

**REVIEW OF JOHN H. WALTON'S *GENESIS 1
AS ANCIENT COSMOLOGY***

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Following his seminal book designed for the general public, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins*,¹ John Walton has written this more technical study, *Genesis One as Ancient Cosmology*,² to convince the expert or the informed theologian. His contention is that, as with the rest of the ancient world, the focus of the Genesis creation accounts concerns only the functions of the cosmos and has, therefore, nothing to do with its material origins (ix). Indeed, the creation story is to be interpreted, according to Walton, strictly in temple terms as a liturgical document, rather than as a document reporting the actual origins of the cosmos.

In order to make his case, Walton proceeds methodically. In section 1, he presents the characteristic features of ancient cosmogonies, demonstrating that these methodologies emphasize function—that is, as notions of existence and nonexistence, of separation, of the place of the gods and of humans, and of the relationship between the cosmos and the divine rest—rather than material origins. An important aspect of the functional nature of these cosmogonies is that they all present the cosmos as a temple. The creation texts are thus to be understood liturgically as functions of worship rather than as reports of the historical and material origins of the cosmos.

In the second section, the author applies the same paradigms used in the previous section to his analysis of Genesis 1 in order to determine to what extent the notions observed in ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies are related to the biblical accounts. His analysis of Genesis 1 leads him to conclude that the functional nature of the text relies on its connection to the temple. Thus “the entire cosmos is viewed as a temple designed to function on behalf of humanity.”³ This view has bearing on the meaning of the Sabbath, the day of rest, which is, according to Walton, to be understood as the moment when

¹John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009); see Jacques Doukhan, “A Response to John H. Walton’s *Lost World of Genesis One*,” *AUSS* 49 (2011): 197-205.

²John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winnona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

³*Ibid.*, 190.

God takes his place in the temple as ruler of the cosmos that he has “set in order” (and not “created”).

The conclusion of the book reminds the reader of the extent and nature of the intersection between Genesis 1 and other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, particularly what is shared with or distinct from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian perspectives. Walton proposes that although Israelite cosmology fits its geographical and historical environment, it contains no new ideas, especially in regard to its functional emphasis. The greatest differences between the Israelite and the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmologies, he contends, is that the divine and cosmic functions are not related in the Genesis 1 account the way they are in other parts of the ancient world (e.g., existence and theomachy).

Walton conducts his demonstration with great pedagogy, always defining his notions and concluding each step with a clear and helpful summary. The reading is rigorous, but often interesting.⁴ There is no doubt that his most important contribution is “the realization that the Genesis account pertains to functional origins rather than material origins and that temple ideology underlies the Genesis cosmology.”⁵ The main problem, however, concerns the validity of that “realization.” I will, therefore, focus on this aspect of his discussion. Indeed, a number of observations suggest that this fundamental assumption about the functional nature of these accounts, whether in the ancient Near Eastern world or in Genesis 1, is not as compelling as his argument may imply.

Since Walton begins with the notion of functionality in the ancient Near Eastern world, it is fitting to begin my evaluation here. It is indeed important to assess to what extent ancient Near Eastern cosmologies have functional cosmologies and, if they are functional, to understand why and in what way they are so. Thus, for example, the Egyptian Memphite text of creation states: “He created sleep to end weariness, waking for looking after food . . . remedies to end illness, wine to end affliction . . . wealth for truthfulness, poverty for falsehood.”⁶ Walton also finds an example in Mesopotamian cosmology. Here created things are listed by their function, with the text implying that this functionality is for the benefit of humans. Thus the creation account in the Sumerian text, *The Exploits of Ninurta*, focuses on the functions of production (e.g., the creation of herbs, honey and wine, cedar and cypress trees), which are designed “for you.”⁷

This attention to the functionality of creation, rather than to its ontological reality, accounts for the difficulty of distinguishing between the

⁴See, e.g., his comments on “the Spirit of God” (ibid., 148-149).

⁵Ibid., 198-199.

⁶Ibid., 39.

⁷Ibid., 52.

idea of creation and the idea of reorganization, “for when functions are involved, creation and reorganization overlap considerably.”⁸ This confusion also explains why the creation is identified with the notion of “destiny,” since references to creation are concerned only with the actual destinies in the present world.⁹

However, just because the functional nature of creation is emphasized in these ancient Near Eastern texts, it does not mean that this property is also necessary for the interpretation of the Genesis text. Functionality pertains to the specifically mythological nature of these texts and does not apply to the specifically historical and antimythological nature of Genesis 1. When the Egyptian view of creation is described as an unfolding process—that is, a becoming (*hpm*) and hence functional process¹⁰—it is due to its mythological nature. Creation is here described as a becoming from the gods. It is because the gods of the ancient Near Eastern world are inside the cosmos and not outside of it¹¹ that creation is viewed here as a function. Since the gods identify with the functions of the cosmos (e.g., sun, moon, water, heaven, and earth), they are divine. Thus these creation accounts will be concerned with functional activity. Not only is the notion that the creation of humans was primarily for serving the gods¹² a foreign idea, but it is, in fact, contrary to the biblical paradigm that suggests the opposite. God created humans not for the function of serving him and giving him food, but on the contrary that he may serve them and give them food (Gen 1:29-30).

In his systematic treatment of Genesis 1, Walton supports his thesis of function in a number of ways. I will now critique them:

1. *Genesis 1:1 and bara' ("create").* The assumption that the verb *bara'* (“create”) does not imply the creation of material objects is highly subjective as it stumbles on the evidence found throughout the OT: heavens and earth (Gen 1:1), creatures of the sea (Gen 1:21), people (Gen 1:27), pure heart (Ps 51:2), you (Isa 43:1), cloud of smoke (Isa 4:5), starry host (Gen 1:14), ends of the earth (Job 28:24), wind (Job 28:24), and covenant people (Deut 32:6) are in their respective contexts material realities. The reference to the Piel form to justify the idea of separation (Gen 1:4, 7) hardly holds as this verb may rather belong to another root than the one used in the Qal and the Nifal.¹³

2. *Genesis 1:2 and the precosmic condition.* Nothing in the text or in the semantic baggage suggests that the expression *tohu wabohu* refers, as Walton contends, to the state of disorganization and lack of function of the world. Instead,

⁸Ibid., 41.

⁹Ibid., 57.

¹⁰Ibid., 29.

¹¹Ibid., 62.

¹²Ibid., 85.

¹³See also my discussion on the verb *bara'* in Doukhan.

it describes a state of emptiness, as suggested through the onomatopoeia and ontological negativity, and, as also suggested by its associations with the words *'ayn* (“not”) (Isa 45:19; Jer 4:23) and *'efes* (“nothing”) (Isa 40:17) and its Genesis 2 parallel section, the second creation story, with the words *'ayn* (“not”) (Gen 2:5) and *terem* (“before, not yet”) (Gen 2:5).¹⁴

3. *Days 1-3 and “day” and “night.”* The creation of “day” and “night” (functions), following the creation of light (not a function) shows that the creation of function is subsequent to the creation of a material entity. In addition, that the firmament (*raqi'*) is described in the functional terms of separation does not necessarily mean that the function was created rather than the matter. This sequence suggests instead that here again function is subsequent to matter, for function depends on the reality of matter. Ironically, while Walton notes the parallel between the separating function of the Hebrew *raqi'* (“firmament”) and the function of the Egyptian god of the air, Shu, who separates the earth from the sky,¹⁵ he still maintains the critical view that the ancient Israelites understood the *raqi'* as a solid material. Walton is somehow aware of this contradiction since, in the light of this parallel, he immediately warns “against a view that is too material.”¹⁶

4. *Genesis 1 and “it was good.”* The Hebrew word for “good” (*tov*) means more than the idea of efficiency, as argued by Walton. The word *tov* also includes the idea of aesthetic, that is, “beautiful,” which better fits the regular context of “God saw” (Gen 1:1, 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It thus implies a visible material reality and not just the invisible operation that “the cosmos functioned well.”¹⁷

5. *Days 4-6 and time.* On the fourth day of creation week the account introduces the function of time before the reference to the celestial bodies, thereby suggesting that here the idea of function may be its main focus since it implies that the celestial bodies already exist. This interpretation does not, however, support Walton’s thesis that the creation account is all about function. The fact that the idea of function is clearly intended here and explicitly indicated suggests instead that when function is not intended, such an interpretation is not justified. It is, for instance, significant that the mention of the creation of the sea creatures (Gen 1:21) precedes the mention of their reproductive function (Gen 1:22). This sequence shows that once again function is subordinate to creation and is not to be substituted in its place, as Walton contends. Likewise, the creation of humans, which presents

¹⁴See Jacques Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure*, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 5 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1982), 53-73.

¹⁵Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 159.

¹⁶Ibid., 160.

¹⁷Ibid., 169.

their material constitution in the parallel text of creation (Gen 2:7), excludes the possibility defended by Walton that only their spiritual function, the *imago Dei*, was meant. Such a dualist interpretation would not only contradict the plain sense of the account, which implies the creation of physical organs with their functions of eating and reproducing, it would also be completely at odds with the general monistic views of the Hebrew Scriptures. Walton is correct in his observation that the *imago Dei* does not contain “*divine* ingredients,” an idea characteristic of Near Eastern mythological views of *ex-divino* creations. The nonbiological connection with the deity does not exclude, however, the material presence of physical elements and does not constitute, therefore, a serious and convincing argument on behalf of the spiritual functionality of the *imago Dei*.

6. *Day 7.* Walton’s thesis that God’s rest on the seventh-day Sabbath of creation does not mean “rest,” but, on the contrary, “an act of engagement,”¹⁸ implicitly questions the validity of resting on the seventh-day Sabbath and stumbles on the common-sense and plain meaning of the word “rest” associated with the Sabbath. God’s injunction to humans to “rest,” that is, to disengage from activity, is a clear indication of the meaning of “rest” here intended for the Sabbath of God. Even if “rest” is incompatible with the divine nature, the fact that God enters into human “space” pertains to his will and capacity of incarnation in order to meet humans where they are. God’s rest in Genesis 2 is also fundamentally different from that of the gods in other Near Eastern texts. While in the biblical account God rests because he “ended His work” (Gen 2:2), the Egyptian and Mesopotamian gods do not rest, but, on the contrary, begin to rule the world, which is interpreted by Walton as the work of creation. Walton’s identification of the gods’ settling into the temple to rest is also problematic, since the word “rest” is never used to characterize this divine settling in Genesis 2. Instead, this stage is described as the beginning of the gods’ activities. The ancient Near Eastern cosmos becomes functional after the rest,¹⁹ while in Genesis 1 the world is made functional before the Sabbath rest (a point that Walton consistently makes). Note also that the gods’ rest is only achieved when humans are created for the purpose of working for them,²⁰ while in the biblical story God rests after he created humans. Not to mention the anachronism, Walton associates the Sabbath rest in Genesis 1 with the creation described in Genesis 2,²¹ which belongs rather to the sixth day when God creates humans and animals and then plants a garden.

¹⁸Ibid., 180.

¹⁹Ibid., 117.

²⁰Ibid., 114.

²¹Ibid., 187.

The parallel between the building of the temple and the creation of the cosmos, although well documented, does not necessarily imply that the creation accounts are concerned only with the function of worship. As Walton notes, “this element is not explicit in the text,”²² and is, therefore, “uncertain.”²³ In fact, to paraphrase Walton, “it might be more likely that the association is the reverse;”²⁴ namely, that the temple inauguration is modeled after the Genesis account. Interestingly, the way this association is worded in the Scriptures suggests indeed that it is creation that precedes the temple and not the other way around: “He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which He has established forever” (Ps 78:69). This simple observation suggests the precedence of creation over the temple. The creation accounts do not imply the temple, but rather the temple implies creation. The function of worship is inferred from creation, but the “functions” of creation are not inferred from worship (Neh 9:6; Pss 95:6; 102:18).

Walton concludes his essay hoping that his contribution will help “in the clear definition of the nature of biblical authority and revelation.”²⁵ Indeed it does, or at least it inspires a reflection about the complex process of revelation. The comparison between the biblical creation story and its ancient Near Eastern parallels suggests not only points of connection between them, but also significant differences, which have been skillfully and insightfully brought out by Walton. One of them, the intention of functionality in the texts, has some bearing precisely on the issue of revelation. Walton is correct when he notes that the ancient Near Eastern texts of creation are essentially functional; but what he fails to realize is the reason why they are so, while the Genesis accounts of origins are not. While the biblical creation story intends to report on the event of origins, the ancient Near Eastern texts are only bringing opinions from the point of view of the one who observes the functions of creation. While the biblical creation accounts refer to the origins of the cosmos in which humans are only an infinitely small part, the ancient Near Eastern accounts focus on their world and are essentially anthropocentric. The former pertains to the revelation about the event of creation, while the latter pertains to *a posteriori* human experience of that creation.

²²Ibid., 195.

²³Ibid., 196.

²⁴Ibid., 182.

²⁵Ibid., 199.