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Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate. Walton, John H. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 256pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2461-8. Reviewed by Joel Duff, Professor of Biology, The University of Akron, Akron, OH.

In the twenty-first century, after almost two millennia of interpretations, is it possible to see the Bible through new eyes? Are novel interpretations of familiar passages of Scripture possible? Is there a “lost world” of the Biblical text out there, waiting to be found? This is what we are led to believe by the title of John Walton’s newest book: *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*. To some extent, the title is simply a marketing strategy that feeds off of the popularity of his first book, *The Lost World of Genesis 1*, and a subsequent book, *The Lost World of Scripture*. For John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, what he presents is not, in his words, a novel or new interpretation but rather a kind of resurrection of an interpretation. What has been *lost* in traditional and confessional readings of Scripture is an appreciation for the “cognitive environment” of the original Hebrew audience. Some of the insights that come from recovering this lost cultural context are indeed little discussed in today’s interpretative literature, not to mention Reformed churches; but most of Walton’s insights here will not be surprising to those familiar with his prior books.

An expert on the cultural context of the ancient Near East (ANE), Walton brings a fresh perspective to passages in Genesis that have perhaps become laden with extra-biblical interpretations and traditions. In *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Walton asks us to step back and ask some of the most basic questions about what the text is telling us about Adam and Eve, and, maybe more importantly, what it isn’t telling us that we may believe it does. A simple example would be the traditional Western image of Eve eating an apple, which, not surprisingly, is what some people think the text says that Eve ate. Yet we don’t know what the fruit was and can only hypothesize what it may have been. Throughout this book, Walton asks fundamental questions that cause us to ask ourselves, “What do we really know about Genesis 2-3”? Did the

serpent speak to Eve from the Tree of Good and Evil? Were the serpent and Eve even in the Garden when they interacted? In most cases, what we assume about the text we really don’t know at all.

Anyone who picks up Walton’s book will surely want to know who Walton thinks Adam and Eve were. Before answering this question, though, Walton constructs an interpretative framework—based on the cultural contexts of the ANE—that he believes is faithful to the text and reflects the “cognitive environment” of the original audience. If you are not a familiar with Walton’s earlier work, you should know that his central thesis is that a proper interpretation of Genesis 1 reveals that the creation story is not about material creation, but instead is about God’s assigning functions to that which He has made in the beginning. However, you need not be familiar with details of Walton’s method of coming to this conclusion before reading this book. The first five chapters, which he presents as key propositions, summarize his method of interpreting scripture and Genesis in particular.

These initial propositions are critical, for if his hermeneutical assumptions are not sound, then his proposed interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3 is going to be suspect. After defending his approach to scripture and providing a summary of the worldview that the original audience and author, Walton turns to the heated debate over human origins, ostensibly the result of a conflict between science and the traditional interpretations of Genesis 2 and 3 and the interpretation of Adam by Paul in Romans.

An important first question for Walton is this: Is Genesis 2 and 3 an expanded description of Day 6 in Genesis 1, or does it follow the events of the creation week? More importantly, what did the original writer(s) and readers think the answer to this question was? The answer is potentially critical for understanding who Adam and Eve were and when they lived. Walton favors the second

option: “When we return to the relationship between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, we find that there is therefore no precedent by which to conclude that the introductory formula in Genesis 2:4 is bringing the reader back into the middle of the previous account [in Genesis 1] to give a more detailed description of a part of the story that was previously told” (66). If Genesis 2 follows Genesis 1 chronologically, then this raises the possibility that the people created in Genesis 1 may not be the Adam and Eve of Genesis 2. Of course, that doesn’t exclude the possibility they are the same Adam and Eve. Walton concludes that “though Adam and Eve may well be included among the people created in Genesis 1, to think of them as the first couple or the only people in their time is not the only textual option.”

Walton argues for a literal Adam and Eve, not because of the need for genetic continuity with all humans but because of the Fall and its effects. Walton thinks that a proper understanding of the text, though, shows that it does not determine when exactly Adam and Eve lived and whether they themselves had physical ancestors. He finds, consistent with his interpretation of Genesis 1, that there are many “imagistic” elements in the Garden of Eden narrative (137), and that Adam and Eve are meant to be interpreted as archetypes as much as they are individuals (Walton again here refers to the ANE to support his claim). Thus, Genesis 2 and 3 is a grand metanarrative that provides context to all our lives, while at the same time, as Walton argues, it is an event rooted in time.

But if the text does not prohibit the presence of other people created before Adam and Eve, then what about the doctrine of original sin? What was the fall? How did it affect humans and the creation? What about death, pain, and suffering? How can it be said that Eve was created from the side or half, not rib, of Adam? One at a time, Walton tackles these questions in a series of propositions, which make up the bulk of the book’s chapters.

There is one theme that crosses multiple propositions that is worth exploring a bit further. Walton spends a number of pages establishing that, in the ANE environment, an important question of the original author and his audience would have been: how is order maintained in the creation? That a deity maintains and establishes order was universally accepted in the ANE, but why is there disorder

in the present if God is so powerful? Why do humans experience pain, suffering, and the devastation of natural disasters? In many ways, these questions—central to Genesis 2-3—are not so dissimilar to our own questions on origins, theodicy, and the human condition.

In the song “Wake Up Dead Man,” U2’s Bono bemoans a chaotic world lacking the order that brings justice and peace. He is impatient for Jesus to “wake up” and bring this current fallen world to an end. In the final stanza he asks: “Is there order in all of this disorder? Is it like a tape recorder? Can we rewind it just once more? Wake up, Wake up Dead Man.” Walton’s 18th proposition on Genesis 2-3 attempts to answer these questions. Yes, he says, there is order, but it is obscured by the disorder that Adam and our sin has brought into the world. As Walton says, “We currently live in an already/not yet situation in which a solution for disorder has been provided (the death of Jesus overcame sin and death), yet disorder remains. Furthermore, the continuing process brings order that can be understood through various phases that God initiated in the past as it waits for its final consummation in a new creation...[:] the cosmology of Genesis 1 was constructed around the idea of bringing order into a non-ordered situation” (161).

For Walton, however, the creation at the time of Adam and Eve’s creation is not one where there was perfection, but the “very good” state of creation meant that all the conditions were right for Adam and Eve to be formed. Animals lived and died, and if there were pre-adamites, they also lived and died.

Further, Walton sees in Genesis 1 a cosmological description of the world, one in which the original state is one of non-order into which God brings order. The Garden of Eden was a sanctuary in a semi-ordered world. There, God established a connection with his prized creation, man (“Adam”), who would bear his image on this Earth and continue the job of turning non-order into order. This central thesis of man’s role as establishing order as God’s image-bearer is presented in Walton’s Proposition 16. God in Genesis 1 established functions for much of His creation, giving them purpose and in that sense showing Adam how to order the world. Adam, placed in Eden, was a “steward of sacred space” (a concept important to the ANE), which means that by extension

he was the steward of all creation, serving the only true and all-powerful God.

Under Walton's reading of Genesis 3, we, as fallen creatures, have not only failed in our task of taking non-order and bringing it to a state of order, but we have instead allowed disorder to proliferate. We do worse than failing to fulfill our creational obligations; we have damaged the creation by bringing disorder, a disastrous problem that can only be overcome by a redeemer. For Walton, in Adam "we did not lose paradise as much as we forfeited sacred space and the relationship it offered, thereby damaging our ability to be in relationship with God and marring his creation with our own underdeveloped ability to bring order on our own in our own wisdom" (145). It is only through Christ our redeemer that paradise can be attained—not a paradise restored, then, but a paradise newly gained.

Throughout the book, Walton puts forth many apparently new interpretations of familiar, key

verses in Christian theology. Walton's propositions are effectively theological hypotheses that must be tested by theologians over the next decade. If his interpretive framework, including his description of the cultural context of the ANE, is sound, it seems likely that many of his propositions will find additional Biblical support as they are explored further. If the conclusions that he has reached do not find further exegetical support, his primary thesis will, of course, need to be reassessed. What we have been given in this book, though, is a series of thought-provoking, at times challenging, propositions that should be discussed and debated in Reformed and evangelical communities for years to come.

Where will Walton turn his attention next? I assume that he will test his interpretive framework and use his knowledge of the ANE to see what new insights it may bring to the Lost World of Noah. At least we should hope he does.

Justice in Love. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. (Paperback with New Preface). 306pp. ISBN: 978-0802872944. Reviewed by Ben Gibson, Candidate for Masters of Religion in Ethics, Yale Divinity School.

Discussions about the relationship between justice and love have become a regular part of Christian philosophy and ethics over the past decade.¹ Is Christ's call to love in concert or conflict with liberalism's call to justice? Can Scripture's love-command serve as a consistent ethic? Nicholas Wolterstorff seeks to answer such questions and many others in his new book, *Justice in Love*. The book serves as a companion to his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008), in which he sought to root contemporary discourse around rights within Judeo-Christian teaching—in Christian thinkers, the New Testament writings, and the Old Testament Scriptures. Although *Justice in Love* may be read as part of Wolterstorff's publications on justice, in this book he does a fine job of summarizing this previous work at pertinent moments, which makes *Justice in Love* accessible as a stand-alone text.

Wolterstorff begins by leveling a critique of the last century of agape ethics. He then attempts to construct an account of love's compatibility with justice, to give an extensive treatment of the literature around forgiveness and to perform a corresponding exegesis of Romans. Ambitious as this is,

how can such wildly diverse projects dwell between the two covers of one book? Wolterstorff views each of these individual sections as part and parcel of the larger project of reconciling the concepts of love and justice, two concepts that he believes have been rent asunder by scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds. In order to bring the two concepts back into harmony, Wolterstorff engages in dialogue with many disciplines: philosophy, theology, ethics, political theory, and Biblical studies, to name only a few. Thus, while the structure of *Justice in Love* may seem daunting, it is undertaken by a scholar who recognizes the complexities and far-reaching implications of speaking about love and justice.

In order to fully understand what Wolterstorff is attempting through this book, one needs a cursory understanding of the 20th-century debate about love as agapism. Among the loves named in the New Testament—*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*—agape is widely regarded as the fulfillment of Christ's love-commandment found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 10:25-28; Mark 12:28-31): "Love the Lord your