

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jhs>



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VOLUME 8, ARTICLE 13

**SILVIO SERGIO SCATOLINI APÓSTOLO,
IMAGINING EZEKIEL**

IMAGINING EZEKIEL

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For recent studies, “genres constitute a form of communication, a system of shared meanings between author and reader.”¹ Meanings can be shared if and when there are channels and codes that make such a sharing possible. Without a channel and a code bridging the gap between the sender and the receiver, there can be no communication. Literary genres belong to the encoded information that a text offers to its readers to facilitate their reading. This explains the importance attributed to the study of literary genres in the field of biblical exegesis.

The aim of this contribution is to highlight some of the clues encoded in the biblical book of Ezekiel and aimed at guiding its audience to produce warranted readings. The following propositions encapsulate the four specific indicators to which I shall turn my attention.

- 1) Ezekiel constitutes a *written compilation or collection of prophetic visionary experiences and oracles strung together within an autobiographical framework*.
- 2) The visionary elements in Ez 1:1–3:14, 3:23–24, 8:1–11:25, 37:1–14 and 40:1–48:35 (and some of the sign acts, e.g. Ez 4:4–14) highlight the *fantastic* dimension of the book.
- 3) Ezekiel is a *work of religious literature* constituting an example of *Hebrew biblical* as well as of *biblical Hebrew* literature.²
- 4) All in all, the determining criterion for reading Ezekiel is that it belongs primarily to the order of the *fictional* (symbolical, metaphorical), prophetic use of language rather than the historical.

The narration is told not in order to convey the literal rendition of things that happened, as they happened, but in order to tell, persuade, convince, teach, challenge and, last but not least, rebut opinions, create meaning and convey an all-round religious message. Ezekiel is more of an

¹ Margaret S. Odell, “Genre and Persona in Ezekiel 24:15–24,” in Margaret S. Odell & John T. Strong (eds), *The Book of Ezekiel. Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000) 196.

² Whenever we speak of *Hebrew biblical* we refer to the Hebrew canon of the Jewish Scriptures. Whenever we speak of *biblical Hebrew* we refer to the language as opposed, for instance, to *Rabbinic Hebrew*.

imaginative rendition and re-creation of reality in terms of a religious (say, ideological) worldview than a literary photograph of the events mentioned during the narration.

The “I-You” style of the book makes Ezekiel involve its readers in an active way. The readers cannot avoid being dragged into the ideological discussion being staged inside/by the book. It is to this autobiographical dynamic that I shall now direct my attention.

1. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION

The first clue that the book gives us is contained in its introductory verses and sustained throughout. The continual “I-You” communication between God and the prophet, as well as between the prophet and his audience, gives the book a clear *autobiographical* character (which, nonetheless—as we shall see later—does not make it into an autobiography).³

The inaugural verses of Ezekiel identify the (imaginary) author, the narrator, and the protagonist. This strategy is usually referred to as *pacte autobiographique* since it indicates that the book is a piece of autobiographical writing.⁴ One could thus compare the data regarding Ezekiel to what is said about Jeremiah⁵ and conclude that Ezekiel constitutes a *prophetic autobiography*. I prefer, however, to say that it is written in an *autobiographical mode* or *within an autobiographical framework* because Ezekiel is not exactly the same as modern autobiographies, which might lead to misconceptions and unwarranted expectations.

³ Zimmerli did not fail to note that in its overall formation the book distinguishes itself from other prophetic books in that “it is throughout composed in the I-style. (...) This stylizing (...) gives to the book of Ezekiel the character of a continuum first person account,” cf. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 24. Block speaks of an “autobiographical perspective,” cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 27. Blenkinsopp describes it as “basically an autobiographical narrative,” cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1988) 6. Lust has recently also drawn attention to the autobiographical character of Ezekiel, cf. Johan Lust, “‘Ik, Tiberius Claudius’ en ‘Ik, Ezechiël,’” in *Schrift* 201 (June 2002) 87–89. The book of Ezekiel begins in a clearly autobiographical mode (cf. Ez 1:1, reinforced later by 8:1, 9:8 and 12:11) and continues that way up to the end. Only in Ez 1:3 does the *autobiographical* perspective become biographical when the text switches from the first person singular to the third singular (betraying redactional work). All in all, the language of the book is deeply *autobiographical* since it presents the readers with a narration that is told from the point of view of the narrator-actant and describes the prophet’s inner world and actions as well as the occasional reactions of his audience.

⁴ Cf. Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, “Vormen van ‘autobiografisch schrijven,’” in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie* (Utrecht: HES, 1989) 42.

⁵ Cf. Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories. The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Their Literary Types and History* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1988) 122.

The autobiographical mode of the book crystallises in the passage in which the prophet is told to eat the scroll (cf. Ez 3:1)⁶ and its inner rationale is revealed in Ez 24:24 (“Ezekiel shall be a sign to you; you shall do just as he has done.”).⁷ A first reading indicates that eating the message signifies its incarnation in the persona of the prophet. A deeper reading reveals that what actually takes place is an entextualization thereof: the divine message, the (imaginary) author, the narrator and the protagonist are all equally semiotic realities. They all exist in the symbolic realm of the text being activated by its audience. This is why Ezekiel is *autobiographical*, but not an autobiography. “Autobiography as such,” suggests Odell, “did not exist in the ancient world.”⁸ That is why “the term ‘autobiography’ is inadequate as a genre description not only for Ezekiel, but also for other contemporary first person accounts.”⁹ Ezekiel *functions* communicatively by using autobiographical strategies without *being* an autobiography. In a way, it is an example of biblical pseudepigrapha (in the sense given to this term by Davies¹⁰), rather than of hagiography. The character is an excuse: although he apparently occupies centre stage, it is God’s Message that matters. However, given that God is not telling the story in person, it is the book—or, better still, the narration—that really matters. The canonisation of the book as Holy Writ further emphasises and consecrates this dynamic by stamping on it the seal of “God’s Word.” In fact, even God is a character within the space of the book. For it is not God whose voice the readers hear, but the book’s “God” (God according to Ezekiel). Because of all these reasons, it is important that we take stock of some of the issues and questions pertaining to autobiographical writings.

1.1. TYPES OF BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

Autobiographical strategies are among the different resources used in the literature that contains biographical details or components, the best-known ones being: biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, confessions and diaries. They all have in common a *biographical mode*, that is, each of them describes somebody’s life, be it partially or in its entirety, from a particular perspective and according to recognisable patterns.¹¹ Yet the difference between memoirs, biographies and autobiographies is not irrelevant, since it sends a message to the readers as to how they must decode the information provided by the work.

⁶ Intertextually read, this passage (“it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness,” Ez 3:3) would also indicate that Ezekiel’s experience of the message and mission bestowed on him is somehow “sweeter” than Jeremiah’s.

⁷ Cf. Margaret S. Odell, “Genre and Persona,” 206–207.

⁸ *Idem*, 207.

⁹ *Idem*, 208.

¹⁰ Philip R. Davies (ed.), *First Person. Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (London, UK – New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 11–14.

¹¹ One must visualize here the distinction between the *biographical writing mode* and *biographies* as such.

Biographies (sensu stricto) are writings about a period or the whole of somebody's life written from the point of view of somebody else. Even in those cases in which this "somebody else" is the same person about whom the book is written, the language of a biography (i.e. third person) makes it clear to the readers that the author has opted to dissociate the functions of author, and of narrator-protagonist or internal focaliser (in Dutch, "interne focalisator")¹², rather than to cast the narration in an I-object form (author = narrator = protagonist).¹³

A biography can be the result of a scientific historiographic study and/or a literary genre. When one refers to a piece of writing whose formal object is the reflection of somebody's life in a factual way, then one speaks of *scientific biography* ("de wetenschappelijke biografie"). "A biography is a narrative account of the stages of a person's life, an account which aspires to authenticity and historical accuracy. It records the actions of a particular individual and his experiences in his struggle to achieve his goals and pursue his principles."¹⁴ This is a narration of the *res gestae*.¹⁵ There are other cases, however, in which a biographical narration is offered not to present mere history to its readers but rather a story (in the usual sense of the word, i.e. not as in opposition to *subject*); one speaks then of *romanticised biography* ("geromantiseerde biografie").¹⁶

Whenever a biography is written in the "I"-form, one speaks of *autobiography*. It is the most explicit historical-literary way whereby the author can come to explicit self-knowledge by means of narration.¹⁷ The personal dimension (the "I"-perspective) of the narration is central to autobiographies: the *factual* is subsumed within the *meaningful*. Meaning rather than the naked facts is what is important.¹⁸ Even the historical side of autobiographies must surrender to the rhythm of storytelling. For history can be told only by means of stories.¹⁹ Facts are of themselves mute and

¹² Cf. Irene De Jong, *Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987) 41ff.; Dimitri Vanlessen, *Een narratologische analyse van Kipphardts März* [thesis] (Leuven: K.U.Leuven, 2004) e.g. 87.

¹³ This would result in a text that is explicitly a biography; while it implicitly is an autobiography. Cf. Sandro Briosi, "Over het literaire karakter van de autobiografie," in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie*, 60.

¹⁴ Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, 109. See also B. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (Bari: Laterza e Figli, 1948).

¹⁵ Cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie. De ontwikkeling van de autobiografie als vorm van zelfbewustwording," in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie*, 11.

¹⁶ Cf. Hendrik Van Gorp *et al.*, "Biografie," *Lexicon van literaire termen* (Deurne: Wolters Plantyn, 1998) 57–58.

¹⁷ Cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie," 9–26.

¹⁸ Cf. Bernd Neumann, "De autobiografie als literair genre," in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie*, 34; see also Sandro Briosi, "Over het literaire karakter van de autobiografie," 57–61.

¹⁹ Cf. Maarten van Buuren, "De biografie als literair genre," in Johan Anthierens *et al.*, *Aspecten van de literaire biografie* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1990) 51, 54 and 59.

must therefore be given a voice. Events must be strung together in causal relationships, which is an ideological narrative enterprise of the imagination. The readers of autobiographical writings must thus struggle against the temptation to identify in a factual way the author whose name is on the cover or the title or the opening verse with the narrator (as though: literary A = historical A). “De gelijkschakeling van auteur en verteller betreft dus alleen hun namen. Het is een illusie die ontstaan is uit een ‘autobiografische overeenkomst’ die niet kan bestaan zonder tegelijkertijd een ‘denkbeeldige overeenkomst’ te worden (Lejeune). Rouseau zei dat de biograaf ‘zich toont zoals hij gezien wil worden.’”²⁰

Another element of autobiographies (and also of biographical writings at large) is their retrospective character,²¹ which determines that construction according to literary convention and themes be the criterion, rather than the re-construction of historical facts in their chronological sequence.²² This makes the distinction between historically accurate autobiographies and pseudo-autobiographies rather difficult to determine. Such difficulty can be overcome by speaking of *autobiographical writing* rather than of autobiography²³ in the sense of some sort of historiography of the self. Retrospection implies that whatever is enunciated about the past is said from the vantage point of the present—which is every now and then explicitly confessed by the text; for instance, in Ezekiel’s remark “to this very day” (Ez 2:3) and the involvement of the prophet’s audience (e.g. Ez 8:1; 20:1)—and with a view to the future.

²⁰ My own translation: “The equation of actor and narrator concerns only their names. This is an illusion that originates from an ‘autobiographical pact’ which cannot exist without simultaneously becoming an ‘imaginary pact’ (Lejeune). Rouseau said that the biographer ‘shows himself as he wishes to be seen.’” Sandro Briosi, “Over het literaire karakter van de autobiografie,” 59. A good example of autobiographical “deception” would be the poetic book called *Martín Fierro*, which is written completely in the “I”-form from beginning to end and is a truthful account of the life of Martín Fierro *as though* he had written it—when in fact the whole tale has been an invention of Hernández. We can see this “deception” at its best in the second strophe: “Pido a los santos del cielo | que ayuden mi pensamiento | les pido que en este momento | que voy a cantar mi historia | me refresquen la memoria | y aclaren mi entendimiento,” [Our own translation: “I ask the heavenly Saints | that they help my thoughts | I ask them that at this moment | in which I am about to sing my story | they refresh my memory | and clarify my understanding”] José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1965) 5.

²¹ Cf. Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, “Vormen van ‘autobiografisch schrijven,’” 46ff. See also Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self. A Critical Study of the Autobiographic Discourse* (London – Sydney: Croom Helm, 1988) 2–3.

²² Cf. Bernd Neumann, “De autobiografie als literair genre,” in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie*, 38; see also Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, “Vormen van ‘autobiografisch schrijven,’” 42.

²³ Cf. Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, “Vormen van ‘autobiografisch schrijven,’” 42–43.

Whenever biographical writings stress the inner side or psychological development of the protagonist, they are called *confessions*, e.g. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.²⁴

Memoirs concern mostly a period in someone's life and his or her relationships with important personalities, the stress being on the interpersonal and social, rather than on the development of the personality of the protagonist.²⁵ Some think they come close to the *res gestae* of classical literature.²⁶

Diaries provide the readers with a more or less day-to-day description of events told from the point of view of the protagonist, where narrator and main character converge on the self-same literary *persona*. The day is the basic biographical moment, and each day has its own content and finality.²⁷ No final evaluation of the global meaning of the whole is given beyond the boundaries of a day. In this sense, diaries give the readers a sense of quasi-simultaneousness.²⁸

The types of literature mentioned above (namely biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and diaries) pose the question whether they must be grouped under the umbrella of either *history/historiography* or *literature*.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Are Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, for instance, a piece of history-writing or an autobiographical literary composition? Or, do the autobiographical elements present in Ezekiel determine it as some sort of prophetic history-writing or an autobiographical literary work?

According to Wellek and Warren, the difference between pure historiography and literature lies in the fact that a "character in a novel [and other literary works] differs from a historical figure or a figure in real life. He is made only of the sentences describing him or put into his mouth by the author. He has no past, no future, and sometimes no continuity of life."²⁹ This is so because time and space in literary works are not those of real life. Time, for instance, does not follow the laws of succession, but those of convention.³⁰ The nature, form and style of an autobiographical writing will determine towards which side it leans most, whether it is a clear collection of documentation on facts or a personal recollection in which the narration does not primarily pretend to offer *the facts and nothing but the facts*, but a story about *some facts*. In this sense, Ezekiel can be said to be a literary

²⁴ Cf. Hendrik Van Gorp *et al.*, "Bekentenisliteratuur," *Lexicon van literaire termen* (Leuven: Wolters, 1991) 41.

²⁵ Cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie," 11; see also Bernd Neumann, "De autobiografie als literair genre," in Els Jongeneel (ed.), *Over de autobiografie*, 30ff.

²⁶ Cf. Bernd Neumann, "De autobiografie als literair genre," 28.

²⁷ Cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie," 13.

²⁸ Cf. Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, "Vormen van 'autobiografisch schrijven,'" 46.

²⁹ R. Wellek & A. Warren, R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature. A seminal study of the nature and function of literature in all its contexts* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1985) 25.

³⁰ Cf. *ibidem*.

work that contains some historical elements (e.g. dates are enunciated) rather than a piece of pure historiography.³¹

The use of historical elements in (auto)biographical literature raises questions about the accuracy of the story being told. These questions can at times be quite embarrassing for believers who are then faced not only with historical riddles, but also theological ones. Before they know it, reading an innocent piece of writing can turn into a theodicy crusade aimed at saving God's face.

1.3 NORMATIVE CRITERION IN BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

Dealing with the relationship between literature, biography and history, Wellek and Warren made a very relevant remark in regard to the question about the literary and historical value of autobiographies. They point out that "the whole view that art is self-expression pure and simple, the transcript of personal feelings and experiences, is demonstrably false. Even when there is a close relationship between the work of art and the life of an author, this must never be construed as meaning that the work of art is a mere copy of life."³² Literary tradition and convention frame the work of the writer in such a way that literature cannot be equated with a mere description of the naked facts, not even a perfect representation of the feelings of the author. Thus, St Augustine's *Confessions* are first and foremost a literary work and only secondarily a historical document. Yet, even in this case, the perspective from which the work is approached will determine whether it is used as literature, i.e. for its literary value, or as a historical document. Looked at from the angle of its readership, the *Confessions* can be both a literary work and a historical document, depending on the intention and reading perspective of its readers.

The normative backdrop of literature is not the order of nature, but the order of imagination. Nature provides literature with certain pointers (e.g. life spans from birth through growth to death); imagination does the rest.³³ And imagination belongs within the realm of the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious, of dreams and desires, vision and determination, both at the individual and the collective levels (e.g. the world of the language within which it originates and unfolds itself, and of collective archetypes). That is one more reason why a literary work escapes the boundaries of the intention of the author. Even if Ezekiel were indeed

³¹ Even in this respect we must bear in mind that history-writing and historiography are also forms of storytelling. "History is our way of giving what we are and what we believe in the present a significance that will endure into the future, by relating it to what has happened in the past. Or, to be a bit more precise: to write history is to write about events in relation to their own past, in order to provide those events with significance that makes them worthy of being remembered in the future." Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1998) 114.

³² R. Wellek & A. Warren, R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 78.

³³ Cf. Brian Fay, "Do We Live Stories or Just Tell Them?," *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 188.

Ezekiel's own autobiography (which must first be proven), the final composition has a far broader scope than the initial intention of the prophet. This has to do with what Gibson calls *the principle of excess*, whereby it is meant that "expressions contain more than their immediate employment in the narrative advertises."³⁴ Indeed, "a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships."³⁵ For a literary work "consists in a complex verbal system, in a system of structures on different planes, related among themselves. It is a system of significant forms."³⁶ This is so because, as Gibson pointed out, "narratives are theoretically pluralist. That is to say, the substructures of a large range of ancient Near East texts contiguous to and polemically intertextually subsumed in the Old Testament manifest in their semantics no single logical grammar, nor presuppose a common thematic mentality with respect to their underlying evidence of psycholinguistic phenomena. Although this may be thought to be a fairly obvious point, stated like this, the way the opinion is expressed is calculated to defend the notion that compositional activity has plural causal relations to author and written narrative, not merely to a reader's indeterministic projection on to a text."³⁷

As readers, we must accept that the text—in this case, Ezekiel—is, as already said, a microcosm of its own, with its own relationships and rules, as well as its own pockets of unpredictability, singularity and chaos. Yet, it does not only have an inner texture that makes it into a microcosm, it also has a contextual texture.³⁸ Ezekiel is, as any other text, both innovative and "traditioned." Its originality is built on what came before.

1.4 BOTH INNOVATIVE AND "TRADITIONED"

Ezekiel exists within a macrocosm of which it unconsciously is, or consciously aspires to be, a reflection or a critique. The written words that make up the text are not self-centred; they do not point to themselves. The physical boundaries of the text and its meaning blocks are not prison bars but the doors and windows to a larger world of meaning and communication within which the text orbits in relationship to other meaning-producing and meaning-bearing entities. This is the symbolic dimension of literary texts, Ezekiel included. Literary works are pointers to something other and larger than themselves, to an intertextual ongoing communication; so as is each and every part of any whole.

³⁴ A. Gibson, *Text and Tablet: Near Eastern Archaeology, the Old Testament and New Possibilities* (Aldershot – Burlington USA – Singapore – Sydney: Ashgate, 2000) 70.

³⁵ R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 27.

³⁶ Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hermeneutics* [The Biblical Seminar, 54] (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 125.

³⁷ A. Gibson, *Text and Tablet*, 73.

³⁸ Cf. Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge – London – New York – Rochelle – Melbourne – Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 1–2.

The fact that a literary work represents a new creation of the imagination, and that it comes into being within the intertextual matrix of a particular language embodying deeply human and universal sentiments and desires, has important repercussions for the study of literature. It shows the insufficiency of the exclusively historical approach to literary works, whereby literary works are seen almost as foregone conclusions of historical conditionings or as mere re-workings of preceding sources from which some of their parts would allegedly have stemmed. The *whole* of the text is *innovative* since it brings each and all of the parts into relationships that they did not know before the composition of the new text.³⁹ It would, however, be equally unrealistic and inadequate to approach literary works as though each one of them was a *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), simply because they are not. Imagination is always-already conditioned, if not completely, at least in part.⁴⁰ Wellek and Warren have therefore advocated for an approach to literary works that does justice to both their traditional and creative dimensions. They characterised this working method as *perspectivism*, which “means that we recognize that there is one poetry, one literature, comparable in all ages, developing, changing, full of possibilities. Literature is neither a series of unique works with nothing in common nor a series of works enclosed in time-cycles of Romanticism or Classicism, the age of Pope and the age of Wordsworth.”⁴¹ There is innovation within tradition.

Ezekiel could be described as being a prophetic book because people already knew prophetic literature. Seen from this angle, it rested and still rests on particular social evidences. At the same time, Ezekiel’s autobiographical style distinguished it from some prophetic books and made it resemble others, especially Jeremiah. This combination of the prophetic and autobiographical styles is not an idle addendum and therefore deserves a closer look.

1.5 PROPHEPIC AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Ezekiel is not only a piece of writing or a book in general; it is an instance of a *prophetic* writing or book. “A ‘prophetic book’ is a book that claims an association with the figure of a prophet of the past (...[in this case, Ezekiel]), and that is presented to its readership as YHWH’s word. As such the book

³⁹ This means that this newness in redactional compositions must be attributed to the redactors. In this sense, if it was shown that Ezekiel has been the result of a multiple compositional process, we would have to acknowledge that the book’s innovative meaning potentials would not go back to some “historical Ezekiel” but to the redactor(s). We would thus read the redactor’s (or redactors’) Ezekiel, not Ezekiel’s Ezekiel, which is not an idle distinction for the exegesis of *the book* rather than *its parts*.

⁴⁰ Cf. Floyd Merrell, *Unthinking thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, mathematics, and the new physics* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991) 182–197.

⁴¹ R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 43.

claims to communicate legitimate and authoritative knowledge about YHWH.”⁴²

Ezekiel—the actant, not the book—is clearly referred to as נביא (“prophet,” cf. Ez 2:5, 33:33) and verbs from the root נבא (“to prophesy”) occur 31 times throughout the book.⁴³ The fact that most of the book is made up of visionary experiences and oracles about YHWH suggests to the readers that the mechanisms inherent to *biblical* prophecy must be taken into account as inscribed signposts along the reading-interpretative itinerary. The book is meant to be *read and reread*.⁴⁴ Books that are meant to be read and reread will comprise different levels of meaning; they will tend to be polysemic and harbour many an instance of ambivalence and ambiguity. They will equally presuppose that its rereaders will be able to journey through the narration making multidirectional and cross-linked associations.⁴⁵

These above elements—biblical and prophetic—root Ezekiel within a particular historical compositional tradition of thought that conditioned the birth of the book and that was in turn enriched by its particular contribution.⁴⁶ In this sense, Ezekiel represents a particular culture: it is at once a cultural product and a producer of culture.

The prophetic character of the book and its composition within the biblical tradition marks the whole of its narration. Even though the book presents itself as Ezekiel’s personal version of events, the main actant is YHWH.⁴⁷ This is a typical factor in biblical prophetic literature and cannot be overlooked, especially not in the case of autobiographical writings that are decentred since the centre stage is occupied by YHWH and not by the actant whose autobiography the book is deemed to be (cf. Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah etc.). It has thus recently been remarked that “das Ich des Propheten neben das göttliche Ich im Spruchgut tritt, in dem die Person des übermittelnden Propheten faktisch nicht vorkommt.”⁴⁸

Ezekiel is autobiographical insofar as it is the compilation of the divine revelations that befell Ezekiel the prophet, but not in the sense that it is the

⁴² Cf. Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah* [FOTL, XXIB] (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2000) 4.

⁴³ Cf. Ez 4:7, 6:2, 11:4, 12:27, 13:2.16.17, 21:2.7.14.19.33, 25:2, 28:21, 29:2, 30:2, 34:2, 35:2, 36:1.3.6, 37:4.7.9.10.12, 38:2.14.17, and 39:1.

⁴⁴ We adapt here what Ben Zvi said about Micah: “As a written text, the book of Micah is aimed primarily at those competent to *read* it (...). Moreover, the book of Micah was not produced to be read once and then put aside, but rather to be read and reread and meditated upon (...),” Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah*, 5.

⁴⁵ Cf. *idem*, 6–7.

⁴⁶ Cf. *idem*, 5.

⁴⁷ This has been noted by Zimmerli, who states that “after the first appearance of an autobiographical structure to the whole book of Ezekiel, we must go on to mention a second, opposite feature. It is striking how, throughout the entire book of Ezekiel, the activity is set almost exclusively in the words and actions of Yahweh,” Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 24.

⁴⁸ Karin Schöpflin, *Theologie als Biographie*, 5 (said in this case esp. referring to Jeremiah).

description of Ezekiel's own self-unfolding.⁴⁹ The fact that Ezekiel's prophetic experiences and revelations are framed within temporal categories determined by dates makes the book resemble a prophet's diary or memoirs.⁵⁰

Some may object to calling the book "Ezekiel's diary" on the grounds that the material that follows each date is too extensive to be exactly what we nowadays call "diary" since it can hardly be understood as the description of a day's events. If it was to be seen as a diary, one would have to take the narrative *wayyiqtol*s in the message-reception formula as one's point of departure for establishing *a day*.

Others may object to its being called "Ezekiel's memoirs" since it does not throw much light upon anybody's life—not even the prophet's own life. The fact that the book resembles more a series of long divine monologues than a narration on Ezekiel's life would make it somewhat more difficult to view the book as being Ezekiel's "memoirs" in the present-day sense of the word, even though not wholly impossible. It could be argued that this is a case of *prophetic* memoirs constrained exclusively to the prophetic dimension of Ezekiel's life.⁵¹ The oracular sections could also be understood as an explanation *ad extra* of the inner significance of Ezekiel's personal prophetic and visionary experiences, the object of which is not *how* he experiences it but *what* is revealed to him by YHWH.

The fact, however, that old literary forms such as *confessio laudis*, *de vita*, *epistola*, *evangelion* or *hagiographia* etc. cannot be equalled to the "autobiographies" that originated in the 18th century CE⁵² and are commonplace nowadays should warn us against any fixed imposition of modern categories on ancient writings without further considerations. It should also warn us against taking generic descriptions in too limited and limiting a way.⁵³

⁴⁹ So as it is spoken of by Weintraub in the last words of his article, cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie," 26.

⁵⁰ In fact Block writes: "Since virtually all of Ezekiel's oracles are cast in the first person, readers are left with the impression that they have gained access to the private memoirs of a holy man, a prophet of Israel (...). Ironically, although the oracles are presented in autobiographical narrative style, occasions where the prophet actually admits the reader into his mind are rare". Daniel I. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 27.

⁵¹ Clements has spoken of "the Isaiah Memoir" as being embedded in the text of Isaiah 6–8; cf. Ronald E. Clements, "The Prophet as an Author: The Case of the Isaiah Memoir," in Ehud Ben Zvi & Michael H. Floyd (eds), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* [SBL Symposium Series 10] (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000) 89; whole contribution, 89–101.

⁵² Cf. Karl Weintraub, "Autobiografie en fictie," 17.

⁵³ Cf. Roy F. Melugin, "Recent Form Criticism Revisited in an Age of Reader Response," in Marvin A. Sweeney & Ehud Ben Zvi (eds), *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003) 46–64, esp. 47. See also Margaret S. Odell, "Ezekiel Saw What He Said He Saw: Genres, Forms, and the Vision of Ezekiel 1," in *idem*, 162–176.

In view of the composite nature of biblical books (indicated in the case of Ezekiel by its visionary and prophetic components and by its double introduction in first and third person singular, cf. Ez 1:1 and 1:3)⁵⁴ and of the fact that the actual narration of the prophet's life is suddenly truncated, whereby the person of Ezekiel just disappears from the narrative scene, I prefer to speak of the book not as a diary or the memoirs of the prophet, and not even as his autobiography, but as an *autobiographical* collection or compilation.⁵⁵ I acknowledge that the *autobiographical framework* of the book is certainly not a superfluous addendum; on the contrary, it calls upon the readers to view all the different readings (i.e. the various parts of the compilation) not as independent units, but as constituents of *one* narration, or *one* book. Indeed, it contextualises them⁵⁶ despite the fact that it has not been rounded off as an accomplished, worked-out personal account. Even after taking this autobiographical framework seriously, there still remains a feeling that although it could have become a diary, memoirs or autobiography, it did not quite go past being an autobiographical collection or compilation.⁵⁷ Oracular and visionary passages were compiled and combined into one narration presented along autobiographical lines. However, this is not just “any old autobiography;” it contains “mind-blowing” material which has given rise to all sorts of interpretations. There is a notably fantastic ring to Ezekiel, on which I shall now briefly elaborate.

2. EZEKIEL'S FANTASTIC DIMENSION

Ezekiel starts and ends with visionary glimpses of *fantastic* things (cf. Ez 1:1–3:15, 3:23, 8–11 and Ez 37:1–14, 40–48). Ez 1:1–3:15 presents the two main actants: the manifestation of YHWH's glory⁵⁸ and of Ezekiel's role in the book (cf. Ez 1–3). Ezekiel 8–11 reveals the iniquity of Jerusalem and its Temple (cf. Ez 8–11), the pride and joy of Judah, which will lead to its collapse. Ez 37:1–14 depicts the victory of YHWH's power over the pitiful, state of present “Israel.” Ezekiel 40–48 depicts a future of wonderful proportions: the idyllic future where YHWH, the land, the city, the Temple, the people and the leadership will be transfigured, thus undoing the iniquity and destruction of the past. This imagery is usually described as having “apocalyptic” virtuality.

⁵⁴ The book of Jeremiah also has a similar double introduction.

⁵⁵ Some speak of *autobiographical report*, e.g. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, xxv; this echoes Zimmerli's comment that Ezekiel constitutes “a first person account,” Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 24. Compare with what Rofé says about Jeremiah, cf. Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, 110–111.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah*, 7.

⁵⁷ We could say that Ezekiel is a biblical, prophetic diary or memoirs and that the characteristics noted above are typical of such sub-genre, but in order to speak of a sub-genre we would have to look at the whole range of prophetic material in the Hebrew Scriptures and that would be too big a detour from the intended course of my research.

⁵⁸ Cf. Margaret S. Odell, “Ezekiel Saw What He Said He Saw,” 162–176.

Apocalyptic literature produces “an implicit critique of the status quo” because it offers “another view of how life could be.”⁵⁹ Ezekiel does this confronting its readers with material that has clear *fantastic* dimensions (e.g. the visions).

“In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely as other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous.”⁶⁰ Now, while the uncanny is the inexplicable based on the current state of knowledge, the marvellous is what has never been seen (at least, not in the present light).

The person who must opt how to interpret what appears fantastic is not really the prophet, but the reader. The vision is not really for Ezekiel (the actant), it is for the book’s readers. In this sense, some could argue that prophetic books in their totality have fantastic dimensions, not just in some parts.

To acknowledge Ezekiel’s fantastic virtuality implies that the readers must hold their breath and judgement. They are expected to listen, or—better still—picture in their minds what the narration is telling them. The text narrates something which sounds fantastic (e.g. the visionary units), the interpretation of which will depend on the reader’s definition of *reality* and *imaginary*. Some will interpret the prophet’s visions as normal phenomena (as events that have regularly occurred in human history and are therefore “real”), some will understand them as an inventive literary strategy (nothing more and nothing less than a figure of speech), while others will discard it as propaganda or nonsense, or both.

Fantastic accounts can be seen as *strange* or *wonderful*. The fact that the idea of having visions of YHWH may appear strange to present-day readers does not mean that the visions must have seemed equally odd to Ezekiel’s first audience. The visions must have responded to the revelatory canons of the time and must have had a place within the reader’s worldview.

“Miracles and some monsters may have been thought to exist by their original audience and even their author, but were often acknowledged to be real only in a special fashion: they only enter the lives of the spiritually or

⁵⁹ Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow. A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1995) 177.

⁶⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) 25.

heroically elect; they are *miracula* or things to be marvelled at, precisely because they are not everyday occurrences and cannot be controlled by just anybody who has a mind to try. We know we are dealing with a form of fantasy if the rhetoric of the text places the dragon fight somewhere else or once upon a time. Such distance and time markers commonly denote an awareness of fantasy.”⁶¹ There are certain phrases that constitute such markers within Ezekiel, for instance:

⁶¹ Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis. Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York – London: Methuen, 1984) 21.

- 1:1 the heavens were opened, and then I saw mighty appearances
[divine sights] (...)
- 8:1 And it happened in the sixth year, in the sixth [month], in the
fifth [day] of the month while I was sitting in my house, and
while the elders of Judah were sitting in front of me there fell
upon me right there the hand of the Lord YHWH
- 8:2 and I saw and behold! A likeness as the appearance of fire
(...)

As the readers opt for seeing the fantastic as a medium for the wonderful (and not just the strange), they take an important step: they accept the book's invitation to *deconstruct* "reality." When the prophetic eye sees what the average eye does not see, the everyday is questioned. If and when the readers accept what sounds fantastic as being a divinely orchestrated wonder, they are precisely where the book wants to have them. They are assenting to the idea that the secret of the "really real" can only be unlocked by the message mediated by the book that they are reading. Fantastic fiction can thus function as an eye-opener. This is why the narration cannot but present itself as a glimpse of an *alternative* world—if one is to believe the book—the *real* world. "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. (...) If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen."⁶²

While the initial visions encapsulate the "Israel-that-was," Ezekiel 40–48 projects the vision of the "Israel-to-come." Ezekiel's visionary episodes could be described as "copias temporales y mortales de un arquetipo inconcebible"⁶³ or as "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss (...) The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent.'"⁶⁴ It could be said with Borges: "La filosofía y la teología son, lo sospecho, dos especies de literatura fantástica. Dos especies espléndidas."⁶⁵

Consequently, the statement that Ezekiel has fantastic dimensions is not intended to brand its material as untrue; it only means that the book presents the readers with a reality that is real in another way than the ordinary is real. This is so, among other things, because it represents an

⁶² J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966) 54–55.

⁶³ My own translation: "time-bound and mortal copies of an inconceivable archetype." Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1992) 19.

⁶⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981) 3–4.

⁶⁵ My own translation: "Philosophy and theology are, I suspect, two species of fantastic literature. Two splendid species." Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra*, 105.

instance of religious literature. Ezekiel's claims are religious and may therefore not be scrutinized as if they were statements made by a physicist or a sociologist. The religious and literary nature of the book must never be lost sight of; that is why I shall now briefly deal with some of its aspects.

3. AN EXAMPLE OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Whatever one may say about Ezekiel, one thing is undeniable: Ezekiel is a piece of writing, a work of religious literature.

Ezekiel, just like all other religious texts, is a language production,⁶⁶ furthermore, a literary work. It is not easy, however, to define what literature actually means. If we take as our point of departure Wittgenstein's principle that the meaning of words is the meaning that is given to them in their use, then we can say with Gaus that "what literature is depends on those who occupy themselves with it, and depends on the reasons why they occupy themselves with it."⁶⁷

Be it lyric, epic or drama, the literary use of language differentiates itself from scientific and everyday usage.⁶⁸ Literary language, unlike scientific language, is more connotative than denotative. It is also essentially artistic and it "imposes some kind of framework which takes the statement of the work out of the world of reality."⁶⁹ While univocity is essential to scientific works (A must always and everywhere mean A), polysemy⁷⁰ (A can mean A1, A2, A3 etc.) is at the heart of literary creativity. The difference between literature and everyday language is more difficult to establish theoretically, even though it is relatively easy to distinguish between texts that are considered to be literary creations and those that are not. One may say, however, that the line between a literary work, on the one hand, and a shopping list, a letter from a son to his mother, or a newspaper article reporting a crime, on the other, is that between art and practical life.

Two criteria would seem to play a part in differentiating between the artistic and the everyday: the purpose for which it was created and the perspective from which it is used. Purpose is the first characteristic making it clear what function a text was destined to fulfil, and how the text profiles itself even now. Use determines the being of a written piece insofar as *what*

⁶⁶ This is not limited to the Hebrew Bible, but applies also to other Holy Books. Cpr. with the discourse on Islamic revelation theology, Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid, *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken* (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2002) 108.

⁶⁷ H. Gaus, *The Function of Fiction. The function of written fiction in the social process* (Gent – Leuven – Antwerpen – Brussel: E. Story-Scientia p.v.b.a, 1979) 46.

⁶⁸ Cf. R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 25.

⁶⁹ R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 25. The difference that exists between Ezekiel and this present study is in fact itself an example of the difference between *literature* and *literary study*. "The two are different activities: one is creative, an art; the other, if not precisely a science, is a species of knowledge or of learning," *idem*, 15.

⁷⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor. Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language* (London: Routledge, 1994) 113ff.

a piece of writing is often depends on *how* it is approached. A letter between two people in love could be considered to be a piece of everyday language, of literature and/or of historical documentation for the reconstruction of the mood of a period. In the same way as “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” so too is a piece of writing also art, namely literature, because its readers behold it as such. These two aspects are, in principle, aspects of the productive process: what the work has been conceived for (its purpose) and how it has been received (the perspective of its users). Ezekiel can thus be said to be a literary work insofar as it was conceived as part and parcel of a religious *literary* tradition and insofar as it has been received as such, since its readers have given precedence to its religious-literary content over all of its other components.

Furthermore, at its most basic level literature has to do with *the imaginative use of language*. Imagination and literature exist only in concrete examples of imaginary thinking and of literary compositions. Ezekiel constitutes, therefore, not only an instance of *literature* but also of *Hebrew biblical* literature. This entails firstly that Ezekiel was written within the *biblical* tradition (which shaped its imagination by suggesting traditional archetypes⁷¹), within a religious community for which Ezekiel is a sacred text. Secondly, its composition happened within the branch of this tradition that cast its thoughts in *Hebrew*, as opposed to the other branch that formulated its ideas in Greek and gave rise to the LXX apocryphal writings.

The fact that Ezekiel is a *written* literary text, as it has been indicated above, means that it has been encoded in a particular *language*, namely *biblical Hebrew* insofar as this is different from Rabbinic Hebrew or present-day ‘Ivrit.’ The book produces and communicates meaning in the manner that is proper to biblical Hebrew.

Hebrew biblical literary works have known a process of compositional growth within a religious tradition. The literary works present now in the Hebrew canon (as reflected by the BHS) and the Greek canon (as witnessed by the LXX) have been the result of more than one agency, including oral and written stages, both converging and diverging.⁷² Hebrew biblical writings often represent the sometimes disconcerting concerted effort of a tradition rather than of an individual, where the appellative *author of the text* is shared by writer, editor(s), redactor(s) and copyist(s). One could speak thus, in a certain sense, of *shared authorship* since the initial writer and the preceding and ensuing tradition (oral tradition as well as redactors etc.) have co-operated in the making of the book, which they nonetheless saw as being *one book* and not wholly unrelated *fragments* or even *books*. This explains why Hebrew biblical literary works lack at times the unity of a modern piece of writing that has stemmed from one hand. This further complicates any

⁷¹ The biblical tradition roots Ezekiel in what we now call the Jewish tradition, and not in the Buddhist or Hindu tradition.

⁷² Lust gives some good examples of the issue of the “canon(s),” including material concerning Ezekiel, cf. Johan Lust, “Septuagint and Canon,” in J.-M. Auwers & H. J. de Jonge (eds), *The Biblical Canons* [BETL, 163] (Leuven: University press / Peeters, 2003) 39–55; see also the whole volume.

question regarding the author's intention (who is the author? and who can judge that?). It also makes it clear that biblical books enjoy a certain degree of openness to re-interpretation that relativises any dogmatism and one-sidedness, be it religious or literary, regarding their use and the boundaries of their meaning.⁷³

The meaning of biblical literature cannot therefore be reduced to the intention of its author(s) or *intentio auctoris/auctorum*.⁷⁴ This is particularly relevant for most Hebrew biblical books, in which the process of composition was not determined—not even stopped—by the intention of the initial “author.” As indicated above, the textual boundaries of the initial composition were not seen as the absolute limits of creative imagination. In many cases, the Hebrew biblical text remained open until it was canonised. The results from scribal activity (e.g. mistakes, corrections, glosses) both before and after canonization⁷⁵ as well as from the masoretic (interpretative) punctuation of the proto-masoretic text⁷⁶ have become so engrained within the text that they have become part and parcel of that very text, thus changing its original configuration. Indeed, all those engaged in the arrangement and delimitation of a Hebrew biblical text know that, at least insofar as they have to make textual-critical decisions, the physical contours of the text continue to be somewhat open, even today.⁷⁷

In the case of Hebrew biblical literature, critics have to work with books that in theory are holy (and therefore wholly untouchable) but in reality are fluid, somewhat unfinished and often ambivalent. What we have in front of our eyes now is neither the word-for-word transcription of prophetic delivery (which now would be impossible to determine on text-critical grounds) nor the first draft of the book of Ezekiel; yet it is *this book* and none other that is called Ezekiel. It is this book that one is asked to read, enter into dialogue with, and try to understand. It is in light of this that I prefer to concentrate on the *intention of the text* (*intentio operis*), rather

⁷³ Reinterpretations are found even within biblical texts, cf. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁷⁴ Cf. R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 42.

⁷⁵ Cf. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press / Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1992) 232–286.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament. An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (London: SCM Press, 1980) 12–41; see also Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 21–79; and Page H. Kelley, Daniel S. Mynatt & Timothy G. Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Introduction and Annotated Glossary* (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998) 13–45.

⁷⁷ Cf. Johan Lust, “The Use of Textual Witnesses for the Establishment of the Text. The Shorter and Longer Texts of Ezekiel. An Example: Ez 7,” in Johan Lust (ed.), *EHB*, 7–20, esp. 16–17; see also P.-M. Bogaert, “Les deux redactions conservées (LXX et TM) d’Ézéchiél 7,” *idem*, 21–47; Johan Lust, “The Final Text and Textual Criticism: Ez 39,28,” *idem*, 48–54; M. Dijkstra, “The Glosses in Ezekiel Reconsidered,” *idem*, 55–77.

than on the intention of the biblical author(s) (*intentio auctoris*) or the intention of the reader(s) (*intentio lectoris*).⁷⁸

As a matter of fact, the intention of the text, in a sense, includes both the intention of the author (present in the encoded clues that he or she has left throughout the text to guide the reading)⁷⁹ and that of the readers (allowed for by the [relative] open-endedness of the work).⁸⁰ The interpretative re-constructive task of the imagination, whereby the meaning of the whole text and of its parts within the whole is sought after, must be led by the criteria of narrative coherence (e.g. as suggested by isotopy and by the “fibula-subject” or “story-plot” relationship).⁸¹ On top of this, encyclopaedic competence is also a *sine qua non* requisite for the readers to arrive at an authorized or warranted reading-interpretation of a literary work.

Competent readers will understand that Ezekiel, as religious literature, must be approached in accordance with its own laws. As prophecy, it does not so much attempt to analyse and reproduce reality, but to critique it and to proclaim alternatives. It exists within the fictional order of *what could/might be* if certain variables are in place. Given that my use of the term *fictional* may scandalise some and dismay others, I will now further explain what is meant by it.

4. BELONGING TO THE ORDER OF THE FICTIONAL

By saying that Ezekiel belongs to the order of the *fictional*, I mean that its content, strategies and structure⁸² are determined by the fictional writing mode rather than the factual (e.g. that of scientific historical biographies). I suggest, therefore, that this order be seen as the ultimate criterion determining all of the aspects encompassed by the artistic production of the work and the meaning of its truth.⁸³

⁷⁸ Such methodological step has been suggested by Umberto Eco. Cf. Stefan Collini (ed.), *Over Interpretation. Umberto Eco in debat met Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992) 34. See also Cf. Walter Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture in the Third Millennium. Author – Reader – Text* (Ottawa, Ontario: Novalis, 1993) 73–101.

⁷⁹ Cf. *idem*, 13–42.

⁸⁰ Cf. *idem*, 43–71.

⁸¹ These terms will be explained in some detail at a later stage.

⁸² This has clearly been highlighted by Schöpflin: “Daß diese Aussage theologischer Natur ist, liegt in dieser alttestamentlichen Schrift nur allzu deutlich auf der Hand. (...) So geht es dem Ezechielbuch nicht um Autobiographie [i.e. scientific (auto)biography], sondern um Theologie; in der autobiographischen Stilisierung—vielleicht auch Fiktion—spiegelt sich ein Theologischer Gedanke (...).” My translation: “That this statement is of a theological nature is only all too obvious in the case of this Old Testament writing (...) Thus, the book of Ezekiel is not about an autobiography, but about theology. Its autobiographical—perhaps also fictional—style [self-profiling] reflects a theological thought (...).” Karin Schöpflin, *Theologie als Biographie*, 18.

⁸³ Schöpflin has already drawn attention to this fact: “Es ist also auch in alttestamentlichem Schrifttum mit autobiographischen Fiktionen zu rechnen. Man

The word *fiction* comes from the Latin *fingere*, which means “to form, to pattern (after a model)” as well as “to feign.”⁸⁴ The etymology of the word suggests already some of the dimensions of fiction: the relationship between the real and the fictional, the nature of fiction as thought pattern, and so forth.

The sense that I attribute to *fiction* in the statement “Ezekiel is a fictional literary work” takes *fictional* in its more restricted meaning (i.e. as a writing mode) rather than in its “expanded” epistemological meaning (i.e. as a characteristic of language and of thought as such).

4.1 EXPANDED FICTION AND THE FICTIONAL LITERARY MODE

“Expanded fiction” refers to the hermeneutic conviction that renders hermeneutics into some sort of ontology since, in this sense, fiction has come to be considered no longer “como discurso dominante, sino (...) [que se] ha convertido en condición de cualquier discurso e incluso, al eludirse la distinción entre imitado e imitante, en condición, y desestabilización, del proceso de verdad.”⁸⁵ The fictional would thus dissolve within the general attributive character of human knowledge at large, which is seen as knowledge without any absolutely necessary referent.⁸⁶ Or, in other words, “se trata del énfasis en la determinación metafórica o retórica del lenguaje y la negación consiguiente de la posibilidad de su lenguaje exterior que pueda regir el discurso topológico. Y por tanto de la de un deslinde estricto entre filosofía y literatura.”⁸⁷ When fiction is extended to such all-encompassing

wird im Falle des Ezechielbuches deshalb zunächst von dem Anspruch Abstand zu nehmen haben, den Verfasser mit dem Ich des Selbstberichtes gleichzusetzen und ihn folglich mit Ezechiel zu identifizieren. (...)” My translation: “One must therefore reckon with autobiographical fiction in the Old Testament, too. In the case of Ezekiel, one will first of all have to take distance from the [text’s] claim [or demand] to equate the author with the ‘ego’ of the ‘I’-reports and to therefore identify him with Ezekiel.” Karin Schöpflin, *Theologie als Biographie*, 6–7.

⁸⁴ Cf. F. Cabo Aseguinolaza, “Sobre la pragmática de la teoría de la ficción literaria,” in Darío Villanueva (ed.), *Avances en Teoría de la Literatura (Estética de la Recepción, Pragmática, Teoría Empírica y Teoría de los Polisistemas)*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 189.

⁸⁵ My translation: “as dominant discourse, but (...) it has become a condition that affects any discourse whatsoever and that even, when one eludes the distinction between that which is imitated and that which imitates, in condition for and destabilization of the process of the truth.” F. Cabo Aseguinolaza, “Sobre la pragmática,” 203.

⁸⁶ There is a dimension of fictionality inherent to all human knowledge. One could say with Brian Fay that “The stories agents tell themselves about themselves are not mere appendages imposed on activity after the fact. Activity is itself already narratively structured, such that stories are integral to the performance of every act. Acts are therefore enactments of some narrative”. Cf. Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, 192.

⁸⁷ My translation: “It is the emphasis on the metaphorical or rhetorical determination of language and the ensuing negation of the possibility of an external language which might rule the topological discourse, and, therefore, also of a strict

proportions one can truly ask with Merrel, “Can we indeed be ‘outside’ the text, any and all texts, in order to formulate some ‘real’ or imaginary ‘proxy function’. Can we make a determinate referential statement about any text, any world, the universe?”⁸⁸

Answering the question whether or not the fictional has a point of reference in the extra-textual world is not only of interest for epistemology but also for exegesis. The answer given to this question will determine what literary criticism, in general, and exegesis, in particular, actually mean. Should there be no relationship between fiction and the extra-textual world, there would be then no room left for literary or historical criticism either. How could exegetes ever arrive at the other side of a text, at its referent, if there were no epistemological and hermeneutic bridges to cross the immense mental *lacuna* separating the mind, the written words, and their cultural milieu?

Such a literary agnosticism fails to see that fictional writing always-already makes reference to the extra-textual, historical world of the language in which it was cast: to its vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and associations. Beyond the general arbitrariness that most or all words entail (onomatopoeic lexemes at least sound somewhat like the realities they convey), the meanings of words as well as their syntactical and semantic usage are socio-geographically conditioned. The meanings of words can grow, develop and eventually change. If one is really to understand what a word *means*, then its cultural (or socio-geographical and historical) referent must somehow be taken into consideration. This holds true even in the case of simple things such as *bread*—for what the word “bread” refers to can change in shape, appearance, taste, and social connotations from place to place and at different times. Understanding what it means, even at its most basic level, entails in most cases (if not always) a certain degree of analogy and socio-geographical conventionality. This is the radically socio-geographical, and thus historical, predicament of human life and of all of its productions and manifestations, literature included.

I cannot fail to agree with Warning’s remark that fictional writings are linked to a framework “which in the final analysis is dominated by a specific historical sociocultural situation, for which and within which fiction is fiction.”⁸⁹ If indeed there were no relationship between the extra-textual world and fictional writings, how could one then even distinguish between *fiction* and *history*?

The relationship between the fictional and reality is not an unimportant point. Fictional writings interact with reality in a different way than non-fictional literature does. The difference between the two lies in the fact that, while the question “Did it really happen?” is irrelevant in the case

delimitation between philosophy and literature.” F. Cabo Aseguinolaza, “Sobre la pragmática,” 203.

⁸⁸ F. Merrel, “Fiction, Fact, Phalanx,” in *Diacritics* 19/1 (1989) 13 [whole art. 2–16].

⁸⁹ R. Warning, “Staged Discourse: Remarks on the Pragmatics of Fiction,” in *Dispositio* 5 (1980) 43, whole article 35–54.

of the fictional, it is at the core of non-fictional writing, such as history writing.⁹⁰ In Van Luxenburg's words: "Omdat een fictionele tekst niet de werkelijkheid beschrijft, maar wel allerlei relaties en samenhangen laat zien die herkenbaar zijn op grond van de ervaring van de werkelijkheid, lijkt de fictionele tekst bij uitstek geschikt om typische aspecten van de werkelijkheid te illustreren. De fictionele tekst kan via de beschrijving van een uniek geval algemene psychologische problemen laten zien, of een algemeen aspect van het menselijk leven naar boven halen. We zijn hier weer dicht bij Aristoteles die (...) de waarde van de literatuur zag in haar vermogen het typische te tonen in het individuele, met als resultaat verdieping van het inzicht in de werkelijkheid. Fictionaliteit en mimesis, begrippen die elkaar schijnbaar tegenspreken, komen hier op een interessante manier samen."⁹¹

4.2 THE FICTIONAL AND MIMESIS

The notion of the *fictional* is often understood in close relationship to *mimesis* or *imitation*, which can in turn be conceived of in at least three different, yet not exclusive, ways.

The more classical school takes its cue from Gadamer's notion of *anamnesis*⁹² and looks upon *mimesis* as a mental metaphor ("una metáfora mental"),⁹³ a way of making present the form of things. *Mimesis* would thus be a manner of re-presentation.

Mimesis has also been seen as an active mechanism whereby "L'imitation ou la représentation est une activité mimétique en tant qu'elle produit quelque chose, à savoir précisément l'agencement de faits par la mise en intrigue."⁹⁴ This approach is the one spearheaded by Ricoeur. What fiction actually does is to open the way for *mimesis* (understood as a meaning-producing mechanism) to expand itself by means of narrativity.

⁹⁰ Cf. Hendrik Van Gorp, *Algemene literatuurwetenschappen* (Leuven: Acco, 2000) 71.

⁹¹ My translation: "The fictional text seems to be very apt to illustrate typical aspects of reality since it does not describe reality, but shows all kinds of relations and constellations that are recognizable on the basis of one's experience of reality. By means of the description of a unique case, the fictional text can show general psychological problems or bring to the fore a general aspect of human life. We come then close to Aristotle, who saw the value of literature in its capability to show the typical in the individual, which results in a deepening of one's insight into reality. Fictionality and mimesis, concepts that apparently contradict each other, come thus together in an interesting way." J. Van Luxenburg, *Inleiding in de literatuurwetenschap* (Muidenberg: Coutinho, 1983) 38.

⁹² Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965).

⁹³ Cf. A. Reyes, *Obras Completas, XV* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963) 197 [a re-print of: *El deslinde. Prolegómenos a la teoría literaria* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1944)].

⁹⁴ My translation: "Imitation or representation is a mimetic activity insofar as it produces something, namely the very ordering of facts by fitting them into a plot." P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récits* (Paris: Seuil, 1983) 60.

The narrative functions in literature as the instrument whereby the metaphorical dimension of the whole of language⁹⁵ creates new meaning.

A third group sees *mimesis* as a pre-rational mechanism, prior to Plato's *mimetic taboo*⁹⁶ and Aristotle's rationality. In this last sense, *mimesis* is comparable to dance and play insofar as it is a means whereby the difference between object and subject becomes blurred, even surmounted. In a way, it is no longer *anamnesis* of *a priori* forms, but *forgetfulness* or *oblivion* of them and of all distinction. Or, as Adorno puts it, it is a divergence that cannot be trivialized.⁹⁷ It is no longer about presence but about absence, or better still, about ecstasy and a new unity that goes beyond any *a priori* heteronomy.⁹⁸

I could thus say that Ezekiel first re-presents reality; it evokes it and places it before the readers' eyes: this *is* the situation. Then, it sets in movement meaning-creating mechanisms that help readers to transcend the fixity of reality (its so-called *literal sense*) so that they may embrace it in a new way: they must see what it *is* (metaphor) in what it *is not* (fiction). When the fixity of everyday knowledge is de-centred by the metaphorical processes of fictionality, the readers will tap into a new dimension of reality, one that defies the conventionality of heteronomy: the liberating promise of what *could be*. In fact, it is these two aspects, the fictional (including fantasy) and *mimesis*, which make Ezekiel into a literary work rather than a mere historiographical word-for-word rendition of some prophet's utterances.⁹⁹

4.3 THE FICTIONAL AS WINDOW ONTO OTHER WORLDS

Ezekiel qua fictional narrative offers the readers a virtual world within which they can place themselves—a hologram within which the facts of life (actual, plausible or possible) are re-interpreted so that they can be *seen as* bearers of meaning (or even anti-meaning). Here lies the *metaphorical* dimension of fictional writings: each word that the readers read is like a stroke of a literary brush that paints before them another plausible or possible world. One could say, using a metaphor dear to Borges,¹⁰⁰ that the

⁹⁵ Since there is no one-to-one correlation between *word* and *what is out there*, one can say that language as such is somewhat metaphorical or figurative since it says and does not say, is and is not, just like metaphors are judgements of being and not-being. There is no absolute, ontological, "literal" correlation between words and things.

⁹⁶ This refers to the metaphysical opposition between the ontological data regarding the "real" and the "representation."

⁹⁷ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Teoría estética* (Madrid: Taurus, 1980) 160 [transl. of Gretel Adorno & Rolf Tiedemann (eds), *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970)].

⁹⁸ For a treatment of these three understandings of *mimesis*, cf. F. Cabo Aseguinolaza, "Sobre la pragmática," 191–193.

⁹⁹ Kathryn Hume argues that it is precisely fantasy and *mimesis* that are characteristic of literature, cf. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis. Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York – London: Methuen, 1984) 21.

¹⁰⁰ "El mundo, según Mallarmé, existe para un libro; según Bloy, somos versículos o palabras o letras de un mundo mágico, y ese libro incesante es la única

world is presented to the readers in the form of a book¹⁰¹ within which they are invited to take their place and by which they could be instructed if they surrender to the book's dynamics. This view is present also in Ezekiel:

- 2:9 Then I saw: and behold, there a hand set out to me, and behold, in it was the roll of a book.
- 10 He then spread it out before me, and it was written upon in front and on the back and there were written on it dirges, and moaning and wailing.
- 3:1 And He said to me then: "Human! What you find, eat! Eat this roll, and go, speak to the house of Israel!"
- 2 Then I opened my mouth, and He made me eat this roll.
- 3 Then He said to me: "Human! Cause your belly to eat and cause your intestines to be filled with this roll, which I am giving you." Then I ate it and it became in my mouth like honey for sweetness.

"Ezekiel's eating of the scrolls of the Torah indicates his becoming Scripture. Every cell of his body, every act as well as every thought, will henceforth breathe Scripture and thus form the hermeneutical framework out of which the priest understands his world."¹⁰²

The written word of Ezekiel re-presents or unfolds the world in which it lives (fictionalised history conceived of, and from the viewpoint of YHWH) as charged with meaning. For human consciousness, facts are not mere facts, they are carriers of meaning. In prophetic books it is YHWH that reveals the ultimate meaning and consequences of human actions: the realest reality is declared by YHWH, it is **נאם אדני יהוה** ("declaration of YHWH"). This interpretation-revelation of the world is possible because we do not live in some sort of *nameless* space, but in our *named* world. Not only does language *speak* (as an intransitive event), it also *speaks its speakers and it speaks the world they live in* (as a transitive conception).¹⁰³ For even the conceived and pre-conceived concept of *nature* presupposes that the horizon whereon human existence takes place has *logical* laws, i.e., that it can be re-presented by means of *logos*. This capability of the text for creating

cosa que hay en el mundo: es, mejor dicho, el mundo." Quoted by María Adela Renard, "Estudio preliminar" in Jorge Luis Borges, *Poesías* (Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1993) 28.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Johan Lust, "Een visioen voor volwassenen met voorbehoud (Ezechiël 1–3)," in *Collationes* 22 (1976) 445; whole article: 433–448.

¹⁰² Martin C. Srajek, "Constitution and Agency in Light of Some Passages from Ezekiel 1–4," in Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Gary A. Phillips & David Jobling (eds), *Levinas and Biblical Studies* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003) 130.

¹⁰³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 63; see also Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1971) 19; Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 4; Luois-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 84f.

and re-creating the world in terms of *logos* (meaning both *verbum* and *ratio*) entails that the universe's mute facts can be structured and re-structured in several plausible ways around different centres and on the basis of different hermeneutical keys.¹⁰⁴ This, too, constitutes the metaphorical, symbolical dimension of the whole of Ezekiel.

Both the text and the world are therefore somewhat open; moreover, they can be opened up or unfolded in different ways. This is the precondition for “revelation” to take place, that meaning can be created and recreated. Neither the world nor the text are fixed once and forever. Any dogmatism regarding reading goes counter to the very dynamics of mediated revelation. “The openness of the text makes possible a relationship with God as interpretation while, at the same time, making space for the emergence of revelation. In other words, the existence of the text itself is not only dependent on being revealed by God, but it is also dependent on being interpreted by humanity. (...) Reading and revelation bring both God and humans infinitely close to this oneness [between them]; however, neither side will reach it fully. This perpetuates the process of interpretation and revelation *ad infinitum*.”¹⁰⁵

It is at the metaphorical and symbolic level of the text that realism and creativity, the description of facts and the vision of another plausible order of things, historiography, and fictional writing touch upon each other without confusion. “For history-writing is not a record of fact—of what ‘really happened’—but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact or to unravel the inner rationale of those facts. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free invention but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value.”¹⁰⁶

It is important to stress at this point that, while reading, readers enter into a special relationship with the narration and the actants, approaching them in ways that are not wholly different from the ways that they look at people in the “real” or “extra-literary” world; “the clues that we take in and use to construct an image of a person are virtually identical in literature and in life.”¹⁰⁷ In a similar way, as they must decipher the mystery of their “real” interlocutors, so too must they draw up a profile of the actants in a literary work. This dimension of reading-interpreting cannot therefore be absent from any reading of biblical texts. As the readers attempt to set the narrative scene in motion by means of their imagination, the fictional may spin off truths which can refashion the working understanding of reality with which the readers read the extra-literary reality. The fictional has its own truth deserving of proper recognition.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, 178–198.

¹⁰⁵ Martin C. Srajek, “Constitution and Agency,” 131

¹⁰⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985) 25.

¹⁰⁷ Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 36. See also Howard Mancing, “Against Dualisms: A Response to Henry Sullivan,” in *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 19/1 (1999) 158–176.

4.4 THE TRUTH OF THE FICTIONAL

Ezekiel uses elements taken from history (e.g. dates and names) and fictionalizes them. “The ‘act of fictionalizing’ embeds ‘reality’ with the triad of ‘the real’—‘the fictional’—the imaginary’ (*Das Reale—das Fiktive—das Imaginäre*).”¹⁰⁸ Reality is used within the context of an account where the rules of the narration come before any strict truth principle in terms of historical correspondence between facts and words.

The fictional in a literary piece of writing—even in a work with autobiographical features (and maybe an autobiographic claim)—consists in the so-called facts that are accompanied by (interpreted) connotative statements whereby meaning is attributed to them.¹⁰⁹ Things *are* and events *happen*. They become *meaningful* when they are *filled* with meaning, i.e., when the mind *reads* meaning *into* them. Then, it strings them up together into semantic games that make judgements possible.

The *fictional* nature of the narration does not mean that what is said is not true, but rather that what the book actually does is *construct* or *imagine* a new given. The reality of the book exists *in the book*. Literature exists in the realm of meaning. Literature exists in the *real* world because it exists in the mind and the mind is real. Furthermore, untrue statements may not be *historically* true, but they are still real. If they exist as thoughts, then they are real.

Meaning takes place or is constructed at the level of consciousness. The mind interweaves a number of events and evaluates them in light of a continuum. This action of interweaving events or of breaking the flow of events into units that are assigned meaning is the fictional dimension of knowledge itself, present even in historiography. What happens is that writers can choose to emphasise either pole of the equation: the givenness of the event within the historical continuum or the meaning attributed to it within the narrative continuum. All writing that implies the existence of meaning does so in the light of a larger framework which in the end can neither be proven nor rebutted. In itself, if a text follows its own logic, it is true to itself. In comparison to other texts (including historiographical texts), a text’s description of extra-textual realities may then be considered to be untrue. Nonetheless, to say that meaning-oriented writings have a fictional dimension and that they ultimately rest on a symbolic framework is one and the same thing.

¹⁰⁸ Hanna Liss, “The Imaginary Sanctuary: The Priestly Code as an Example of Fictional Literature in the Hebrew Bible,” in Oded Lipschits & Manfred Oeming (eds), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 669. Here, the author is following: W. Iser, *Fingieren als anthropologische Dimension der Literatur* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1990).

¹⁰⁹ This is so because, so as Fay explains: “Countless facts, themselves the result of interpretations, can be arranged in any number of different ways to form a coherent configuration which makes a life intelligible. (...) That is, biography involves the creative imagination of the biographer as well as the intentions of the biographer.” Cf. Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, 188.

In fact, “what makes fictional and breaks historical writing is not the presence of invented material—inevitable in both—but the privilege and at will the flaunting of free invention.”¹¹⁰ The comparison between what archaeology reveals about those self-same historical events and what Ezekiel tells the readers or makes them believe will offer clues about Ezekiel’s as well as the archaeologists’ own view of things.

Even though Ezekiel does indeed contain elements from history, the final criteria according to which it was composed and must now be read and reread is rhetorical and ideological¹¹¹ rather than historical or historiographical.¹¹² Indeed, “the reality represented in the fictional text is not represented for its own sake. Rather, it functions as a reference or means to something that does not exist, but will be made imaginable. By means of fictionalizing, the author presents the world in the modus of ‘As if (*Als-Ob*), striving for the ‘irrealization of the real.’”¹¹³

As hinted above, the truthfulness of the book must not be equalled with its adequacy to render fixed facts. Truth is a logical and rational reality and thus mental, ideational and propositional¹¹⁴—which means that it is relative to the system within which it is expressed.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Cf. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 29.

¹¹¹ Cf. Jesús G. Maestro, “Reviews (of: Jean Canavaggio, *Cervantes, entre vida y creación*)” (Alcalá de Henares: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 2000), in *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 22/1 (2002) 158–165, esp. 162.

¹¹² To say that Ezekiel is composed according to the criteria of fictionality that rule autobiographical and ideological narration is taken by many as a denial of any core of truthfulness. Zimmerli expresses such unease when he writes that “for all this, it is still not said that in Ezekiel’s visions and symbolic acts are have to do with a pure literary fiction. This interpretation, which was much favored in the pre-critical phase of Ezekiel study—and beyond it—is out of place. Everything which recent study of the prophets has brought to light of the true experiential background of prophecy renders it inappropriate to deny to Ezekiel, the younger contemporary of Jeremiah in whom the submission to the divine power is certainly not to be overlooked, a genuine experience underlying his prophetic teaching.” Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 1, 18.

¹¹³ Hanna Liss, “The Imaginary Sanctuary,” 672.

¹¹⁴ The relativity or relational nature of truth is implied by basic principles of (Western) rationality, namely the principles of identity ($A=A$), of non-contradiction ($A=A$ and $A=\text{non-}A$ cannot be true at the same time and looked at from the same perspective), and of excluded middle or *tertium non datur* (either $A=A$ or $A=\text{non-}A$, there is no third possibility). The same can be said of the old logical axiom that truth and error exist only in the proposition (i.e. the sentence, $A=B$), which must be either true or false, i.e. the (semantic) principle of bivalence. The proposition’s truth or falsehood depends on and can be verified only in relation to an extra-propositional context that helps establish the value of A and of B and the perspective from which A and B are viewed.

¹¹⁵ For an interesting example of this, cf. Umberto Eco, “On Truth. A Fiction,” in Umberto Eco, Marco Santambrogio & Patrizia Violi (eds), *Meaning and Mental Representations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988) 41–59.

Ezekiel has a message to convey, a tale to tell. Facts, on the contrary, are mute data calling for interpretation. In this sense, even historiography is based (in part) on fiction or creative imagination, on the skilful art of weaving a story around archaeological objects and past events, and on the re-construction and actualization of what is no longer at hand. *Truth* must therefore neither be equalled to *happening* nor opposed to *imagination*, for there are different kinds of truths. There are factual truths (“this is a chair”) and there are existential truths (“all humans are born equal”), and both types are relative to the ideational system that contextualises them within which there must be nouns such as “chair,” “humans,” adjectives such as “equal,” and so forth. Things can therefore be completely true despite the fact that they may never actually have taken place or that they are wholly fictitious and imagined (for example, YHWH uniting the dispersed into one “Israel,” Ez 34:12–16; 37:21–22). Truth and truths can thus also lie in the imagined future as a promise, i.e., as that which can be, in which case fiction would then be a more adequate way of attaining to truth than historiography.

Ezekiel’s view is true, therefore, not because it is historical, but because *from the perspective of the book*, it will *appear* (i.e., reading can mediate *revelation*) that *it makes sense*. It may not be factual, but it is still true, if only one looks at it from the book’s own standpoint—the same can be said about the archaeologist’s truth. This is the truth of the metaphor, the truth of the literary work.¹¹⁶ The geniality not just of Ezekiel, but of the whole Hebrew Scriptures, lies in its ideology and “in the world view projected, together with the rhetoric devised to bring it home.”¹¹⁷

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this contribution, I have sought to highlight some of the dimensions of the biblical book called Ezekiel. I accept that biblical books are “books” *in a special way*, not only because they are approached as somehow being God’s speech, but also because the very compositional history of most of them deconstructs our usual notions of book, author and writer.

If, as Jews and Christians believe, this book can indeed mediate God’s Revelation to the faithful (as it has done for so many throughout the centuries), then it can do this only by being a *text*. Therefore, theological exegesis cannot but entail the conscious and systematic effort to let Ezekiel be a *biblical book* and to speak to us *as a book*. We must consequently (re)discover and acknowledge its literary character.

The first rule for reading understandingly is that readers should have enough encyclopaedic competence to commune with the text in its own terms, without “raping” it. Thus, the first skill we ought to acquire is respect towards the text. Whenever we disregard the literary nature of Holy Texts, say, under the pretence of saving their revelatory status, we will ultimately fail to appreciate the very dynamics of “entextualised” Revelation.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hermeneutics*, 131.

¹¹⁷ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 37.

The autobiographical, fantastic, and fictional dimensions of Ezekiel do not undermine its divine message; they actually bridge it over to the readers. Ezekiel's message cannot be respectfully understood unless we recognise and interact with its autobiographical, fantastic, and fictional strategies.

Acknowledging Ezekiel's literary nature will not be a detriment to its message. On the contrary, it will keep us, the readers, from divinising anybody's understanding of the text. The text is the *meeting place* where God and the readers can communicate, *not God*.¹¹⁸ When the doors of its encoded traces are opened by the inquisitive mind of the readers, meaning takes place and the conversation between God and the readers starts. Then, the Word of God *happens*. Consequently, it is no longer an extra-literary person who functions as prophet: the real prophet is the book. The stage where this revelatory meeting between God and the readers through the text occurs is our imagination, which explains the title of this contribution: "Imagining Ezekiel."

From a historical viewpoint, the literary character of Ezekiel suggests a close connection between the book and the literati (scribes and middle sectors of society). Its apocalyptic message further confirms this since as "a genre, apocalyptic could have flourished only within circles of sufficient education and erudition to produce this kind of literature."¹¹⁹ This is an invitation for us the readers to read not only what is on the lines but also what is between the lines.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Hanna Liss, "The Imaginary Sanctuary," 689.

¹¹⁹ Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 185.