



Book Review of *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, John H. Walton, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009, 191 pp.

For decades agnosticism about the early chapters of Genesis felt comfortable. This despite two close family members who have been adamant “Creation Science” rationalists.

Out of the blue came this book urged on me by friends. In response I echo a reviewer on the back page: “[The author] has blown away all the futile attempts to elicit modern science from the first chapters of the Bible.” (Davis A. Young, Calvin College)

John Walton is professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and has authored many books on the Ancient Near Eastern background of the Old Testament, and a commentary on *Genesis*. He explains in the “Prologue” that he has proposed a reading of Genesis that is “faithful to the context of the original audience and author, and one that preserves and enhances the theological vitality of the text (p. 5).” In doing so, he “argues convincingly that Genesis was intended to describe the creation of the functions of the cosmos, not its material nature. In the process, he elevates Scripture to a new level of respectful understanding, and eliminates any conflict between scientific and scriptural descriptions of origins.” (Francis S. Collins on back cover)

Agreed!

“The case is laid out in eighteen propositions, each presented succinctly and plainly so that those not trained in the technical fields involved can understand and use the information presented here (p. 6).”, Walton explains. Further, in the Introduction, we read: “Mythology by its very nature seeks to explain how the world works and how it came to work that way, and therefore includes a culture’s ‘theory of origins.’ (p. 12)” As for the Ancient Near East, so for today, such mythology expresses theories of origins and how the world works. The author explains that “By this definition, our modern mythology is represented by science – our own theories of origins and operations (p. 13).” Over against other Ancient Near Eastern, and modern science (that “makes no room for deity (though neither does it disprove deity¹) (p. 13)...”) views, “Genesis 1 serves the similar function of offering an explanation of origins and how the world operated, not only for Israel, but for people today who put their faith in the Bible (p. 13).”, claims Walton. In this way early Genesis is a mythology.

¹ Of interest in this respect: noted former atheist (now deceased) Antony Flew published a book in 2007 about his previous atheistic position that “changed by force of argument about the significance of scientific discoveries (Ian H. Hutchinson, back cover).” Hutchinson adds: “This engaging personal retrospective on Flew’s philosophical pilgrimage illustrates that it is dangerous for an atheist to think too hard about his religious commitment – he might become unconvinced (back cover).” The book’s title is: *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007). On the jacket cover, “NO” is scratched out and replaced by “A” after “THERE IS”.

Proposition 1 is that “Genesis 1 is Ancient Cosmology (p. 14)”: not at all similar to the way moderns think about cosmology. To attempt “concordism”² between ancient and modern cosmologies, “we are making the text say something that it never said (p. 15).” We thereby actually change the text’s “literal” meaning³. Further, concordism seeks concord with current scientific thinking. Science by definition is a moving target. Therefore concordism rivets the text to a *passé* science or to a current consensus that without doubt will become *passé*! Not to acknowledge culturally relative aspects of biblical interpretation is spiting not minding the text. Further, in Ancient Near Eastern cosmology, there was no distinction between a “natural” and a “supernatural” world.

Bluntly, Walton asserts, “The Bible’s message must not be subject to cultural imperialism (p. 19).” This is an endlessly pertinent challenge in reading the Bible, no less with reference to Genesis 1.

Proposition 2 asserts: “Ancient Cosmology Is Function Oriented (p. 21).” Close reasoning through analogy follows for a few pages, eventuating in: “I propose that people in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system* (p. 24).” – not in scientific, rather in human societal and cultural terms. Something “existed” in the worldview of Genesis when it *functioned; a material object* did not connote “existence” in the Ancient Near East – so unlike our worldview. “In the ancient world, what was most crucial and significant to their understanding of existence was the way that the parts of the cosmos functioned, not their material status (p. 26).” Get our head around this, and essentially the debate between modern science and Genesis 1 melts away.

Several instances from Ancient Near Eastern literature are adduced. All point to that conclusion: “to create something (cause it to exist) in the ancient world means to give it a function, not material properties (p. 33).” Wow! Something liberating is already emerging!

The third proposition is: “‘Create’ (Hebrew *bārā*) Concerns Functions” (p. 36). Drawing on all biblical “usage” instances conveniently supplied in Table 1, pp. 40 and 41, Walton indicates that “the absence of reference to materials, rather than suggesting material creation out of nothing [*ex nihilo*], is better explained as indication that *bārā*’ is not a material activity but a functional one (p. 42).” Walton’s telling additional comment is: “This is not a view that has been rejected by other scholars; it is simply one they never considered because their material ontology [creation *ex nihilo*] was a blind presupposition for which no alternative was ever considered⁴ (p. 42).”

The above interpretive move by Walton is telling and a warning in wider application: what questions are asked or are not of the text (due to presuppositions) may indeed dramatically

² “Concordism” is further discussed in Proposition 11, pp. 101ff. It is of course vigorously upheld by detractors of this book.

³ Walton states in the book’s “FAQs” section: “I believe that the reading that I have offered is the most literal reading possible at this point (p. 169).”

⁴ In the “FAQs” section, Walton asks rhetorically: “If this is the ‘right’ reading, why didn’t we know about it until now (p. 170)?” Walton explains that Ancient Near Eastern “ways of thinking that were prominent in the ancient world” but relatively unknown until recently, have had new windows opened “to an understanding of an ancient worldview that was the backdrop of the biblical world (both quotes on p. 170).” He points us to his own publication: *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

influence “*rightly dividing the word of truth* (II Timothy 2:15, KJV).” In this discussion, Walton adds the *caveat* that he affirms the material creation of all things by God, and without doubt *ex nihilo*. But in relation to Genesis 1, Walton observes that most interpreters of this passage have thought *only* in terms of material origins of creation, when in fact “origins” could be discussed at other levels. Not to have done so is simply a fallacious hermeneutical move, one to which to some extent every biblical (or other literary text) interpreter is *ipso facto* prone. This should at minimum evoke a certain humility in the receptor *vis à vis* all texts/communication.

Walton gives an expanded *interpretive* translation (or paraphrase) of Genesis 1:1: “*In the initial period, God created by assigning functions throughout the heavens and the earth, and this is how he did it.*”

Proposition 4 is: “The Beginning State in Genesis 1 Is Nonfunctional” (p. 46). That is, there is *material* in the “beginning” that needs assignment of *function in an ordered system*. So “creation” refers not to *material* (that is already *there*) but to *function*. And this *function* invariably focusses on people. Thus, “In Genesis people are not put in place until day six, but functionality is established with their needs and situation in mind (p. 50).” “*It was good*” in its repetition takes on the meaning of “‘functioning properly’ (p. 50).” Walton asks, What would not be “*good*?”, to which the text responds, “*It is not good for the man to be alone* (Genesis 2:18; p. 50).” There follows this: “The human condition is not functionally complete without the woman. Thus throughout Genesis 1 the refrain ‘it was good’ expressed the functional readiness of the cosmos for human beings (p. 50).”

In passing, Walton adds profoundly, “So there is reason or motivation for studying the detailed nature of creation, which we now call science, even if the ancient Hebrews didn’t take up this particular study (p. 50).”

Again from the author: “All of this indicates that cosmic creation in the ancient world was not viewed primarily as a process by which matter was brought into being, but as a process by which functions, roles, order, jurisdiction, organization and stability were established (p. 52).”

Proposition 5: “Days One to Three in Genesis 1 Establish Functions” (p. 53). Time is the first so established⁵ on Day One. Weather is next established on Day Two. Food production emerges on Day Three. So the comment: “These three great functions – time, weather and food – are the foundations of life. If we desire to see the greatest work of the Creator, it is not to be found in the materials that he brought together – it is that he brought them together in such a way that they work... We should never lose the wonder of this. Functions are far more important than materials (p. 58).”

Walton touches on the Genesis flood that sees the material world return to a primordial state of chaos. “What follows is a re-creation text as the land emerges again from the waters and the blessing is reiterated (p. 59. He cites his own writing, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 344 – 45.)” After quoting Genesis 8:22 about the Creator’s post-flood promise concerning enduring faithfulness to the (re)Creation, Walton states:

⁵ For a fascinating study of time, see *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, 3rd edition. Oscar Cullman. Translated from German by Floyd V. Filson. SCM Press Ltd., 1962.

“Here we find the three major functions in reverse order: food, weather and time, never to cease. The author is well aware that these are the main categories in the operation of this world that God has organized (p. 59).”

As a good teacher, Walton underscores in this context: “We should not worry about the question of ‘truth’ with regard to the Bible’s use of Old World science. As we mentioned before, some scientific framework needs to be adopted, and all scientific frameworks are dynamic and subject to change. Adoption of the framework of the target audience is most logical (p. 60).”⁶

Proposition 6 asserts: “Days Four to Six in Genesis 1 Install Functionaries” (p. 62). As to creation of humankind, Walton writes: “All of the rest of creation functions in relationship to humankind, and humankind serves the rest of creation as God’s vice-regent. Among the many things that the image of God may signify and imply, one of them, and probably the main one, is that people are delegated a godlike role (function) in the world where he places them⁷ (p. 67).”

⁶ Terry Eagleton in *Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009) observes: “Most Christians do not in fact hold that their faith contradicts science – though it would be plausible to claim that in some sense science contradicts itself all the time, and that this is known as scientific progress. [Atheist Christopher] Hitchens fails to distinguish between reasonable beliefs and unreasonable ones. His belief that one should distrust anything that outrages reason is one example of a reasonable belief, while his belief that all belief is blind is an example of an unreasonable one [and of course self-contradictory!] (p. 125, emphasis added).”

⁷ Father Thomas Hopko *theologically* argues a different “image of God” emphasis:

The Orthodox approach is that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and that God is a Trinity of persons in absolute identity of being and of life in perfect communion. Therefore, communion is the given. Anything that breaks that communion destroys the very roots of our existence. That’s why forgiveness is essential if there is going to be human life in the image of God. We are all sinners, living with other sinners, and so “seventy—times—seven” times a day we must reestablish the communion—and *want* to do so. The desire is the main thing, and the feeling that it is of value...

The obsession with relationship—the individual in search of relationships—in the modern world shows that there is an ontological crack in our being. There is no such thing as an individual—he was created, probably, in a Western European university. We don’t recognize our essential communion. I don’t look at you and say, “You are my life.”

Contemporary interpretations of the commandment in the Torah reflect this individualistic attitude. The first commandment is that you love God with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and the second is that you love your neighbor as yourself. The only way you can prove you love God is by loving your neighbor, and the only way you can love your neighbor in *this* world is by endless forgiveness. So, “love your neighbor as yourself.” However, in certain modern editions of the Bible, I have seen this translated as, “you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” But that’s not what it says...

[Hopko then cites a rabbi]: “That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from *Leviticus*,” he said, “and it cannot possibly be translated ‘love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ What it says is ‘you shall love your neighbor as *being* your own self.’ ” Your neighbor *is* your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After I heard this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that’s what they all say. They say, “Your brother is your life.” I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God’s own self is another—his Son, to use Christian evangelical terms. The same thing happens on the human level; so the minute I don’t feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I’ll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerges only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That’s how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God’s image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical suicide (*Parabola: The Magazine of*

Walton observes that against other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, creation is for the benefit of humanity, not humanity for the benefit of the deity (not unlike Jesus' "*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath...* (Mark 2:27)")

Proposition 7: "Divine Rest Is in a Temple" (p. 71). Walton indicates that Day 7 is crucial in a functional reading: "In a material account day seven would have little role, but in a functional account, as we will see, it is the true climax without which nothing else would make any sense or have any meaning (p. 71)." Why? In the ancient world "Deity rests in a temple, and only in a temple (p. 71)." And "After creation, God takes up his rest and rules from his residence (p. 73)." Further, "When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role (p. 74)." Finally, "In the view being presented here, on the eighth day, and on every day since then, he is in the control room from where he runs the cosmos that he set up. This is the ongoing work of creation⁸ (p. 76)."

Proposition 8: "The Cosmos Is a Temple" (p. 77). Walton draws on several Ancient Near Eastern sources to show similar understandings. With reference to Isaiah 66:1 – 2, he writes: "Here we can see the elements of a cosmos-sized temple, a connection between temple and rest, and a connection between creation and temple. This in itself is sufficient to see that the cosmos can be viewed as a temple. That is precisely what we are proposing as the premise of Genesis 1: that it should be understood as an account of functional origins of the cosmos as a temple (pp. 82 & 83)." Further "It is describing the creation of the cosmic temple with all of its functions and with God dwelling in its midst... The most central truth to the creation account is that the world is a place for God's presence (pp. 83 & 84)."

Proposition 9: "The Seven Days of Genesis 1 Relate to the Cosmic Temple Inauguration" (p. 86). Walton explains: "In short, by naming the functions and installing the functionaries, and finally by deity entering his resting place, the temple comes into existence – it is created in the inauguration ceremony (p. 88)."

In Proposition 10, "The Seven Days of Genesis 1 Do Not Concern Material Origins" (p. 92), Walton urges that Genesis contributes *nothing* to the discussion about the age of the earth (or one could add of the cosmos). "The point is *not* that the biblical text therefore supports an old earth,

Myth and Tradition, "Forgiveness", Volume XII, Number 3, August 1987, "Living In Communion: An Interview with Father Thomas Hopko", pp. 50 - 59.)

⁸ In the context of discussing the South African understanding of *ubuntu*, in light of the subsequent brokenness of the good *functioning* Creation, I have written elsewhere (unpublished):

Ubuntu, meaning we are people – *most fully human* – through other people, in more theological terms is the *anthropological* principle of the formal *theological* doctrine of the Trinity. Just as we are created in God's image above all as *people-in-relationship*, so God in this respect is *Trinity-in-relationship*. Just as sin above all means broken relationship towards God (*theological*), towards self (*psychological*), towards others (*sociological*), towards the Good Earth (*ecological*), and towards the created universe (*cosmological*), *ubuntu* in this respect points towards the profound healing ideal of the Gospel, namely *to restore broken relationship with others to (re)create peace, to (re)create unity*. The II Corinthians 5 passage that begins, "*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation...*" is Paul's articulation of *ubuntu* in Gospel-restored human relationships, and by extension in all other restored – (*re*)*created* – relationships. This is a second "re-creation" after the Noahic.

but simply that there is no biblical position on the age of the earth (p. 94).” In this context, Walton emphasizes and reiterates an earlier point: “*Viewing Genesis 1 as an account of functional origins of the cosmos as temple does not in any way suggest or imply that God was uninvolved in material origins – it only contends that Genesis 1 is not that story* (p. 95).” The author speculates on aspects of the “before” and “after” of the temple inauguration that I found less than helpful.

Proposition 11 states that “ ‘Functional Cosmic Temple’ Offers Face-Value Exegesis” (p. 101). The author makes a convincing case.

Proposition 12 asserts that “Other Theories of Genesis Either Go Too Far or Not Far Enough” (p. 107). The author concludes: “In this view, science cannot offer an unbiblical view of material origins because there is no biblical view of material origins aside from the very general idea that whatever happened, whenever it happened, and however it happened, God did it (p. 112).” (This is not unlike songster Ken Medema’s playful account of the Virgin Birth!)

Proposition 13 argues that “The Difference Between Origin Accounts in Science and Scripture Is Metaphysical in Nature” (p. 113). The author states at the beginning of this chapter that “We have now completed the presentation of the view that Genesis 1 presents an account of functional origins and will begin to integrate this view in to the broader issues of science and society... in relation to evolution and Intelligent Design, as well as consideration of some of the issues of policy in public education (p. 113).”

Walton clarifies that in relation to the creation “Neither ultimate cause nor purpose can be proven or falsified by empirical science (p. 115).” He concludes: “The principle factor that differentiates a biblical view of origins from a modern scientific view of origins is that the biblical view is characterized by a pervasive teleology: God is the one responsible for creation in every respect (p. 117).”

Proposition 14 claims that “God’s Roles as Creator and Sustainer Are Less Different Than We Have Thought” (p. 118). Walton: “Both initiating and sustaining are the acts of the Creator God. We recognize his role of Creator God by our observance of the Sabbath, in which we consciously take our hands off the controls of our lives and recognize that he is in charge (pp. 122 & 123).”

Proposition 15 contends that “Current Debate About Intelligent Design Ultimately Concerns Purpose” (p. 124). Intelligent Design is subject to neither verification nor falsification by current scientific standards, claims Walton. Therefore Walton is agnostic about how material creation happened, but not about its God-ordained *teleology*.

Proposition 16 claims that “Scientific Explanations of Origins Can be Viewed in Light of Purpose, and If So, Are Unobjectionable” (p. 131). But unanswered questions about evil and origins arise, Walton allows.

Proposition 17 believes that “Resulting Theology in This View of Genesis 1 is Stronger, Not Weaker” (p. 141). The author claims that “In the view that we have presented of Genesis 1, the

material is subordinate to the functional. The Bible considers it much more important to say that God has made everything *work* rather than being content to say that God made the physical stuff (p. 143).” That said, the very *sacredness* of creation calls forth ecological/cosmological stewardship of, and reconciliation with, creation, God’s temple filled by his glory and thus (by extension in my thinking), with *restorative justice/ubuntu* in response to all brokenness as in footnote 8.

Walton touches on several additional theological implications, all inspirational and suggestive to this reader.

Proposition 18 looks at public education: “Public Science Education Should Be Neutral Regarding Purpose” (p. 151). “In conclusion,” Walton argues, “when origins are discussed in the classroom, empirical science should be taught (p. 157).” Walton summarizes “three important criteria regarding what constitutes empirical science (p. 157).” There is also a helpful “SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS” on pp. 158ff.

In the final chapter, “Summary and Conclusions” (p. 161), Walton states: “The purpose of this book has been to introduce the reader to a careful consideration of the nature of Genesis 1... The position that I have proposed regarding Genesis 1 may be designated the *cosmic temple inauguration* view (p. 161).” He lists numerous helpful “advantages” to this reading, beginning on p. 163.

His concluding words are: “We are willing to bind reason if our faith calls for belief where reason fails. But we are also people who in faith seek learning. What we learn may cause us to reconsider interpretations of Scripture, but need never cause us to question the intrinsic authority or nature of Scripture (p. 167).”

There is an appendix labelled “FAQs” beginning on p. 168 that discusses at a basic level aspects of the author’s interpretive understandings in relation to creation.

For a longstanding agnostic about the origins debate, I found this reading of the text enormously enlightening. It settled why I have been content with being “agnostic”. It strengthened my love of the text and theology of creation in dynamic worshipful ways.