

John H. Walton, *THE LOST WORLD OF GENESIS ONE: ANCIENT COSMOLOGY AND THE ORIGINS DEBATE*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 192 pp., pbk \$16, ISBN 978-0830837045. Reviewed by C. John Collins, Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri (USA).

John Walton of Wheaton College, author of works aimed at helping Christians to read the Old Testament in the light of its Ancient Near Eastern context, has contributed this book to argue for a new interpretation of Genesis 1 (really 1:1-2:3), one that he thinks does justice to the concerns of the ancient Israelites.

We can state Walton's basic goal very simply: He wants to read Genesis 1 as the same sort of thing as other Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, because he thinks that was the way the ancient Israelites took it. He says, "I believe that if we are going to interpret the text according to its face value, we need to read it as the ancient author would have intended and as the ancient audience would have heard it" (page 103). If we put things this way, the goal is wholly laudable. But it is also platitudinous: few serious Bible students will dispute it. The challenge, of course, is to discern the intentions and literary conventions of the ancient authors and audiences.

Walton argues for what he calls "the cosmic temple inauguration view," that is, he wants us to read Genesis 1 as the account of God's work of inaugurating the cosmos as a temple for his habitation. He makes his case by making 18 propositions, one per chapter. These propositions break down into 14 that concern Genesis itself (with the consequent theological implications), and four dealing with "the origins debate" in modern American society (mostly the question of detectable design in biology).

Walton's argument depends on six principal theses:

- (1) Genesis 1 uses the terms of the cosmological "science" of its day. Nothing in Genesis 1 contradicts received views of, e.g., a solid sky (page 16).
- (2) There is no concept in the ancient world, and thus in Genesis 1, of a "natural" world, or of the natural-supernatural distinction that we are familiar with (pages 20-21 and throughout). "The Israelites, along with everyone else in the ancient world, believed instead that every event was the act of deity" (20). This thesis underlies Walton's view that science, which studies the material world, will generally be complementary to faith-oriented descriptions of the world.
- (3) For the ancients, including the Israelites, existence had more to do with what Walton calls "function" than with "material." The concern of Genesis 1 is therefore with functional origins, rather than with material origins.
- (4) Genesis 1:1 is a literary introduction to the entire account, rather than a description of an initial creation event (45).
- (5) The Hebrew word translated "create" (*bara'*) refers to assigning functions rather than to material creation.
- (6) God's rest on the seventh day (Gen 2:1-3) is the rest of a deity in a temple, and this shows that Genesis 1 tells the story of God's work of inaugurating the cosmos as his temple.

In this last thesis, Walton believes he has found a way to read Genesis as an account of an actual set of events that took place over six regular days, without getting concerned with the scientific questions of origins. After all, before the cosmic temple was inaugurated, the material things could well have been doing all manner of activities, which do not come into the events that Genesis 1 describes.

Walton is aware that there are competing interpretations for Genesis 1, and gives very brief discussions of why he does not follow them. For example, there is Young-Earth Creationism, which thinks of the Genesis days as the first six days of the universe, regular days in the fairly recent past, during which God created the cosmos. Walton rejects this approach, primarily because he thinks the exegesis is misguidedly concerned with material origins. Another example is Day-Age (or Old-Earth) Creationism, which correlates the Genesis days with long ages over which God has distributed his creative work. Again, Walton does not accept the concern with material origins; he also questions the high level of “concordism” that this view assumes between Genesis and modern science: “Is that what the author of Genesis is trying to say?” (page 110). Finally, he mentions the Framework Hypothesis, which he calls “a literary/theological approach to Genesis 1” (page 111). The central tenet of this reading is that “the six workdays are a literary device to display the creation week as a careful and artistic effort” (page 111). He dismisses this way of reading Genesis 1 because he takes it to imply that Genesis 1 is nothing more than “theological affirmations expressed in a literary way” (112), which he finds inadequate. However, he invites adherents of this reading to enrich their reading with his functional perspective, although it is not clear how he thinks that will work. Some framework proponents will be surprised that Walton thinks their reading is *only* theological affirmations, apparently without historical referent.

It is to Walton’s credit that he does not confine himself to expounding his way of reading Genesis 1; after all, it would not be such a “hot topic” if other issues did not hang on the reading. These issues include theological points regarding the close connection of God’s ongoing creative role in the world, and the “culture war” matter of whether our scientific discussions of biology have anything to do with purpose (or its absence). Walton’s Proposition 17 contains a number of theological points that he thinks his view strengthens: these include God’s pervasive involvement in everything, and the importance of the Sabbath for people today. These points are worth making, but I see no grounds for implying that other readings of Genesis 1 weaken these in any way.

In discussing the place of purpose (or “design”) in science, Walton is speaking primarily about the teaching of evolution and intelligent design in American public schools. His overall position is that this education should be neutral with respect to purpose, since he thinks that one cannot legitimately conclude from scientific observations whether an object or event has been designed with a purpose. He says, “Those who accept the Bible by faith accept also by faith a teleological view of origins” (152). “Empirical science is not designed to *define* or *detect* purpose, though it may theoretically be able to deduce rationally that purpose is logically the best explanation” (page 116). This makes faith-based affirmations complementary to scientific ones. It also leaves one wondering what Walton thinks is the connection between one’s faith and one’s interaction with the world

— a controversial topic, to be sure, but it would be nice if Walton had told us (briefly!) that he was aware of why this is controversial, where exactly he stands on the questions, and why.

Walton clarifies that he has not written as an advocate of evolution (page 165), though it seems a fair inference that he is willing to accept it as a description of the means God used to bring about the diversity of life on earth. (He exempts mankind from this process; see below.) Neither is he a critic of intelligent design as such, since he tries to do justice to the pronouncements of the Discovery Institute (the chief think-tank for intelligent design theorists). In my judgment, though he aims to be even-handed, his discussion here is superficial: first, because he never really expounds or defends his own metaphysic, which seems to favor the idea that “God might be working alongside or through physical and biological processes in a way that science cannot detect” (page 120; see further below). The second shortcoming of the discussion is its brevity, which means he does not really seem to me to have grasped the argument of the best design theorists. He says, “design in nature can only be established beyond reasonable doubt if all naturalistic explanations have been ruled out” (128). This is a drastic oversimplification: it may fall out this way with some topics, but not with others. For example, when design theorists point to the information processing system in DNA, we do not need to consider *every possible* naturalistic explanation for it before we infer that an agent has done something special in this case. The farmer in Jesus’ story about the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30) did not need to eliminate all other possibilities before he could declare, “An enemy has done this.” There are more complexities around this topic, dealing with Walton’s own philosophy of science, which need not detain us further: it is enough to say that the short discussion in this book obscures the complexities that it seems to be trying to clarify.

Walton’s book has a number of strengths. First, as already mentioned, there is the commendable goal of reading Genesis 1 in its ancient context, which includes the competing narratives from the other cultures in the Ancient Near East. Further, Walton is not misled into making Adam and Eve mere symbols; they were actual people whose sin had catastrophic consequences for their descendants (pages 139, 175 n. 5). Indeed:

Whatever evolutionary processes led to the development of animal life, primates and even prehuman hominids, my theological convictions lead me to posit substantive discontinuity between that process and the creation of the historical Adam and Eve. Rather than cause-and-effect continuity, there is material and spiritual discontinuity, though it remains difficult to articulate how God accomplished this (page 139).

While I am glad for Walton’s clear convictions about Adam and Eve, I would like to know *why* he thinks the process that produced them must be different from the evolutionary one. Does he think this difference is “scientifically” detectable? How is this compatible with his reticence about other discontinuities in the history of life?

Walton is clear on the benefits of the Sabbath for human beings: “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” (pages 123-24; cf. 146-47). I would have liked for him to develop his attractive presentation, perhaps in

connection with discussions of things like “creation ordinances,” what relation he finds between the Sabbath and the Christian Lord’s Day, and what he thinks it would look like for a Christian to observe a Sabbath; but, alas, he flies too quickly to the next topic!

There are also severe weaknesses in the book, of which I will list a few briefly. I will focus on larger methodological questions, leaving most matters of specific exegetical disagreement to my own or others’ published writings.

I consider Walton’s first five main theses (listed above) to be highly debatable, and generally mistaken. For example, as soon as we acknowledge that Genesis 1 is almost “liturgical” in its function (see page 91, following Moshe Weinfeld) — an acknowledgement that I agree with — then we should recognize that the kind of language will be far removed from “scientific” description. The likelihood is that we will encounter pictorial, even poetic, depictions, suited to a celebratory text. This means that the connection with “science,” whether Ancient Near Eastern or otherwise, is simply out of place. By the same token, this liturgical, or quasi-liturgical, purpose of Genesis 1 will lead to its focus on “functions” much more than on any kind of material ontology — a property it shares with other ancient origins tales. But this hardly excludes an interest in material ontology as such.

In light of all this, Walton’s distinction between “function” and “material” may be useful for analytical purposes, but it hardly warrants the kind of separation that he advocates. After all, for some created thing to have a function it will usually have some material existence as well!

It is further wholly inadequate to deny a “natural-supernatural” distinction in the Hebrew Bible without some very careful definition and discussion; we get neither. If, for example, we define the “natural” in terms of the causal properties an item has by virtue of the way God created it, then such a notion is indeed a part of the Hebrew Bible. Consider Deuteronomy 11:13-17, which insists on God’s careful supervision of the rainfall in Israel. God will send the rain “that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil”; as a consequence of the rain, there will be grass in the fields for livestock. Without rain “the land will yield no fruit.” It seems fair to say that the rain is more than simply the *occasion* for these benefits; it is, under God, a *cause* for them. That is, in a passage that so clearly affirms pervasive divine involvement, we also find a ready acknowledgement of causal properties (“natures”)! We might go into more detail about the assumption of causal properties in such texts as Proverbs 26:20-21; 30:33; etc., but this will suffice. When Balaam’s donkey spoke (Num 22:28), it was because “the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey,” that is, brought about a result that goes beyond the “nature” of the animal. The word “supernatural” seems to be just right to describe this situation.

This leads to Walton’s discussion of what we might call “detectability” of any of God’s special actions (pages 119-20), specifically in regard to the origin and development of life on earth. Walton lays out the options as (1) God “jump-started” the evolutionary process and then let it unwind on its own; (2) God “intervened” at various junctures

along the way to “accomplish major jumps in evolution”; (3) God is “working alongside and through physical and biological processes in a way that science cannot detect.” As I have mentioned already, it looks like option (3) is his preference. He calls option (1) “deistic,” and option (2) “interventionist”; he rejects them both because they “potentially remove God from ongoing operations in nature.” He never stops to consider whether he has fairly represented either of positions (1) or (2), and whether their “potential” removal of God is a *necessary* consequence of the position — both of which I doubt. And he never tells me why the third option must *alone* be the answer: why can God have not combined “natural” developments together with an assortment of “detectable” and “undetectable” special actions?

Traditional Christian theology has developed the resources for talking about these matters, insisting on God’s pervasive participation in every “natural” event (often called “concurrence”), and allowing for events that go beyond the natural causal powers of the things involved. This means that everything that happens is God’s work, whether it be natural or supernatural. Walton writes as if his recognizing God’s active participation in all events is a new insight for us; it may be new to popular evangelicalism, but it is not new to the classical Christian tradition. If Walton disagrees with this, he surely may; but he ought to alert his readers that there is something to discuss.

In the same vein, Walton owes it to his readers to inform them of the difficulties involved in thinking that Genesis 1:1 is a literary introduction, which I take to mean a summary of the entire narrative, 1:2-2:3. That is definitely a position one will find among competent scholars; but — at least as I see it — the grammatical and exegetical problems with that position are so severe that it is very unlikely to be right. For example, the tense of the verb “created” (*bara’*, in the “perfect”) is normally used for events that precede the main story line, which makes the “creation” event part of the antecedent conditions of the main account of the six days (which begins in verse 3, where we find “and he said,” the first verb in the *wayyiqtol*, or narrative tense). The lexical argument for *bara’* as “assign functions” is pretty surprising, too. Generally, the verb denotes making some kind of fresh start, and this can have material implications. In the book of Genesis as we have it, 1:26-31 are parallel to 2:4-25; this means that the “forming” of the man using dust (2:7), and the “building” of the woman using the man’s rib (2:22), are parallel descriptions of the “creation” of the first humans of 1:27. Hence it makes sense to read 1:27 as a description of a material operation. Further, Walton affirms several times that he believes in creation from nothing; but our theological notion stems from the reading of Genesis 1:1 as implying just that. If the Biblical texts that assert creation from nothing did not get their assertion from Genesis 1:1, where did they get it?

Now, it is no secret that the verb “create” (*bara’*) does not of itself mean “create from nothing.” If any proof were needed, the parallel of 1:27 with 2:7, 22 would be decisive. But that hardly entails that Genesis 1:1 does *not* imply such a notion; we must read the sentence as a whole. After all, when we read the words, “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” we realize that “the heavens and the earth” refers to everything, while “in the beginning” tells us when it happened, and is best understood as

an absolute beginning. And if God “created” — i.e., made a fresh start with — everything at the beginning, then “before” the beginning there was — what else but nothing?

Besides my own writings, this interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is adequately discussed in Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 89-96. If Walton disagrees with this line of reasoning, that is of course his right; but it would serve the reader, and especially the lay reader who might not be familiar with the arguments, for Walton to inform him or her of the reasons for these judgments.¹

Walton’s final basic thesis, that Genesis 1 tells the story of God’s work of inaugurating the cosmos as his temple, is plausible, however, if taken apart from the other theses. Walton offers a “parallel” from Exodus 35-40, the building and inaugurating of the Israelite tabernacle (page 89). Exodus 39:32 uses terms similar to those of Genesis 2:1: “thus all the work of the tabernacle was finished.” But it surprised me to see that Walton concludes that material origin in Genesis 1 is unimportant! What was going on through Exodus 35-39 except the shaping of the materials that would be used for the tabernacle? Hence, if this be a true “parallel,” it makes more sense to see Genesis 1:1 as describing the initial bringing into existence of all things; verse 2 gives the conditions under which the first “day” began. The six “days” are God’s activity of shaping the material of the earth to provide a suitable place for mankind to live, to love, and to serve. And this, as it turns out, is a fairly conventional way of reading the story. By this conventional reading, the main event of “material origins” is in 1:1; the rest is mostly shaping the material that is already there. Walton, however, seems to lump this shaping activity in with material origins, which is confusing. (Incidentally, while stories from other Ancient Near Eastern peoples do indeed lack any notion of the origin of matter, they do lay a heavy stress of the organizing and shaping of materials to serve their functions.)

Now, the idea of the cosmos as a temple might be illuminating. If we want to establish it, though we would need more attention to the way the rest of the Hebrew Bible itself actually reflects on Genesis 2:1-3; Walton’s survey is not adequate for this. It makes good sense to see the Garden of Eden as a primeval sanctuary, with Adam and Eve having the task of working outwards from Eden, populating the world and spreading Edenic blessing throughout the earth, turning it all into a sanctuary. This idea is the main theme of Gregory Beale’s *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (InterVarsity Press, 2004) — a book that attributes many of its insights to Walton. I wish Walton had said something about what he thinks of Beale’s development of these ideas. The point here is that one has no need to deny an interest in “material origins” to appreciate the theme.

I have already given some evaluation of Walton’s discussion of biological origins and intelligent design. Mainstream evolutionary theory aims to give a complete picture of the origin and development of all life forms, leaving no “gaps” for any special creative action to overcome. Walton seems to assume that this is what qualifies as a “scientific”

¹ See also C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Crossway, 2003), especially chs. 4-5; *idem.*, *Genesis 1-4: A linguistic, literary, and theological commentary* (P&R, 2006), especially chs. 4-5.

description, and, since intelligent design attends to these gaps, it cannot be truly “scientific” (though he does not for that reason intend to say it is untrue). But he never queries whether this aim of a gapless account actually fits the facts of nature itself; intelligent design proponents say that it does not.

Walton cites the (American) National Association of Biology Teachers statement on teaching evolution, but does not really come to grips with what it says:²

The diversity of life on earth is the outcome of evolution: an unpredictable and natural process of temporal descent with genetic modification that is affected by natural selection, chance, historical contingencies and changing environments.

“The diversity of life on earth” would seem to include human beings, whom Walton has excluded from this process. And the notion that the process is entirely “natural” prejudices what one may reason about the evidence. But there is no rational justification for insisting on this *beforehand*, unless you already know that this is the only relevant factor. The scientist as such does not need to own any “interference” or “guidance” in the process; but he ought at least to be honest about the problems. I have spoken with a university biology teacher who freely admits that the origin of life and the origin of human beings do not fit well with standard naturalistic models, and this honesty is exactly what I would like to see. Walton seems to be preventing that, which makes no sense to me.

Walton opposes what he calls “concordism,” which he defines (page 19): “Concordists believe the Bible must agree — be in concord with — all the findings of contemporary science.” Well, that is one form of concordism, and it is pretty obviously misguided. But there are other forms. The concordism that bothers Walton is what we may call “hard concordism,” which assumes that only a literalistic hermeneutic does justice to the Bible. But what of a “soft concordism,” which recognizes the kind of pictorial language, and the rhetorical purposes, of passages like Genesis 1? Another kind is “historical concordism,” concerned with matching Biblical events with documentation from other sources (Kenneth Kitchen is an excellent example of this sort). Are these others also to be thrown out of court? I doubt that Walton would say yes; but that leads to the question, may we approach Genesis 1 with this aim, or with some other, in view? Walton is silent.

I should comment on the overarching methodology, about which Walton gives very little reflection. This has to do with the effort to interpret the Bible in connection with the writings from the other nations. Walton says (page 104):

The view presented in this book has emphasized the similarities between the ways the Israelites thought and the ideas reflected in the ancient world, rather than the differences.

In this light he claims, “The Israelites were more attuned to the functions of the cosmos than to the material of the cosmos” (page 162), seeing the Israelite view as similar to that of the other peoples.

² That statement, originally issued in 1995, has undergone revision; the latest edition, 2008, lacks these words altogether, simply calling evolution “an important natural process” (<www.nabt.org/websites/institution/index.php?p=92>).

One would have expected someone to come to grips with the obvious problems with this perspective. For example, the whole point of Genesis 1 is to offer a *different* origins story than that on offer from elsewhere; so the differences are indeed highly relevant. Further, it is a mistake to identify the views of Genesis with the views of Israel, at least by traditional understandings of Moses' work. Moses sought to *shape* the worldview of Israel, not to *echo* it. If Walton thinks otherwise, I wish he would say so, and explain why.

This means that a good interpretation of a Biblical passage will recognize that the Hebrew text is itself part of a coherent context (its place in the Bible), which means that the syntax and lexicon of Hebrew must control our interpretation. I have already offered some observations about Genesis 1:1. I would add to this the way the passage itself is structured, with each of the six days beginning with "and God said," and ending with the refrain "evening, then morning." This structure sets the seventh day off as different, and makes us wonder whether the author intended for us to see it as having no end. This account is set next to Genesis 2:4-25, which (traditionally, at least) is taken as an amplification of the sixth day. (I have argued elsewhere that this has implications for the days as not ordinary ones.) This would make it hard to square the literary features of Genesis 1-2 as we have them today with a denial of interest in "material origins." This literary structure also should control the way we see the account as similar to and different from the accounts from other peoples.

Finally, I am at a loss to know exactly what function Walton thinks Genesis 1 played in the life of ancient Israel, let alone what role it should play in the modern church. Surely one should say something about its role in worldview formation. One should also comment on its connection to Israel's universal mission (Genesis 12:1-3), even if it is to disagree with what has become a fairly common understanding of Israel's calling (e.g., in the writings of Christopher Wright and of N. T. Wright).³ I found no such comments here. Nor did I find anything about how Genesis 1 might (or might not) encourage people to enjoy God's world, and to study it as an act of honoring the Creator — a theme that recurs frequently in science-and-religion writers.⁴

In sum, this book would be much more useful, to lay person and scholar alike, if it were *longer*, engaging those whose views Walton rejects. I cannot accept that lay people should be content with any less; I hope they will insist on more substance from those scholars who want to inform them.

³ Cf. Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, ch. 3.

⁴ Cf. Collins, *Science & Faith*, ch. 4.