

*AN EXAMINATION OF JOHN WALTON'S MISUSE OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN
MYTHOLOGY UPON THE TEXT OF GENESIS 1*

INTRODUCTION

John Walton is a prominent Old Testament scholar¹ who is highly respected and influential. Thus, when he introduces the reader to the topic of mythology in his popular-level commentary on Genesis, it is intriguing. It is concerning when he articulates that his methodology is to utilize comparative studies to “give us the tools to make the cultural adaptation. Familiarity with the literature of the ancient Near East helps us become informed about the ancient culture and worldview.”² His rationale for appropriating mythology into Genesis is, “the mythological literature of the ancient Near East is relevant to all of Genesis because it provides for an understanding of how people thought about deity in the ancient world.”³ As it pertains to the Genesis account, Walton argues that Genesis 1 is not describing the act of creating, but rather demonstrates the functionality of the cosmos. His hermeneutical approach to Genesis 1 and the resulting theological interpretation is worthy of consideration and analysis.

This paper argues that Walton imposes the theology of the ANE into the biblical account of creation. To do so, the first section of the paper will examine Walton’s view of Ancient Near Eastern literature upon Scripture. The second section will analyze the effects of Walton’s ANE theological assertions upon the biblical text through a critique of *The Lost World of Genesis One*. This section will counter Walton’s view by arguing that Genesis 1 is describing the action of God creating the material elements of creation, which forms a polemic against ANE thought. In the third section the overarching problems of Walton’s view of Genesis 1 will be discussed. The conclusion offers some areas of discussion where dispensational hermeneutics may seek to clarify its correction of Walton’s exegetical process.

WALTON'S VIEW OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MYTHOLOGY

Walton’s main assertion is that Genesis 1 is adopting the ancient Near East (henceforth called ANE) mythology because this would have been the worldview through which the audience would have understood the biblical text. He writes,

The ancients also had a cosmic geography that was just as intrinsic to their thinking, just as foundational to their worldview, just as influential in every aspect of their lives, and just as true in their minds. And it differs from ours at every point. If we aspire to understand the culture and literature of the ancient world,

¹ John Walton is professor at Wheaton College. He is the author of many books and journal articles relating to the ancient Near East and the Old Testament. His books on Genesis include: *Genesis: NIV Application Commentary*. (2001); *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (2009); *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (2011); *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (2015); *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate* (2018); *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (2019).

² John H. Walton, *Genesis: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

whether Canaanite, Babylonian, Egyptian, or Israelite, it is therefore essential that we understand their cosmic geography.⁴

One notices in this quote that according to Walton the creation account is no more different than its cultural neighbors.⁵ Walton narrows in on the common theme, writing,

Beyond this physical description, it is important to realize that this cosmic geography was predominately metaphysical and only secondarily physical or material. The role and manifestation of the gods in the cosmic geography was primary.⁶

This assimilation of ANE mythology forms a common cosmic geography that will undergird his interpretation of Genesis 1.

Although noting commonalities among ANE myth, Walton particularly attempts to connect Genesis 1 with that of Egyptian mythology. He writes, “Principle cosmogonic texts relate to thee important cult centers and their gods: Hermopolis (Ptah), Heliopolis (Atum), and Hermopolis (Amun).”⁷ Indeed, there are similarities between Egyptian mythology and Genesis one. The following chart compares the Hermopolis and Memphis Egyptian mythology with Genesis 1:1-2:3.

| Hermopolis/ Memphis | Genesis 1:1-2:3 |
|--|--|
| 1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep | 1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep |
| 2. Breath/wind (Amun) moves on the waters | 2. Breath/wind of Elohim moves on the waters |
| 3. Thought and word of Ptah creates Atum (light) | 3. Word of God creates light |
| 4. Emergence of primordial hill “in midst of Nun” | 4. Creation of firmament “in midst of the waters” |
| 5. Procreation of sky (Shu) when Nun was raised over earth | 5. Creation of sky when waters were raised above the firmament |
| 6. Formation of heavenly ocean (Nut) by separation | 6. Formation of heavenly ocean when waters were separated |
| 7. Formation of dry ground (Geb) by separation | 7. Formation of dry ground when waters were gathered |

⁴ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 132.

⁵ Walton argues, “The language of the Old Testament reflects a similar view, and no text in the Bible seeks to correct it.” *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John H Walton, “Creation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 156.

| | |
|---|--|
| 8. Sun created to rule the world as the image of Rê | 8. Creation of plants . . . later fish, birds, reptiles, animals |
| 9. Earth sprouts plants, fish, birds, reptiles, animals | 9. Sun and moon created to rule day and night |
| 10. Creation of gods' statues, cult sites, food offerings | 10. Creation of man as divine image, food to eat, dominion |
| 11. Ptah completes activity and "rests" in satisfaction | 11. God completes activity and "rests" (in satisfaction) |

Figure ⁸

While these similarities exist, much more significant differences exist between Genesis 1 and Egyptian mythology. Johnson explains,

As impressive as are the thematic continuities, the ideological discontinuities are more significant. First, the Hebrew cosmogony rejects all notion of theogony. Second, the Israelite cosmology rejects any hint of pantheism. Third, the Yahwistic version of creation is clearly monotheistic. Fourth, the apex of creation in the Hebrew version is not the generation of the sun as the image/manifestation of the sun god, but the fashioning of humanity as the image of Yahweh. Fifth, the distinctive seven-day framework of Genesis 1 is an ideologically loaded paradigm shift away from the one-day pattern of recurrent creation brought about each morning with the sunrise symbolizing the daily rebirth of Rê-Amun, the sun god creator as embodiment of Atum, the primordial demiurge creator. Sixth, Yahweh is self-existent, unlike the self-generated Atum. The Egyptians conceived of the various elements of the material world as the embodiment, physical manifestation, or terrestrial incarnation of the individual gods. The sun was the terrestrial manifestation of the sun god Rê (later Rê-Amun). The sky was the incarnation of Nut, the ground the embodiment of Geb, the dry air between was the male deity Shu and moist humidity was the goddess Tefnut. The primordial sea was Nun, the original womb of Atum, the original creator-god. Atum was called the All or One because all that he created (immaterial gods and material world) was simply an extension of himself. The Egyptian creator was immanent in his creation. Creation in Egyptian cosmogony was not ex nihilo, but was a transformation of the immaterial deity into his material manifestation. The procreation of the gods was the means of the creation of the material world (e.g., the birth of Shu is the creation of the sky [dry air], and the birth of Geb is the creation of the ground). Even Atum was procreated; the primeval waters (Nun) were his father and mother (although some versions depict Atum generating himself in the womb of the primeval

⁸ Gordon H. Johnson, "Genesis 1 and Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165:658 (Apr 2008), 183-184. This chart is a combination two separate charts that Johnson produced.

waters). Likewise the primeval waters, once the lifeless infinite monad, transformed itself in the waters of life from which all living beings and things in the cosmos would ultimately spring.⁹

Hence, Johnson’s conclusion is sound when he writes, “Genesis 1 appears to be a polemic designed to refute ancient Near Eastern creation mythology in general and ancient Egyptian creation mythology in particular.”¹⁰ Even Walton will concede some ground here when he writes, “There are admittedly many points in the narrative [of the Genesis account] where such an anti-mythical, polemical perspective can be plausibly supported.”¹¹ Yet, he prefers to focus on the worldview of the ANE as he concludes, “In the process however, the numerous points of worldview should not be ignored.”¹²

The view that Genesis 1 is a polemic against Egyptian mythology is strengthened when Genesis 1 is understood canonically within the Pentateuch. This is clearly seen in the ten plagues that God sent upon Egypt which “were designed to discredit the forces of nature the Egyptians worshipped (Exodus 7:14-12:31).”¹³ The following chart links the elements of creation to each Egyptian god.

| PLAGUE | EGYPTIAN DEITY | REFERENCE |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1. Water to Blood | Osiris, Hapi, Khnum | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 2. Frogs | Heqt, frog deity | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 3. Mosquitoes | Seb | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 4. Flies | Kephra and Uatchit | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 5. Cattle | Typhon and Imhotep | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 6. Boils | Hathor and Apis | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| | | |
| 7. Hail | Seraphis and Isis | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 8. Locusts | Seth, protector of crops | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 9. Darkness | Ra, sun deity | Exod. 7:14-25 |
| 10. Death of Firstborn | Ptah, god of life | Exod. 7:14-25 |

Figure ¹⁴

To better understand this event in relation to the Pentateuch, Sailhamer writes,

There is no indication that the author assumes his readers are familiar with the theology of the Egyptian religion. It seems more likely that the author is portraying the events of the plagues to a primarily Israelite audience, or at least one who would understand the world in terms of the theology of the Pentateuch

⁹ Ibid., 192.

¹⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹¹ John H Walton, “Creation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 161.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ed Hindson and Gary Yates, *Old Testament: A Survey*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 76.

¹⁴ Ibid.

itself. Thus, this series of plagues need not intend any more than the general but all-important point that the God of the covenant, the Creator of the universe, is superior to the powers of the nations- whether those powers be merely political and military powers or powers that rely on magic.¹⁵

Thus, in the plagues God demonstrates His power by showing that He alone materially creates each element represented in the miraculous event. How does one know that the material makeup of each creation element is in focus rather than functionality? Because the Egyptian magicians tried to compete with Moses' God by attempting to materially produce what Yahweh did (Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18,19, 9:11). Hence, the Scriptural account of God as the material Creator refutes the ANE belief system. The creation account in Genesis 1 is serves a polemic by making a propositional truth claim about Yahweh.

IMPROPER APPROPRIATION OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MYTHOLOGY UPON THE TEXT OF GENESIS 1

To better understand how Walton's misuse of ANE mythology affects his hermeneutic of the biblical text, it is useful to analyze his work on Genesis 1 through a critique of *The Lost World of Genesis One*. Walton's thesis is: "People in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, but by virtue of it having a function in an ordered system."¹⁶ Walton presents his argument by presenting eighteen propositions.

Propositions 1-4: Positing the Thesis of Functionality

It is within the introductory propositions Walton establishes how he views Genesis 1. He begins in proposition one by stating, "Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology. That is, it does not attempt to describe cosmology modern terms or advance modern questions. The Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their 'scientific' understanding of the cosmos."¹⁷ He further explains, There is no concept of a 'natural' world ancient Near Eastern thinking...As a result, we should not expect anything in the Bible or in the rest of the ancient Near East to engage in the discussion of how God's level creative activity relates to the natural world (i.e., what we call naturalistic process of the laws of nature)."¹⁸ Walton asserts in proposition two that Genesis 1 is communicating our existence through functional ontology. He explains, "The actual creative act is to assign something its functioning role in the ordered system. That is what brings it into existence. Of course, something must have physical properties before it can be given function, but the critical question is, what stage is defined as 'creation?'"¹⁹ In another work he calls this ontology "cosmic ontology,"²⁰ explaining,

¹⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 253.

¹⁶ John H. Walton, *The Lost Worlds of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 26. Walton further explains, "Here I do not refer to an ordered system in scientific terms, that is, in relation to society and culture." Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27.

²⁰ John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 23.

The philosophical concept of ontology can be applied to many ideas (such as, evil, belief, the cosmos), but here we are dealing specifically with cosmic ontology. Understanding ancient peoples' cosmic ontology must precede discussion of their understanding of cosmic origins because ontology determines what aspect of origins will be of interest and ultimate significance.²¹

Thus, for Walton, Genesis is not concerned with describing material creation, but rather is describing how “the parts of the cosmos functioned.”²²

In an effort to textually argue for functionality Walton then embarks on a series of studies to attempt to show that function rather than form is in view in Genesis 1. The first word Walton deals with is *bara* “create.” Walton associates a functionality meaning on the basis “that grammatical objects of the verb are not easily identified in material terms, and even when they are it is questionable that the context is objectifying them. That is, no clear example exists that demands a material perspective for the verb.”²³ Walton’s conclusion on *bara* faces considerable objections.

Yet, Walton’s conclusion must be refuted by an analysis of *bara* as used in Scripture itself. Steven Boyd observes, “In the Biblical Hebrew, the verb בָּרָא (create) always has God for its subject and never mentions the material from which He created. Its presence in a verse therefore underscores that *God is Creator*.”²⁴ Kenneth Matthews adds *bara* “is used in the Old Testament consistently in reference to a new activity.”²⁵ Thus, grammatically it is of utmost importance to understand the subject of this verb. Morris writes, “The use of the word ‘create’ here in Genesis 1:1 informs us that, at this point, then physical universe was spoken into existence by God. It has no existence prior to this primeval creative act of God.”²⁶ The problem with Walton’s emphasis on the object created is it takes the focus away from what is being proclaimed, namely, that God created *ex nihilo*. It can also be argued that the meaning בָּרָא in Genesis 1:1 is material creation is seen by its connection with the synonyms עָשָׂה “made” (1:7, 16, 25, 31; 2:3,4) and יָצַר “formed” (2:7, 8, 19) within Genesis 1-2. The syntactical

²¹ Ibid.

²² John H. Walton, *The Lost Worlds of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, 29. To make his point Walton uses some analogies to show that in our modern times we think of objects and entities according to their function rather than their material makeup. Examples he offers are a chair, computer tower, or a company. He argues that we are only concerned with the existence of these objects because of their functionality, and we are less concerned with how they are materially constructed. This philosophical argument actually can be used to support the opposite view that functionality is derived from material form. Take for instance a chair. It certainly can be asserted that the usefulness and enjoyment can be found in functionality of a good chair. Yet, if the material components of the chair are not of good quality and the chair breaks then the chair has not given optimal usefulness. Hence, functionality is derived from material form. When takes this philosophical principle into Scripture one finds that the optimal functionality of the creation is predicated on the Creator who material made, or formed, each element of creation. Thus, the Scriptural principle is both form and function are described to proclaim the power of the Creator. Ibid., 43.

²⁴ Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (editors), *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth* (Green Forest, AG Master Books, 2008), 189.

²⁵ Kenneth A. Matthews, *New American Commentary: Genesis 1:11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 128.

²⁶ Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1976), 40.

connectedness of these terms²⁷ within Genesis 1-2 demonstrates that what is being described is God materially creating, making, and forming the elements of creation.²⁸

The next word Walton focuses on is “beginning.” Walton believes “that the ‘beginning’ is a way of talking about a seven-day period rather than a point in time prior to the seven days.”²⁹ This is interesting because this does not match his concluding remarks on the origins debate, which is decidedly against a young earth creationist view of seven-day period of creation.³⁰ Yet, Walton does touch on an interpretative question that arises, which is: should this verse be translated an independent clause (“In the beginning..”) or subordinate clause (“When God began to create..”)?³¹ This will have theological implications on the meaning of the text. “Does Gen. 1:1 teach an absolute beginning of creation as a direct act of God? Or does it affirm the existence of matter before the existence of matter before the creation the heavens and the earth?”³²

It seems best to understand this verse as an independent clause that begins the narrative with an absolute point in time. Hamilton writes, “The prepositioned בְּרֵאשִׁית is a temporal, describing a point in time in which God created creation. Since this marks specific time of beginning, it implies an ending point due to its association with “end.”³³ “If the author has at the outset shown the creations beginning, were initiated with a future goal intended, and eschatological purpose. Thus, the prophets could speak of “new heavens and new earth” (Isa. 65:7; Rev. 21:1).”³⁴ Sailhamer agrees, “In opening the account of creation with the phrase ‘in the beginning,’ the author has marked Creation as a starting point of a period of time. Hence here will be the beginning of the history which follows.”³⁵ Davidson writes, “The phrase ‘evening and morning,’ appearing at the conclusion of the six days of creation, is used by the author to clearly define the nature of the days of creation as literal twenty-four-hour days.”³⁶ Hence, “beginning” indicates the point in time when God begins to materially create. This would undercut Walton’s functionality argument.

²⁷ As seen by their wayyiqtol forms.

²⁸ This argument is also important for refuting Walton’s view of the historical Adam. He posits that Genesis 1-11 is not describing material creation but rather describing the functionality of creation as a “home,” (temple) for God. He believes that Adam is archetypal rather than the representative head. As it relates to Adam, God both “made” and “formed” Adam from dust in the narrative of Genesis 1-2. Romans 5 becomes important in refuting Walton because Christ came to save us from our sin to undo what the first Adam did. If one denies the material makeup of Adam, then they deny the curse of sin and our need for a Savior. Walton’s view of Christ would also be erroneous because if one important aspect of Christ is the hypostatic union whereby Christ is 100% God/man in his incarnation. This is important because Christ had to come materially as a man to conquer the curse of sin and bring eternal life.

²⁹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 45.

³⁰ As one can see it is assumed that a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic lends itself to a young earth creationist view of Genesis 1.

³¹ Victor Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapter 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 103.

³² *Ibid.*, 105.

³³ Kenneth A Matthews, *NAC*, 127.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992, 83.

³⁶ Gerald A. Klingbeil (editor), *The Genesis Account and its Reverberations in the Old Testament* (Berrein Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2015), 78.

The third word study that Walton embarks on is *tohu* “unformed” and *bohu* “emptiness” in Genesis 1:2. He writes, “We propose that *tohu* and *bohu* together convey the idea of nonexistence (in their functional ontology), that is, the earth is described as not yet functioning in an ordered system. (Functional) creation has not yet taken place and therefore is only (functional) nonexistence.”³⁷

HALOT renders תֹהוּ as “empty.” “This word is used three times in the OT and is always used with *tohu*.”³⁸ Because of the scarcity of usage of *bohu* and its connectedness to *tohu*, Walton focuses on *tohu*. Matthews notes that the meaning of בֹהוּ is “unclear,” saying “It refers to an unproductive, uninhabited land, or has the sense of futility or nonexistence.”³⁹ To precisely narrow down the precise meaning within Genesis 1 one must understand the context of this verse. Morris writes, “Initially there were no stars or planets, only the basic matter component of the space-matter-time continuum. The elements which were to be formed into the planet Earth were at first only elements, not formed but nevertheless comprising the basic matter- the ‘dust’ of the earth.”⁴⁰ This word pair (or merism) is not speaking of nonexistence but rather is describing the process of creation beginning with the basic elements of material creation.

Propositions 5-6: The Functionality of the Days of Creation

In these propositions Walton compares the ancient Near Eastern myths to the creation of days to indicate that in days one through three God are describing a “functional sense, not a material one.”⁴¹ He continues,

In the account of days four through six we see a shift in focus. While a functional orientation is still obvious, God is not setting up functions as much as he is installing functionaries. In some cases, the functionaries will be involved in carrying out the functions (especially the role of the celestial bodies in marking the periods of time), but in most cases the functionaries simply carry out their own functions in the spheres delineated in the first three days (time, cosmic space, terrestrial space).⁴²

Yet, is it appropriate to combine these days only according to function? Once again, it must be said that there is no doubt that each element within God’s creation is made for a purpose (function). Yet, Walton overlooks the beauty of the creative process God uses to make creation.

Propositions 7-12: Creation as a Cosmic Temple

Within this section of propositions Walton builds on the ontological functionality of Genesis 1 by asserting that goal of the text is to describe creation as a functioning cosmic temple. Walton arrives at this conclusion by noting how God “rested” at day seven. He claims that this is confusing to our modern understanding but turns to ancient Near Eastern thought to derive an answer. He writes,

³⁷ John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 49.

³⁸ Victor Hamilton, *NICOT*, 108.

³⁹ Kenneth Matthews, *NAC*, 130.

⁴⁰ Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 50.

⁴¹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 57. Here he is specifically referencing the periods of light and darkness.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 65.

The difference is in the piece of information that everyone knew in the ancient world and to which most modern readers are totally oblivious: Deity rests in a temple, and only in a temple. This is what temples are built for. We might even say that this is what a temple is- a place for divine rest...But in the ancient world rest is what results when a crisis has been resolved or when stability has been achieved, when things have settled down.⁴³

The problem with this view is that it presupposes conflict at some point in the creative process. Yet, there is nothing in the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1 that God needed to reestablish stability. Additionally, to compare ANE mythology to “rest” is not an equal comparison. Matthews writes, “In Babylonian creation stories the gods are freed from their labors after the creation of humans...God’s sabbath however, is not aversion to labor but there celebrative cessation of a completed work, whereby he expresses his mastery over time and by sanctifying it.”⁴⁴ Thus, the concept of God resting is not an arbitrary piece of information that is out of place. Sailhamer writes, “The author’s intention is to point to the past as a picture of the future, then the emphasis on God’s rest forms an important part of the author’s understanding of what lies in the future.”⁴⁵

Walton continues to develop his point, “We are proposing as the premise of Genesis 1; that it should be understood as an account of functional origins of the cosmos as temple.”⁴⁶ Evidence of this is found in Isaiah 6:3 whereby “the seraphim chant, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.’”⁴⁷ Yet, the creation of archetypal temple does not take place in Genesis 1, but rather in the garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8-14. God created a special place on earth, the garden of Eden, for man to be in His presence. This localized divine space becomes the type for all future temples. Daniel Liroy writes, “The creation narrative points to Eden as the earliest-occurring sacred space. Because it is a prototype and archetype of future temple, Eden becomes a conceptual framework for understanding and appreciating their purposes.”⁴⁸ Liroy continues, “For instance, according to Genesis 2:8, the Creator planted an orchard of various fruit trees in the Eden. Deliberate representations of these were found in the wood carvings placed within the temple of Solomon which gave it a garden-like atmosphere. The intent of the temple design was to recreate the primordial landscape of creation. And draw attention to its luxurious, pristine, and life-giving character.”⁴⁹

Walton misconstrues the relationship of creation in Genesis 1 to ancient Near Eastern mythology of temple. Writing on Genesis 2:8-14 Matthews writes, “In ancient Near Eastern mythology is found a ‘garden of God’ motif that depicts the divine residence on earth.; it typically possesses abundant waters, fertile herbage, and beautiful stones.”⁵⁰ Yet, the verbiage that Near Eastern mythology uses is not present, and the narrative of Genesis 2 decidedly shows

⁴³ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁴ Kenneth A. Matthews, *NAC*, 179.

⁴⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 96.

⁴⁶ John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 84.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Daniel T. Liroy, “The Garden as a Primordial Temple or Sacred Space for Humankind,” *Conspectus* (Sept 2010), 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kenneth A. Matthews, *NAC*, 201.

God as Creator and does not live in the garden.⁵¹ Regarding the command not to eat the fruit of the trees Hamilton writes, “Once again ancient Near Eastern literature provides distant parallels to the eating of plants or some edible substance and the subsequent bestowal of life.”⁵² Yet, “Here again the Bible present its material in a way that is quite different from that of its neighbors.”⁵³ The problem is much of scholarship, like Walton, have accepted that these myths are the underlying structure of Genesis 1-3.

OVERARCHING PROBLEMS WITH WALTON’S VIEW OF GENESIS ONE

Problem 1: Improper Hermeneutic for Genesis One

From a dispensational perspective, Walton’s interpretation of Genesis 1 is flawed because it is based on an improper hermeneutic. In the introduction to the book Walton establishes his hermeneutic, which is to import cultural thinking of the times into the biblical text. Walton’s rationale for this is that to understand the words within our translations we must turn to their cultural meaning. He writes “Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves in a culture, and is designed to communicate within a culture, we must translate the culture as well as the language if we hope to understand the text fully.”⁵⁴

Therefore, Walton does not begin with a literal hermeneutic, but rather allows foreign texts to decide meaning. Absent from Walton’s interpretive process is authorial intent of the text, which must be the boundary for the text itself to determine meaning. Walton refutes a literal hermeneutic when he writes, “It is interesting that many people who discuss Genesis 1 express an interest in interpreting the chapter ‘literally.’ By this they generally mean that is to be taken exactly for what it says rather than understand Genesis 1 simply in metaphoric, allegorical or symbolic terms....Our interpretative commitment is to read the text at what I call ‘face value.’”⁵⁵ Walton explains that “face value” is defining the lexical meaning of a word based on its cultural connotation. Hence, Walton stresses “the similarities between the ways the Israelites thought, and the ideas reflected in the ancient world, rather than the differences.”⁵⁶

Yet, as one considers the lexical meaning of each word in Genesis 1 it becomes clear that what the author is communicating is something unique from the ancient Near Eastern world. Beal notes the broader problem with Walton’s hermeneutic of adopting ANE mythology, “The view that Genesis 1-11 is mythological, based on the (untrue) legends from Mesopotamia and

⁵¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *NICOT*, 161.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9. Walton explains how this is done, “Rather than translating the culture, then, we need to try to enter the culture...How do we do this? We can begin to understand the culture by becoming familiar with its literature.” *Ibid.*, 11-12. Thus, Walton’s hermeneutic is to compare ancient Near East literature with that of Genesis 1 and import its meaning into the text. Walton writes, “It is expected that that Israelites held many concepts and perspectives in common with the rest of the world...Rather we recognize the common conceptual worldview that existed in ancient times. We should therefore not speak of Israel being influenced by that world- they were part of that world.” *Ibid.*, 13. For those concerned about comparing ANE mythology with Scripture, Walton writes, “For the Israelites, Genesis 1 offered explanations of their view of origins and operations, in the same way that mythologies served in the rest of the ancient world and science serves us today.” *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

elsewhere, is not consistent with the divine authority and inspiration of Scripture.”⁵⁷ The hermeneutical principle that must be applied to Genesis 1 is to begin with what Scripture is saying by determining its meaning. This is done exegetically by examining the lexical and syntactical work on each word of Genesis 1. In this way the interpreter is upholding the divine authority and inspiration of the text.

Walton also overlooks a key aspect of exegesis which is to observe the genre of Genesis 1. Steven Boyd has done outstanding work in this area and through careful analysis of the text decisively concludes Genesis 1 is “a literal historical account.”⁵⁸ Boyd notes, “For Genesis 1:1-2:3, three characteristics stand out: it is a magisterial literary composition; it is a foundational literary treatise; and it is a literal historical account.”⁵⁹ Boyd defines ‘magisterial’ as: “profound, majestic, full of grandeur, foundational, fundamental, vast, sweeping towering, incompatible, unplumbable, and inexhaustible.”⁶⁰ Regarding this text being a theological treatise Boyd writes, “It the foundation of Christian theology: our God, our Savior, is both Creator and Redeemer. In addition, it presents a powerful polemic against the present polytheism of the Ancient Near East.”⁶¹ Additionally, the structure of the text supports that his is narrative by the presence of wayyiqtol sequentially describe the process of God creating.

Problem 2: Improper Understanding of the Material Nature of the Creation/Recreation Motif

Walton’s view affects the theological issue of the creation/recreation motif that runs through Scripture. In fact, Walton has written on this theological theme in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament* where he focused on the comparisons to ANE creation myth (focusing primarily on Egyptian mythology). In this work he writes,

A number of documents from the ancient Near East contain extensive treatments of creation. It is questionable if any of them can be labeled as creation accounts, since the ancient thinkers did not think of creation as an end in itself... Nowhere in the ancient Near East did people think of creation primarily in terms of *making* things... Matter is not a concern of the author of Genesis.⁶²

Yet, Walton’s assessment of Genesis 1 does not align with how the rest of Scripture builds on God’s forming creation in Genesis 1 to point to recreation brought by the Messiah. Gallusz confirms this when he writes,

The Biblical story is structured around the movement from creation to new creation, and the process of redemption is seen as a means of leading to restoration of the old creation... The strong link between the two ends of the canon suggests that these passages frame the entire biblical narrative, and therefore serve as two poles with critical interpretative significance for all biblical material. Consequently, everything in the biblical canon is to be understood as

⁵⁷ Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (editors), *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, 134.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶² John H Walton, “Creation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 156; 161-162.

having its roots in Genesis 1 to 3, and also moving towards the final goal in Revelation 21-22.⁶³

Genesis 1:1 is an emphatic statement that God created the heavens and the earth. “As a praise of God of God’s grace, the theme of the remainder of the Creation account (1:2-2:25) is God’s gift of the land. God first prepared the land for men and women by dividing the waters and furnishing its resources (1:1-27). Then he gave its resources a blessing to be safeguarded by obedience (2:16-17).”⁶⁴ This statement reflects that the function of the land comes by from the God who materially created the land. The blessing of the land when it will produce abundantly is seen in the Messianic blessings that will occur when Messiah comes again and brings the recreation of Eden is the creation account.

It is because of this motif within Scripture that Walton’s view of *tohu* is misguided. To demonstrate this one must analyze the chart that Walton produces on lexical term.

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Deut. 32:10 | Parallel to the wilderness; describes howling |
| 1 Sam. 12:21 | Describes idols who can do nothing |
| Job 6:18; 12:24 | Wasteland away from wadis where caravans perish for the lack of water; |
| Job 12:24; Psalm 107:40 | wandering in a trackless land |
| Job 26:7 | What the north is stretched over |
| Is. 24:10 | Settlement is described as desolate |
| Is. 29:21 | Turn aside from righteousness |
| Is. 34:1 | Measuring with a plumb line |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Is. 40:7 | Worthlessness of the nations |
| Is. 40:23 | Rulers of the world made as to nothingness |
| Is. 41:29; 44:9 | All who make images; |
| Is. 45:18 | God did not bring it into existence formed it for habitation |
| Is. 45:19 | Israelites not instructed to seek God in the waste places; parallel to darkness |
| Is. 49:4 | Expending one’s strength to no purpose |
| Is. 59:4 | Describes relying on empty arguments and worthless words |
| Jer. 4:23 | Description of <i>tohu</i> and <i>bohu</i> ; light gone, mountains quaking, no people, no birds, fruitful lands waste, towns in ruins |

Figure ⁶⁵

Walton concludes, “Studying this list, one can see nothing in these contexts that would lead us to believe that *tohu* has anything to do with material form. The contexts in which they occur, and

⁶³ Thomas Shepherd (editor), *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the New Testament* (Berrien Springs: MI: Andrews University Press), 158.

⁶⁴ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 84.

⁶⁵ John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 48.

the word phrases used in parallel suggest rather that the word describes that which is nonfunctional, having no purpose and generally unproductive in human terms.”⁶⁶

The opposite can be argued in that these references determine that the functionality of the land can only occur when Messiah brings material recreation. For instance, the context of Deuteronomy 32:10 is a poetic seam that points to eschatological restoration of Israel to the land by the Messiah. Thus, the unproductiveness in these verses is due to material deterioration of objects and beings and points to the need of restoration to function properly. Hence, the pattern of the usage of this word in Genesis 1 follows the same pattern of God creating material elements to fulfill their functionality to provide abundantly in the land when Messiah rules in His millennial kingdom.

Revelation 21-22 also clearly points to the elements of creation for recreation as recognized for its material makeup in the eternal state. For instance, the new heavens and earth are described by gold and jewels and gold. What is in view is not their functionality as much as their material quality. In Revelation 21:18 it says, “the city was like pure gold, like clear glass.” Notice the clause “like clear glass” is present to provide additional information about the material quality of the gold. This “pictures ideal gold so pure that it is transparent. This surpasses any gold known in this present creation.”⁶⁷ Another example is in Revelation 22:2, which refers to the leaves of the tree of life. Thomas explains their importance, “The tree yields additional benefits through its leaves (“the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”). The nations benefit from the health-giving qualities of the leaves...’Healing’ then must connote a promoting of health of the nations such as will be an ongoing service in new creation. This agrees with the identification of the nations in 21:24.”⁶⁸ Clearly, the elements mentioned in Revelation 21-22 refer to the creation of all the elements that formed the garden of Eden. Thus, for Walton to assert that Genesis 1 does not refer to the making of creation, he misses how the rest of Scripture uses and refers to the creation account in Genesis 1-2.

Even the miracles of Jesus in the gospels, especially in the gospel of John, focus on Jesus’ ability to materially change objects and beings of creation as proof of His deity. The focus of the narrative of Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) is first on the material change (meaning at the molecular level) from one substance (water) to wine (wine). The functionality aspect of the miracle only comes into focus after the material change has occurred. Even the headwaiter’s response to the taste of the wine focused on the quality of the newly created beverage. When Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead (John 11) the focus was on the materially new body of Lazarus (i.e., repairing whatever was the cause of his death). The function of Lazarus’ body could only happen due to Jesus’ miraculous healing of the material body. Indeed, Jesus’ own resurrection proved God’s power to bring new life.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁷ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1995), 469.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 485.

Problem 3: Improper Understanding of God (Yahweh) as Creator and its Impact on the Debate of Origins

By relegating the creation account to a description of functionality rather than a declarative statement of God as Creator, this attribute of God is denied (or at best very limited). The ramifications of Walton's rendering of ANE mythology upon Genesis 1 extends into the debate of origins. Walton attempts to avert the science/faith debate through in essence forming a philosophical allowance for both.⁶⁹ The justification of this allowance for Genesis 1 and naturalistic processes comes from a teleological argument. He writes,

I have proposed here that Genesis is not metaphysically neutral- it mandates an affirmation of teleology (purpose), even as it leaves open the descriptive mechanism for material origins. Affirming purpose in one's belief assures a proper role for God regardless of what descriptive mechanism one identifies for material origins...Genesis is a top-layer account- it is not interested in communicating the mechanisms (though it important that they were decreed by the word of God).⁷⁰

Walton does is leaves the door open for evolutionary thought if God is involved in the process. Walton attempts to arbitrate the Intelligent Design and Neo Darwinian positions by trying to decipher proper naturalistic mechanisms (in his estimation). Yet, he ultimately vaguely affirms the positions when he concludes, "God has designed all that there is and may have brought some of his designs into existence instantaneously, whereas others he may have chosen to bring into existence through long, complicated processes. Neither procedure would be any less an act of God."⁷¹

Theistic evolutionist Dennis Lamoureux also places the debate on origins within a discussion on concordism when he writes, "Since the Bible includes both theological and scientific statements, it could be argued that here are two basic types of biblical concordism. 'Theological concordism' claims there is an indispensable correspondence between the theological truths in Scripture and spiritual reality. 'Scientific concordism' states that there is an alignment between the assertions about nature in the Bible and the physical world."⁷² Lamoureux's position is to view science as separate from Scripture. He writes, "Our challenge as modern readers of the Bible, then, is to identify this ancient vessel and to separate it from, and not conflate it with the life-changing Messages of Faith."⁷³ What could give Lamoureux the ability to do separate the biblical text from the origins of life? Walton's improper hermeneutic which detaches the meaning of the text allows for old earth and evolutionists to detach science from Scripture.⁷⁴

⁶⁹He uses the analogy of a layer cake to make the case that the top layer of the debate is whereby "the top layer represents the work of God," the lower layer represents the whole realm of materialistic or naturalistic causation or processes John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 115.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁷¹ Ibid., 131.

⁷² Dennis O. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 16.

⁷³ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁴ Walton attempts to guard the reader from "concordism," which he defines as attempting "to read an ancient text into modern times. He explains, "Concordists interpretations attempt to read details of physics, biology, geology, and so on into the biblical texts." John H. Walton, *The Lost World*, 105.

Using a dispensational hermeneutic, a young earth creationist will argue that the whole purpose of Genesis 1 is to proclaim God as the sole Creator, and the biblical account would circumvent the naturalistic explanations that assert otherwise. Perhaps this is why Walton is so antagonistic toward creationism when he writes,

Creationism, particularly young earth creationism, differs from the view proposed in this book by insisting that the Bible does offer a descriptive mechanism for material origins in Genesis 1, and therefore, is both teleological and intrinsically opposed to the descriptive mechanism offered in biological evolution. We have suggested that this perspective does not represent an accurate contextual reading of Genesis.⁷⁵

So, Walton is fine with promoting a naturalistic explanation of creation based on mythology, but refuses to accept a literal reading of Genesis 1.

Problem 4: Improper View of Inspiration and Inerrancy

The hermeneutical approach that Walton utilizes is a comparison of the Genesis creation account with ANE myth. He explains his rationale when he writes,

The biblical text is a cultural artifact (in addition to whatever theological significance and claims may be attached to it) emerging from an ancient context, we should not be surprised that there are frequent occasions on which the meaning of the text will not be immediately transparent to us. Ancient Near Eastern ideas, concepts, beliefs, or worldviews may then be necessary in order to discern the meaning of the text.⁷⁶

Peter Enns adopts a similar position to Walton when articulating his view of inerrancy and the nature of Scripture.⁷⁷

Yet, this is disturbing when one considers its effects on the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. While on the surface this hermeneutical approach might seem like it is honoring the historical background of the text, it is elevating foreign historical texts to the same level of Scripture. Within the process of exegesis, a choice must be made as to what determines meaning. Using the comparative studies methodology Walton has chosen the meaning according to ANE literature. This denies Scripture's authorial intent under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented Walton's hermeneutic of using ANE literature as a primary text to be imposed upon the Biblical text. Walton's assertion that Genesis 1 is describing the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁶ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 30.

⁷⁷ Geisler and Roach write of Enns, "Enns claims that the non-Christian worldview of their day influenced what the biblical authors wrote...He says myth is a proper way to describe Genesis, even though he claims it contains history...Enns also asserts that God transformed ancient myths to focus on Himself." Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 101.

functionality of creation rather than the act of God creating has been rejected. Rather, it has been argued that Genesis 1 is a description of God creating the material elements of creation. Ultimately, Walton's view represents an improper hermeneutic through an improper appropriation of ancient Near Eastern mythology upon the biblical text of Genesis 1. The argumentation offered in this paper follows the LGH of dispensational hermeneutics, especially noting the process of examining the grammar of the text itself prior to seeking historical data.

Yet, this discussion of Walton's hermeneutic offers Dispensationalists the opportunity to correct the procedure of dealing with historical material with a proper hermeneutic. When using historical literature in the exegetical process it must be secondary to the Biblical text. Additionally, one must not just compare non-canonical writings with Scripture but must also observe contrasts. This showcases the polemical nature of the Biblical text by highlighting the contrast between Scripture's proclamation of God against that of the gods of the ANE world.

The hermeneutic Walton establishes by imputing the content of non-canonical writings upon the meaning of a Biblical text is a practice which extends beyond OT studies. It seems that this same practice takes place in NT studies with the usage of the Dead Sea Scroll literature. Rather than simply use this material to inform of the historical background, some use it to improperly import new meaning into a text. An example of this problem is seen in how scholars deal with Ezekiel 40-48 and Revelation 21. Many covenant theologians transfer the promise of Ezekiel's vision of a future literal temple to the vision of the eternal state in Revelation 21 through the use of DSS material. The justification for such a maneuver is the belief that the Qumran community's attempts at allegorizing serves as the underpinning of the NT authors. Thus, what Walton attempts in Genesis presents a broader problem that must be dealt within OT, NT, and theological studies.