

The Lost World of John Walton

Book Review of *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, by John H. Walton (IVP Academic, 2015)

Upon the release in 2006 of Francis Collins's *Language of God*, a bestseller by a respected evangelical scientist who advocates theistic evolution (or "evolutionary creation"), a campaign was launched to establish theistic evolution as the default conservative evangelical position, in place of more traditional creationist views. With Collins as the initial vanguard through the BioLogos Foundation, and thanks to generous funding by the Templeton Foundation, many scientists and theologians (generally from those Christian colleges and universities where theistic evolution quietly had become the accepted teaching position) have felt empowered to take this view from their campus classrooms to church pulpits and Christian bookstores.¹

John Walton's² *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* is his latest contribution to this movement. Applying many of the principles and observations from his 2009 *Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP), Walton attempts to align the consensus of modern science concerning human origins with early Genesis. His solution is: a resounding silence. Under close examination, Walton finds that early Genesis does not speak at all to the material origins of humans (or of any material, for that matter). Since Genesis and the rest of the Bible say nothing on the topic, Walton concludes that science is left as our only source for questions about material origins. To

¹ See *World Magazine's* coverage, most recently:

http://www.worldmag.com/2014/11/interpretive_dance. As an example, see Bethel University's (Minnesota) Summit on Origins church event, where one goal was "to develop a coherent vision of what an evangelical view of the gospel can look like if we take science seriously." Note that "the planning team intentionally left out debates about creation and evolution, intelligent design, and the like" because "that's not working." From the list of speakers given, only theistic evolution was presented as viable (<https://www.bethel.edu/news/articles/2014/december/intersections>).

² Walton serves on the advisory board of BioLogos and is a professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, having earned his PhD in Hebrew and cognate studies at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

his credit, Walton does maintain a minimalist historical Adam and Eve position (they were real people, but Adam was not necessarily “the first human being, the only human being or the ancestor of all humans today” (p. 101). Moreover, he disagrees with purely naturalistic interpretations of macro-evolution (13–14).

I have a great deal of empathy for Walton’s intentions: to present Christianity in a manner that does not create a conflict between science and the claims of the Bible, and especially not to lay any particular creation model as a stumbling block in front of the cross. This said, I find that Walton’s novel approach of isolating Genesis from material origins is far too radical and, upon careful analysis, unsustainable. Instead I favor the opposite approach of drawing out the parallels between Genesis and scientific findings that actually point to a Creator, some even in the area of human origins.

Paralleling *Genesis One*, the format of *Adam and Eve* is a series of twenty-one propositions that are explained and defended in chapter-length sections. The first five propositions offer a review of points from *Genesis One*, emphasizing Walton’s idiosyncratic “functional” (what something does, or the role it plays) instead of “material” (physical stuff) creation view³ and the thesis that Genesis 1 is a temple text.⁴

³ Walton notes, “This is not a view that has been rejected by other scholars; it is simply one they have never considered because their material ontology was a blind presupposition for which no alternative was ever considered” (*The Lost World of Genesis One* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009], 44). While unique and new perspectives are interesting, one needs to be very cautious in evaluating them: to claim to see something that other scholars have missed for centuries is extraordinary, and should require extraordinary evidence before accepting.

⁴ As interesting as the literary parallels of this idea are, it seems unlikely that the original audience would have grasped a cross-cultural parallel here to pagan, polytheistic temple-building when the text of the Pentateuch itself gives a more powerful and personal application: Exodus 20:11 pictures God as a workman creating in six days and resting on the seventh; therefore Israel is to do the same. While great literature is often multidimensional, when an answer and purpose are given in the text, we should conclude that the average ancient hearer would probably see and prefer the internal explanation to an external one. It is possible for a modern scholar to see something that an ancient layman would not. Moreover, a temple-text understanding of Genesis 1 is antithetical to Walton’s functional thesis, as the clearest biblical temple-text parallels regarding the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple give highly detailed *material* accounts of their construction.

After this review, Walton's new proposals are (1) that "Adam" should mostly be seen as an archetype, not an individual, (2) that the garden of Eden account (Gen. 2:4–24) should be read as a sequel to, rather than a zoom-in on, the generic creation of many humans on Day Six (Gen. 1:26–30), (3) that God takes one man from this initial large group of humans to serve as the high priest in the sacred space of the garden/temple, and (4) that Paul and Jesus' use of "Adam" is more interested in his archetypal role and contributes nothing to the origins question.

While many scholars⁵ have expressed concern over Walton's imagined divide between the material and functional, my own doubts reflect my training in ancient near eastern (ANE) studies and the influence of A. Leo Oppenheim, the great Assyriologist who expressed extreme skepticism that any modern Westerner could really grasp ancient Mesopotamian religion because of "the nature of the available evidence, and the problem of comprehension across the barriers of conceptual conditioning."⁶ Moreover, the religion of the common man remains essentially unknown from our recovered Mesopotamian sources,⁷ so it seems unwise to generalize from texts written for royalty and for city-temple officials any universals about the ANE religious worldview, particularly of the lower classes. Perhaps we could come closer if we were cultural Hindus or held to any variety of folk religions, but as monotheists, we simply are not conditioned to see the world as the physical manifestation of a wide variety of spirits. With this caution, scholars observe that, *fundamentally, most ANE creation accounts appear to be genealogies* of gods who manifest themselves as more and more diverse physical things with each new generation. These accounts appear to give the familial relationship between the gods so that humans could better understand the social/political structure of the pantheon and peoples' role *within a divine society* as the gods' slaves. After all, in a polytheistic universe, it's important to know who's related to whom and who therefore has power over whom.

⁵ See for example Richard Averbeck's contribution in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013).

⁶ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 172. See also 182–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

Walton's bold new approach is to say that no ancients really had an interest in material origins, since it was only functional roles that mattered to them. This idea might be plausible if by "functional roles" we mean the gods' *social and political functions in the cosmic community*. But such functional roles would have made no sense to the ancient Hebrews because Israel did not see the physical universe as a divine community. I think that Walton's attempt to transplant his unique hypothesis about the supreme importance of *polytheistic relational functions* into a culture that expressly opposed polytheism reflects the insensitivity to conceptual conditioning that Oppenheim warned us about: Walton apparently doesn't appreciate the gulf between animism and monotheism.⁸ But this serves his goal.

Further, since the gods are uniformly portrayed as embodied material, most ANE scholars conclude that the ancient peoples surrounding Israel saw the material and spiritual worlds as one, or heavily co-mingling. Yet Walton makes a striking break from this consensus view about the material and spiritual worlds, a holistic view that the Old Testament strongly affirms but in a monotheistic setting, based on his reading of the fragmentary evidence from surrounding pagan cultures whose animistic worldview we have trouble conceiving. Once again, it seems insensitive for Walton to conclude that no ancients cared about the material nature of the world. But fracturing the material/spiritual polytheistic ANE world and then homogenizing his novel construct with the monotheistic biblical world serves his goal.

Compared to the surrounding cultures, the shock of the Genesis account is that the heavens and earth are *depersonalized*, that God creates and commands *things* (not gods or spirits) as He forms the material world. Since elsewhere gods produce new gods *from themselves* (by birth, etc.) to populate the cosmic community, what exactly God in Genesis is creating *from* is a good question. Thus one might think that the ancient Hebrews would have some interest in material origins, because their world was not the manifestation or bodies of various gods who were organized into social or

⁸ Animism does not separate the material and spiritual worlds and sees physical objects and phenomena as conscious beings. Polytheism is the belief in many gods, which in the ANE were associated with physical objects (sun, moon, earth) or attributes (wisdom). Monotheism is the belief in only one God, who is transcendent over material objects and all other (lesser) spiritual beings.

political functions. To avoid material origins and claim that only function is in view in Genesis, Walton must argue that the Hebrew word *bara* means something other than “create” as we’ve traditionally understood it (29; dispensing with both *ex nihilo* [out of nothing] and *de novo* [anew] creation), and must assert repeatedly that only functional origins, not material things, are in view (as if repeating something often enough will make it true). But what do “functional” origins mean in a depersonalized universe with no polytheistic social or political structures, if they carry no inkling of material origins with it? But this also serves Walton’s goal.

Much of Walton’s views on Adam and Eve already have appeared in his section of *Four Views on the Historical Adam*,⁹ and readers should consult that volume for excellent responses to the weaknesses in Walton’s position. Space here limits me to mention only a few: Walton dismisses Genesis 2:7 (“God formed man from the dust of the ground”) as referring to a material act of creation, noting instances where “formed” applies to spiritual objects (*Adam and Eve*, 71). This is simply unsustainable grammatically because the Hebrew syntax of 2:7 makes explicit reference to the material from which man is formed. While Walton does not want to think of dust “in terms of chemistry” (72) because of his aversion to material origins, the fact is that humans and animals are composed of the same elements that constitute the earth. Actually, “dust of the earth” isn’t a bad description of human material origins for a narrative that is intended to be simple, timeless, universal, and true, but not an exhaustive communication—but that’s my view,¹⁰ not Walton’s. While Walton is correct that “dust” can refer to our mortality, to insist that it *only* means that and has nothing to say about our material origin goes beyond the intention of the Hebrew text, many scholars believe. When it comes to the origin of Eve, Walton evokes a wooden literalism of “side” (saying that it is ridiculous to think that “God cut Adam in half,” 79) to dismiss the idea that the ancient Hebrews would have thought of surgery here, arguing instead that Adam simply had a vision of Eve coming from his side. Such a forced deviation from the standard interpretation seems unnecessary, as various types of surgery were

⁹ *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

¹⁰ Echoing Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972).

known in the ancient near east, to say nothing of routine male circumcision in Israel proper. But this, too, serves Walton's goal.

Walton's most striking re-interpretation of an important text is Paul's address to the Athenians on Mars Hill, where Paul begins his argument that all mankind should seek one God by saying, "He made from one man, every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). Since Walton has argued that Adam is just one of the many humans that "functionally appear" on Day Six (remember, Genesis tells us nothing about material origins), Walton proposes that Paul's "one man" must refer to Noah in the geopolitical context of the table of nations in Genesis 10, not to Adam proper (186–87). Then immediately in a footnote he even distances himself from any biological significance for Noah, evoking a wooden literalism of "his [God's] offspring" to conclude, "Our [human] commonality does not require a genetic relationship to Noah any more than it requires a genetic relationship to God." Then he asserts that this verse, like all of the others, "makes no statement about material origins" (238).

While there is much that I can agree with in Walton's book, his goal of avoiding any hint of material origins in the Bible by making rash interpretive sword thrusts does not sound like "a very sensitive hermeneutic rather than a wholesale application that happens to coincide with someone's predetermined outcome" (99). Walton's almost Gnostic¹¹ lost world is contrived to produce an outcome that isolates science from the Bible, using ANE backgrounds as window dressing. This reminds me too much of "historical Jesus" studies that massage portions of the New Testament (and ignore others) to arrive at a Jesus who is acceptable to twenty-first-century tastes. As both an Old Testament/ANE scholar and scientist myself, I think there are much better ways to work through biblical models on human origins. For example, I prefer C. John Collins's (no relation to Francis Collins) thoughtful and precise hermeneutical scalpel on these issues and would encourage readers to invest their time in his excellent books.¹² I also

¹¹ The ancient Gnostics eschewed the material world in favor of the spiritual world.

¹² C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2005); *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). I note that Collins considers—but only considers—some controversial options like the possibility of more than one pair of humans being created by God, but he recognizes that the

am attracted to much of the material from *Reasons to Believe*¹³ and, overall, I think that *Four Views on the Historical Adam* offers a more fruitful discussion of this topic than Walton's monologue here in *Adam and Eve*.

While Collins's *Adam and Eve* book and *Four Views* chapter respond to Walton's Genesis 1–2 sequel idea in detail, I want to offer a brief comment on it here: could a generic pool of humans have been "functionalized" on Day Six to give the genetic diversity that modern biology reportedly sees in the modern human population, and then God later takes Adam (and still later, presumably Eve) from this group to serve as high priests in the sacred space of the garden? If so, would this human group have been bearers of God's image and "engaging in activities we would consider sinful" but "they are not being held accountable," as Walton notes in *Four Views* (114)? Even though Collins dispatched this speculation so well in *Four Views* (130), Walton presents essentially the same model in *Adam and Eve*, noting "After all, anthropological evidence for violence in the earliest populations deemed human would indicate that there was never a time when sinful (= at least personal evil) behavior was not present." (154, cf. Proposition 17) . Walton's sequel interpretation thus represents a radical departure from the standard model for the origin of sin and the Fall.

Walton draws unwarranted ANE parallels in other areas, such as his view of the serpent in proposition 14. Would the monotheistic ancient Hebrews have thought of the serpent as an "amoral" "chaos creature" (a semi-divine composite animal) who was not evil (132–33)? Granted, our understanding of the serpent as Satan comes later in the Bible, but aside from the literary suspense value in presenting the serpent with an ambiguous personality before it tempts Eve, a reader should not miss its evil nature in light of the curse God puts on it. In a later section, Walton again mentions that some demon activity was "amoral" (151), yet the Pentateuch repeatedly warns Israel to distance itself from all spirits and demons, leading me to further doubt that the Genesis text ever intended to present an "amoral" picture of the tempting creature, as Walton suggests. That demons were more highly regarded elsewhere is one of the significant

scientific evidence that argues in favor of such a view is open to interpretation, has met with challenges, and is in flux.

¹³ Such as Fazale Rana and Hugh Ross's *Who Was Adam? A Creation Model Approach to the Origin of Man* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2005).

differences between ancient Israel and the surrounding cultures; to be seeking “amoral” and semi-divine animal parallels here in Genesis is looking the wrong direction.

In concluding proposition 11, Walton notes:

I have suggested that one can accept the historical Adam without thereby making a decision about material human origins. This has the advantage of separating scientific elements (material human origins) from the exegetical/theological elements, with the result that conflict between the claims of science and the claims of Scripture is minimized without compromise. This reading of the biblical text has not been imposed on it by the demands of science, but science has prompted a more careful examination of precisely what the text is claiming. (103)

I beg to differ. By inventing a wedge in ANE animism to drive between the gods’ material and personal natures, and evoking novel hermeneutical gymnastics, he has distanced the Bible from having any voice in the area of material origins, let alone human material origins, in precisely the passages where the Bible appears to be going out of its way to tell us something about them. While it may be wonderful that he can craft a novel interpretation of the text that does not make any claims to compete with science, I cannot but think that he started out with this goal in mind. More importantly, I see no reason to accept it: not only does the cautious consensus understanding of ANE religion fail to support it, but also a number of areas in science today that speak to origins issues are crying out for a Designer as the answer. While this is just barely starting to surface in human origins, astrophysics and biochemistry are revealing vast levels of fine-tuning and computational information processing that belie a naturalistic explanation. As welcome as Walton’s approach may be in some Christian circles today, I fear that in another twenty years, as the shifting claims of human genetic diversity are better understood and the evidence for overall design grows stronger, they will be wondering why they embraced a view that entirely divorced science from the Bible.

As noted earlier, I don’t like creation models being laid as a stumbling block to the cross, and prefer an old-earth creation model in apologetic situations for its unifying power in showing the God of the Bible as the Creator of the universe. For seekers who

feel that macro-evolution demands more than two individuals as the founders of the human race, I advise patience as the size of the pool of human common ancestors has been shrinking in recent decades, and there even exists plausible evidence for an initial pool size of two.¹⁴ For impatient seekers, I would commend an allegorical interpretation of Genesis regarding human origins, as many theistic evolutionists already do. That seems far simpler, less forced, and less damaging than stripping material origins completely from the Bible. As wise generals have observed, we shouldn't need to destroy a village in order to save it. —*John Bloom*

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¹⁴ Ann Gauger, Douglas Axe, and Casey Luskin, *Science and Human Origins* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012).