

## Book Review

*The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*

**John H. Walton**

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009) 190 pages

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John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, is a well-published, proven, conservative scholar of the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern context. His writings have been very helpful to me, and I consider him trustworthy in dealing with this important, controversial, and emotional topic of the origins debate involving Genesis and science. He presents eighteen propositions to lay out his understanding of the relationship of Genesis 1 to ancient cosmologies, as well as to modern scientific views. Following the conclusion, Walton provides succinct answers to frequently asked questions on this subject.

Walton's first proposition is the foundational understanding that Genesis is *ancient cosmology*. By this, he means that God led the author of Genesis to describe the origin of the universe in terms common to the culture at that time. Walton clarifies that he does not take a concordist approach, which assumes that the Genesis account can be "translated" into the terms of modern science. He asserts, rather, that "there is not a single instance in the Old Testament of God giving scientific information that transcended the understanding of the Israelite audience" (106). That claim is arguable, but I would say that, if God did give scientific truths that the people in Scripture could not understand, it was rare. Walton rightly calls the reader to enter the

cultural world of the text so that he or she begins to think in their terms and concepts. The reader should not put *his or her* definitions on *their* descriptions. In other words, one must define words such as "order," "good," "beauty," "spirit," and "create" through the writer's lens. Walton makes the important point that the biblical writers did not see a dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural world, as common in Western thinking.

The second proposition (which is the major concept presented in the book and one which proceeds from the first) is that ancient cosmology is *function-oriented*. The rest of the book elaborates on the implications of that proposition. Walton claims that the ancient cosmology was concerned with function and purpose—the "why" of existence—and did not focus on the "what" or the "how" of coming into being. In summary, he says that Genesis and science are dealing with different questions about origins; therefore they do not conflict. While I generally agree with Walton, I would not totally rule out any intersection of science with biblical teaching. I still think Genesis 1 includes some references to material origins and is not simply a reference to functionality.

The result of Walton's understanding is the elimination of the argument that a "literal" reading of the text is incompatible with the

theory of evolution and the belief in millions of years for the development of life on earth. If Genesis 1 is only about function, then it does not tell anything scientifically specific about the process or how long it took to arrive at the state of the current physical world. Walton argues that the author of Genesis did not intend for people to believe that the universe came into material existence in six 24-hour days. He believes the days of Genesis 1 took place *after* the material world had existed for a long time and refer to “the period of time devoted to the inauguration of the functions” of the creation (92). Walton makes a very important and astute clarification about the idea of reading “literally.” He asserts that the best reading and the most “literal” is the one that accurately represents the *intended meaning* of the inspired author. I agree with Walton on this and his efforts to arrive at that intended meaning through understanding the cultural and literary context of the Scripture writer. However, I have not reached a personal decision regarding his conclusion on the days of Genesis 1.

The other major issue is that Walton’s view allows for some form of evolution to be the process that God used to bring the world to its present state. I was glad to see that Walton brought up the same concerns and qualifications I have. Above all, according to Genesis, God has to be behind it all and involved in it all. Biblically, He neither micromanages the universe nor is He deistically uninvolved. The other main theological concern is that whatever theory one accepts it must not contradict God’s two teachings in Genesis 1-3 that all people are made in His image and are fallen from a relationship with God through sin, which involves God’s judgment. Personally, I do not see the compatibility of evolution with those two truths—even if God initiated the evolutionary process.

Walton presents an interesting interpretation that “Genesis 1 can now be seen as a creation account focusing on the cosmos as a temple” (84). He gives the ancient Near Eastern background for this and shows that temple imagery explains a lot of the Genesis text. I remain unconvinced about the detailed significance he sees; nevertheless, he convinced me that the temple imagery has some validity.

The final proposition gives Walton’s view on what is appropriate in the public science education debate. He calls for the public classroom to be neutral in regard to the expression of *purpose* in the origins theories. This means that neither Intelligent Design nor secular scientific theories should be allowed to teach in the public classroom any goal at work in the processes of nature. However, this also precludes teaching the absolute *denial* of any purpose or goal in the processes.

For people who consider the Bible to be their authority in matters of faith and conduct, I believe this book is one of the best presentations of the principles one must take into account when discussing this important and controversial subject. Walton provides a balanced approach while avoiding the extremes on either side of the issue. I wish everyone would remind themselves in these debates of this point by Walton: “we are presumptuous if we consider our interpretations of Scripture to have the same authority as Scripture itself” (168). *The Lost World of Genesis One* is a must read for anyone dealing with the issues of Genesis and science.