inter-Varsity Press, IL, 1991.
8. Harrison, R.K., *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 966, 1969.
9. For a comprehensive treatment of how the presence or absence of rhythm/meter has been misappropriated to become one of the defining attributes of poetry or prose respectively, see Kugel, J.L., *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1981.
10. Longman, ref. 5, p. 132.
11. Avishur, Y., *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background*, Archaeological Center Publication, Tel Aviv, pp. 14–15, 1999.
12. On the inadequacy and irrelevancy of analyzing Hebraic material via neo-classical conceptions of literature, see Reed, W.L., A Poetics of the Bible: Problems and Possibilities, *Journal of Literature & Theology* 1(2):156 and *passim*, 1987.
13. Kugel, ref. 9, p. 3.
14. Kugel, ref. 9, pp. 8, 52.
15. Kugel, ref. 9, p. 43.
16. Blocher, H., *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Preston, D.G. (Trans.), Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, p. 32, 1984.

17. Fischer, D.H., *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, HarperPerennial, NY, p. 219, 1970.
18. Watson, ref. 6, p. 123. For further, albeit brief, discussion on this see p. 53. Watson, however, oddly judges that Genesis 1:2,10, on the strength of these lines containing gender-matched parallelism, is verse.
19. Kugel, ref. 9, p. 59.
20. Gray, G., *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, p. 38, 1915.
21. Gray, ref. 20, p. 40. For more detailed discussion on the non-sufficient, or, indeed, non-necessary condition of the identification of parallelism's appearance with poetry, see Longman, ref. 5, pp. 122–123.
22. Gevirtz, S., Evidence of Conjugational Variation in the Parallelization of selfsame verbs in the amarna letters, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 32(1/2):104, 1973. See also Kugel's additional sources in Harrison, ref. 8, pp. 83–84.
23. Avishur, ref. 11, p. 15.
24. Avishur, ref. 11, p. 76.
25. Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, James, H. and McKenzie, R., Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 1991, 1968 as cited in McCoy, B., chiasmus: An important structural device commonly found in biblical literature, *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 9(Fall):19, 2003.
26. Brouwer, W., *The Literary Development of John 13–17: A Chiastic Reading*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA, p. 3, 2000. For a brief historical overview of chiasmus see pp. 23–27.
27. McCoy, ref. 25, p. 18.
28. McCoy, ref. 25, p. 22.
29. McCoy, ref. 25, pp. 19, 25.
30. Herodotus, for example, writes that Xerxes exclaimed, 'My men have behaved like women, and my women like men.' Herodotus, *Histories* 8.88.3. McCoy also favourably cites from Myres, J.L., *Herodotus: Father of History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1953, as strong argument that chiasmus was utilised in Herodotus' reports. John Welch, however, while recognising the importance of balance and structure in Herodotus' work—Myers labels it 'pedimental', from the pediments of Greek temples—disagrees and minimises the chiastic structure here. See Welch, J.W., Chiasmus in Ancient Greek and Latin Literatures; in: Welch, J.W. (Ed.), *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, Research Press, Provo, UT, p. 264, 1999.
31. Welch, ref. 30, p. 259.
32. See Welch, ref. 30, pp. 260–61 for elaboration on these and other Latin writers' use in their prose writing. For another compelling analysis of literary technique, though not limited to chiasmus, in one ancient historian's work, see Carney, T.F., Plutarch's Style in the *Marius*, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* LXXX: 24–31, 1960. For a succinct analysis of literary arrangement in the classical world see Talbert, C.H., *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, University of Montana, Missoula, pp. 5–7, 67–70, 1974.
33. Inflection is the 'Modification in the form of a word by means of affixation, vowel change, etc., to express a particular grammatical function or attribute, as number, case, gender, tense, mood, etc.' (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 1363, 1993.). English originally was a highly inflected language. However, principally as a result of the Norman Invasion in 1066, Middle English, over an approximately 400 year period ending in 1500, was transformed from a highly inflected language, where word endings convey meaning, to an extremely analytical one in which word order has the same function.
34. Schertz, M.H. and Yoder, P.B., *Seeing the Text: Exegesis for Students of Greek and Hebrew*, Abingdon, Nashville, p. 52, 2001.
35. Lund, N.W., *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, p. 29, 1942.
36. Radday, Y.T., Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative; in: Welch, ref. 29, p. 50. It should be noted that despite the invaluable service Radday has provided for appreciating this biblical literary technique, Radday eschews acceptance of the historicity of practically all of Genesis. Radday dismisses the historicity of Genesis 12–36 by comparing it unfavourably with Plutarch's biographical material on the grounds that the biblical units are too replete with chiastic structure. Ironically, Plutarch used chiasmus and it may be that Radday was unaware of this. See Radday, p. 101.
37. Radday, ref. 36, p. 51.
38. Avishur, ref. 11, p. 18.
39. On literary patterns being a manifestation of Near Eastern psychology and culture generally, and ancient Israel and Judaism specifically, see Talbert, ref. 32, pp. 70–75.
40. Avishur writes that Radday has shown 'that the chiastic principle reigns supreme in many books of the bible ... [such as] Daniel, Esther, Joshua, Jonah, Kings, Judges, Ruth and Samuel, as well as in the Pentateuch' (Avishur, ref. 11, pp. 19–20.).
41. Avishur, ref. 11, pp. 21–22, 24, 41–43, 57–60, 75–85, 173–196. Avishur notes that Sasson, J., The 'Tower of Babel' as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History (Gen. 1–11:9); in: Rendsburg, G. (Ed.), *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of C.H. Gordon*, Ktav Publishing House, NY, pp. 211–219, 1980, argued that the entire Flood account is structured chiastically. Also see Lund, ref. 34, pp. 42–43, 51–62, for detailed discussion on chiasmus in the Law. Note also Wenham, G.J., The Coherence of the Flood Narrative, *Vetus Testamentum* 28:336–48, 1978. Gary Rendsburg sees chiasm in the story of Abraham. For the original suggestion see Cassuto, U., *A Commentary on the book of Genesis, Part II From Noah to Abraham Genesis VI 9–XI 32*, Abrahams, I. (trans.), Magnes, Jerusalem, p. 296, 1964 and for the development Rendsburg, G., *The Redaction of Genesis*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, pp. 27–52, 1986.
42. Dorsey, D.A., *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 47–102, 1999. See McCoy, ref. 24, p. 27, for a brief discussion of Dorsey's examination of chiasmus in Torah and Joshua. For an extremely detailed and technical analysis of chiasmus in specific parts of Torah see Andersen, F.I., *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*, Mouton, The Hague, pp. 119–140, 1974.
43. Breck, J., *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, pp. 59–60, 1994.
44. Brown, R.E., *John 1–12*; in: Albright, W.F., & Freedman, D.N. (Eds.), Doubleday, Garden City, vols. 29–29A, pp. 1:276; 2:667, 728, 858–863, 910–916, 1966–70 and Brown, R., The Resurrection in Matthew 27:62–28:20, *Worship* 64(Jan–March):157–70, 1990, as cited in McCoy, ref. 24, p. 26. Also see McCoy, pp. 27, 33, for other sources for discussion on chiasmus in New Testament; Talbert, ref. 32; Breck, J., ref. 43, pp. 143–176 (concerning Mark's Gospel), 191–231 (concerning John's Gospel); Brouwer, ref. 26, pp. 89–170, (concerning John's Gospel).
45. Reasons to do with the existence of death before the Fall if long ages and/or ahistoricity are forced into the text.
46. Walsh, J.T., *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, pp. 7, 191, 2001. Also note Sternberg's concurrence in Sternberg, ref. 3, p. 113 and *passim*.
47. Ross, A., 'Literary Analysis: The Study of Poetics', pp. 2, 10, <www.bible.org>, June 2006.
48. Ross, ref. 47 and Walsh, ref. 46.
49. Revell, E.J., The Repetition of Introductions to Speech as a Feature of Biblical Hebrew, *Vetus Testamentum* XLVII(1):92, 1997. Revell emphasises that the nominal 'God' is frequently used rather than the pronoun 'He', even though the latter would suffice, because 'the involvement of God in events is always worthy of particular attention' (p. 95). This observation is particularly apposite with regard to Genesis 1 and the repetition in this chapter in no way vitiates the text's being an historical record.
50. Watson, ref. 6, pp. 52–53.
51. Also note the repetition in, *inter alia*, the following historical passages: Judges 3:7, 9, 12, 15; 1 Kings 1:15–16. For dozens of other examples see Revell, ref. 48.
52. See Watson, ref. 6, pp. 273 ff. for a detailed discussion of this technique in

- Hebrew poetry, in addition to other techniques utilised. Also note Walsh, ref. 46, p. 36.
53. Walsh's discussion on asymmetrical repetition in Hebrew narrative in which there is a 'violation' of what had been hitherto a more or less regulated pattern may be of particular relevance to the 'interruption' noticed in Genesis 1 when man is created, indubitably the most significant creative act in the 6 day account. This irregularity thus serves to draw the reader's attention. See Walsh, ref. 46, pp. 8, 74, 101–103, 105–106 and *passim*.
 54. Brown, W.P., Divine Act and the Art of Persuasion in Genesis 1; in: Graham, P.M. et al. (Eds.), *History and Interpretation, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 173*, Sheffield, p. 29, 1993.
 55. Revell, ref. 49, p. 92.
 56. See e.g. Wenham, G.J., *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1–15*, Word Books, TX, Waco, pp. 6–7, 1987; Cassuto, U., *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Abrahams, I., (Trans.), The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, pp. 12–19, 1972. Some hint of Wenham's leaning toward ahistoricity is gathered from his labelling of Genesis' use of 7 as 'strange'.
 57. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Bk XI, Ch. 30, 1998. The whole of this chapter is particularly illuminating as to the extent of Augustine's devotion to the numerical perfection of 6. Here, and elsewhere (see e.g. Augustine, *Confessions*, Pine-Coffin, R.S.(Trans.), Penguin, Bk. VII, Chs. 20–21, 1961), Augustine demonstrated a Platonic influence. Apropos Plato, his Socrates declares that 'the study of number is conducive to truth', that this study makes 'it easier to redirect [the soul] from becoming and towards truth and being ... [and helps] us see the form or character of the good ... [forcing] the soul to turn towards that place where lies the most blessed part of what is' (Plato, *The Republic*, Griffith, T. (Trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Bk. 7, 525b–c, 526d–e, 2000.). As an aside, Augustine addressed the first chapter of Genesis in five books and much ink has been spilt as to whether Augustine believed in a literal, consecutive 6 days. Suggestions that comments in his later books *De civitate Dei* and *De Genesi ad litteram* were testimony to a final development of literal belief remain moot. Even after apparently professing a literal view, one can sense in Augustine a degree of ambivalence when he states: 'But what kind of days these were it is extremely difficult, or even impossible, for us to conceive, still less to express' (*De civitate Dei*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Bk XI, Ch. 6, 1998.). This is not to say, however, that he didn't believe that 'fewer than six thousand years have elapsed since [man] began to exist' (*De civitate Dei*, Bk. XII, Ch. 13.). All cavils, ambiguities and ostensibly perspicuous statements aside, one is frequently confronted with what appears to be a restrained gnostic hermeneutic, as would be expected for someone upon whom Platonic thinking held considerable sway. Indeed, Augustine, in his *Confessions*, regarded the works of Moses as polysemous, viewing plain meaning as baby food for minds which were less prepared for the inner secrets of the texts (Augustine, *Confessions*, Penguin, London, Book XII, ch. 27,30–32, 1961). For an insightful, though brief, consideration of some of the issues see Augustine, *Saint Augustine on Genesis*, Teske, R.J. (Trans.), The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, pp. 3–35, 1981.
 58. Blocher, ref. 16, p. 51.
 59. Dickson, ref. 2, p. 5. Note also Hummel, C.E., Interpreting Genesis One, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 38(3):178–179, 1986; <www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1986/PSCF9-86Hummel.html>, May 2006.
 60. Dickson has continued to push a privileged insight by asserting, *sans* supporting documentation, that, 'unlike today's creationists—the ancient peoples for whom Genesis was written would not have believed it important to view the world as being created in six, 24-hour days.' Tennant, E., 'Museum breathes life into creation fossil', *Insights Magazine*, May 15, 2005; <insights.uca.org.au/2005/march/creation-theology.htm>, July 2006.
 61. For a full list see Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, Arizona, p. 121, 2004.
 62. Sloane, A., 'Theological Boundaries on Theistic Evolution', p. 5, 2003; <<http://www.iscast.org.au/papers/>>, July 2006.
 63. Sloane, ref. 62, p. 5.
 64. See e.g. Eliade, M., *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, and Jaki, S., *Science and Creation: From eternal cycles to an oscillating universe*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, 1974.
 65. Sternberg, M., Time and space in biblical (hi)story telling: the grand chronology; in: Schwartz, R.M. (Eds.), *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, MA., p. 82, 1990.
 66. Hyers, C., The Narrative Form of Genesis 1: Cosmogonic, Yes; Scientific, No., *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 36(4):212–214, 1984.
 67. Hyers, ref. 66, p. 213.
 68. See the following critiques: Pipa, J.A., From Chaos to Cosmos: A Critique of the Framework Hypothesis, pp. 7–8; <capo.org/cpc/pipa.htm>, July 2006; Kulikovskiy, A., A Critique of the literary framework view of the Days of Creation, pp. 14 ff; <www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/Framework.pdf>, July 2006.
 69. Bar-Efrat, S., Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative, *Vetus Testamentum* 30:167, April 1980. This is not to say that the author toes the literal 6 day line—he doesn't! But his comment remains quite astute, despite the inconsistency of not living by his own advice.
 70. Derrida, J., *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, p. 158, 1976.
 71. Schaeffer, F., *He is There and He is not Silent*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, p. 325, 1990.
 72. Perhaps the most common manifestation of this is denial concerning the existence of three 24-hour days before the creation of the sun on 'scientific' grounds. If one part of Genesis appears contradictory, then, in order to save the baby, no matter how grotesque an infant is rescued, the bathwater of grammatical-historical exegesis is surrendered.
 73. Eskenazi, T.C., A literary Approach to Chronicles' Ark Narrative in 1 Chronicles 13–16; in: Beck, A.B. et al (Eds.), *Fortunate the Eyes That See*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 261, 1995.
 74. Sternberg, ref. 4, p. 39. Sternberg, quite early in his book, points out the prevailing academic view that equates 'literariness' with 'fictionality' i.e. non-history. See ref. 4, p. 6.
 75. Typically, Christian literary theorists love to, on the one hand, say how similar, in terms of literary structure, Genesis 1 is to other texts of the time; but of course they're Christian and they must have some means of separating the two. Because they've *a priori* tossed out history, the one thing that naturally and conclusively distinguishes the Jewish from the pagan cosmogenic accounts, they are forced to then circularly assert Genesis is different because, for example, it is God's Word or that its prime function is to serve as an orderly monotheistic polemic against the chaos of polytheism. Of course, this is not to deny that the latter is one of Genesis 1's functions, but without being historically accurate, the LT is hard-pressed to claim more than a pagan without seriously begging the question of Genesis 1 being different.
 76. See e.g. the detailed analyses of the literary structures of Assyrian, Hittite and Egyptian conquest accounts in Younger, K.L., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 98, JSOT Press, Sheffield, pp. 61–194, 1990.
 77. Bar-Efrat, ref. 69, p. 173.
 78. Barton, J., Reading the Bible as literature: two questions for biblical critics, *Journal of Literature & Theology* 1(2):151, 153, 1987.
 79. Elton, G.R., *Return to Essentials. Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 49, 2002.

Marc Kay has a bachelor's degree in philosophy, religious studies and Indo-Malay; postgraduate certification in TESOL. He works full-time assisting people with disabilities, teaches English as a Second Language part-time and occasionally philosophy. Periodically with a friend he mans a creationist stand at community events and fairs.