

## A RESPONSE TO JOHN H. WALTON'S *LOST WORLD OF GENESIS ONE*<sup>1</sup>

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John Walton's main thesis is that Genesis 1 is not "an account of material origins"; it does not mean to speak about the creation, the beginning of the heavens and earth as such, but should be understood "as an account of functional origins."<sup>2</sup> What the biblical text is about, claims this author, concerns the beginning of the operation of creation—when creation started to be operative, to function, and to work for humans and nature—and not about the beginning of matter—of rocks, plants, and even animals and anthropological specimens, which did, in fact, precede this account.<sup>3</sup> Walton defends his reading of the biblical texts on the basis of four literary and exegetical arguments. His defense is presented convincingly, and his reading of Genesis 1 offers, in the context of the science-and-religion debate, a highly seductive option. The problem that I have with Walton is that he is often right.

### *Walton is Right: Near Eastern Cosmogonies are More about Functionality than Material Origins*

Walton is right in his reference to ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies—they are indeed more about the functions of the cosmos than about its material. Using what the author identifies as "Near Eastern texts giving information about creation" or "full-fledged creation texts,"<sup>4</sup> the author shows evidence of the functional intent of the Genesis accounts. What has been overlooked, however, in Walton's analysis is the reason for this emphasis in ancient cosmogonies. Unlike the Genesis creation accounts, these other cosmogonies are not meant to be "creation stories." Instead, they are cosmogonic texts. They are anthropocentric. Thus their purpose is not to explain the presence of created objects, but to provide reasons for phenomena observed in the present human condition. In Egyptian literature, for instance,<sup>5</sup> we find Spell 1130 of the *Coffin Texts*, which, although constituted with cosmogonic

<sup>1</sup>A part of this paper was presented at the Adventist Forum Conference, Chicago, Illinois, 3 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup>John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2009), 163.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>5</sup>On the characteristic features of Egyptian cosmogony, see Susanne Bickel, *La Cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, OBO 134 (Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions Universitaires, 1994), 213.

material, does not intend to inform about origins, but is for understanding the existence of evil in the world. The reason for these acts of creation is, in fact, explicitly given in the introduction:<sup>6</sup> “to silence evil” (*n-mrw.t sgrt jsft*). The intention of this text is, then, essentially anthropocentric. The actions of the divine Creator are all human-centered and serve only the purpose of accounting for a function of the world. What is noteworthy is that this literary role is also attested in the Hebrew Bible. Besides the Genesis creation story, whose cosmogonic nature is clearly and explicitly affirmed in its introduction as well as in its conclusion (Gen 1:1, cf. 2:4), the Bible contains a number of “cosmogonic” texts whose purpose is other than to account for the origin of the cosmos.

These other passages only use cosmogonic traditions anchored, this time, in the biblical memory to serve the purpose of a theological idea or to deal with an anthropological concern. Job 38–41 uses the creation to convey the idea of God’s grandeur versus man’s littleness and to incite repentance and humility (42:6). Proverbs 8:22–36 uses it to promote the search for wisdom (v. 35); Psalm 104 refers to creation to justify the acts of worship and blessing the Lord (vv. 1, 33–34), and Eccl 1:1–11 to teach about the vanity of the world and of the human condition (vv. 2, 14). Walton’s argument about the function of cosmogonic texts holds, then, only for those texts whose recognized intent is functional in nature; but, again, it does not hold for the Genesis creation text, whose explicit and primary intent is cosmogonic. The fact that the Hebrew Bible contains both genres—cosmogonic and functional, with the latter referring back to the former—constitutes another evidence of the cosmogonic intent of the Genesis creation accounts.

Another important problem in Walton’s connection with the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies is his uncritical adoption of these texts as “the key” for understanding the biblical text of creation.<sup>7</sup> He not only overlooks the significant differences between the two cosmogonic traditions, but also deliberately ignores the strong polemic intent of the biblical text precisely directed against these other cosmogonic traditions of the ancient Near East.<sup>8</sup>

*Walton is Right concerning the Functional  
Uses of the Verb bārā’*

Walton is also right concerning the functional uses of the verb *bārā’*. Indeed in several biblical occurrences this verb does not directly refer to the historical

<sup>6</sup>CT. 1130 VII462c.

<sup>7</sup>Walton, 12.

<sup>8</sup>See esp. Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *EvQ* (1974): 81–102; J. Doukhan, “The Genesis Creation Story: Text, Issues, and Truth,” *Origins* 55 (2004): 18–20.

“making” of objects, but appears in theological texts to express a theological idea implying function. Again, the purpose for this reference to creation is not to speak about cosmic origins, but to evoke an affinity with the process of the original event of creation. This is why in most of the passages in which the verb *bārā*’ appears it is connected to the idea of newness (Exod 34:10; Num 16:30; Deut 4:32; Pss 51:10; 102:18; 104:30; Isa 4:5; 41:19-20; 42:5, cf. v. 9). This also explains why the verb *bārā*’ is often used to evoke the idea of salvation, which implies a process of radical change from a negative to a positive state (Isa 42:5; 43:1, 15).

These texts are not just using the motif of creation for their own functional purpose; the way they allude or refer to the event of creation, the words, the syntax, and the structure of these texts denote clearly that they all refer to a single literary source as recorded in Genesis 1–2.<sup>9</sup> This way of pointing back to the prior document presupposes the event of creation. It is not the idea of function—the experience of salvation or of newness—that has produced and, therefore, preceded the idea of creation, but the other way around. Creation is already assumed to be a past event, and it is on the basis of this reference that the functional idea has been generated and elaborated.

The fact that these secondary texts refer to the Genesis text of creation and apply it in a functional sense does not mean, then, that this was the sense implied in the creation accounts. This referring-back to that text may even suggest that the sense of function was not originally intended in the creation accounts, and may well have been an *a posteriori* application. Indeed among those texts that use the verb *bārā*’, there are a number that refer to creation for no other purpose than for what it is, namely, a specific historical event of the past (Isa 42:5; Deut 4:32; Ps 89:47; Eccl 12:1).

The same reasoning could apply to Ps 148:5, where the “celestial inhabitants” have been created, according to Walton, “to praise the Lord,” when the Psalm is, in fact, saying that creation is the reason for worship—not that the function of creation is worship, but that worship is the natural human response to creation, a message that pervades the whole book of Psalms. Worship follows creation; creation does not follow worship. Thus it is not worship that justifies and makes sense of creation, as is implied in a functional understanding of creation. It is creation that makes sense of worship. Besides, in the great majority of texts, as listed and classified by Walton himself,<sup>10</sup> creation does, indeed, play a role in applying functions to real material objects. The cosmos, light, plants, animals, and people are material objects.

<sup>9</sup>Jacques B. Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story*, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 5 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup>Walton, 41, 43.

*Walton is Right in His Exegetical Analysis  
of the Genesis Creation Story*

In his exegetical analysis of the Genesis creation story, Walton is right. Walton is right when he observes that at the precreation stage (Gen 1:2) nothing yet functioned. But the reason for this unproductivity is not just because it does not work; it does not work simply because there is nothing yet there. The terminology chosen by the author intends to mark nonexistence rather than just the absence of functionality, an understanding suggested by the parallelism of the two creation accounts, which makes the words *tobu wabohu* (“without form and void”) in Gen 1:2 correspond to the negative words *’ayin* (“not”), *terem* (“not yet”), and *lo’* (“not”) in Gen 2:5,<sup>11</sup> an equivalence that is confirmed in biblical usage (Isa 40:17; 45:19; Jer 4:23).

Walton is right in his functional understanding of the word *tob* (“good”), but it would not be right to limit the sense of *tob* to that meaning. Thus the word *tob* may also refer to aesthetic beauty (Gen 24:16; 1 Sam 16:12; 1 Kgs 1:6; Dan 1:4), especially when it is associated with the word *ra’ab* (“see”), as is the case in the first creation account (Gen 1:1, 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). *Tob* may also belong to the ethical domain (1 Sam 18:5; 29:6, 9; 2 Sam 3:36). Thus the view that God was only referring to function when he said “it is not good for man to be alone”<sup>12</sup> confines the value of the human conjugal condition to a mere utility and overlooks other aspects of the relationship, including ethics, aesthetics, and even love and emotional happiness, as the immediate context suggests it should have (Gen 2:23).

Walton is right when he sees function in the creation accounts. The most “enlightening” textual evidence is found in the passage reporting the creation of the luminaries. Here the syntax clearly supports Walton’s thesis of the creation of function and not of material. Indeed the objects mentioned in the text are directly and systematically related to their function through the *lamed* of purpose (vv. 14-18). The luminaries exist (vv. 14-15), are made (v. 16), are given (vv. 17-18) *for* the function (*lamed* of purpose) of separating day and night, light and darkness, and for ruling over time—a function previously held by God himself (v. 4).

Yet there are many other works of the creation week in which function is totally absent. On days five and six, the account records the creation of living beings—animals and humans—and the creation of their function of reproduction. Nevertheless, God did not just make them to reproduce, as if only function was intended.<sup>13</sup> After having created humans “male and female” (Gen 1:27), God, then, provides for the reproductive system to function, according to Gen 1:28. The two creations, male and female, are dependent,

<sup>11</sup>Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story*, 54.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 67.

the former being the basis for the latter. Also the parallel between the plants coming from the earth and the living beings appearing on the earth suggests that the creation of plants and seeds pertains to “the same sort of marvel.”<sup>14</sup> This process confirms that the act of creation for plants is similar to that of the creatures, since these are, in the same manner, the result of an external divine creation and not merely the inner product or natural function of the earth.

Walton’s understanding of the creation of humans in God’s image as a function following and, therefore, distinct from the actual creation of the physical human, contradicts not only the holistic view of biblical anthropology, but also the actual biblical description of the creation of humanity as coming directly from God’s hands and breath (Gen 2:7). According to the biblical text, the divine creation of humans concerns their material *and* their spiritual components. Although Walton notes the difference between ancient Near Eastern texts, which “only deal with the mass of humanity” and have only an “archetypal understanding” of human origins,<sup>15</sup> and the Bible, which speaks about the creation of an individual or a couple, he does not, however, draw the logical lesson from this observation. In actuality, the biblical focus on particular individuals, Adam and Eve, denotes a concern that is more historical than philosophical. Before serving as a spiritual message about the meaning of human destiny (function), the biblical account is, first, a historical report (matter). Thus the divine creative acts demonstrate how the creation of function systematically accompanies the creation of matter.

Walton’s view of function is not clear. Thus it often seems that function belongs to the spiritual domain (e.g., God’s image in man), distinct from the material substance of creation (e.g., human body). Not only is this dissociation artificial, but it also pertains to a dualistic approach that is foreign to biblical thinking. How can, for instance, the function of taste in the vegetable be separated from its material reality? For matter without its function, the body without the spirit, does not exist, just as the function without the matter or the spirit without the body does not exist. Significantly, the *ruah*, the spirit, is the principle of life (Ps 104:30)! Also significant is the fact that the biblical account does not totally ignore the creation of function; but the very fact that when function is intended, it is specifically indicated through the use of syntax and grammar suggests that when it is not there, it should not be assumed.

*Walton is Right in His Observation of the Connection  
between the Temple and Creation*

Walton is right in his observation of the connection between the temple and creation, as in the ancient world “temples were considered symbols of the

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Walton, 70.

cosmos.”<sup>16</sup> The Bible contains many evidences of that connection. Yet Walton’s deduction that “the Cosmos Is a Temple”<sup>17</sup> and that, therefore, Genesis 1 “should be understood as an account of functional origins of the cosmos as a temple”<sup>18</sup> goes too far and even distorts the biblical intention. In the Bible, it is not creation that is like the temple, but the temple that is like creation. It is not creation that speaks about the temple with the intention of conveying ideas of salvation; it is the temple that speaks about creation in order to emphasize the cosmic scope of salvation.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this chronological misplacement is that in Walton’s perspective the temple precedes creation, and, therefore, Genesis 1 is a temple text that does not intend to speak about origins, but rather conveys spiritual lessons related to the life and liturgy of the temple, a hypothesis that is found in the controversial and never-documented premise of an enthronement festival or New Year celebration of creation.<sup>20</sup> In fact, this chronological reversal is consistent with traditional ideas foundational to biblical criticism that the creation story originated in the postexilic Priestly source, a view that has been reassessed by Y. Kauffmann.<sup>21</sup> This reverse-sequence is also suspect as it betrays the classic Marcionite paradigm that prioritizes spiritual redemption over material creation,<sup>22</sup> a scheme adopted by theologians such as R. Bultmann, K. Barth, and G. Von Rad, which still dominates the contemporary theological scene.<sup>23</sup> All this current of thought is, in fact, indebted to the mental habits of Western thinking anchored in the Cartesian paradigm that places thinking before existence (“I think, therefore I am”). Hebrew thinking takes the reverse direction and prefers, on the contrary, to place history and existence before spiritual and theological constructions (Exod 24:7). Indeed, Hebrew thinking is essentially historically oriented, which is immediately evident in the literary genre that characterizes

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>19</sup>See the theology of *kippur*, which promotes the “cleansing of the sanctuary/temple,” thereby implying the cleansing of the creation (Jacques Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000], 129-130; Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry Into the Jewish Bible* [Minneapolis: Winston, 1985], 124).

<sup>20</sup>Walton, 90-91.

<sup>21</sup>See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 175-200.

<sup>22</sup>See Claus Westermann’s discussion on creation/redemption in *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 113-123.

<sup>23</sup>See Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story*, 190-197; 227-240.

the Genesis creation story, a *toledot* (“genealogy,” Gen 2:4a).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the biblical author uses the term *toledot* for the creation of the heavens and the earth *and* for the genealogy of the patriarchs (Genesis 12–50) shows his intent to relate historically the event of creation to the rest of Israelite history. If history and the emphasis on the concrete physical flesh and matter are so fundamental in Hebrew thinking, as recognized by many biblical scholars, why, then, would such an important aspect of creation, its historical dimension, be completely ignored in the creation story? If “Genesis 1 is not that story,”<sup>25</sup> where is that story? Walton’s response is simply that “the material phase had been carried out for long ages prior to the seven days of Genesis.”<sup>26</sup> One implication Walton infers from this last observation is that “death did exist in the pre-Fall world.”<sup>27</sup> Not only is this information completely absent from the biblical text, but it even goes against the thrust of the Genesis text, which is all about life (Gen 1:29–30) and is written from the “not yet” perspective.<sup>28</sup>

Walton’s connection between Genesis 1 and the temple also affects his understanding of the very nature of those seven days of Genesis and, by implication, the meaning of the seventh-day Sabbath. Since for him the cosmos is a temple, the seven days of creation relate, then, to the cosmic inauguration of the temple and do not concern material origins. In this view, the nature of the days of the creation week, as twenty-four-hour days, does not play a significant role because these days are not related to the age of the earth. They do not refer to the time of the cosmos, but to a liturgical time. They are temple days, not creation days. Yet nothing in the text allows such a “spiritual-functional” interpretation of the days, which are described in Genesis 1 as clearly and only creation days and not liturgical days in the context of worship. We have to wait until the end of the creation work, on the seventh day, to enter into a time of worship. For Walton, the Sabbath rest, although valuable and rich in content,<sup>29</sup> has lost its basic justification from creation (Exod 20:11). For him, the Genesis Sabbath does not mark the end of creation, but, on the contrary, the beginning of God’s ruling activity. Therefore, it does not apply to human observance: “Obviously, God is not asking us to imitate his Sabbath rest by taking the functional controls.”<sup>30</sup> Walton founds his views on the basis of the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonic

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 213–220.

<sup>25</sup>Walton, 96.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>28</sup>See above my comments on the parallelism between the two creation stories.

<sup>29</sup>Walton, 146–147.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 147.

views of the day of rest. Yet his reconstruction in the light of these parallels does not do justice to the fundamental difference between the divine rest in the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and the divine rest that follows the six days of the Genesis creation story. Unlike the gods of the ancient Near East, the God of the Bible does not rest in order to rule and undertake “the normal operations of the cosmos” or to enslave his creatures and be served by them.<sup>31</sup> Instead, God rests in order to conclude his work and thus enter into loving relationship with his human creatures. It is a time of worship, but it is also a time to remember the past and finished creation work (Gen 2:1-2).

In the rest of the book, in which Walton situates himself in the context of the science-and-religion debate, his philosophical presupposition is unveiled. In spite of his numerous affirmations against what he calls the “metaphysical implications” of evolution<sup>32</sup> and his protest that “this book is not promoting evolution,”<sup>33</sup> Walton’s reading of Genesis 1 stands in good harmony with evolution, as he seems to recognize, noting that “Genesis 1 offers no objections to biological evolution.”<sup>34</sup> “There is no reason to believe that biological evolution teaches something contradictory to the Bible.”<sup>35</sup> “In the interpretation of the text that I have offered, very little found in evolutionary theory would be objectionable.”<sup>36</sup>

This last observation may reveal the other problem I have with Walton’s approach to the biblical text. Although he holds a high value of Scripture in the evangelical tradition, his theological and philosophical presuppositions still prevail over his exegesis. He readily confesses this priority, stating: “Even though it is natural to defend our exegesis, it is arguably even more important to defend our theology.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Walton could have reached different theological conclusions had he reversed the sequence and just remained faithful to the principle he meant to uphold, namely, that “we must be led by the text.”<sup>38</sup>

I do understand Walton’s dilemma and share his concern, especially in regard to the science-and-religion debate. If the biblical text means what it says—that there was a creation of matter in six literal days—we have a serious problem; our thinking, our intelligence, is challenged. We are thus confronted by the following alternatives: either we suppress our thinking and by faith we

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 165.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 94.



slavishly and naively submit ourselves to the words of the text, or we ignore the text so that we can feel comfortable with our thinking. As thinkers of faith, neither of these options is satisfactory. Thus the temptation has too often been to change the text or “interpret” it so that it fits with our thinking. Concordism, which has often been the option of choice for those who hold a high view of Scripture along with a high view of science and reason, becomes a tempting alternative for breaking the tension and solving the unbearable question, a trap which Walton denounces.<sup>39</sup> I do not think that this direction is satisfactory either. I suggest, then, that, whether we receive the biblical text as it is or are engaged in the demanding adventure of thinking, we assume our question without answer. For the question without answer is more important than the answer without questions. On the other hand, the answer that is given to us is more important than the answer that we may give. Unfortunately, in our discussion about our questions without answer we have missed the answer that was contained in creation itself. The beauty and the power of life and the wonders of creation, all that which makes my question irrelevant, is more important than all my brilliant solutions. Indeed we should not abandon searching for the complexities of the divine creation, “all that has been done under the sun,” for this is the “grievous task God has given to the sons of men” (Eccl 1:13). At the same time, we should realize with Qohelet that all this enterprise is mere “vanity and grasping for the wind” (Eccl 1:14). We should, therefore, or at least also, meditate on this wonder of creation that has been offered to us, which is far more important than all the answers we are tempted to give in order to solve it.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 16-19.