

John H. Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. IVP Academic, 2009. 192 pages. Area: Creation

John Walton's, *The Lost World of Genesis One* has as its thesis: "Throughout the entire Bible, there is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture."¹

Walton persuasively argues that we have a problem when we approach Genesis one as moderns. We hold to material ontology ("the belief that something exists by virtue of its physical properties and its ability to be experienced by the senses"[24]) but the ancients held to what is called functional ontology ("the ancient world believed that something existed... by virtue of its having function in an ordered system"[26]). Material ontology could be understood as something that you can touch like a chair, whereas functional could refer to the creation of a business. Is a business something you can touch or is it more of an organized system that exists as it finds itself functioning systematically to offer its unique services? In other words, if we imagine a grocery store being built with the tangible materials needed to build the actual building, this is completely different from that *material* building actually becoming a store. It becomes a functional store when the employees are in place to make the building function so that it is stocked with food and ready for customers. Walton further explains:

I do not refer to an ordered system in scientific terms, but an ordered system in human terms, that is, in relation to society and culture. In this sort of functional ontology, the sun does not exist by virtue of its material properties, or even by its function as a burning ball of gas. Rather it exists by virtue of the role that it has in its sphere of existence, particularly in the way that it functions for humankind and human society... In a functional ontology, to bring something into existence would require giving it a function or a role in an ordered system, rather than giving it material properties. Consequently, something could be manufactured physically but still not "exist" if it has not become functional. [26]

Based on the functional ontology of the ancient world, we can rethink our approach to this text. Genesis one seems not to be concerned with material origins, but rather with functional origins. This passage is about taking unorganized materials that already exist (which, we must still believe God is the source of) and organizing them into the various functions that benefit humanity and the whole of the cosmos. This becomes clear when we consider that the Hebrew word translated "create" always refers to God as the subject and to objects being arranged for functionality, not to new forms of matter. And the word for "beginning" is regularly used to introduce "a period in time, rather than a point in time" [45]. Therefore, it is evident that "verse 1 serves as a literary introduction to the rest of the chapter" [45]. Verse 1.1 uses "beginning" to introduce the *initial period* outlined in the whole of the book of Genesis and the following eleven sections are introduced by the phrase "this is the account of," for a total of twelve divisions. Walton proposes the following translation for the first verse in the Bible: "In the initial period, God created by assigning functions throughout the heavens and the earth, and this is how he did it" [46].

If Genesis 1 is not about physical origins, then what is it about? Walton suggests a perspective that he has coined the "cosmic temple inauguration view" [162]. In the ancient world, deity was expected to dwell restfully in a temple. Day seven reflects that when God is finished organizing the functional elements of the world to operate for the benefit of human image bearers, that God rests. The difference in this instance than say, Solomon's Temple, is that this passage envisions God as setting up the universe to function as his cosmic temple. After the "chaos" (pre-historic evolutionary material reality) has been arranged to function with "order," God's world is now a place where God rests and humanity functions as his care providers for the earth. It is important to point out that rest never meant that the deity (God) was inactive, but rather in a functional ontology exactly the opposite was true. "When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role" [75]. Resting in a temple, especially the cosmic temple, is all about God settling into his cosmic home to set up "headquarters" or the "control room" for the newly organized world that is set up for the new era of human functionality. God runs the world as he rests in his cosmic temple [75].

What does this view of Genesis one leave us with? It allows us to understand this chapter as a time in the history of God's ongoing creation of materials in the world, when he intervened to set up the cosmos as his functional temple for the benefit of humankind who, for the first time were branded with his divine image to become higher than all of the animals. Prior to this time, it is possible that the evolutionary processes (which God initiated) progressed for several billion years, but at the right time the *tohu va vohu* (the chaos of verse 2) of the prehistoric age was organized with God at rest and humanity as ready to function as his image-bearers. After the six days of God organizing functions, "it was very good" because the world now was set up to work for the benefit of all people [97-98]. In the final few chapters, Walton addresses the practical issues raised by the *science wars* in the church.

¹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 19. All subsequent citations will be in brackets within the text in order to save room on this one page document.

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

It is safe to say that Christians are in the midst of a culture war

Is this a cultural issue or a biblical issue?

THESIS: “Throughout the entire Bible, there is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture.” page, 19

STRUCTURE: 1)Genesis One is Ancient Cosmology, 2) Ancient Cosmology is Function Oriented, 3)“Create” Concerns Functions, 4)Beginning State in Gen 1 is nonfunctional, 5)Days 1 – 3 Establish Functions, 6)Days 4 – 6 Install Functionaries, 7)Divine Rest is in a Cosmic Temple, 8)The Cosmos is a Temple, 9)7 Days Relate to the Cosmic Temple Inauguration, 10)7 Days Do Not Concern Material Origins, 11)“Functional Cosmic Temple” Offers Face-Value Exegesis, 12)Other Theories Either Go Too Far or Not Far Enough, 13)The Difference Between Origins Accounts in Science and Scripture is Metaphysical in Nature, 14)God’s Roles as Creator / Sustainer Less Different than We Thought, 15)Current Debate About I.D. Ultimately Concerns Purpose, 16)Scientific Explanations of Origins can be viewed in light of Purpose, and if so, Are Unobjectionable, 17)Resulting Theology is Stronger, not Weaker, 18)Public Science Ed. Should be Neutral Regarding Purpose

THEOLOGY OF THE AUTHOR:

Material vs. Functional Ontology

Material - “the belief that something exists by virtue of its physical properties and its ability to be experienced by the senses” page, 24

Image = Chair

- Can be touched and experienced
- Essence is physical

Functional - “the ancient world believed that something existed... by virtue of its having function in an ordered system” page, 26

Image = Grocery Store

- Not defined merely by a building
- Essence is functional
- A grocery store does not become functional when the building materials finally come together to make a storefront. It becomes a functional store when the employees are in place to make the building function so that it is stocked with food and ready for customers.

“I do not refer to an ordered system in scientific terms, but an ordered system in human terms, that is, in relation to society and culture. In this sort of functional ontology, the sun does not exist by virtue of its material properties, or even by its function as a burning ball of gas. Rather it exists by virtue of the role that it has in its sphere of existence, particularly in the way that it functions for humankind and human society... In a functional ontology, to bring something into existence would require giving it a function or a role in an ordered system, rather than giving it material properties. Consequently, something could be manufactured physically but still not “exist” if it has not become functional.” Page, 26

Big Idea #1: *Genesis One is a text about functional origins, not material origins*

- This is constant with the ANE worldview and all of the uses of the word “bara” (create) in the Hebrew Bible.
- “bara” is never used to describe material origins in Scripture
- This does not negate the reality that God did in fact create, but Genesis One is not about that. It describes God organizing reality to function for human image-bearers

Big Idea # 2: Cosmic Temple Inauguration

- In ANE, deity was expected to dwell restfully in a temple.
- The cosmos is God's universal temple
- The functional arrangement of the cosmos for seven days, parallels a 7 day inauguration ceremony
- After setting up the "temple" to function for humanity, God takes residence in it to run the world (rest)
 - "When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role" page, 75
- God took the "chaos" of pre-historic evolutionary materials and organized them to function with "order." (very good)
- The 7 days are God's assigning of functions to the cosmic temple to work for human image bearers.
- God's world is now a place where God rests and humanity functions as his care providers for the earth

INSIGHTS AND APPLICATION:

- Gen 1 is the moment in the history of God's ongoing creation of materials in the world, when he intervened to set up the cosmos as his functional temple for the benefit of humankind who, for the first time were branded with his divine image to become higher than all of the animals.
- Gen 1 when read this way, allows us to embrace what science seems to tell us about material origins, because this text concerns functional origins.
- Evolution and Creation are no longer at war with each other!
- Begg questions about Adam. Was he created (functionally) by being chosen out of all the other homo-erectus?
 - Did humanity come from common ancestors who would eventually bear the image of God?
- **Sabbath:** *If rest for God is him at work running the cosmos, then "our Sabbath rest can be seen in a new light... When we "rest" on the Sabbath, we recognize him as the author of order and the one who brings rest (stability) to our lives and world. We take our hands off the controls of our lives and acknowledge him as the one who is in control. Most importantly this calls on us to step back from our workday world – those means by which we try to provide for ourselves and gain control of our circumstances."* page, 147

SHOLARLY ADVANCEMENT?

- The functional/temple reading demonstrates that the two main schools of thought have either gone too far or not far enough

Too Far... 7 Day / Old Age Creationists

- Fails to read Gen 1 as an ancient (inspired) document
- Imposes material ontology on text
- Looks for scientific info about origins that is not there
- create a false polarity between evolution and Scripture

Not Far Enough... Literary Approach (Framework Theory)

- Reduces Gen 1 to literary theological expressions
- Risks reductionism
- "...theory in this book does not require them to discard that interpretation, but only to accept the functional perspective alongside it." Page, 112

- The "cosmic temple inauguration view" puts forward a perspective that other theologians can build off of to further improve their interpretations.

- I think there are huge ramifications for reading creation as functional.
- New Creation (Isaiah 65, Romans 8, Revelation 21) becomes about God restoring order or shalom functionally rather than replacing this cosmos with brand new materials (deconstructs the possibility of the destruction of cosmos and its replacement with “new earth”

LIST OF KEY INSIGHTS:

Introduction – Loaded w/ understanding the need for interpretation to take place in light of ancient culture. Great intro for anyone learning biblical interpretation in light of cultural context!

- 16 – Concordism defined
- 17 – God communicated on ‘their terms’
- 18 – Heart as seat of the emotion... good illustration for explaining culture gap
- 24 – Material vs. functional ontology
- 26 – Thesis quote listed above
- 31 – Ancient Creation features
- 35 – His proposal on creation based on ancient literature
- 38-39 – “Bara” discussed
- 43 – Ancient understanding of “bara” quote
- 44 – ex nihilo exposed as flawed
- 46 – “beginning” as opening the book of Genesis as first of 12 literary sections of the whole of Genesis
- 46 – Alternative translation of Gen 1.1
- 49 – “Tohu” has zero to do with material form... also, definition of term
- 50 – Function is the result of purpose, not material properties
- 55 – “Day” and period of light / darkness explored (day 1)
- 56 – Day 1 = creation of ‘time’
- 57 – sky dome → weather system from an ANE perspective
- 59 – Days 1, 2, 3 = functions of time, weather, & food
- 60 – flood = return to non-functional cosmos
- 61 – old world science and the Bible
- 64 – day 4 = signs, days, years, seasons
- 65 – “asa” – “made” discussed
- 68-69 – image of God
- 70 – created out of dust points to all humans in Gen 2
- 72 – deity rests in a temple in the ancient world
- 73 – “rest” defined in ancient world
- 74 – God rests and rules from cosmic temple
- 76 – computer illustration
- 81-82 – Temple elements represent the cosmos
- 83 – Text about earth being a temple is Isaiah 66
- 84 – summary of main points about temple view
- 88 – Temple inauguration makes it functional and not merely a material building
- 91 – Genesis 1 read as a liturgy?
- 92 – Day-Age theory flawed
- 94-95 – Overview of the main arguments of this book thus far... quote about age of earth
- 96-97 – material origins discussed... affirmed in New Testament
- 98-99 – before and after of Genesis 1
- 100-101 – death discussed based on Romans 5
- 102 – “literal” discussed
- 109 – Young Earth Creationism best trait = day is 24 hour period
- 111-112 – Framework Theory doesn’t go far enough
- 122 – God’s continuing work in creation after Gen 1
- 138 – Gen 2 and Romans 5
- 146 – environmentalism in functional view
- 147 – Sabbath and Functional view application
- 153 – teleological evolution expounded
- 159 – main points about public science theories and public discourse
- 163 – Key flow of whole argument reviewed... very helpful!