

Dubious and dangerous exposition

A review of
The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate
by John H. Walton
Intervarsity Press, Il, 2009

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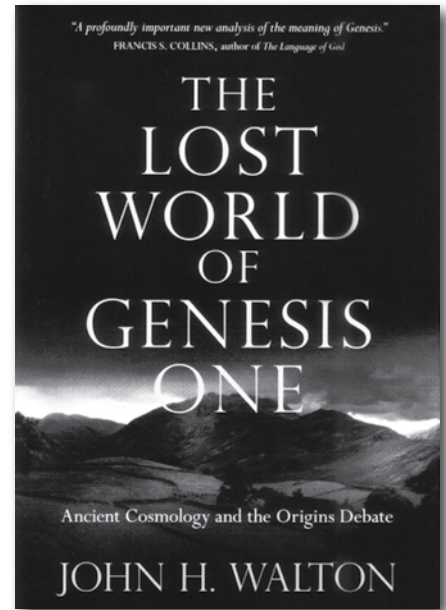
The first verse of the first book of the Bible teaches, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1) and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews asserts, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb. 11:3). Throughout history, the church has held that such statements from Scripture provide the basis for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). The first line of the Apostles’ Creed reads, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth”, and the first line of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God ... maker of heaven and earth and everything that is, seen and unseen.” The Shorter Westminster Catechism states, “The work of creation is God’s making all things of nothing.”

According to Walton, the church has misunderstood Genesis for centuries

According to Walton, however, this view of Genesis is wrong, and the church has misunderstood its real meaning for many centuries. The first book of the Bible, he argues, does not provide an account of *material* origins, but *functional* origins. The ancients, he maintains, thought of existence in terms of function in society and culture, and, in their view, true existence is not even achieved until people and God are there to benefit from these functions

(pp. 27, 36). The Genesis account, he claims, refers to a literal seven day period in history, sometime after the material creation, when God assigned the cosmos its real intended functions, prior to his taking up residence in it as his temple. So, according to Walton, the Creation Week should be understood as follows. On Day 1, God’s command, “let there be light”, and his “separating” light from darkness inaugurated temple time. The expanse (sky), ordained on Day 2, is established as the space in which his people live and would function in the new order to control rainfall and irrigation for their benefit. On Day 3, God separated the waters on the earth so that plants could grow on the dry land, providing us with food. On Day 4, the “lights in the sky” were dedicated as separators of day and night and markers of seasons, days and years. On Day 5, the roles of fish and birds are assigned their temple function, this being to fill the waters and fly in the sky. Similarly, on Day 6, the terrestrial creatures are ordained to reproduce and fill the land. Man is brought into being as a spiritual creature, carrying the image of God, and his function is established, to exercise dominion over the earth under God. Finally, on Day 7, God’s resting from his work should be understood as his taking up residence in the cosmos, thus making it his temple. Hence, the seven days refer to an inauguration ceremony where God’s temple is “created” and made functional (pp. 87–88).

According to Walton, the reason why the church has almost universally misunderstood Genesis is that knowledge of the ancients and their world-view had been lost for many centuries. However, in recent years, as archaeologists have recovered many ancient texts, and linguists have re-learned the ancient languages, it has been possible for scholars to regain an understanding of how the ancient world thought. Now, through his study



of ancient near eastern beliefs, Walton claims, he has been able to correctly interpret the first book of the Bible. He writes:

“While this reading [Walton’s interpretation of Genesis] is initially based on observations of the biblical text ... without an understanding of the ancient worldview, it would have been difficult to ask the questions that have led to this position and nearly impossible to provide the answers to the question that we have proposed” (p. 171).

Scripture must interpret Scripture

In evaluating Walton’s claims, we must apply the usual rules of hermeneutics and, particularly, that Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. Our interpretation of any one passage must be such that it is harmonious with and sits comfortably with our interpretation of related passages. This could not be said of Walton’s exposition of Genesis.

In general, both OT and NT references to creation emphasize its material nature and often celebrate God’s power and wisdom. For example, in Is. 40:25, 26, God asks, “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? ... Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: who created

all these?” and in Is. 40:28 we read, “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no-one can fathom.” Jer. 10:12 confirms “God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom”. (See also Is. 42:5; Ps. 33:6, 9; Ps. 102:25; Job. 38:44ff; Neh. 9:6.) According to the Apostle Paul, God’s act of creation makes his power and divine nature plain so that unbelievers “are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20, 25). The first verses of John’s Gospel are also particularly relevant here. “In the beginning” is clearly a reference to Genesis 1, yet verse 3 speaks of the Word creating all *things*. And, again, in Col. 1:16, Christ is said to have created all “*things* in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”.

Moreover, Walton’s rejection of Genesis 1 as an account of material origins hardly fits the statement of Gen. 2:2–3, which makes clear that, after Day 6, God ceased from *work*. If God had not created anything material, but simply proclaimed the functions of that which already existed, what work had he done? It hardly fits the sense of Ex. 20:8–11 either, which likens God’s work of creation to the physical work done by the Israelites. Furthermore, Walton’s argument that the ancient Israelites’ understanding of the Hebrew word ‘bara’ (translated ‘create’) would have emphasized function is hardly a reason to reject the view that it also refers to a material creation. Would God have created something without intending it to have purpose? In Gen. 1:14 we read, “God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night’”, suggesting both creation from nothing *and* assignment of function. If assignment of function was the only intended meaning, why does the text not read, “Let the lights in the expanse of the sky separate day from night”? Similarly, why does v. 6 not read “Let the expanse separate water from water” instead of “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water”?

Walton admits that his view is not one which would be supported by many other scholars (p. 44) and, indeed, this is true. James Barr, who was Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford University, wrote:

- “...probably, so far as I know, there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1–11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that
- creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience
 - the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to later stages in the biblical story.”¹

It is difficult to accept the idea that the vast majority of Christian and Jewish scholars have been wrong about the Bible’s account of creation for so many centuries. Moreover, if Genesis made no reference to material origins, how were the Israelites to counter the creation accounts of other religions? The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is essential in defending the Judeo/Christian view, making clear that God is sovereign, and the only creator of everything. He existed before the material universe and is not co-eternal with matter. He was not limited in creation by what already existed: rather, being omnipotent, he produced whatever material was needed to form whatever he wanted to create. The universe is his design and ordered entirely according to his own plan and purposes. Moreover, he did not create out of his own substance and is therefore not a part of the fallen world.

Walton claims that his exposition of Genesis solves many problems that have beset the church in recent years. For example, since, according to this view, the Bible makes no statement regarding the age of the earth, it can accommodate any hypothesis that might be supported by science (p. 95). Similarly, since Genesis is not an account of material origins, it would be perfectly admissible to consider an evolutionary account of

life, so long as it is accepted that God is ultimately responsible for its existence. In answer to the question, “Where do the dinosaurs and fossil ‘Homo’ specimens fit in?” he answers that:

“... these creatures could be part of the prefunctional cosmos—part of the long stage of development that I would include in the material phase... The anthropological specimens would not be viewed as humans in the image of God. They would not be assessed morally (any more than an animal would), and they were subject to death as any animal was” (p. 169).

Moreover, he claims, “In the interpretation of the text that I have offered, very little found in evolutionary theory would be objectionable” (p. 170) and “Biological evolution is capable of giving us insight into God’s creative work” (p. 138).

Walton’s God is not the God of the Bible

The idea that millions of years passed before God conferred human status on a sufficiently evolved ape, however, does not sit comfortably with the words of Christ, who maintained that “at the *beginning* of creation God ‘made them male and female’” (Mark. 10:6). Moreover, a view of the pre-fallen world full of bloodshed, disease, desperate competition and death hardly squares with God’s assertion that his creation, in every respect, was very good (Gen. 1:31). Presumably, in Walton’s view, Adam and Eve, in their originally perfect state, would have been surrounded by this ruthless, violent world. One wonders how Walton would answer the non-Christian Philosopher of Science, Professor David Hull, who wrote:

“Whatever the God implied by evolutionary theory ... may be like, He is not the Protestant God of waste not, want not. He is also not a loving God who cares about His productions. He is not even the awful God portrayed in the book of Job. The God of the Galapagos [evolution by natural selection] is careless, wasteful, indifferent; almost diabolical. His is certainly

not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.”²

The answer to Professor Hull, of course, is that God did not create through evolution. Rather, as the Bible teaches, God created plants, animals and people fully formed and perfect (Gen. 1:31). The suffering and death we see all round us came into the world later, because of Adam’s sin, and is a salutary lesson for all of us as to sin’s terrible nature. But praise God that, one day, he will restore the world to its original beautiful form, reflecting his own beautiful nature, and where “the wolf will live with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the goat ... [and] the lion will eat straw like the ox” (Is. 11).³

The doctrine of creation matters

The biblical doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* lies at the heart of the Christian faith and we should be careful not to diminish its biblical basis. It affirms that God is sovereign and that He can be trusted to do all that He has promised. There are no other gods who compete with Him and He alone merits our worship. The universe belongs to Him, and He will do with it whatever He pleases. By beholding his creation, we are enabled to glimpse something of his greatness and beauty. By recalling that He brought everything into being simply by his word, we begin to realise something of his awesome power. And we are reminded that, as well as being the only creator, He is the only Saviour.⁴

References

1. Barr, J., letter to David C.C. Watson, 23 April 1984. Cited by Sarfati, J., *Refuting compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, p. 137, 2004.
2. Cited by Grudem, W., *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 302, 1994.
3. Gurney, P., The carnivorous nature and suffering of animals, *J. Creation* 18(3):70–75, 2004; creation.com/carniv.
4. It is significant the Hebrew word ‘bara’ (‘create’) is used in the context of both creation and salvation. See, for example, Is. 43:1ff and Ps. 51:10.

New study shows the importance of Genesis creation for early apologist’s Christology

A review of
Irenaeus and Genesis: A study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics
by Thomas Holsinger-Friesen
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Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake,
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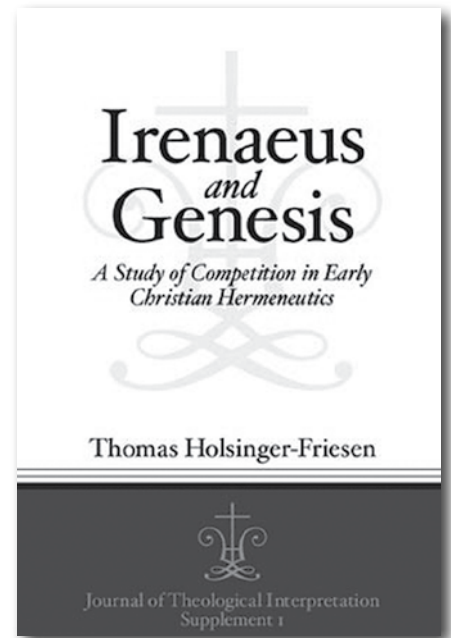
Lita Cosner

In *Irenaeus and Genesis*, Thomas Holsinger-Friesen examines the significance of Genesis 1:26 and 2:7 for early Church Father Irenaeus (d. c. AD 200). In particular, Irenaeus’ interpretation of Paul and his arguments against the Valentinian heresy, a type of Gnosticism. This study examines both Irenaeus’ and the Gnostic sect’s use of Genesis in their respective theological systems, and shows how the interpretation of Genesis became a key battleground where Irenaeus fought against the Gnostic ideas threatening orthodox Christianity.

“Recapitulation” in Irenaeus and modern scholarship

Irenaeus was an important early Christian apologist, and Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of John the Evangelist himself. He was best known for his defence of Christianity and demolition of the Gnostic heresy of Valentinus, *Adversus Haereses* or *Against Heresies* (c. 180).

A recurring idea in Irenaeus’ exegesis is that of “recapitulation”—that Jesus, through His incarnation



and life, ‘relived’ Adam, but in such a way that He performed perfectly where Adam failed. Holsinger-Friesen notes that for Irenaeus, “in order to understand the ultimate and crowning significance of Jesus Christ for humanity, one must start with the beginning” (p. 2). Naturally, this presupposes a historical first man Adam who was the ancestor of the human race.

His use of the idea of recapitulation is especially noteworthy in his writings against the Valentinian Gnostics, who were also very protologically oriented. In these texts, Genesis 1:26 and 2:7 are of central significance. Irenaeus seems to agree with his opponents that protology is key when it comes to understanding the person and work of Christ; the debate is how the protological texts are to be interpreted.

“A coherent, satisfying interpretation of the Jesus Christ of