



Walton, John H.

The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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The Lost World of Genesis One (hereafter *LWGO*) is a book that has received plenty of attention over the past year from folks of all stripes. Having read so much about it in various reviews and in the comment threads on various blogs I decided that it was time to check it out for myself. I'd already been impressed with John H. Walton's work on the background to Genesis in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* and *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* so I had a reasonable expectation that I'd be impressed here as well. I'm glad to say that Walton didn't disappoint. In *LWGO* he presents an argument that may seem somewhat controversial to many people who think about the issue of creation according to the Bible's account but it's one that makes so much sense it cannot be ignored. In short Walton argues for a functional creation depicted in Genesis 1 rather than a material creation.

Walton skillfully works his way through a variety of ancient Near Eastern texts, along with the various creative days of Genesis 1, showing that material origins were not at the forefront of any of these texts. Rather they show God (or the gods) assigning functions for the purpose of working in an ordered system. With various analogies Walton shows how simply "creating" material doesn't necessarily make the object what it was intended to be; instead the object must be assigned a function and then operate according to that function to truly be "created." But Walton also sees these creation texts as depicting a cosmic temple. It sounds strange at first but once he makes his case it's hard to ignore it. On Walton's reading the seventh day is a day of rest

for a reason completely different than most of us generally think—it's not that God stopped working or took a nap or anything like that—but temples were built for the sole purpose of deity resting in them! In other words, once the work of assigning the various functionaries in the cosmos their functions was completed, God could sit down and rest (= reside) in his temple and enjoy that everything was working as he intended it.

This brings me to a point that I've been arguing for some time—most recently with a friend after being subjected to hours of Ken Ham DVDs—but when God calls his creation "good" he's not pronouncing a moral judgment; he's simply announcing that everything is working the way he intended it to work. This has been my understanding for a while now and within Walton's framework it makes even better sense! And if the Ken Hams of the world tend to bother you then rest assured, Walton has some criticism for them; but not for them alone, also for everyone who reads Genesis 1 as being about material functions. Walton briefly summarizes and criticizes the various explanations of creation like the Day/Age Theory (which doesn't do justice to the word יום which at face value means 'day' as we think of a 'day') and the Gap Theory (which wrongly reads היתה of Gen. 1:2 as saying 'became' rather than 'was' and leaves way too many questions unanswered concerning pre-Adamic beings) as well as theistic evolution (which is functionally deistic in that it says God set the process in motion but then stepped back and let it happen as it would). All of these are problematic because they treat Genesis 1 as if it is concerned to explain material origins rather than functional ones.

I could carry on about how fantastic a book this is, and I've underlined quotable passages on nearly every other page of my copy, but in the end I think Walton makes a strong case and destroys a few idols in the process. For example, he rightly erases the line drawn between 'natural' and 'supernatural.' In the ancient world everything functioned because of God (or the gods) and to think that anything happened apart from them is unimaginable. He also lays to rest the silly idea that the age of the earth can be determined based on anything that Scripture says. He constantly pleads with the reader to stay far away from anachronism and avoid asking questions of the text that the text doesn't seek to address. And perhaps my favorite sacred idea that has come toppling down in the pages of *LWGO* is another thing that I've argued against for quite some time, namely that Adam & Eve were immortal and that there was no death of any kind prior to the fall. According to the text death came to Adam & Eve after the fall because their access to the tree of life was restricted. And the idea that there was no death of any kind is a serious misreading of Paul when he says that "by one man sin entered the world and death through sin" (Rom. 5:12) since Paul is obviously referring to the death of mankind! Life and death was always a part of the creation and Walton does well to highlight this!

My objections to this book are minimal and peripheral. I'd take issue with Walton's insistence that ancient thinkers didn't use words like "bowels" or "heart" metaphorically (see p. 18) and I

lament that there is no Scripture index, but as I said, these are extremely minor issues. My lack of interest in the creation vs. evolution debate as well as intelligent design being taught in schools made the last few chapters a bit boring to me personally but those interested in such things will enjoy them much more than I did to be sure. In the end Walton managed to cram a lot of information into 18 succinct (yet dense) propositions and some FAQs at the end. His prose is immaculate and students at just about any level can understand this book with ease. I highly recommend it to one and all!