Title:Genesis 1:1-2:3 in the light of textlinguistics and text-oriented-literary studies

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Abstract:

This study investigates Gen 1:1-2:3 through grammatical textlinguistic/pragmatic and text-oriented-literary analyses. The need for such an eclectic approach has arisen not only in view of the emergence of text-oriented approaches resulting from the recent methodological switch from historical diachronism to literary synchronism, but also the realization that the integration of textlinguistics/pragmatics and literary analysis promises fresh avenues for analyzing and understanding biblical texts, including such difficult passages as the first pericope of the Hebrew Bible.

A review of pertinent literature has shown that despite the volume of scholarly attention to Gen 1:1-2:3, historical (e.g., historicity and authorship), literary (e.g., genre and structure), and linguistic (e.g., syntactic and semantic) questions remain. Not discounting the validity of the various standpoints from which the text has been studied, it appears that a comprehensive approach is needed that could help throw further light on the perennial problems thereof. The discussion on the linguistic and literary problem areas would seem to benefit from recent text-oriented studies which seem to provide fruitful perspectives for further investigation. In this respect, the study has proposed a method that combines textlinguistic/pragmatic and literary analyses, hoping that its application to the biblical text may yield profitable results and may help clarify certain enigmatic issues in the pericope under study.
Because textlinguistics and pragmatics are recent phenomena in biblical studies, a detailed definition of the specific parameters of the method was deemed necessary. As defined in this study, the grammatical textlinguistic/pragmatic analysis takes shape in the following areas: (1) a morpho-syntactical diagram, which demarcates each clause and indicates its syntagms/constituents, structure/word order, and type; (2) clausal analysis, which offers syntactical analysis within each clause and highlights variations and discourse functions of word order/markedness as well as clausal functions; (3) paragraph analysis, which deals with inter-clausal relations, foregrounding/backgrounding functions, and cohesion; and (4) lexical semantics, where ambiguous terms/word pairs are examined through syntagmatic (and rarely paradigmatic) relations in light of the clausal analysis. The literary aspect of the study focuses on the text type and structure of Gen 1:1-2:3. Thus, the study follows a ‘bottom-up’ process where analysis proceeds hierarchically from the lower level to the higher level of the text, so that the analysis of text type and structure of the pericope is informed by the analysis at clausal and paragraph levels. Being text-oriented approaches, textlinguistics/pragmatics and literary analysis share certain commonalities in that, among other things, both are concerned with understanding text types and analysis of text structure. As hopefully demonstrated in the study, the analysis of text structure and, especially, text types should be informed by morphosyntax and clause patterns.

While this study is, to some extent, an experiment in method—the primary interest being to analyze Gen 1:1-2:3 synchronically from textlinguistic/pragmatic-literary perspective rather than focus specifically on isolated issues—a few conclusions have been reached that relate to several problem areas in the pericope. For example, the study has suggested that (1) Gen 1:1-2 possibly contains antecedent information upon which the rest of the passage is based;
(2) several formal features (emic or etic) seem to suggest that Gen 1:1-2:3 may be understood as a historical narrative in its own right; and (3) the symmetric and stylistic structures found in 1:1-2:3 need not be emphasized over and above its formal/linear structure which is clearly and explicitly marked, and which accords well with the narrative understanding of the pericope.

The study hopes that the incorporation of relevant elements of textlinguistics/pragmatics into OT exegesis may contribute to a better understanding of the biblical text. Some of these aspects are verb forms and their discourse functions, word order (markedness/fronting, topic/focus), foregrounding/backgrounding functions, text typology, and cohesion.