

**AN OVERVIEW OF JOHN H. WALTON'S  
*LOST WORLD OF GENESIS ONE***

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Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009. 192 pp. Paperback, \$16.00.

John H. Walton, a professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College Graduate School, specializes in the book of Genesis and in the comparative analysis of ancient Near Eastern texts and artifacts as they relate to the interpretation of the OT. During his college years, he developed an interest in comparative studies between the culture and literature of the Bible and the ancient Near East to help, especially Christians, gain a better understanding and appreciation of the OT. He has authored numerous books and articles and served as the general editor for the recently published (2009) five-volume series, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*.

In his most recent book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, Walton presents his case, laid out in eighteen succinct and easy-to-read propositions, for “a careful reconsideration of the nature of Genesis 1” (162), arguing that the biblical creation account should be read as ancient literature and not as modern science. He claims that ancient cosmology is function oriented and that this sentiment is shared by the author of Genesis 1. As such, the biblical account “does not attempt to describe cosmology in modern terms or address modern questions” (16), but rather describes the function of the cosmos. When read from this perspective, Walton proposes a *cosmic-temple-inauguration* view of Genesis 1, suggesting that the creation story gives an account of the building process of God’s temple from which he would reside and control the cosmos. The seven-day creation week should be understood as a seven-day inauguration of the cosmic temple, “setting up its functions for the benefit of humanity, with God dwelling in relationship with his creatures” (163). Walton gives the following six key arguments in support of his view:

- (1) The Hebrew word, **אָרָץ** (“create”) does not describe a creation of the material world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), but the assigning of function to God’s creation.
- (2) The creation account in Gen 1:2 introduces a material cosmos in a state of chaos that God will order and assign function to during the creation week.
- (3) The first half of the week (days 1-3) relates to time, weather, and food—three major functions of life.
- (4) The second half of the week (days 4-6) assigns the roles and spheres to the functionaries that will operate within the cosmos.

- (5) The recurring evaluation of God's work as "good" describes its functionality relative to humans.
- (6) The climax of day seven, when God rests from his work, describes God taking control of his cosmos from his newly created temple (ibid.).

His new perspective of Genesis 1 is a natural and logical development of his study on the culture of biblical Israel and the ancient Near East as presented in his publication, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

Walton's interpretation has an important implication for the creation/evolution/intelligent-design debate since his proposal effectually removes Genesis 1 from the debate. According to this perspective, Genesis 1 no longer has any relevance for the question of material origins of the cosmos and offers no mechanism for material origins. He notes that his view would allow both the young-earth and old-earth creationists the freedom to consider the mechanisms suggested by modern science, while still retaining a high view of Scripture. Thus he asserts that every scientific explanation could be viewed as God's handiwork and given a *teleological evolutionary* meaning—the biblical creation account that claims God is the creator of the material world, while science reveals how God did it. Walton concludes that "whatever aspects of evolution that continue to provide the best explanation for what we observe should not, in most cases, be objectionable for Christians" (166).

Although *The Lost World of Genesis One* presents a helpful and intriguing new perspective on the biblical creation account of Genesis 1, nevertheless its grounding upon the ancient Near Eastern functional cosmological view means that this book does not sufficiently address two key problems this viewpoint causes for a creationist: the problem of sin and the reality of death.

Walton argues that "just because death came to us because of sin, does not mean that death did not exist at any level prior to the Fall" (100). He notes that the notion that there was no death would defy common sense since death is a part of the natural process; it exists on the cellular level (the epidermis level of the skin consists of dead cells), in flora (sprouting leaves, flowers, fruit, seed), and in fauna (carnivorous and herbivorous animals, birds, and fish). He concludes that human resistance to death was only due to their access to the Tree of Life. As such, death existed before the fall, but humans became subject to it only as a punishment for disobeying God, at which time they lost access to the Tree of Life.

While science provides us with data from current biological observations and the fossil record, no specific data exists from the Garden of Eden. Thus, while it is highly probable that biological function is the same now as it was then, we cannot assume conclusively, as we simply do not have the data. Biblical evidence suggests that biological function may have performed differently and that must be considered by biblical scholars. There are several passages

in the Bible that infer that life in Eden and in the coming Messianic Age was and will be quite different than current scientific observation. Some ancient Jewish traditions claim that the first couple were clothed in light as humans were created in God's likeness (Gen 1:26) and received a tunic of skin (ancient traditions makes a wordplay on the two Hebrew words אור ["light"] and עור ["skin"]) after the fall to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:21). This interpretation may explain why, for example, the skin of Moses' face is described as having shone when he returned from a lengthy visit with God (Exod 34:28-35), why Daniel describes the resurrected saints as shining stars (Dan 12:3), or why Paul states that the body of the resurrected will be glorified (1 Cor 15:36-49; for further extrabiblical examples, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998], 114-120, 132-136). Additionally, Gen 1:30 and Isa 11:6-7 imply that carnivorous fauna had a different diet in the Garden of Eden and will have again in the coming Messianic Age. However, this point does provide some support for Walton's claim that death did exist at some level prior to the fall as vegetarian fauna would have to consume and often kill flora.

In his discussion on the problem of sin (138-140), Walton deals with the theological problem that humans are created in the image of God, while at the same time are a result of an evolutionary process. He admits that there are no concise solutions to this problem and is led by his theological convictions to "posit substantive discontinuity between that [evolutionary] process and the creation of the historical Adam and Eve" (139). Walton admits the difficulty in explaining how God accomplished this discontinuity, but speculates that perhaps biblical scholars have made this issue more difficult than need be. This may be the Achilles's heel of Walton's endeavor to adopt evolution as God's mechanisms—it cannot give a theologically satisfying answer to the problem of sin and death, which is one of the major concerns of the Bible, and, as such, for creationists. If death pre-existed Genesis 1–3 and "Adam and Eve" were just the first humans who reached the evolutionary stage that God defined as "His image and likeness," such an assumption may call into question biblical ethics, Jewish/Christian philosophy, and the relevancy of Jesus' mission to this earth.

On the whole, *The Lost World of Genesis One* is a great contribution to the creation/evolution/intelligent-design debate, providing a helpful framework in which biblical scholars, scientists, and laypeople can dialogue about the Bible, theology, faith, and science.