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The Lost and Found World of Genesis 1

Roy Gane

Andrews University, gane@andrews.edu

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March 04, 2011

The Lost and Found World of Genesis 1

By Roy E. Gane (Old Testament Department, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)

בראשית ברא אלהים את
השמים ואת הארץ

Here I would like to respond to the January 30, 2011 post by my friend and colleague Nicholas Miller (Department of Church History, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University) titled: [“The ‘Found’ World of Genesis 1: Is Theistic Evolution a Meaningful Option for Seventh-day Adventists?”](#) Dr. Miller was reacting to the Friday evening and Sabbath afternoon presentations at Andrews University on January 21-22, 2011 by my friend [John H. Walton](#) of Wheaton College, author of [The Lost World of Genesis One](#). On Friday evening, Dr. Walton presented his approach to comparative methodology: how to understand the Old Testament within its ancient Near Eastern context. On Sabbath afternoon, he applied his approach to Genesis 1, proposing that this account of the Creation week (of literal days) recounts God’s assignment of functions to components of Planet Earth and its environment to inaugurate it as a cosmic temple in which he took up residence and began his rule.

Miller raised a number of issues that deserve clarification and further discussion. I will not attempt to provide solutions to all the problems he raised, but will try to identify some productive directions in which we can make progress regarding (1) understanding comparative methodology, (2) what is at stake regarding a comparative approach to Genesis 1, and (3) the role of Andrews University in hosting scholarly debate.

I agree with Miller on several important points, including the need to pay careful attention to methodologies and philosophies behind them, the assessment that theistic evolution is not in harmony with Seventh-day Adventist teaching, and the opinion that we at Andrews University need further thinking and discussion concerning choices and formatting of opportunities for live interaction with scholars who are impacting the wider academic community in some ways that may be challenging to us. However, my perspective differs from that of Miller in some ways, at least partly because we work in different disciplines: While he is a church historian, I am in the area of Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern studies, like Walton.

Comparative Methodology

John Walton is an evangelical scholar who, like Seventh-day Adventists, believes in the uniquely authoritative divine revelation and thought inspiration of the Bible in the sense that God used ancient Near Eastern messengers to convey his messages for human beings of all subsequent ages (*Genesis* [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 19-20; cf. *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 9-15). For him, the meaning of a given passage of Scripture must be ascertained within the context of the biblical text itself. The question is: What does the Bible intend to say? Enduring principles in God's messages transcend time and place to reach us today, but communication of these principles is often clad in the garb of the ancient culture of the human messengers and their original audience. Culture is not the biblical authority, but even divine communication to humans must take their culture into account in order to be effective.

We can agree with Walton that God gave his principles to people with particular world-views and lifestyles, not in a cultural vacuum. The very fact that he revealed himself through human language means that the Bible contains a cultural element because language is always a product of culture; it is never culturally sterile. The culture of the biblical messengers and those whom they addressed was foreign to ours in a number of ways. Although we can ascertain basic principles of God's salvation through Christ and will for our lives without trans-cultural awareness, deeper understanding of God's written Word requires us to engage in some careful cultural translation so that we do not simply read our own ideas into the Bible. We possess a growing corpus of historical resources (such as extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern texts and material remains) to help us with such translation to some extent, but the ancient human authors had no access to our modern ways of thinking. So it is up to us to try to understand them. This is why Walton is passionate about making relevant biblical background materials accessible to Bible students. He has rendered us a huge service by writing [*Ancient Israelite Literature In Its Cultural Context*](#) and [*Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*](#), co-authoring [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*](#) (with Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas), and editing the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* on the Old Testament (ZIBBCOT).

In his *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, Walton briefly reviews the history of comparative methodology from early simplistic, unbalanced, and often polemical approaches that claimed to either "prove" the Bible from ancient Near Eastern parallels or to "disprove" its unique inspiration by using the same kinds of parallels to argue that the Israelites simply borrowed from their neighbors and their religion was not unique (15-19, 29-38). Walton has adopted the "contextual" approach championed by W. W. Hallo (see [Quote of Walton](#), *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 18, posted on Mar 2, 2011). This approach, which is now generally accepted by scholars involved in biblical comparative studies (including myself), recognizes that elements common to the Bible and its ancient environment must first be examined within their respective cultural (including textual) contexts before they are compared with each other. Comparison must consider not only similarities but also differences. Even items that appear identical on the surface may function differently within different cultural (including religious) systems (cf. "Principles of Comparative Study" in *ibid.*, 26-27). Study of ancient Near Eastern materials can enhance our understanding of the Bible by comparison and contrast, but it can never override or replace careful analysis of the biblical text itself.

If Walton's Friday evening presentation sounded philosophical, it is because he was outlining relationships between the Bible and other ancient materials and demonstrating his methodology. His comparative approach is based on careful analysis (by himself, Hallo, and many other scholars) of the nature of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern materials themselves. It is not his concoction from modern philosophies, such as those of Kant or Gould, or a circular reflection of his own modern world-view. The point of his "layer-cake" analogy is simply to illustrate the comprehensiveness of God's knowledge, as compared with limited human (including scientific) understanding, which grows but never can equal that of God (*The Lost World of Genesis One*, 114-118). Walton does not detach the "natural" and "supernatural" domains from each other. Rather, he points out that ancient peoples, such as the Israelites, did not see the transcendent and mundane

realms as separate from each other the way moderns do. They “believed instead that every event was the act of deity...The idea that deity got things running then just stood back or engaged himself elsewhere (deism) would have been laughable in the ancient world because it was not even conceivable” (ibid., 20).

I am in full agreement with Walton’s basic comparative approach as he has clearly articulated it both in his publications and his Friday night presentation at Andrews University. For decades I have used the same kind of methodology to enhance exegesis, including in collaboration with Walton, who edited my contributions to the NIV Application Commentary (Leviticus, Numbers) and ZIBBCOT (“Leviticus”) series. Walton has done far more than I in systematic presentation and analysis of comparative materials, and I am deeply grateful for his large contribution. There is nothing about his basic approach, per se, that threatens Seventh-day Adventist teachings in any way. We are committed to learning all we can about the Bible, the messages of which constitute our authoritative guide to faith and practice. Proper interpretation of extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern data does not co-opt or subvert sola scriptura; nor does it prove or disprove the Bible. Archaeology and study of ancient extrabiblical texts and cultures are no basis for faith or lack thereof, nor are they higher criticism, which seeks to edit the text of Scripture by reconstructing earlier phases of authorship, editing, or tradition. Rather, comparative study helps us to see the biblical messages in sharper relief as we observe how God’s ancient people lived, thought, and interacted with other peoples.

The Creation Account of Genesis 1

Like Seventh-day Adventists, John Walton accepts literal days in Genesis 1 and a special role for the Sabbath. It appears that we could adopt his interpretation of the Sabbath as the culmination of a week-long inauguration of God’s cosmic temple—an idea that he finds in the Bible, in agreement with some analogies in ancient Near Eastern texts—as a significant contribution to Seventh-day Adventist theology of the Sabbath. He has also enhanced our understanding by drawing attention to God’s role in assigning functions as an integral part of his creative process. Walton is right that not every day of creation brought new material into being: For example, the Sabbath was not new material.

For us the challenging aspect of Walton’s conclusions regarding Genesis 1 is his idea that this account does not cover creation of materials, which occurred earlier during a period of time that is unspecified by the biblical text. He believes that God originally made everything out of nothing, but does not know whether the Lord did it a few days before the week in Genesis 1 or whether he evolved it over a much longer period. According to Walton, this information is simply outside the scope of Genesis 1, and we should not try to get more out of it than what is there just because we want to and we have always believed that this passage provides a comprehensive view. So Walton’s conclusion does not require long ages for material Creation, but he opens the door for this possibility. If he is right, he has “cut the Gordian knot” to resolve tension between the Bible and scientific theories, including those maintaining that life on Planet Earth is millions of years old.

So if Walton’s basic methodology is correct, why has he come up with a conclusion that threatens Young Earth Creationism, the position accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination? Does this mean that the SDA church, which is committed to relying on the actual meaning of the biblical text, should now adopt Walton’s open-ended conclusion that material creation preceded the Creation week of Genesis 1? Not necessarily. In any discipline, a correct basic methodology provides a helpful environment or framework for investigation, but it does not dictate one possible correct conclusion. While proper overall methodological controls narrow the range of options to potentially correct ones, these may significantly vary from one another. This does not mean that research is hopelessly subjective and unable to yield solid conclusions. Rather, different conclusions from the same basic methodology result from variations in application of the methodology.

For example, scholars who share a source-critical approach to the Bible have come up with a plethora of

divergences in their dissections of the text. Similarly, conservative scholars who would die for sola-, tota-, and prima-scriptura in its final form have plenty of ongoing debates. Likewise, biblical scholars attempting to employ the basic guidelines of the “contextual approach” can disagree over the meaning of the biblical text, the significance of an ancient Near Eastern textual or material artifact, and/or the relationship between them. This doesn’t mean that everyone is right. Rather, as in science, further data, investigation, debate, and testing of hypotheses are needed to eliminate options and refine our understanding, which may never be adequate but usually can be improved. This is what the scholarly enterprise is all about.

Any true scholar, such as Walton, who develops a new theory expects that his work will be rigorously tested. Conclusions derived through a valid methodology must still be tested to find out whether its application to the raw data holds up to scrutiny. Since Walton’s basic methodology is correct, it is off-target to criticize that, and we should move on, narrowing the focus to questions about his application to the text of Genesis 1. Thus, for example, we could seek further clarification concerning issues such as the following:

1. Do all Hebrew terms for Creation in Genesis 1 (including the verb “to be”) lack components of their semantic range that refer to bringing visible phenomena (which could include material) into existence in such a context?
2. [Genesis 1:2](#) refers to the state of Planet Earth as covered with water and dark (for an unspecified length of time) before God created light = day on the first day of the Creation week ([verse 3-5](#)). Why would verse 2 describe the world in this way if the material Creation were already complete and all that remained was for the components to receive their functions in the cosmic temple? By contrast, the wilderness tabernacle is clearly described as materially complete (Exod 40) before its functional consecration in Lev 8. Granted that the pre-Creation state was functionless and that Creation brought functionality into being, is it possible that God (unlike the Israelites who constructed the tabernacle) simultaneously brought the cosmic “temple” of Earth into phenomenological existence and inaugurated it?
3. What does [Genesis 2](#)—describing material formation of Adam, animals, and birds from earth and Eve from Adam’s rib (vv. [7, 19, 21-22](#))—contribute to what we learn from Genesis 1? Granted that the narrative of Genesis 2 provides archetypes for categories of living beings (e.g., we are all “dust”; The Lost World of Genesis One, 70-71), doesn’t the text present the origins of these functional archetypes as events in which God brought something materially new into existence?
4. We can agree that Genesis 1 communicates about Creation in ways that would be understandable to an ancient observer of the cosmos and its contents, not in strict harmony with the more precise accounts that could be supplied by modern scientists describing the same phenomenological dynamics. But in terms of content, how can we differentiate between humanly supplied background information (in accordance with shared ancient Near Eastern cosmological views) and divine message in this context? Granted that there may be points of agreement with ancient Near Eastern traditions, does not [Genesis 1-2](#) present itself as the definitive account of origins (Hebrew toledot; [Gen 2:4](#)) revealed by the God of the Bible to his ancient people? What background could be accurately supplied regarding a process that (according to the text) began before there was a human observer? It is true that the purpose of Genesis 1-2 is not to answer scientific questions, but the details in these chapters do provide the theological/relational foundation for the entire Bible by showing how God is the omnipotent Source, Originator, and therefore legitimate Ruler of everything on Earth.
5. Strictly speaking, the problem of death before sin is outside the scope of Genesis 1, according to Walton’s theory. However, he recognizes the potential implication “that if the material phase had been carried out for long ages prior to the seven days of Genesis, there would be a problem about death” (The Lost World of Genesis One, 99). His answer is that the biblical teaching of death through sin

applies only to the death of human beings ([Rom 5:12](#)), who were created mortal but were to have access to the tree of life as the antidote to mortality ([Gen 3:22-24](#); *ibid.*, 100). So “death did exist in the pre-Fall world—even though humans were not subject to it” (*ibid.*). But if death is normal for non-human created beings, why does [Romans 8:19-23](#) speak of the “bondage to decay” and “groaning” of all creation as temporary, pending “the redemption of our bodies” (NRSV), i.e., from the results of sin? And is “death” in the limited ancient biblical sense of loss of the “breath of (the spirit of) life” ([Gen 7:22](#); not applicable to plants, microbiological life, or the cellular level, such as the epidermis of human skin) an indispensable part of existence in a non-fallen Earth? So has Walton really resolved the problem of death in the geologic column?

I raise these as examples of issues that could be discussed with those who are interested, including Walton, who undoubtedly has thought about them. Since they are real questions, not rhetorical ones, simply stating them neither neutralizes Walton’s credibility nor closes the case in any direction. Rather, my point is that this dialogue about application of the “contextual approach” to Genesis 1, in which many Christians have a stake (not just SDAs), is just beginning to get underway.

Andrews University and Scholarly Debate

In his post, Miller stated: “As a Christian university, we should be open to hearing and considering ideas that we may not agree with. I have no trouble with having Prof. Walton being on our campus and lecturing. But I do have concerns about the format that was put into place for the presentations.” I agree. The Seminary at Andrews University is the logical place for discussions of this nature, which properly require some consideration of technical aspects (including those raised by Walton in *The Lost World of Genesis One*, such as the semantics of Hebrew *bara’*, “create”; 38-44) and opportunities for prepared responses by relevant specialists, which the invitee(s) could then answer. In fact, the possibility of the Seminary inviting Dr. Walton was explored in 2009, soon after his book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, appeared. But it was felt that the topic was too hot for the Seminary to handle, given that there are members of the church who would pounce on the Seminary leadership, as they have in the recent past, if we host a speaker whose ideas are controversial in our environment.

This raises a question about the nature of the education that we are attempting to provide at the Seminary and in the wider university. Granted that there may be speakers whom we probably should not invite because the result of their “rattling our cage” would not likely be helpful. But why can’t we personally interact with those Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars (as we have in the past) whose thinking can be productively stimulating for us, even if we do not agree with everything they say? Why should the fact that we invite them be taken as a blanket endorsement of all their ideas, so that we are accused of departing from the faith that was once delivered to the saints? Keep in mind that I am talking about invited guests here, not permanent faculty members.

No doubt some think our Seminary should be like a glorified SDA catechism class, but it is essential for the education of our Bible teachers and pastor-evangelists that they learn how to interact with and reach out to people who think outside their “box.” So what will happen if some undergraduates attend such an event? Will their faith be undermined? I would ask in response: Which is better, to have them hear the various sides of an issue in the faith-affirming environment of our university, or to hear only some sides by reading books or getting information from the internet? They will inevitably be confronted with questions that affect or potentially affect their faith. Will they encounter such issues here, where they have support, or elsewhere, where they will be on their own? Will we do enough if we only teach them what to think, or should we also teach them how to think?

Is it possible that many young people are leaving the church because we have never taught them how to think for themselves? Have those who want to deny us the opportunity for productive scholarly discussion with outside speakers thought about that? Should we go on bowing to their pressure? We are just as concerned


about the confessional integrity of our teachings and the effectiveness of our education in carrying out SDA mission as they are. This is not about flexing the muscles of academic freedom; it is about practical common sense: What really works toward the achievement of our shared goals?

Again, I am not trying to solve everything here. But I do propose that Andrews University, and especially the Seminary, should give some serious thought to these questions and formulate some consistent protocols for the future, which we are prepared to defend. If we don't invite challenging outside speakers, the Adventist Forum will be happy to take up the slack and do it for us, as it did in arranging for Walton's presentation on January 22. But that is not the best venue and format for the kind of scholarly discussion that is needed to address some issues, including Walton's proposal regarding Genesis 1. Nevertheless, it is thanks to that event that we are having this discussion, which can bring theologians and scientists of faith into fresh and positive interaction with each other. I am not worried about the outcome, provided that we continually seek to humbly and carefully follow God and his Word.

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on March 04, 2011 in [Archaeology](#), [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Church and Society](#), [History of Interpretation](#), [Science and Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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I want to thank you for this post. Spot-on.
Keep up the good work!
Johnny Ramirez-Jorge

Posted by: [Johnny Ramirez](#) | [March 04, 2011 at 10:42 PM](#)

Thank you for this post, it was indeed stimulating; I truly miss the seminary. Dr Gane is spot on with what he states about the process of education; again thanks!

Posted by: Harold Alomia | [March 05, 2011 at 01:40 AM](#)

Well said. I hope this provokes a meaningful conversation. The first Adventists didn't become so because they only listened to people in their own theological circle. Seeking truth requires the risk of encountering error.

Posted by: Matthew Lucio | [March 05, 2011 at 08:01 AM](#)

Thank you, Professor Gane. I really enjoyed this.

Ideas like the one's you've expressed are the antidote to the caricature "Gnu Atheists" and many, many other outsiders like to draw of Christianity as philistine.

Posted by: [Eric "Siggy" Scott](#) | [March 05, 2011 at 06:14 PM](#)

Dr. Gane's call for more scholarly dialogue and interfacing with a larger selection of ideas under the umbrella

of the seminary resonates with me—and I hope it gains traction. Perhaps one of the reasons some have opposed doing just this is because the seminary has stumbled recently in handling the presentation of divergent views in a way that is sensitive to the spiritual growth of students and the biblical affirmation expected of the Seventh-day Adventist church's premier confessional institution (examples include the most recent HMS Richards Lectureship, which demonstrated that a significant number of seminarians were not equipped to critically evaluate the presenter's direct attack on biblical hermeneutics as understood by Adventists, and the keynote presentation at the recent scholarly symposium—neither of which were responded to in any significant fashion).

So, yes, let's engage in substantive, open scholarly dialogue at the seminary, even with those who hold diverging views. Yet let's do so in a responsible manner which critically engages those invited to present rather than merely providing a platform for the dissemination of their perspectives.

Posted by: Sean Reed | [March 05, 2011 at 08:10 PM](#)

To my above comment, I hasten to add that I am not intending to throw accusations at the dean or any other seminary professors. The examples I cited must be understood within their various contexts and the purposes for which each event was planned, taking into consideration the fluid dynamic of guest presentations. Rather, I am seeking to highlight the need for great intentionality to ensure that public dialogue takes place in such a way that credible, substantive Adventist responses provide the context for the conversation. Without intentionality, such a context will not be created and the conversations naturally take a form which is not befitting a confessional institution (at least in my view).

Now why didn't I simply originally articulate my thoughts in this manner?

Posted by: Sean Reed | [March 05, 2011 at 08:20 PM](#)

It seems that the greatest threat to Liberty are the controls that intend to protect it yet inevitably destroy it. There is always inherent risk in Liberty, yet we do not place our hope in the means of man but the power of the Spirit. What is the role of the Spirit in our colleges and universities? What are the risks? What are the blessings?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [March 06, 2011 at 02:23 PM](#)

Well said.

Posted by: Anthony WagenerSmith | [March 06, 2011 at 09:33 PM](#)

So have your scholarly debate, but why was this done on Sabbath? We do not hold classes on Sabbath, why this item which was surely expected to call forth dissent?

Posted by: -Shining | [March 09, 2011 at 04:55 PM](#)

@Shining: You're hurting my image of Adventism. If thoughtful religious discussions are not allowed on the Sabbath, even by those whose natural element is "scholarly debate," then it must be a pretty thoughtless religion.

I for one always preferred to use the Sabbath for truth-seeking.

Posted by: [Eric "Siggy" Scott](#) | [March 20, 2011 at 02:29 AM](#)

If I remember correctly, Professor Walton attaches a great deal of importance to the meaning of the Hebrew

word "bara" [Online Bible #01254].

It appears numerous times in parallel structures with other words which either illustrate its meaning or shed light on it:

Isaiah 43:1 But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator <01254> [bara], O Jacob, And He who formed <03335>[yatsar] you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!

Isaiah 43:7 Everyone who is called by My name, And whom I have created <01254> for My glory, Whom I have formed <03335>, even whom I have made."

Isaiah 45:7 The One forming <03335> light and creating <01254> darkness, Causing well-being and creating <01254> calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

Isaiah 45:18 For thus says the LORD, who created <01254> the heavens (He is the God who formed <03335> the earth and made it, He established it and did not create <01254> it a waste place, but formed <03335> it to be inhabited), "I am the LORD, and there is none else.

Amos 4:13 For behold, He who forms <03335> mountains and creates <01254> the wind And declares to man what are His thoughts, He who makes dawn into darkness And treads on the high places of the earth, The LORD God of hosts is His name.

It can be plainly seen that to "create" something means to "form" it. Isaiah 29:16 uses the term yatsar to describe one who forms clay. The word is actually translated as "potter" in verses 30:14 and 29:16 of Isaiah.

In the interest of completeness, another word used in parallel with "bara" <01254> should be considered, the word "chadash" <02318>.

This word appears in English translation as "repair," "restore," "renew". "Create "bara" in me a clean heart and renew "chadash" a right spirit within me," is one example

"Chadash" may have the meaning of repairing or renewing something which already exists. The word is used in an abstract sense to refer to the renewing of the spirit (Ps. 51:10) or the restoration of salvation's joy (Ps. 51:12). It is also used in more tangible ways with reference to repairing the temple (2 Chron. 24:4,12).

After looking at all the passages where "bara" is used and considering the parallel terms used with it, I don't see the idea of functional assignment as preeminent, if it exists at all.

"Chadash" certainly adds to the range of "bara" but not in the sense of function rather than manufacture. Am I missing something?

Posted by: [Hansen](#) | [August 04, 2011 at 02:22 AM](#)

@Siggy-I think Shining's point might be to not engage in "controversial" actions on Sabbath. I personally think this isn't a bad suggestion since it could at least quell SOME of the criticism. There is the idea that the Sabbath should only be for "uplifting" actions which for some of the critics is pretty narrow. This is a suggestion that I don't think would be too hard to accomplish. I also agree with Sean that debate and discussion should occur just in the proper context.

Posted by: [austudent](#) | [August 04, 2011 at 07:45 PM](#)

Dear Roy,

I wholeheartedly appreciate this idea of inviting non-Adventist scholars as occasional speakers. I also agree with your advocacy of promoting critical thinking in our universities.

Best regards,

Posted by: [Florin Lăiu](#) | [December 13, 2011 at 07:54 AM](#)

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