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UNDERSTANDING GENESIS AND THE TEMPLE

TB Spackman

Review of John H. Walton, The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009). 192 pp. \$9.85.

Abstract: Genesis 1 meant something very particular to the Israelites in their time and place. However, because that contextual knowledge was lost to us for thousands of years, we tend to misread it. Walton offers an interpretation of Genesis 1 that juxtaposes it with temple concepts, simultaneously allaying some of the scientific issues involved.

In *The Lost World*, Hebrew Bible professor John Walton (Wheaton College) lays out an in-depth argument and accessible argument for a new reading of Genesis chapter 1, with serious implications for religion, education, and politics. He argues that creation therein is *functional*, not *material* or *physical*. Though easy to grasp once explained, this concept is difficult to summarize concisely. In Genesis 1, God does not create everything materially *ex nihilo* but is instead organizing and assigning function(s) to matter and objects (sun, moon, etc.) that have a material existence *prior* to Genesis 1. Walton provides several clear and useful analogies to explain what he means by functional creation as well as to demonstrate the extent to which materialist assumptions unconsciously pervade the modern worldview.

Walton further asserts that this functional reading *is* the literal and original interpretation, representing an Israelite understanding of Genesis 1; moderns unconsciously misread the text because we no longer share its worldview nor are we even aware of it. This is the lost world Walton attempts to recover and explain.

Walton organizes his book into eighteen propositions. Each is well supported with careful analysis of the Bible and ancient Near Eastern sources, clear analogies, and suggestions for further reading. Nearly every chapter offers fresh perspectives and intriguing ideas. For

example, Walton proposes that in spite of the obvious focus on creation, Genesis 1 is actually temple-centric and that the most important day to the Israelites was the seventh day, in which nothing is created. Deities rested in temples and only in temples; that God rested on the seventh day meant that he had entered the cosmic temple “constructed” in the previous six days, that God “is taking command, that he is mounting his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role” (74). Stability, order, and life result. Walton here likens functional creation and the Sabbath to “getting a new computer and spending focused time setting it up (placing the equipment, connecting the wires, installing the software). After all of those tasks were done, you would disengage from the process, mostly so you could now engage in the new tasks of actually using the computer. That is what it had been set up for.” (75) He further offers a devotional aspect of this understanding of the Sabbath. God asks us on the Sabbath “to recognize that he is at the controls, not us. 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 control and acknowledge him as the one who is in control” (146).

If Walton’s proposal is correct (and I believe his arguments merit serious consideration), several modern conflicts seen as pitting science against religion effectively disappear, as do other questions that assume material creation, such as “how can there be light before there is sun or stars?” In later chapters, Walton addresses the doctrinal and political/educational implications for evolution and Intelligent Design, as well as one LDS sticky wicket, the question of death before the Fall. Walton also explains why concordism, the attempt to align current scientific ideas with ancient scripture (an impulse also found among LDS) is misguided.

Although Walton is an Evangelical speaking to a like-minded audience, LDS will find much to appreciate in this affordable paperback, all the more valuable because of its clarity and readability. Walton has since published a more technical version for an academic audience, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Eisenbrauns, 2011) as well as a follow-up covering Genesis 2 and 3, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (IVP, 2015).

TB Spackman graduated from BYU in Near Eastern Studies. He then received a MA and did further PhD work in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (Comparative Semitics) at the University of Chicago, during

which time he was a Hugh Nibley Fellow. He has taught part-time at BYU and served as a volunteer Institute teacher for 10+ years. Currently, he is authoring a book on how we read Genesis 1 and the parallel LDS accounts, tentatively titled Reading Scripture, Reading Creation: The Ancient Context of Genesis 1. He blogs at Times&Seasons, and writes Gospel Doctrine background posts at Benjamin the Scribe.

