Is this Story Possible?
Exploring Possible Worlds Theory

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ABSTRACT
The nature of this article is exploratory rather than argumentative, and definitely not polemic. I shall explore three notions in possible worlds theory, i.e. the pragmatic turn, modal operators and trans-world identity to tentatively attempt to facilitate a discussion between the two fields of study. The first important move in this regard, taking its lead from modal logic, is the shift from a correspondence theory of reference to a pragmatic theory of reference. Possible worlds theory has resulted in the fact that fiction has come to be regarded as a pragmatic concept and is defined pragmatically. In the pragmatic view of fiction, fiction is located in a social communication situation where fiction is a convention of communication. This convention is indicated by modal operators. Such operators subsume the text. Cross-world identity relates to the way in which one identifies the same individual across world boundaries. The article questions the validity of determining the truth of ancient religious texts on the basis of the tenets of modern logic only. It poses the question whether one does not have to reckon with the pragmatics, the modality and the complexity entailed in the notion of reference too.

A INTRODUCTION
Fiction permeates the global society in many more ways than one. On a naïve level, parents tell it to their children. On a sophisticated level, literary authors produce fictional texts. Every Tom, Dick and Harry knows fiction, what it is and how it differs from non-fiction. However, philosophers grapple with the notion of fiction. What seems to be a global intuition on one level seems to be a global riddle on another. Intuition apart, how does one conceptualise the difference between fiction and reality? How does one conceptualise the difference between a fictional text and a work of history? How do fictional texts refer? Or do they not? Is the Napoleon, Russia or Yahweh in a fictional text the same as the one in the ‘actual’ world? Do fictional worlds communicate about the actual world? And if so, how?

Over the past decades, literary theory has become an entrenched approach in studying ancient Near-Eastern religious texts, notably those in the Old Testament. With this approach, the question of fiction and history has become a pressing one. It would be naïve to think that one could answer all questions
pertaining to fiction and reality/history in one article. One would not even be able to ask all the questions. My focus in this article is much more restricted. Could the current discussions in possible worlds theory contribute anything to the problems related to reading religious texts?

To my mind, the interface between possible worlds theory and current issues in applying literary theory to religious texts is precisely the notion of fiction. Worldwide, through various religions, bodies of text exist that are read as fiction by some and as history by others. What is today called ‘Greek mythology’, implying that its reference to gods is not true or that the referents do not exist in the actual world, has been read as true in previous generations. In the case of the Old Testament, the problem is even more pressing. What is ‘true’ for some now is ‘fiction’ for others. So, does possible worlds fiction offer anything in this regard?

To be honest, I am not convinced either way. The article aims to provide an overview of the current literature on the notion of possible worlds. This is done with the following research question in mind: Does possible worlds theory offer the modern reader of Old Testament texts any useful conceptual tools with which to take forward the current debate on the epistemological status of religious narrative texts? As a method, this article will enter the debate, not with the aim of being polemic, but rather with the aim of illustrating the possibilities that possible worlds theory holds. Without going into all the philosophical details, I shall explore three notions in possible worlds theory, i.e. the pragmatic turn, modal operators and trans-world identity to tentatively attempt to facilitate a discussion between the two fields of study.

B POSSIBLE WORLDS THEORY: THE PRAGMATIC TURN

Since the mid-seventies, fiction has been redefined in an interdisciplinary way. This new view opened up fresh perspectives for viewing the problem of fiction and its relationship to history and reality (Proudfoot 2006; Ronen 1994:1-3; see Copeland 2002 for a detailed discussion on the origins of possible world semantics). The interface between fiction and philosophy came from both sides: theorists of fiction became interested in philosophical issues pertaining to reference and philosophers came to question the existing definitions of fiction and reality (Ronen 1994:19). The cross-fertilisation that resulted yielded new insights into both fictionality and history/historiography (see Mink 1978; 1984 and White 1984; 1987). It also led to new conceptualisations on reality. While the field of study is wide-ranging and complicated, especially the philosophical side of it, this article will attempt to follow the debate as it relates to fiction and the ways in which possible worlds theory has been appropriated for literary theory.

Possible worlds theory has very specific philosophical roots, which I definitely do not intend discussing in detail here. Various scholars argue that one
cannot divorce the application of possible worlds theory to literature from its philosophical roots (e.g. Doležel 1998:785; Ronen 1994:5, 6, 24). With this, I agree because one’s view on the topic holds immense implications. I intend elucidating the philosophical roots and its implications at a later stage.

While acknowledging the existence of unsolved philosophical issues, I side with literary scholars, such as Doležel, Eco, Pavel and Ronen who nevertheless proceed by exploiting notions from the interface between literary theory and philosophy. Possible worlds theory offers literary theory two concepts that serve to enlighten textual semiotics (Ronen 1991:3). The first is the metaphor of ‘world’, which describes the semantic domain projected by a text. The second is the concept of modality, which describes and classifies the various ways in which objects, states of affairs and events that make up the semantic domain exist. I shall trace the implications these notions hold for fictional texts and those they may hold for religious texts.

In literary theory, possible worlds theorists view fictional worlds as a subset of possible worlds (Ronen 1994:51). One has to understand that fictional worlds are not possible in the sense that they could have existed. They are rather like possible worlds in the sense that they are non-actualised in the actual world (Ronen 1994:51). Fictional worlds, one could say, thus have some sort of existence, but not an actual existence in the actual world. This argument is drawn from the philosophical argument that draws a distinction between necessity and possibility. For literary theorists, propositions about the actual world are necessary, while propositions about fictional worlds are possible (Ronen 1994:53). Literary theorists take their lead from the observation that, in our cultural practice, fictional entities exist. The theories we devise should, therefore, explain these entities and not wish them away or declare them impossible. The very notion of fictionality presupposes reality, whichever way one defines the latter. To view fiction and reality in an integrationist fashion, then, would not suffice (Ronen 1994:123) precisely because of this presupposition.

Pavel (1975:165) posits the basic tenets of possible worlds theory in fiction by indicating that literary theorists use, what he calls a more ‘intuitive’ approach, to possible worlds theory. According to him, all possible worlds form a set, with the actual world forming a privileged member of the set. Between any possible world, which in our case is a fictional world, and the actual world exists a relationship of the alternativeness. This relationship can indicate various criteria of alternativeness (Pavel 1975:166). Pavel (1975:167) also quotes Aristotle who said that the poet not only relates things that have happened, but also things that might happen, i.e. what is possible. Now obviously, this is a simplified version of a complex issue and not without criticism amongst possible worlds theorists. For now, however, it would have to suffice to allow us to continue with our topic.
The first important move in this regard, taking its lead from modal logic is the shift from a correspondence theory of reference to a pragmatic theory of reference. Possible worlds theory has resulted in the fact that fiction has come to be regarded as a pragmatic concept and is defined pragmatically (Ronen 1994:10). Doležel (1998:790) relates the intentional nature of fictional worlds to performative speech acts. By this speech act, a possible is made into a fictional existent. A fictional text thus calls into existence a fictional world. This means that literary theorists are not looking for something in the form of a fictional text by which to define its fictionality. In this approach, one cannot argue, for instance, that an omniscient narrator is an indication of fiction or that internal focalisation marks a text as fictional. The reason for this is that the same form tends to be used in a variety of texts – including fictional and historical. A further criticism against a taxonomic approach to fiction is that indicators of fiction in a text will always be language specific while literary theory is looking for universal notions on the concept (Ronen 1994:79).

In literary theory, possibility and impossibility are seen as conventions pertaining to world construction and not logical restraints of possibility. It is clear that the focus is not on the inherent logic but on the conventions according to which fiction operate in communication situations. Fictional is a cultural category, which results in texts being read according to fictional world-constructing conventions and assigned meaning according to fictional world-reconstructing conventions (Ronen 1994:11). In this model, one would have a communication situation in the actual world operating under the convention that the modality of the contents of the communication itself is fictional. In other words, both the actual speaker and the actual listener agree for the sake of the communication situation that they will not be talking about the actual world, but about a possible world. They agree that not everything they are talking about will have to ‘exist’ in reality, but that they can talk about possible entities that do not necessarily exist in the actual world.

In non-taxonomic models, fictionality is viewed as a context. Fiction pertains to the relationship between a speech situation and its context as well as to the degree and kind of commitment of a speaker towards the contents of his or her utterance. Ronen (1994:83) argues that it is important to distinguish between fiction and literariness. Fiction is a relational concept, i.e. it pertains to the relationship between the content of a literary text and the world beyond its boundaries (Ronen 1994:83).

Ronen (1994:36) thus convincingly argues that correspondence theory has been replaced by a pragmatic theory of truth, which has a more flexible view of truth. This more flexible view does not ask about the ontology of a text, but about what one is doing with a statement or text, and whether it works. The implication of this move is that it transfers the place where truth is assessed from the real world to possible or fictional worlds (Ronen 1994:37). This relaxed
notion of truth, as Ronen (1994:34) calls it, should be able to account for truthful or false propositions within a fictional world. By modal operators, which will be discussed later, one distances a fictional world from the actual world. However, within that fictional world, matters of truth are evaluated in terms of that particular fictional world. This implies that one will not decide on the truth value of a text in terms of either its correspondence to the actual world or its form. Rather, one will view a text as historiographic, fictional or whatever on account of a complex of cultural parameters.

This explains why different cultures hold different notions of fictionality and history. It also explains why notions on these topics can change with time. One of the problems in relating texts to the actual world is that the ‘actual’ world differs for different people or different groups of people (Pavel 1975:167). How does one account for the differences in world view between ancient religious texts and modern readers with a modern, scientific encyclopaedic knowledge of the ‘actual’ world? This has to be researched further, but at this stage one should acknowledge that the problem cannot be solved by giving preference to modern worldviews above others. This would amount to cultural colonialism and the rape of the text.

In this new approach, fiction is not viewed as a textual phenomenon. It is rather viewed as a complex of literary, cultural and institutional considerations (Ronen 1994:10). Fiction is therefore a pragmatic position of certain texts in relationship to their particular culture (Ronen 1994:2). Fiction is a notion relative to texts with different cultural positions or texts with different versions of reality – a pragmatic-contextual definition of fictionality.

The logic behind this is that fictional universes create their own ‘universe of discourse’ and one then asks questions pertaining to truth in terms of that discourse, not in terms of correspondence to the real world (Ronen 1994:39). The truth of a reference is determined by the laws of discourse, not merely by reference (Ronen 1994:39). Truth has thus changed from a metaphysical principle to a semiotic-oriented principle (Ronen 1994:40). One could also say that in this approach, truth cannot be assessed merely by logic. One also has to grapple with the pragmatic and contextual issues of a text. Once again, this change implies that truth cannot be assessed in terms of correspondence with the actual world.

A debate is raging on the truth value of fictional discourse. According to the correspondence theory of truth, the truth value of propositions is determined by a corresponding state of affairs in reality (Ronen 1994:35). For literary theorists, the incompleteness of fictional entities is a rhetorical issue, not a logical one (Ronen 1994:112). Fictional entities are not incomplete because they lack logic, but because they are brought about by and conform to certain principles of rhetoric. The whole notion of pragmatics poses major questions
for reading religious texts. Can texts and the truth they claim to convey ever be a question of mere logic? Or does one, even a scholar, have to reckon with the pragmatic communication situation in which texts operate.

So, which way does one go? Does one say something only exists if it exists in the ‘actual’ world? Or does ‘things’ in possible worlds also exist? How real is real? Is real only what can logically be proven to exist in the actual world? Or do logically impossible worlds also exist?

Possible worlds theory has convincingly shown that fictional and historical/real are not formal categories. In other words, one cannot say that this form of logic or that form of literature, this way of writing or that way of constructing creates either fiction or history. Thus, one can not from the form of a text, or the logic in a text, deduce that its referents are fictional? The complicating problem in religious texts being that one is working with an invisible referent. In religious texts, many of the referents would themselves be termed possible, from the perspective of the actual world.

One therefore has to conclude that aspects of fictionality in a text and the use of certain formal strategies cannot be used as proof that certain characters in a text do not refer to counterparts in the actual word. Eco (1979:223) stresses exactly that: Our commitment to a possible world is an ideological, not an ontological matter. Whether one reads a text as fictional and, therefore, some or all of its characters as fictional is a matter of decision based on cultural, ideological and conventional considerations.

C MODAL OPERATORS
In the pragmatic view of fiction, fiction is located in a social communication situation where fiction is a convention of communication. This convention is indicated by modal operators. Such operators subsume the text.

In philosophy, fiction has always been a problem. One of the ways in which theorists try to solve the problem is by using the notion of modal operators. The fiction operator delimits a fictional world from the real world. As Ronen (1994:33) eloquently puts it: ‘… a fictional operator closes a domain under implication and subjects it to laws of inference obtaining in this domain, and regardless of what lies beyond the domain’s boundaries …’ One could thus, in terms of this approach, define fiction as non-actual objects existing in possible worlds. In possible worlds theory, the autonomy of a world is secured by prefixing it with a modal operator, i.e. it is a fictional or possible or whatever world (Ronen 1994:28). Thus, an intentional operator marks out a discourse as fictional (Ronen 1994:29). This modal or intentional operator functions in the actual world, assigning a particular mode or ontology to the world created by the text. A fictional world is analogous to the actual world in the
sense that it has its own set of facts and its own sub-worlds and counter-worlds (Ronen 1994:29).

Thus, modal operators offer some solution to the problem of fiction (Ronen 1994:38). Whereas philosophers use modal operators to delineate fictional worlds from the real world, literary theorists use it in a less strict sense to bind together the constituents of a fictional world and distinguish it from other fictional worlds and the real world (Ronen 1994:39). Thus, in this perspective, the actual world is merely another world prefixed by the modal operator ‘actual’ (Ronen 1994:39). Obviously, possible worlds theory holds metaphysical implications. For instance, does one discuss possible worlds from an extra-systemic point of view or from an intra-systemic point of view? Would the actual world have preference? Are all fictional worlds fictional to the same extent or would it be possible to indicating various relationships between fictional worlds and reality (Ronen 1994:26)?

The modal structure of fiction is important. Fiction indicates not what could have or could not have occurred in actuality, but what did occur and what could have occurred in fiction (Ronen 1994:9). For possible worlds theory, non-actual possibilities form coherent systems that can be described, imagined and intended. One can also refer to these systems. The fact that these states of affairs are non-obtaining, not at hand, does not preclude the fact that one can know it or study it. Possible worlds theory helps literary scholars conceptualising alternativeness.

This is in contrast to the classical philosophical approaches to fiction, i.e. the segregationist and integrationist approaches. The aforementioned saw fiction as a deviation from actuality; the last mentioned blurs the distinction from scratch (Ronen 1994:11). Would it be stretching the fact if one was also to define the notion of religious literature as a pragmatic category? Is ‘religious’ as a notion not a modal category, denoting a possible way of perceiving reality?

Possible worlds theory holds that non-actual possibilities form coherent systems that can be described and qualified, imagined and intended, and to which one can refer (Ronen 1994:25). In other words, the fact that the state of affairs is non-obtaining, not at hand, does not preclude the fact that one can know or study it.

Possible worlds theory holds metaphysical implications, i.e. does one discuss a possible world from an extra-systemic viewpoint or not; does the ‘actual’ world have preference (Ronen 1994:26)? This also extends to fictional worlds. Are all fictional worlds fictional to the same extent or are there different relationships between different fictional worlds and ‘reality’ (Ronen 1994:26)? Thus, is a world with certain ‘fictional’ constituents totally fictional, or is it situated somewhere on a continuum. If there is one fictional entity in a
'possible world,' does that mean that all referents are fictional; that no referent really exists?

Possible worlds, and therefore fictional worlds, are intentional worlds, i.e. the meaning of words determines the collection of things referred to by these words (Ronen 1994:28). Possible worlds theory allows one to see a fictional world as a universe of discourse, which constructs its own world of referents (Ronen 1994:28).

A relaxed notion of truth should be able to account for truthful and false propositions within a possible (or impossible) fictional world (Ronen 1994:40). One thus has to assert the truthfulness of fictional assertion, i.e. in terms of that fictional world (Ronen 1994:41). In other words, one needs a theory that accounts for the modal structure of the fictional world, as a world, and one that accounts for the relationships between various fictional worlds, fictional worlds and other possible worlds, and fictional worlds and the actual world (Ronen 1994:41).

D CROSS-WORLD IDENTITY

Another philosophical concept pertaining to possible worlds that has entered into literary theory is trans-world identity. This notion relates to the way in which one identifies the same individual across world boundaries (Ronen 1994:57). It rests on the recognition that names are tied to referents, not to a set of properties. Thus, in a text, Napoleon is Napoleon because he is so named, not because the properties or attributes ascribed to him conform to what the historical Napoleon did. For instance, does one talk about the same person when you discuss Napoleon in *War and Peace* and Napoleon as discussed in a work of history? The problem also pertains to the what if? game. What if Napoleon had not …?

In possible worlds theory, names maintain a stable referent across contexts, but the descriptions attached to a referent may vary in differing contexts (Norris 2003:232). Names are rigid designators that designate the same referents for all possible worlds. In short, names are regarded as rigid designators, referring to particular individuals across world boundaries (Doležel 1998:789; Pavel 1975:169). Whether Napoleon was executed in an American jail in book X or whether he died on St. Helena, it is the same Napoleon that is referred to. However, although the character in a fictional world can refer to an actual person, it need not do or be anything that the historical figure did. Because of the modal operator, fictional, this character Napoleon in world x could have been a musician, lived in India for a while and died an infamous robber. Thus, fictional characters are not determined in total by what their actual counterparts did or did not do. Neither are historical individuals influenced by what is written about them in historical or fictional texts. Each world is separate and has its own characters acting and being according to the rules of that world.
Although names are rigid designators, referring to the same referent across world boundaries, each possible world will attribute different characteristics to that person. Ryan (1991:15) made the observation that ontologically hybrid textual worlds represent a theoretical problem. I do not intend solving the problem. What I do wish to point out is that reference in works of literature is a complicated notion. It seems to be impossible at all times to draw clear-cut distinctions between referents in the actual world, fictional referents and all of the varieties in between. The way in which the actual world is related to possible worlds as represented in texts is much more complicated than merely viewing it from one perspective or applying one type of logic to it.

E  POSSIBLE WORLDS THEORY AND ANCIENT NEAR-EASTERN RELIGIOUS TEXTS

It has been argued on many occasions, e.g. Alter (1981), Sternberg (1987) and even me (Marais 1997) that the religious texts in the Old Testament use fictional modes of communication, that history is not the main representational driving force in these texts. Does this, however, necessarily or logically lead to the conclusion that, for instance, Gericke (2004) drew in concluding that God, or for that matter any other referent in Old Testament religious texts, does not exist?

If fiction is a pragmatic notion, not an ontological one, can one draw conclusions on whether the referents in a text are fictional or not from a study of the form of the text? Or rather, could the form of a text be a contributing factor in ascribing fictionality to a particular referent in a text? Should the pragmatic context in which this particular text functions not be part of the evidence for or against fictionality? Raphael (2002:39) suggested that no formal analysis can adequately distinguish between scripture and literature. This can only be done in a community. Fiction is not a matter of style or form, or even logic. It is a modal notion. It is an ideological notion.

Secondly, if fiction is designated by a modal operator, designated by a society of readers or by cultural convention, who decides to assign that operator to religious texts? Is ‘religious’ not in this instance to be regarded as some sort of modal operator itself? Or is this missing the point? The problem with ancient Near-Eastern narratives is that they do not have a prefix. In other words, they do not come with a cover saying ‘Novel’, ‘Fiction’, etc. So, who decides on the prefix? If fiction is a pragmatic notion, not an essential one, can one prove it to be fiction or not on the basis of the logic of the text? And a modern, philosophical, Occidental logic at that. Possible worlds theory would suggest not. Should the discussion then not be about what role a text is playing in a reading community? Thus, in a particular community, one would read the text realistically. In another one not. Put simply, in some communities, readers would believe on account of the text that (a) God does exist and in other communities...
they would believe the contrary. The point that possible worlds theory seems to be making is that whether God exist or not is not necessarily a function of the logic of the text, but of the orientation of the community of readers.

Gericke (2004), for instance, has applied only one criterion for truth, a philosophical criterion and more particularly an actualist model of reference. His criterion for truth is logic as defined by philosophical endeavour. From his perspective, obviously, he came to the correct conclusion. However, what were the underlying assumptions in his thought? God can only exist if one can prove that every reference to him correspond to a referent in the ‘real world’. If not, God is totally fictional. If Gericke’s argument was to hold, one would have to declare Napoleon fictional if one read a fictional text in which Napoleon is a character, or if one read a history in which untrue things were being said about Napoleon. If it is true that fiction is a cultural construct, indicating a variety of possibilities on a continuum, is fiction not a much more complicated notion that can not adequately be appropriated by any one type of logic? Once again, possible worlds theory seems to indicate precisely that. Fiction seems to communicate about reality in a way that cannot be limited to either philosophical or historical logic. And yet, so possible worlds theory claims, fictional communication still holds some truth.

Philosophically and theoretically, fictional characters and events do not preclude the co-existence in the same possible world of real characters and events. Furthermore, the use of narrative strategies in a text does not imply that the text does not refer to real referents too. The exact division is impossible to determine, but the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Naïve realists should maybe keep in mind that what they are reading is a text, not the real world. They are relating to the real world in a textually, narratively, mediated way. On the other hand, critical theorists may do well to remember that many different worlds are possible. I would tentatively suggest that ‘religious’ functions as a modal operator saying precisely that this narrative operates in a particular mode or should be read in a particular mode. Whether I believe the truth claims of the text or not, I suggest that I, the reader, should respect the modal operator when I read a text. I further suggest that it is possible to combine this notion with Ricoeur’s concept of the world in front of the text. Then one would say that fictional texts open up possible worlds for readers. One may say, ‘I do not believe this possible world’, but may one say, ‘This world is not possible’ or even ‘This world does not exist’?

If literary theorists can take their point of departure from the notion that, as a cultural practice, fictional entities exist and that they have to account for this phenomenon, I want to suggest that one could, in similar fashion, argue that it is at least possible, as cultural practice, that religious entities exist and that religious texts exist. I want to suggest that it should be possible for theorists of text or religious literature to describe the unique ways in which reli-
religious entities are communicated and that it does not all have to be subsumed under philosophical and/or scientific logic. Furthermore, I contend that it is not valid to determine the truth of ancient religious texts on the basis of the tenets of modern logic only. Possible worlds theory suggest that one has to reckon with the pragmatics, the modality and the complexity entailed in the notion of reference as well.

F  CONCLUSION

In the South African context, the debate concerning epistemological issues pertaining to the Bible is fierce. On entering the debate, I do not wish to be fierce in advocating answers, but hopefully fierce in debating the questions and in looking for new questions that may lead to new answers.

I explicated three notions of possible worlds theory, namely, the pragmatic turn, modal operators and trans-world identity. I tried to explore the possibilities these notions hold for reading religious literary texts, in this case the Old Testament. I questioned approaches that operate on the bases of singular theories of reference or logic, using possible worlds theory to argue that reference is a complex notion, as is logic. Not the least of the complexities attached to these notions, is modality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


