

**A SCHOLARLY REVIEW OF JOHN H. WALTON'S
LECTURES AT ANDREWS UNIVERSITY ON
THE LOST WORLD OF GENESIS ONE**

NICHOLAS P. MILLER
Andrews University

Earlier this year John Walton, a Professor of Old Testament studies at Wheaton College, came to Andrews University to share his thoughts on the question of how Genesis 1 should be read and understood. The crux of his argument was historical, and gave further philosophical background to his arguments found in *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009). His lecture, addressed directly to a Seventh-day Adventist audience, is helpful for understanding how his arguments are framed and understood in an Adventist context and how Adventists might relate to them.

After a brief overview of Walton's lectures and basic arguments regarding Genesis 1, I will consider the philosophy that appears to underlie his proposal. I will then examine some of the theological presuppositions undergirding his conclusions that Genesis can be reconciled with some form of theistic evolution. I argue that Walton's conclusions are in profound tension with, and even contrary to, core Adventist theological commitments involving theodicy, the loving character of God, and the theme of the great controversy between good and evil.

In his first lecture, Walton discussed the general interpretive approach to the OT, arguing that we can only understand the meaning of the stories in the Bible if we understand the worldview of its immediate intended audience. The Bible was written for their worldview, not for that of the twenty-first century; nevertheless, its spiritual and moral messages were also intended for today ("It was written *for* us, but *to* them"). Therefore, we should recognize, he argued, that its authority does not lie in its claims about the physical world and material reality. The Bible makes no scientific claims, he asserted, and its observations on the natural and physical world are not different from the existing worldviews of the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East.

Walton claimed that the surrounding cultures, as shown in their literature and writings, did not have a materialist ontology, but rather a functional one. This meant that these peoples were primarily, if not entirely, concerned with how systems and institutions came to carry out their present functions, rather than when they first physically or materially appeared.

In his second lecture, Walton applied this model to the issues of Genesis 1. He observed that on day one, God did not actually create light, but rather put it to the use or function of marking off periods of light and dark. This observation on the function of light was what originally led him

to his hypothesis regarding the functional nature of creation as recounted in Genesis 1. From this insight regarding light, he posited that the Hebrew mind was, like the surrounding cultures, actually concerned about the function of things, and not their material origins. This concern with functionality was the model for all the days of creation in Genesis 1.

Walton accepted that the days of creation were seven literal twenty-four-hour periods of time, but that nothing was physically created on those days. Rather, the functions of the material world—the earth, the sea, the sky, plants, animals, and humans—were instituted, and the whole was inaugurated as a temple, or sanctuary, for God.

One does not need to agree with all of Walton's arguments to appreciate his insight into the role that function plays in the days of creation. A number of creation elements such as earth, sky, and sea all existed on day one. Indeed light itself existed well prior to day one, as Scripture proposes that heaven and angels exist in it, and even God himself "dwells in light unapproachable" (1 Tim 6:16). Under a completely materialist view of creation, it is hard to understand what actually was created on the first two days of creation week. On day three, one can point to the creation of green growing things, though the main point of that day also seems to be functional, the separating of the existing elements of land and sea. Recognizing a functional process to the interpretation of Genesis 1 helps to more fully explain how the first three days are truly acts of creation.

Viewing creation through lenses that include a functional prism also shows how integral the seventh day is to the creation week—a point that Adventists should truly appreciate. A functional view helps to clarify that the Sabbath is not merely an addition to the six days of creation. Rather, on the Sabbath day God created the ongoing temporal order and organization within which creation operates. Thus the seventh day is firmly a part of the week of creation and not merely an afterthought tacked on to the end. Therefore, the addition of a functionalist outlook on the creation week is something that Adventists can applaud and embrace.

However, what is concerning about Walton's proposal is the elevation of functionality to the exclusion of materiality in the creation week. He seems to view the creation process described in Genesis 1 solely as one type of creation at the expense of other processes, particularly the creation of matter.

Why must we be forced to choose between the two kinds of creation? Cannot functionality and materiality both play a role in creation as portrayed in Genesis 1? Is it possible to have a creation as complex and existential as that found in Genesis and not have both elements involved? These rhetorical questions lead to a practical one: What is Walton's view on when plants, animals, and humans were materially created? He suggests that one cannot answer these questions from Genesis 1 as it was not written for that purpose. During a question-and-answer session, he indicated that the Genesis account

would allow God to have created in one day, six days, or in some other length of time—in other words, God is not limited to creating within any particular length of time. In his writings, it is clear that, he accepts a good part of the current scientific evolutionary story. He writes, “I am not suggesting a wholesale adoption of evolution, merely that neither Genesis 1 specifically nor biblical theology in general give us any reason to reject it as a model as long as we see God as involved at every level and remain aware of our theological convictions.”¹

What are Walton’s theological convictions? First, God exists; therefore, “whatever evolutionary processes may have taken place, we believe that God was intimately involved with them.”² Second, Genesis 1 does not require a young earth; nor does it objection to biological evolution.³ While he proposes that God did something special at “the creation of the historical Adam and Eve,” causing a “material and spiritual discontinuity,” he finds it “difficult to articulate how God accomplished this.” Ultimately, nothing in the Bible provides an obstacle to “allowing us to reap from science understandings of how life developed up to and including the creation of the first humans.”⁴

In his lecture, Walton’s justification for his hermeneutical approach focused primarily on the nature of reality, the division between the natural and supernatural, and the implications of communication-“word/act” theory. In developing his hermeneutical model, Walton rejected the notion that reality is a like a pie that has been sliced into natural and supernatural realms. Under this model—essentially a “God-of-the-gaps” view—the more we discover about nature, the smaller the slices of the supernatural become. In response to this problem, he proposed instead that reality is like a layered cake, with a layer of “natural” on the bottom and a layer of “supernatural” on top. We can explore the natural world, make all the discoveries we wish, and never threaten the supernatural, which is over all and guides all. We are merely discovering the mechanisms and materials that the Creator uses to develop and guide his creation.

While proffered as an illustration of the ancient Near Eastern mindset, the layered-cake model actually bears striking resemblance to immanuel Kant’s divide between the noumena (supernatural) and the phenomena (natural world). This divide explains in part the sharp break we have in our contemporary world between the discipline of science on one hand, and philosophy, metaphysics, and theology on the other. This division has roots going back to Descartes, Hume, and Spinoza, who posited that there is no meaningful connection or

¹John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 137.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 138.

⁴Ibid., 139-140.

integration between the natural and supernatural realms. This view of reality lies at the foundation of many twentieth-century philosophical perspectives that have led to a devaluation of Scripture, and includes views such as positivism, historicism, materialism, and the higher-critical methods of biblical exegesis. A more recent and extreme way of describing the discontinuity of nature and supernature is the Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA) model, described by Stephen Jay Gould, the late Harvard paleobiologist. NOMA is based upon the idea that science and religion govern two separate domains. The findings of one should not be allowed to shape, intrude upon, or define the other. Science interprets the physical, material world, while religion interprets the world of values, morals, and spiritual beliefs.⁵

The problem with NOMA is that it leaves no room for truly historical religions such as Judaism and Christianity. These religions say that the supernatural has invaded, and will continue to invade, the natural world from time to time. Even Walton himself is not willing to fully accept NOMA because it would exclude all the miracles of the Bible, including Christ's incarnation, miracles, and resurrection. He reserves his "layered-cake" model particularly for the early chapters of Genesis. In the NT, he prefers to view miracles such as the incarnation more like what he terms a "marble-cake," with the supernatural more obviously intruding into the natural world.

This mixed-methodological approach to interpreting different sections of the Bible in different ways appears inconsistent. Could Adventism afford to take Walton's approach seriously, even if they could swallow its inconsistency? I believe the answer is a firm no. It is an answer based in part on the profound theological differences between the Reformed tradition and the Adventist theological heritage, and it revolves around a core pillar of Adventist theology—the great controversy framework of history.

Whether he claims it or not, Walton is influenced by the Reformed Calvinistic tradition, in which the highest concern is the glory of God as shown in his sovereignty. On the issue of God's inscrutable authority, he invokes the classic Reformed argument that God's ways of dealing with humanity are truly beyond comprehension. He acknowledges that "an evolutionary system is difficult to reconcile to the character of God"; but he seeks to answer this objection with the argument that "God in his wisdom has done things in the way that he has. We cannot stand in judgment of that, and we cannot expect to understand it all."⁶

This may be a satisfactory response for a thinker within the Reformed tradition. Adventists, however, find their roots in Arminianism and have as their greatest concern the character of God, as demonstrated in his love and

⁵Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 49-67.

⁶*Ibid.*, 133-134.

fairness in dealing with his creation. While both Adventists and Reformed Calvinists value the other's views about God, when faced with the dilemma of choosing between God's sovereignty and human free will, Calvinists choose to emphasize God's sovereignty over his loving character. The result is a God who eternally condemns those who have no choice but to sin.⁷ Adventists, on the other hand, believe that a central point of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan, which God has let unfold for millennia, is to show that the ways of God are righteous and true and to reveal his true character of love—God allows all people to freely choose whether to follow him and then grants power to succeed in following his way. In the Adventist perspective, God voluntarily limits his sovereignty by respecting our free choice. This self-limitation is an expression of God's character of love.

How do these theological positions relate to Genesis 1? First, the Calvinist, who believes that God created much of humanity in order to condemn them to everlasting torment in hell, will have no qualms about God creating through a process that requires death, i.e., evolution, with its primary mechanism of survival of the fittest. If Adventists, on the other hand, were to accept a prefall "good" and call it "good," creation that involved suffering and death, they would see their whole theological framework based on the Great Controversy between good and evil basically splinter apart.

A God who creates through the use of sin and suffering is one who would not fare well even under imperfect human standards of fairness and kindness. The Bible goes out of its way to affirm that death came into the world *through* humanity's sin (Rom 5:12). It teaches that suffering and death in nature and the animal world is connected with the attempt to bring back fallen humanity. "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-21).

This unwilling subjection to "futility" is not consistent with the "good" that God saw throughout his initial creation (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The problem of reconciling "goodness" with the suffering and death of sentient beings appears insuperable, at least if one believes that the Bible teaches a death-free heavenly world. Ultimately, Adventism cannot accept theistic evolution, or any variant of it, that allows suffering and death on earth before Adam's sin, because has staked its theological framework on the revelation of God's moral government and character of love in history.

⁷R. E. Olson describes Calvinist theologian Theodore Beza as putting it, "those who suffer for eternity in hell can at least take comfort in the fact that they are there for the greater glory of God" (*The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999], 459; see esp. 454-472).