

John Walton reimagines Adam and Eve

The Lost World of Adam and Eve

John H. Walton

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In this third book of his ‘Lost World’ series, John Walton, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School, weighs in on the current debate over the historical Adam. Since he admits that he’s bought into what he deems the “scientific consensus” on evolution (p. 204), it is quite convenient that he reaches this conclusion: the Bible makes “no claims” about “biological human origins” (p. 181). That is, the Bible does not say when, where, or how people began, except that God was involved.

Walton at least believes that Adam and Eve were a historical couple. But, he says, they were not necessarily “the first human beings, the only human beings or the universal ancestors of all human beings” (p. 103). In 2009, Walton held that there was both “material and spiritual discontinuity” between Adam and “prehuman hominids”.¹ But now he is comfortable with the idea that Adam was “born of a woman” (p. 76) and that, as N.T. Wright says in his contribution to chapter 19, “perhaps ... *God chose one pair from the rest of the early hominids*” (p. 177). However, Walton is severely misreading the Scriptures, erecting his case on a foundation of errors in judgment, logic, and exegesis. This review will explore just a handful of Walton’s missteps.

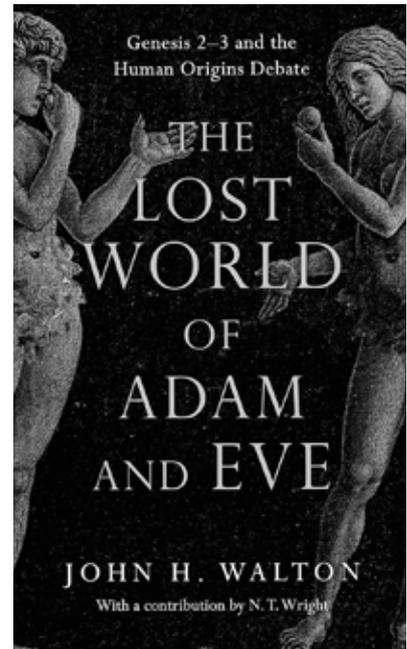
Subverting inerrancy

While claiming to believe in biblical inerrancy, Walton denies it in practice. He engages in doublespeak—saying, on the one hand, “Inerrancy pertains to that which the text affirms” but, in the preceding paragraph, claiming that “the text affirms” a falsehood—that people literally think with their hearts—an idea which he “can safely set aside” (p. 201). In biblical imagery, however, the ‘heart’ was an idiom for the mind, just as today it’s an idiom for love—no one thinks that the blood pump literally ‘loves’.

Walton also supposes that the Bible preserves the following wrong beliefs of its human authors: intestines are likewise used for thinking (p. 18), the sky is solid (pp. 18–20), and the sun and moon are very nearby (p. 39). Again, Walton is speaking out of both sides of his mouth when he says that the “text does not affirm” these beliefs (pp. 20–21). He is correct there. But then how can he supposedly determine from the text that the authors believed such falsehoods, as opposed to using idioms of their day?

At least Walton discloses his method for distinguishing between biblical affirmations we are free to reject and those which are authoritative and binding. It depends on “whether the text hangs theology on the belief” (p. 201). However, the doctrine of inerrancy itself is theological—what Scripture says, God says (2 Timothy 3:16). Therefore, Walton’s criterion should not allow him to reject any biblical affirmations since theology is always on the line, no matter how incidental the subject.

Nevertheless, Walton justifies his selective denial of biblical claims by



appealing to the notion that, as God inspired Scripture, He was “accommodating ... current thinking” (p. 201). This in itself is hard to understand, since God so often *corrected* ‘current thinking’ if it was wrong, as Jesus, God Incarnate, did in the Gospels. But when Walton cites John Calvin to legitimize his concept of accommodation (p. 202), it is clear that he conflates *simplifying* the message with *embracing error*—only the first of which is consistent with inerrancy.

Redefining creation

Because this book builds upon his earlier work, Walton revisits his outlandish claim that Genesis 1 is exclusively about *functional* origins, making absolutely no reference to *material* origins. This has many problems, not the least of which is that the rest of the Bible takes Genesis 1 to refer to material creation.² Moreover, if Walton is wrong about the Bible’s teaching on origins in general, his specific claims about human origins crumble.

Adam as archetype

For Walton to maintain his thesis that Genesis is silent about the material origin of humanity, he must explain away the accounts of God forming Adam and Eve. Thus, his “core proposal” is that those accounts “should be understood archetypally”—meaning they speak not just about individuals but about a larger group to which the individuals belong (p. 74).

Regarding Adam, then, Walton claims that there is nothing unique about the fact that he was formed from dust. The Bible says that people in general were made from dust and return to dust (Job 10:8–9; 34:15; Psalm 90:3; 103:14; 104:29; Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7) so Walton believes this merely alludes to human mortality. In this sense, he asserts, Adam could be ‘made from dust’ (i.e. mortal) and still be the offspring of earlier human ancestors.

As for Eve, Walton says she was not the result of surgery performed on Adam’s ribcage, even though that’s what the text indicates. Rather, as Adam went into “a deep sleep” (Genesis 2:21), he dreamt about being divided in two, with one of his halves becoming Eve. According to Walton, the archetypal truth this conveys is that “All womankind is ‘from the side’ of all mankind” (p. 80).

While there is some merit to Walton’s claims about archetypes, the problem is that he regularly sets up the archetypal and individual interpretations as though one must choose between them. For example: “Once the forming accounts are recognized as archetypal, they cease to be meaningful in terms of chronology or history of material human origins” (p. 200). This is a false dichotomy. While Walton recognizes that Adam himself is both historical and archetypal, he doesn’t consider that ‘being made from dust’ can be both as well. But biblical archetypes often work this way. All believers “have been crucified with

Christ” (Galatians 2:20), yet this is only figuratively true of us because it was literally and historically true of Jesus. Plus, we were literally made from dust in a *collective* sense due to the fact that we all go back to Adam.

Furthermore, there is textual evidence that Adam was formed from dust in a unique, historical sense. For one thing, the references to others’ formation from or return to dust occur in poetic passages, while Adam’s formation in Genesis 2:7 is historical narrative. Also, taking v. 7 as a nod to Adam’s mortality may be anachronistic, since it’s not until 3:19 that God spoke of reversing the process and sending Adam back to dust.

Besides, Walton’s interpretation makes no sense of the context in which Genesis 2:7 occurs. Verse 5 describes the setting, highlighting the lack of a “man to work the ground.” So, v. 7 should be seen as the provision of what was lacking. But highlighting human mortality is no solution to the absence of man; *creating* man is.

Also, there is textual evidence that Eve was built from a rib in a unique, historical sense. Again, the account is historical narrative and the context is about supplying a helper fit for Adam. But if the text doesn’t describe Eve’s material origin and only points to the universal truth that women are natural counterparts to men, then we have no idea where Eve came from. She along with other women might have been around before this time. If so, then why could Adam not find a suitable helper and why would he be in a position to name the entire gender—saying, “she shall be called Woman”—if females were already a category familiar to him and they preceded him?

Furthermore, the idea that this takes place in a vision is fanciful. Genesis 2:21 mentions God closing up the location where He had removed part of Adam but this detail is only worth stating if God actually performed surgery, so readers know that

Adam was repaired. Plus, using ‘flesh’ to ‘close’ the ‘place’ makes perfect sense if this was a small incision but is strongly incongruent with Adam being split in two since, in that case, Adam wouldn’t need patching up—he would need half of his body to grow back!

In addition, the New Testament authors treat the formation narratives as unique historical events. In 1 Timothy 2:13, for example, Paul makes a theological point about the roles of men and women based on the chronology of their origins. He says, “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” But this would be incoherent if Paul understood Adam’s ‘formation’ as a declaration of mortality rather than Adam’s individual coming into existence. Walton even admits that Paul is not using Adam and Eve archetypally in this verse (p. 95) but fails to recognize how this contradicts his interpretation of Genesis.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:8–12 (a passage Walton does not address), Paul says that just “as woman was made from man, so man is now born from woman.” Paul distinguishes between what happened in the past and what happens today, yet treats both as historical events, indicating that Eve’s formation did not happen in some symbolic dream world but in reality.

Decoupling Genesis 1 and 2

Because most Christians understand that both Genesis 1 and 2 describe the origin of humans, it makes sense to read chapter 2 as an elaboration of the events of Day 6. Walton instead sees Genesis 2 as a ‘sequel’ involving events that may have taken place long afterwards. Therefore, “the people in Genesis 1 may not be Adam and Eve, or at least not only Adam and Eve” (p. 64). The trouble is, this can’t be sustained biblically.

On the one hand, Walton’s attempts to drive a wedge between Genesis 1 and 2 are weak. For example, Walton

raises the old canard about contrary sequences of events. He claims that plants came before man in Genesis 1 but after man according to Genesis 2:5–6. Only two pages later, however, Walton has forgotten his own challenge, now recognizing that Genesis 2:5–6 describes “cultivated crops rather than the general vegetation of Genesis 1” (p. 66). So there is no contradiction here. Well, not in the Bible—just in Walton’s argument.

Likewise, Walton claims that animals came before man in Genesis 1 but vice versa in Genesis 2. But, again, the animals in chapter 2 could be a subset of the groups previously created or, as many translators and commentators have recognized, the verb in v. 19 may faithfully be rendered as “had formed”.

Walton’s other arguments about there being too much activity in Genesis 2 for 24 hours and Cain’s encounters with alleged non-relatives have been answered long ago.³ Also, Walton’s argument about the word *toledot* (translated: “generations” or “account”) in Genesis 2:4—supposedly serving as a clear indicator that events in that section occur after the previous section—is undermined by his own admission that there are chronological overlaps in several other adjacent *toledot* sections (p. 65).

In fact, there are NT texts which tie Genesis 1 and 2 close together in time but Walton fails to interact with them. In Matthew 19, for example, Jesus connects the “one flesh” couple in Genesis 2 with the “male and female” of Genesis 1 and says that God established marriage “from the beginning” (Matthew 19:4, 8), not generations down the road. Many other NT passages similarly place events closely associated with Adam and Eve at the foundation of the world, ruling out Walton’s long time gap between Genesis 1 and 2.^{4,5}

Also, 1 Corinthians 15:49 says that all people bear Adam’s image and, in



Figures 1. The creation of Adam and Eve in Paradise by Hinrich Luckander, 1759–1792.

context, this means (at least) having the same kind of weak and perishable body that he had, in contrast with the imperishable bodies believers will one day receive, whereupon—according to the text—we will bear Christ’s image. But, especially given

Genesis 5:3 which says that Adam passed his image on to Seth, the fact that all bear the image of Adam is most naturally explained by our descent from him. We receive Christ’s image through supernatural transformation but, apart from this, Adam’s image

must have been transferred through inheritance—confirming Adam as father of all.

Misconstruing motherhood

Although she is called “the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20), Walton claims that this does not prove “all humans are genetically descended from Eve” (p. 187). He says such an expression is not indicative of biology, since Jabal and Jubal were the fathers “of those who dwell in tents and have livestock” and “who play the lyre and the pipe” (Genesis 4:20–21). But, as usual, Walton has ignored the differences in context. Jabal and Jubal started disciplines which they passed on to others and in this way played a fatherly role to those who followed in their footsteps. But how is Eve’s motherly role anything like that? Eve did not invent the discipline of ‘living’ and pass that on to non-relatives. There is no reason to think that she would be a mother to all in any sense unless she and Adam were the biological progenitors of the entire human race.

Nations from Noah?

Regarding Paul’s proclamation that God “made from one man every nation of mankind” (Acts 17:26), Walton says he is referring to Noah, not Adam, and has a geopolitical focus, not a biological focus. However, the idea here is not that national entities were formed when existing people organized and established governments; it’s that all people groups trace their ancestry back to one person. As Walton admits, “The nations come into being through lines of descendants” (p. 186), so this absolutely does concern biology! And, given this, it is unlikely that Paul was referring to Noah. Paul’s language is very universal, speaking of God as the Creator of all things (v. 24) and the Sustainer of all mankind (v. 25). So Paul considered this “one” to be

the universal biological ancestor of all people. Noah did not give rise to the women on the Ark or the people living before the Flood—but Adam did.

First in line

Walton notes “that the genealogies consistently go back to Adam” and Luke 3 goes one step further, “back to God” (p. 188) but he denies the implication that Adam was the first man. Walton argues that Luke presents “a lineage through Joseph, so it is specifically *not* his biological lineage” and he says Luke may have added the “connection to God” because it signified Adam’s federal headship or his priestly role (pp. 188–189).

However, the genealogies—including Luke’s—are about father/son relationships, so most of the links are biological, even if there are exceptions to the rule with links involving adoptions or in-laws. Also, as many have argued, Luke’s genealogy probably gives Mary’s lineage using Joseph’s name in place of hers (as son-in-law or adoptive son of Mary’s father Heli), since Jewish custom then traced ancestry through males.^{6,7}

Plus, Luke does not merely claim that Adam was ‘connected’ to God; he indicates that Adam was the “[son] of God.”⁸ Walton doesn’t give us any examples where that designation indicates federal headship or a priestly role, nor does he explain how this context supports those meanings. But the Bible certainly calls angels “sons of God” (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; cf. Ps. 29:1; 89:6), likely because they had no forebears besides their Creator. And that meaning fits nicely into Luke 3.

Sinful pre-Adamites

Walton also argues that death did not result from Adam’s sin but that Adam and Eve merely failed to secure the antidote to death. He doesn’t think the Bible precludes even

human death before the Fall (pp. 144–145, 159)—another area where his views have wandered further from Scripture over time.⁹ In fact, Walton now believes there could have been “personal evil” before the Fall, which he defines as “antisocial behavior that causes suffering in others” (p. 154). He states, “anthropological evidence for violence in the earliest populations deemed human would indicate that there was never a time when sinful . . . behavior was not present” (p. 154) but here his eisegesis results from treating evolutionary history as a given.

Walton tries to maintain a distinction between pre-Fall and post-Fall evildoers by abusing Romans 5:13 (“sin is not counted where there is no law”). On the basis of this verse, he claims that God didn’t hold anyone accountable for their actions until Adam and Eve disobeyed His command. However, in context, Romans 5:13 is speaking of the *Mosaic* law. This is why Paul says in v. 14 that “death reigned from Adam to Moses,” not prior to that. Paul’s point is that sin and its deadly consequences were present even for those without the law of Moses. When he says their sins were “not counted” he does not mean that these people weren’t being held accountable at all—only that the full scope of their violations was made more explicit later, after which they were *more* accountable. This is consistent with v. 20, which says, “the law came in to increase the trespass.” But nothing like this is ever said of Adam’s sin. Adam did not increase human sin; he introduced it. Paul explicitly says that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin” (Romans 5:12), “death reigned from Adam” (Romans 5:14), and “by man came death. . . For as in Adam all die” (1 Corinthians 15:21–22). Unfortunately, Walton doesn’t treat these passages with the seriousness they deserve.

Adamant about Adam

Walton's exegesis of biblical texts is often creative and original—but that is not a good thing. Unfortunately, he is quite influential, judging by the adulation he receives in the book's blurbs. So creationists would do well to become familiar with Walton's thinking in general and this book in particular.

Despite Walton's monumental efforts to deny it, however, the Bible has much to say about human origins. Adam and Eve were not only historical but our first parents, supernaturally created just the way the Bible says.

Hopefully, this review will serve to expose Walton's egregious mishandling of Scripture and to prevent his brand of compromise from spreading further.

References

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7. Sarfati, J., The virginal conception of Christ, Section 5: The reliability of the birth narratives, 1994; creation.com/virgin#Reliability.
8. The Greek word 'son' (υἱός, *huios*) does not appear in Luke 3:38 but is properly supplied in many translations since it is used in v. 23 and the implied meaning carries through the subsequent links.
9. In 2009, he wrote, "death did exist in the pre-Fall world—even though humans were not subject to it" (Walton, ref. 1, p. 99).