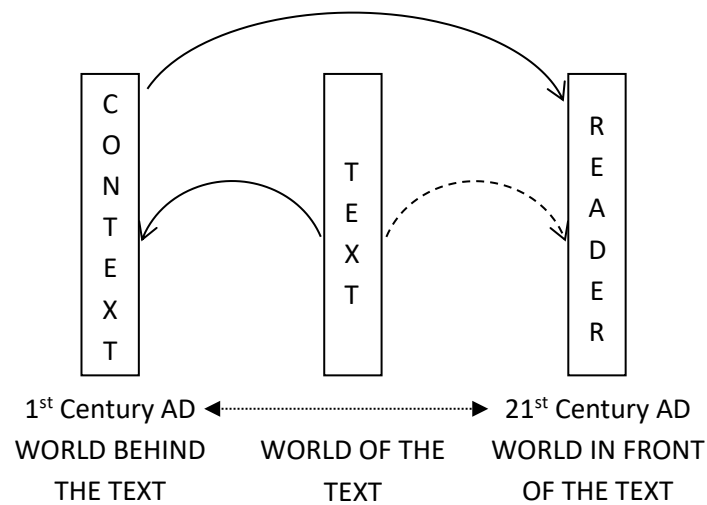


THE “THREE WORLDS APPROACH” TO READING SCRIPTURE

In *All Things New: Joining God’s Story of Re-Creation* (2020), Pete Hughes refers to Terence Fretheim’s “Three Worlds Approach” to reading Scripture:

[Freitheim] argues that when we read Scripture, three worlds are colliding: the world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. The task of interpretation is to read the text, and before applying it to our culture (the world in front of the text), we need to delve into the world behind the text to better understand the context the writer was speaking into. Once we have a better grasp of that world, we are more likely to answer the question of what the author was trying to say to his intended audience. We will then be equipped to do the work of translation in figuring out what the author might want to say to us, his unintended audience (p. 38).



In other words, the thoughtful interpreter will go through the process represented by the bold arrows, resisting the temptation to jump to quick conclusions about how the text applies to the modern world represented by the dotted arrow. This is where John Walton is coming from in urging us to “read Genesis through ancient eyes”.

In the above quote, Pete Hughes’s focus is on the importance of attending to the world behind the text as this is the one that’s frequently neglected. But we must consider all three worlds, as each of them will have a bearing on how we understand the meaning of the text. The following is adapted from a paper written by my friend Stu Alred, who draws on the work of Randolph Tate:

World to study	Behind the text	In the text	In front of the text
Features to consider	Historical context Linguistic patterns of the day Ideological assumptions of the day	Genre of literature Language used Structure of the argument	Different levels of skill in interpreters Personal experience Cultural context
Requirements of students	Getting at the original author’s intended meaning	Close reading of the text	Humility and dialogue with others

