Theology is on the defensive within modern Western universities. Religion and its practice of religious narration are no longer intellectually respectable since the rise of a methodological change in the 17th century. In that period, the ideal of one unified system of all knowledge emerged: this system is grounded on one epistemic method—deduction and perception. This shift since then radically influenced the appreciation of the status of biblical stories to this very day. Recently, however, it emerged that narration is needed in contexts quite different from narrative theology as well. Furthermore, even in theology, hidden metaphysical presuppositions completely determine the meaning of narratives.

1. The Cartesian Depreciation of Narrative

Within the perspective of the Physics, René Descartes regards it ridiculous to presuppose that God has created all things merely for our benefit because we, being reasonable, “cannot doubt that an infinitude of things ... have never been of use to anyone”. By way of precaution, Descartes subscribes to the doctrine of creation of a complete world in the beginning, but for the natural sciences he simultaneously recommends a somewhat evolutionary approach to cosmology. The creation narratives of Genesis, according to him, are perhaps metaphorical and need to be left to theological conversation, and so he tried to avoid a conflict with contemporary religious authorities (Cottingham 1986: 98–99). We can argue that Descartes approaches religious and scientific issues in a slightly dualistic way. In this way he does maintain the religious meaning of biblical creation stories, but he considers them unimportant with respect to the cosmological status of the planet earth. Meanwhile, he intends to avoid arguing over the compatibility of the religious stories with the universal principles of argumentation. However, according to his general conviction there are two ways of speaking of God:

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1 René Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, III 3.
the first one is accommodated to the human mind in religious metaphors and the other one is the more philosophical way to express “the bare truth” without evocative language. In Scripture, the first mode is used: anthropomorphic language in order that common people may understand “some truth”, whereas in science and philosophy we use formally clear language to get rid of anthropomorphisms in order to describe actual events exactly as they happened.

Descartes’ basic idea seems to be that the philosophical outlook searches for the truth behind the story for a more general (perhaps religious) use. This tendency to look for a broader context of application outside the narratives became characteristic for the Enlightenment treatment of religious language and was continued by its 18th and 19th century successor as the historical-critical analysis of biblical texts. This analysis wants to reconstruct the historical events which those texts are thought to refer to and also the most likely historical course. The procedure of this historical reconstruction looks at biblical texts from an externalist perspective and attempts to fit them into another world, i.e. the contemporary world of the historian herself. This is a universe behind the stories, a world rationally reconstructed by an account of factual information, i.e. of stories empirically verifiable of their own. The religious story may represent an unsophisticated understanding of God’s agency in the world, but it is to be distinguished from the well-considered ideas of reason about the world. Now it is the conceptuality of that rational system which tries to interpret the biblical stories in modern secular terminology, thereby assuming that their “meaning is detachable from the specific story” as if its meaning is not dependent on both its literary form and on how it is used in the particular context (Frei 1974: 6). By consequence, the narrative character of biblical stories became subsidiary matter to a rational world view. The historical-critical approach of the time used to look for possible interpretations by which those biblical texts might fit into its own contemporary modern world view and tell us what actually happened in the past according to the standards of modernity. This approach of biblical texts looks more like an interest in reconstruction of their propositional and moral content and the historical context from which they arose. Thus, from a perspective of rational or natural philosophy, there is no special focus on the textual characteristics and the form of the writings or the dynamics of the interplay between text and stories and their readership or audience.

2 Descartes, “Objections against the Meditations and Replies,” second reply.