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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 189pp + Index. ISBN: 978-0830837045; *Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2011. 199pp + Bibliography and Index. ISBN: 978-1575062167.

The topic of biblical cosmology is of interest to modern readers of the Bible—not merely as an intellectual or academic pursuit, but also out of the devotional and religious (even sometimes political) sentiment of modern believers in the biblical text. Given that the Bible is actively read, interpreted, and revered as the word of God by Jews and Christians around the globe, it is no surprise that the debate around biblical cosmology (particularly in light of Charles Darwin’s theory of the development of life by natural selection) has generated considerable academic and polemical literature. Clashes between groups of fundamentalist evangelical Christians and evolutionary biologists in the United States over the topic have even taken to the Supreme Court the issue of the propriety of teaching “biblical” creationism versus evolutionary theory in public schools (most recently in 2005 with *Kitzmiller et al. v. Dover*).¹

Thankfully, in the midst of the heated polemics have emerged more reasonable and sensible authors such as John H. Walton, an evangelical biblical scholar and professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College. Walton’s two major monographs on the discussion of biblical cosmology (*The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* and *Genesis 1 As*

1. Molleen Matsumura and Louise Mead, “Ten Major Court Cases about Evolution and Creationism,” online at <http://ncse.com/taking-action/ten-major-court-cases-evolution-creationism> (accessed October 5, 2014).

Ancient Cosmology)² are welcomed additions to the discussions of the relationship between biblical cosmology and modern evolutionary theory and the nature of biblical cosmology in its ancient Near Eastern *Sitz im Leben*.

For the purposes of this brief review I will forgo an examination or critique of Walton's views on teaching biblical cosmology in public schools, other than to note that he is against teaching Genesis in science classrooms (*LWG* 151–160). The reason he gives is that the cosmology of Genesis 1 is non-scientific, and concerned with affirming a metaphysical “teleology with no possible neutrality.” As such, teaching biblical cosmology would not be appropriate for an ideal scientific classroom, which would remain free of promoting any ontological teleology (*LWG* 158). Those wishing for a fuller review of Walton's arguments along these lines would do well to look elsewhere.³ Rather, I will focus briefly on Walton's analysis of Genesis 1 as ancient cosmology. Instead of reflecting modern scientific cosmology, Walton argues that the cosmology of Genesis 1 is fundamentally a “cosmic temple inauguration,” by which he means that the cosmos, in the biblical view, “is being given its functions as God's temple, where he has taken up his residence and from where he runs the cosmos” (*LWG* 161).

While Walton develops this exegesis succinctly in *The Lost World of Genesis One* for a non-scholarly audience, it is in *Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology* where Walton convincingly demonstrates the concordance between biblical cosmology and the cosmologies of ancient Israel's neighbors in Egypt and Mesopotamia, through a skillful execution of critical exegetical and historical tools. Drawing on what he calls the “ancient cosmological cognitive environment” of the ancient Near East (*GAC* 23–121), Walton proceeds to demonstrate that Genesis 1 shares multiple affinities in both the specifics of its lexical terminology (*GAC* 122–92) and the content of its overall cosmological narrative with other ancient cosmologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia (*GAC*

2. Throughout this review I will abbreviate *The Lost World of Genesis One* as *LWG* and *Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology* as *GAC*.

3. See for example James F. McGrath, “Review: The Lost World of Genesis One,” *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 30, no. 1–2 (2010): 52–53; Sean M. Corday, “Review: The Lost World of Genesis One,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (September 2010): 227–28; Ken Mickelson, “Review: The Lost World of Genesis One,” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought & Practice* 18, no. 3 (August 2010): 47–48; Wayne Northey, “Review of John H. Walton's ‘The Lost World of Genesis One,’” *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, online at <http://www.clarion-journal.com/files/book-review-of-the-lost-world.pdf> (accessed October 5, 2014); Andrew Steinmann, “Lost World of Genesis One: John H. Walton, American Evangelicals and Creation,” *Lutheran Educational Journal*, online at <http://lej.cuchicago.edu/book-reviews/lost-world-of-genesis-one-john-h-walton-american-evangelicals-and-creation/> (accessed October 5, 2014).

193–99). Accordingly, Walton concludes that “the Genesis account pertains to functional origins rather than material origins [of the cosmos] and that the temple ideology underlies the Genesis cosmology” (GAC 198–99). In essence, Walton argues that Genesis 1 is a temple text that is concerned with depicting the enthronement and empowerment of God in his cosmic temple. Although this view has similarities with Egyptian and especially Mesopotamian cosmologies, “if we may borrow a clichéd metaphor,” Walton concludes, “the wheel was not reinvented in Genesis, but it was put on a different axel (temple dedication?), on a different vehicle (monotheism)” (GAC 198).

The methodology Walton employs to arrive at this conclusion is a careful comparative study between Genesis and nonbiblical cosmologies (GAC 1–16). Walton laments that “many attempts to trace literary trails from ancient Near Eastern texts to Genesis have been too facile and the results too superficial” (GAC 2), and so sets out to construct a more robust methodology for comparing Genesis with such cosmological-mythic texts as the *Enuma Elish*. “Reconstructing literary relationships often becomes an elaborate connect-the-dots game in which the results resemble more the apparent randomness of a Rorschach inkblot test than the clear literary links that are claimed,” Walton argues. “Our efforts should focus on using all the literature at our disposal to reconstruct the ancient cognitive environment, which can then serve as the backdrop for understanding each literary work” (GAC 2). This is highlighted again in Walton’s conclusion, where he emphasizes, “Even though Israel shares in [the] broad ideological commonalities [of ancient Near Eastern cosmology], there are distinctive ways in which Genesis 1 interacts with and develops them” (GAC 194).

I am favorably impressed with Walton’s careful exegesis of Genesis 1 in light of comparative Near Eastern studies and advancements in our understanding of biblical Hebrew. For those interested in biblical cosmology as it relates to modern science and strictly on its own terms, both *The Lost World of Genesis One* and *Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology* are excellent resources for any inquisitive student.

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