A Phenomenological Analysis of the Elements in Biblical 'Genesis': *Chaos. Formal Creation, Law*, and the resurgence of the 'dimension of religious depth' in the Gospel of Jesus

Dr. John Roemischer (City University of New York, retired) and Jack Kenneth Roemischer (Xavier High School)

Synoptic Preface: God's *creation* of *formally* organized *chaos*.

   Historically, perhaps the most controversial statements in Biblical 'Genesis' are the first three propositions:
   1. In the beginning God *created* the heaven and the earth.
   2. And the earth was *without form*, and *void*; darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [A common translation, especially using Greek terminology, was that this initial creation was a state of 'chaos'.]
   3. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. . .Etc.

> *And the end of our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And to know the place for the first time.*
> (T.S. Eliot)

Some scholars have asked "Have we Misunderstood Genesis 1:1?" Was this an absolute beginning of the universe (*ex nihilo*)? And in his comparative reflection on historical "creation myths," Roger Shattuck (*Forbidden Knowledge,* 50) noted that "Out of thousands of creation myths imagined by peoples everywhere, this [Biblical] "just so" story produced long ago by an obscure Semitic people has won out over all others in the three principal monotheistic religions on Earth: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We come back to it again and again, less because it is ours than *because it affords endlessly renewed meanings. .* Despite its familiarity, the creation story from Genesis is as invisible to many of us as air, or as our own personality. It surrounds us too closely. We cannot stand back in order to see it better.*"* (Italics added.)

Chaos and Creation:

'*Chaos', the subject of the first three propositions in Genesis, is the critical issue in this paper.* The term 'Chaos' (from the Greek χάος—a formless primordial space) seems an appropriate rendering of the phrase: the earth was "without form, and void." It needs to be stressed here that this terminology is not meant to be merely metaphorical; rather, it should be read as genuinely "catachetical" (κατήχέω—the Greek word for "instruction" and the Catholic word for "catechism"). In Janet Martin Soskice's formulation, in her *Metaphor and Religious Language* (90, 96) "the question is not simply whether we have a metaphor here or not, but what, if anything, the metaphor refers to or signifies." As Soskice further notes: "the skeptic's problem is not a problem with metaphor as such when employed in religious language, *but with the possibility of language about God at all.* His difficulty is not with the way in which religious metaphors are significant or intelligible, but with the problem of how, even granted the existence of a transcendent God, we can possibly claim to talk about him in finite language" (italics added). But is there any other language than the one in Genesis that will suffice? Furthermore, as Roger McCabe will point out (below), the human need to understand might then result in "framework views" that are literary deviations from the Genesis text.

   There is no skepticism in the present paper; it is simply a hypothetical attempt precisely to "stand back in order to see it [Genesis] better," that is, to elaborate on the events that already exist in Biblical Genesis in order to mitigate the charge that these Genesis propositions are paradoxical.

Thus, notwithstanding the claim that the statements in Genesis are more than metaphorical, that they are catachetical propositions concerning God's creation, then these famous Biblical propositions 1—2:3, noted above, have got to be cleansed of the charge of paradoxicalness.

 1.An "earth…without form" raises the question of the initial nature of the chaotic substratum to which God gives 'form'. Why can't this powerful God create a universe without going through a chaotic stage—a 'Paradise' without potential (chaotic) instabilities?

2. In Greek philosophy, 'form' is ideal or ideational and therefore existentially transcends creation. In the Gospel of John, the creation mystery is compounded: Ἐν ἀρχῃ ἦν ὁ λόγος. . . .καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

   ["In the beginning was the Word. . . .and God was the Word."]

In Genesis, God 'speaks' creation—"and God said let there be light…" If God's 'speech' creates forms out of chaos, then was John's notion that "God was the Word" on a new metaphysical track? In the 18th century A.D. this question is pursued in the work of Immanuel Kant; here the *formalization* of reality becomes a constitutive (*a priori*) contribution buried in the metaphysics of human experience. As the concept of *form[ing]* in modernity becomes an embedded human capacity, does the 'determinate' God of Genesis become more and more 'indeterminate'? In the 19th Century, as 'form' becomes more and more definitive of human art and technology, the stage is set for Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead."Also, with the demythologization of Sisyphus' plight, the endless effort at '*laborious forming'* is replaced by the concept of '*form as work'*—that is, *modernism* can be defined as the celebration of the *formal production of a work* (of Art or of Technological Science). And in the 20th century, "absolute art" attempts to bypass the God-related representational creations. Ironically, in the 17th century, Galileo's principle of "*libertas philosophandi"* was condemned for its heretical tendency to "lead to chaos"; but this was a procedural direction Galileo could not resist. His pathetic escape from a 'chaos induced' punishment inspired a diminution of scientific research in Italy for hundreds of years. The gradual separation of 'form' from 'idolatry' (as in Kant's *Critiques*) defined modernity and gave rise to a greater attention to Faith. While the 2nd Council of Nicaea [787 A. D.] struggled to resolve the problem of the relationship of 'form' to 'idolatry', the solution of *modernism* was to free 'form' from its religious connotations. In Clive Bell's 20th century concept of "significant form," and in Arnold Isenberg's promotion of the prominence of form in relation to content, the ontology of Genesis is transformed: God's work becomes, more and more, a human project (cf. John Dewey's pragmatic distinction between 'religion' and 'the religious' in his work, *A Common Faith*.) This drive toward modernism has led to what Robert McCabe (212) calls the newly composed "framework view," a view that asserts *that the creation "week" of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is a literary framework intended to present God's creative activity in a topical, non-sequential manner, rather than a literal, sequential one.*" The "framework view" is a modern attempt to reduce Genesis to a "poetic figure." The present paper accepts McCabe's view, based on his detailed analysis of this questionable "framework view," that the "literal, sequential" view of Genesis seems to be meaningful. It seems ironic, however, that while McCabe sticks to a strictly literal reading of Genesis, he fails to mention *chaos.*

   3. If modern man is essentially a creator of 'forms', then why is God's creation of forms embedded in paradox? In a sense, human creations also contain an element of paradoxicalness: humans create forms that require re-creative efforts. But why does an invincible God 'form' a world that is productive of instabilities—instabilities that require God's constant reappearance in the temporal dimension. *Does 'chaos' emerge as the critical (ironically developmentally productive)*

factor in the process of God's constant need to re-stabilize creation? Jack Miles, in his *A Biography of God,* emphasizes the paradoxical nature of these propositions of Genesis:

> True the Lord God of Israel is the creator and ruler of time, and yet
> the Psalms delight in repeating that he lives forever. . .And yet
> *contradictory as this must seem*, he also enters time and is changed by
> experience. Were it not so, he could not be surprised; and he is
> endlessly and often most unpleasantly surprised. *God is constant; he
> is not immutable.* (Miles, 12, italics added.)

The suggestion in this paper is that God's "immutability" is not the issue; rather, that the instabilities that require his reappearance are due to the metaphysical **recurrence** of the element of **chaos**, a recurrence that required a continuous act of adjustment to God's formal creation. But this should not be confused with McCabe's more complicated complaint—that Genesis has been distorted by a "framework view."

   4. Does the undisclosed immeasurability of a recurrent chaos gradually evolve into the socio/political interest in toleration and democracy—especially in the 17th century work of Baruch Spinoza and John Locke. At the same time, it becomes the basis of John Milton's paradoxical proclamation that "The Fortunate Fall" of mankind, rooted in Genesis, is the basis of human progress. In 20th century science (cf. Paul Davies, Ian Percival, *et al*.) chaos becomes an essential concept in science. By the 20th century A.D. the resistance to chaos manifests itself in two social directions: control through tyrannical government vs. the American radical subjectivization of belief (cf. Kurt Andersen's *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire*). American Pragmatism was an early attempt to reign in this social chaos through a new Politics, but to no avail. The recent, commonplace complaint is that the American political system has become clearly chaotic! The present need would be the re-creation of systemic order.

   5. In essence, but hypothetically, *chaos* is the underlying characteristic of the concept of "*differentness*," and, as such, opens the door to Jesus' fate and his controversial solution in an "epistemology of love"—a grand attempt to bypass both tyranny and subjectivization. (cf. Fr. Bernard Lonergan's proposal that *love should be made "the basic mode of knowing"*).

   The recurrence of the chaos/creation relationship is the theme of this paper. Without it, the Bible could not have been written, and to come back to Roger Shattuck's assertion: *Genesis "affords endlessly renewed meanings."* The paper you are reading attempts to resolve a commonplace reservation, one strongly reiterated in Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World:* "Again, no real attempt was made to resolve the inevitable paradox of an immutable God whose purposes nevertheless changed in response to historical developments."

The Paradox in Genesis:

  In his article on Genesis, Steven W. Boyd (2008) asks why a "literal historical account" of Genesis 1:--2:3 has become "the center of a maelstrom of controversy." Boyd argues that these propositions in Genesis "should be read as other Hebrew narratives are intended to be read—as a concise report of actual events in time-space history, which also conveys an unmistakable theological message" (Boyd, 191). The God of Biblical Genesis lives in "a single, eternal moment. . .And yet contradictory as this must seem, he also enters time and is changed by experience. Were it not so, he could not be surprised; and he is endlessly and most often unpleasantly surprised. God is constant; he is not immutable" (Boyd 12).

The hypothesis that governs the present paper is that the ostensive paradox in Genesis ultimately relates to the connection between the nature of both creation and chaos: Is the chaos of Genesis (apparently a creation of God) merely *transient*, or is it the *material transmuted into the creation* that becomes *formed* into the birth of a world? If Chaos becomes an element in that world, one that can reassert itself in creative evolution, then is the aforementioned paradox mitigated? These are the implied ontotheological questions:

--Why did the process of Creation require a step into Chaos? Why did God's power not allow Him to simply create "the heaven and earth" in a formed and differentiated condition? Why Chaos? Is chaos a necessary ingredient of 'differentiation'?

--Did God's move through a *chaotic* stage have a (intended or unintended?) lasting impact on the created world, one that resulted in the *multiple instabilities* that have beleaguered mankind (and God's need for renewed covenants) since Creation? Was it paradoxical, or not, that these instabilities made God's temporal reappearances inevitable for the salvation of Creation?

--Did Jesus' "epistemology of love" appear in this chaotic world in order to relieve God of these seeming paradoxical intrusions? Furthermore, did the chaotic factor in man's disobedience in Genesis ultimately lead to John Milton's proclamation (*Paradise Lost*) that this "Fortunate Fall" led to the incarnation of Christ, to redemption, and mankind's exalted progress?

The *Recurrence* of Chaos in Creation as a Developmental Process

If the chaos/creation connection becomes a *recurrent process* rather than a one-time occurrence "at a finite moment in the past," then this cosmogonic 'recurrence' could serve to demythologize, among other notions, Jesus' promise of a recurrent presence in our lives. In the history of human development, as an example, the creation of Art and Music out of chaotic materials has always had supreme religious significance. Moreover, the need for hundreds of laws in the Old Testament, a need that Jesus questioned, was possibly due to the "resurgence of chaos" in the social domain. Jesus sensed that this tendency to procreate restrictions needed what Geza Vermes called "a new reformation" and what Paul Tillich formulated as the loss of "religious depth." In his *A History of Christian Thought* (xli) Tillich argues that the tendency to transform one's "ultimate concern" into the dishonesty of doubtless (dualistic) dogmas, is a dishonesty that has haunted Christian thought. For example, the philosophic insistence that a Christian must be either an "essentialist" or an "existentialist" becomes a metaphysical arrogance—"*For the world is still open to the future, and we are not on the throne of God…*" (541, italics added).

Jesus' response to dogmatic dualisms involved an attempt to open human life to infinite progressions. As if Jesus sensed the significance of modern "fractal mathematics", we might call his response "the Jesus set": *there are but two great commandments—first, there is the love of God, and second the love of one's neighbor* (cf. Matthew 22:35-40, and Mark 12:28-31). These are the principles of continued creation in an unstable world; they do not insist on dogmatism and do not reject reflective doubt. The "Jesus Set" allows for both the disappearance of God and his (its) return, and it is therefore hospitable to the re-appearance of chaos. *The "Jesus Set" was not modeled on Sisyphus' **labor** of love; rather it was **a love for work**.* As Gregory Erickson notes (3), "I suggest that God did not disappear, but he can be found inscribed and disguised within the difficulty and contradictory nature of many modernist works' structures and ideologies." And then Erickson (7) quotes Jacques Derrida: "there have been not only some events attesting to the fact that people believe in God, but *everything in humanity* is organized according to this belief."

The "Jesus Set", one can argue, is precisely what turned the great mathematician, Georg Cantor, to the wedding of the mathematics of infinity and theology: Cantor resisted the (Aristotelian) medieval dogma

"infinitum actur non datur." Aristotle's (as well as the medieval scholastics) "assumption that there were only finite numbers, which led to the conclusion that only enumerations of finite sets were possible, precluded any consideration of infinite numbers from the start." (Dauben, 122) Hence, in 1896, Cantor said, "From me, Christian Philosophy will be offered for the first time the true theory of the infinite." (Ibid. 147.) It was this view of the "actual infinite" that "most philosophers, theologians and mathematicians had traditionally opposed." (Ibid. 120) If both theologians and mathematicians opposed this view, then their comfort with dogma literally amounted to a discomfort with the "Jesus Set."

'C*haotic recurrence,'* an important ontotheological concept, has most recently been re-formulated by the Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade in his extensive study of creationism. In his *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954, 2005), Eliade gives serious consideration to the "*regeneration of time.*" Eliade's formulation of the "regeneration of time" turns the cosmogony of Genesis into a portrait of continuous creation—that is, into a general theory of evolutionary development. In this study of ontotheology, Eliade discovers that '*recurrent chaos'* is part of the essence of religion: he argues that the cosmogony of chaos/creation ultimately makes 'repetition of creation' a developmental/cosmological necessity. Here, chaos and energy become intertwined in the continuous process of creation. *Chaos provides the material that requires the differentiation that creation provides, but a differentiation that simplifies and is therefore always subject to further chaotic, developmental change.*

Eliade writes:
> Any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn; *to recover vigor, it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant;* **it must return to "chaos"** (on the cosmic *plane),* to "orgy" (on the social plane), to "darkness (for seed), to "water" (baptism on the human plane, Atlantis (on the plane of history), and so on. (Eliade, p. 88, italics added.)

This ontology of chaotically induced "differentness" is embedded in Jesus' concept of love. With Lonergan in mind, Bishop N.T. Wright notes:
> What is love all about? When I love, I affirm the *differentness* of the beloved; not to do so is of course not love at all but lust. We need to articulate, for the postmodern world what we might call an epistemology [not of *knowledge* but] of love. (*The Challenge of Jesus*, italics added).

Once again, the aforementioned paradox of Genesis is mitigated: If chaos is ontologically a recurrent part of our lives, then God, the creator, could not escape from His existential involvement with that creation. God's presence was to make sure that humans would transform chaos into productive creations. This protective custody is built into the very nature of humankind—it makes the bridgework provided by the twofold 'Jesus set' inevitably important. Jesus did not attempt to eliminate chaos by eliminating 'differentness'—an elimination that has been the curse of modern fascistic politics; that is, a fear of 'disorder' and 'change'. For Jesus, the chaos/creation process was exactly what made 'love' both necessary and possible. Recent social history has taught us that when chaos is not transformed into a creative process, it becomes the root of social destruction. And not withstanding atheistic skepticism, the paradox of God's involvement with creationist instability can be resolved—but neither through ironic theistic tyranny, nor through the 'fantasyland' of American subjectivized politics; it requires an "epistemology of charitable love." Canon Brian Mountford has moved us in this direction in his study of *Christian Atheists*. Gregory

Erickson agrees: "So, although often atheist in ideology, modernism is still part of a Christian epistemology; it belongs to the same ontotheology it fights against."(Erickson, 8) Also, the "Principle of Charity" in the writing of the 20th century American philosopher, Donald Davidson, is a vital illustration of this concept. The fear of Chaos in the modern world is the product of one of the most damaging myths ever created—a myth that has been used to destroy the virtue of the recurrent chaos/creation evolutions—namely, the "myth of simplicity."

The Prominence of the concept of Chaos in the Modern World:

Ian Percival, writing in Nina Hall's (ed. 1994) *Exploring Chaos,* attempts to explode the 'myth of simplicity': "Chaos: a science for the real world," has avoided the scientific quest "for the simplest view of the world around us. Now, mathematics and computer power have produced a theory that helps researchers to understand the complexities of nature. The theory of chaos touches all disciplines" (Hall, 11). Consistent with this paper's interpretation of Biblical Genesis, it is logical that Percival would define chaos as a "persistent instability," and that he would make this instability an essential component of contemporary science-based cosmology. This would seem to make the instabilities in God's created world a product of a *recurrent chaos.*

In this same volume of essays, Paul Davies argues that the "instability" of the world means that "the Universe is not irredeemably fixed" (Hall, 221). With a colossal irony in mind, Davies notes that 'instability' is not evil; that, on the contrary, evil is the attempt to create a fully static and immobile universe—one governed by tyrannical law. Tyranny is a violation of Bernard Lonergan's recommendation that love should be made "*the basic mode of knowing."* (Lonergan's concept of knowledge is discussed in Bishop N. T. Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus*.)

In his brief book, *Chaos: A Very Short introduction*, Leonard Smith makes at least two observations that support the thesis of this paper: First, referring to the work of Charles Darwin, Smith notes that "Evolution and chaos have more in common than one might think." He also notes that "some ecosystems evolve as if they were chaotic systems, as it may well be the case that small differences in the environment have immense impacts" (Hall, 5). Second, that chaos in modern science has shifted the dominant interest from "linear systems" [for example, the Euclidean system] to "nonlinear models. . . models for the weather, the economy, epidemics, the brain. . .even the earth's climate system, etc. All difficult decisions are made under uncertainty; understanding chaos has helped us to provide better decision support" (Hall, 159).

Conclusion:
In essence, the disintegration of Jesus' gospel—Tillich's loss of "religious depth"—into conflicted Religious tyrannies and Christian Atheists, needs a "new reformation." The modest proposal suggested here is a rebooting of the *chaos/creation* elements in Genesis into an advanced evolutionary/developmental concept. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* ushered in a new reformation— a reformation lost in history.

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