

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 8

A Critique of John Walton's Functional Creation Interpretation

Today we want to continue our discussion of John Walton's functional interpretation of Genesis chapter 1. We ended last time by saying that Walton has an enormous burden of proof with regard to justifying his interpretation. He needs to show that Genesis 1 involves *only* functional creation and *not also* the creation of material objects at the same time. Otherwise, his view will reduce to the typical literal interpretation of Genesis 1 that God actually brings into being over the course of six 24-hour days the plants, the animals, the dry land, the astral bodies, and so forth. Walton needs to show that all God does during these six days is to assign functions to material objects.

Can he sustain this burden of proof? Let's first look at ancient Near Eastern cosmology. Walton claims that when we look at ancient Near Eastern creation myths we find, "people in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system."¹ But does the evidence support this claim? I think that the answer is clearly no. Walton points out, "Nearly all the creation accounts of the ancient world start their story with no operational system in place. Egyptian texts talk about a singularity – nothing having yet been separated out. All is inert and undifferentiated."² Creation often begins with the primeval waters out of which dry land or gods emerge. You'll recall that when we discussed *creatio ex nihilo* we saw that the typical form of these ancient creation myths was "When _____ was not yet, then _____. This is the type of form that Walton identifies in the myth of the founding of the Babylonian city of Eridu. This is what this ancient text says:

No holy house, no house of the gods, had been built in a pure place; no reed had come forth, no tree had been created; no brick had been laid, no brickmold had been created; no house had been built, no city had been created; no city had been built, no settlement had been founded; Nippur had not been built, Ekur had not been created; Uruk had not been built, Eanna had not been created; the depths had not been built, Eridu had not been created; no holy house, no house of the gods, no dwelling for them had been created. All the world was sea, the spring in the midst of the sea was only a channel, then was Eridu built, Esagila was created.³

This typical form of ancient creation myths is what you find in Genesis 2:5-7:

. . . when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up . . . then the Lord God created man . . .

¹ 26. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.

² Ibid., p. 31.

³ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

The descriptions of the primordial world in pagan myths were therefore not the descriptions of material objects according to which plants and animals and buildings and people all existed but merely lacked a function. Rather, they are descriptions of a state in which distinct material objects of these sorts do not exist at all. None of them existed at that time. This is especially evident in the Egyptian myths mentioned by Walton.

Egyptian mythology was a form of monism or panentheism. It was an attempt to solve the ancient problem of “the one and the many,” that is to say, what is the unifying factor behind the multiplicity of things that we observe in the world. The monistic answer to this question was to say that originally there was a primordial, undifferentiated, single reality from which then multiplicity evolved or emanated. In these Egyptian myths you have such a primordial, undifferentiated, inchoate, characterless condition out of which then multiplicity evolves. It involves the creation of an orderly system of functioning objects that come into being. It involves the coming into existence of these objects and not just the specification of functions for material objects that were already present. So when Walton concludes, “consequently, to create something (cause it to exist) in the ancient world means to give it a function, not material properties,”⁴ he's drawing a false dichotomy which is foreign to these ancient texts.

When it comes to Genesis chapter 1, for this text to feature only functional creation we must imagine that the dry land, the vegetation, the trees, the sea creatures, the birds, the land animals, even man were all there from the beginning but they just were not functioning as an ordered system. But such a view is implausible (not to say ridiculous). It would require us to take as literally false all of the statements about the darkness, the primeval ocean, the emergence of the dry land, the earth's bringing forth vegetation and fruit trees, the waters bringing forth sea creatures, the earth's bringing forth animals, and God's making man. Notice that Walton cannot say that these things can't exist apart from an orderly system, for the moment that you say that then the functional creation view collapses into the traditional view of a six-day creation – actually bringing these things into being over those six days. That's the traditional interpretation. God both brings the things into existence *and* specifies their role in an ordered system.

Just how bizarre Walton's interpretation becomes evident in his statement that the material creation of the biosphere may have gone on for eons prior to Genesis 1:1 and then at some point in the relatively recent past there came a period of seven consecutive 24-hour days during which God specified the functions of everything existing at that time.⁵ Walton notwithstanding, this is the farthest thing from a literal interpretation of the

⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

⁵ Walton says that prior to day one, “The material phase nonetheless could have been under development for long eras . . .” He also claims, “Prior to day one, God's spirit was active over the nonfunctional cosmos; God was involved but had not yet taken up his residence. The establishment of the functional cosmic temple is effectuated by God taking up his residence on day seven.” (Ibid., pp. 98, 85.)

text that you can have, which he claims his view is.⁶ It implies that all of the descriptions of the world at the beginning of and during that relatively recent week are literally false. If you were to ask what would an eyewitness have seen during that week, Walton either begs off answering the question or he admits that the answer is that the world before those seven days would have lacked only humanity in God's image and God's presence in his cosmic temple.⁷ In other words, everything looked exactly the same except that the people who existed then had not yet been declared by God to function as his vice regents on Earth, and God had not yet specified the cosmos to function as his temple. An eyewitness would not have observed, and they did not observe on his view, any change whatsoever in the world as a result of that creative week.

If we're to adopt a reading of the text which is so at odds with the text's *prima facie* description of the world, we must have extremely powerful evidence, I think, for adopting such an interpretation. So we want to ask next what evidence Walton gives for a purely functional interpretation of Genesis 1.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I want to dialogue about this from the reference of Proverbs 8:22-31. This is Wisdom speaking.

Dr. Craig: OK. Proverbs 8:22-31:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.

Student: The first person is Wisdom, and he says he was before the foundation of the world. This is a possible view where this abstract – we can even say in the beginning was the Word – that Word can equip as this Wisdom. It's an abstract concept that we can think

⁶ Walton says, "I believe that this *is* a literal reading. . . . I believe that the reading that I have offered is the most literal reading possible at this point." (*Ibid.*, p. 170.)

⁷ Walton says, "The main elements lacking in the 'before' picture are therefore humanity in God's image and God's presence in his cosmic temple. Without those two ingredients the cosmos would be considered nonfunctional and therefore nonexistent." (*Ibid.*, p. 97.)

of as God's design. It was there before the material world existed, and God spoke that into material world. So in that view, the functional is actually prior to the material. I want to hear what you think about this.

Dr. Craig: All right. Great question. Clearly this is a reflection on the creation account, isn't it? You see the many parallels. When it speaks of Lady Wisdom here, this is, as you say, a literary personification of an abstract concept. Wisdom is an attribute or property of God, and in the Proverbs Wisdom is personified as a woman who then speaks. She says, *I was with God in the beginning*. It seems to me that the passage we just read clearly supports the view that these objects come into being; that they are created. It's not that they all existed and God merely assigns functions to them. Over and over again in the passage it says there were no depths, before the mountains had been shaved, before the hills. Over and over again it seems to say that there was a condition during which God existed with his Wisdom but all of these material things did not exist, and he brought them into being. It seems to me that this passage would run contrary very much to Walton's functional view of creation.

Student: Considering your interaction with apologists and theologians around the world basically, how much influence do you think Walton is having? I know he's a prolific writer.

Dr. Craig: Yes, he is!

Student: Everybody that I talked to doesn't really follow his view of Genesis 1 so much as his views on Adam and Eve. I'm just curious what do you think his influence is?

Dr. Craig: I think, at least for a time, it was very extensive. When I was at sessions at the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature on Walton's view, I was just shocked at how the panel acquiesced so readily in his views, and no one seemed to raise a critique or an objection, which to me are patent! These objections are obvious, I think. Since then, as we'll see in a moment, I think that with some passage of time and greater reflection there is now, I think, increasing skepticism about the viability of the functional interpretation because it requires you to draw this strong dichotomy between material creation and functional creation. He won't allow you to have both in these texts – just assignment of functions. The impression I get is that scholars now are saying that that dichotomy is a false one.

Student: We always talk about form follows function, or that you design something so that it functions for what you want it to do, I have a hard time distinguishing creating that dichotomy that you just said.

Dr. Craig: That is so interesting that you bring that up. Wasn't that the so-called Bauhaus school of architecture and art? That form follows function? As I recall anyway. I remember we studied this in college.

Student: We didn't consider architecture real engineering, so . . . [laughter]

Dr. Craig: The idea of "form follows function" was to eliminate from your designs superfluous decoration that had no function. Things like a Rococo Church. If you've seen how they're just encrusted with decorations and cherubs and all sorts of fanciful things, and the form-follows-function school of thinking was, no, these non-functional elements should be eliminated, and you should create aesthetically pleasing forms that are functional. That seems to me to say that if a designer has a function in mind – for example, a pitcher. He wants to create something that will store and pour water. He will then create a pitcher that is simple, that has a kind of spout, that has a handle, that is able to hold a good amount of water, but he would not create, for example, a pitcher that is in the form of, say, a cow and the water pours out of its mouth into the glass. We've all seen pitchers like that. The form-follows-function would say that's a bad design. That seems to me quite consistent with the notion that God designs the world with certain functions in mind, and that then he creates the plants and the animals to carry out these various functions. What Walton's view requires us to say is that there were these material objects already and that now God assigns functions to them. For example, the vegetation will now serve the function of food for the animals. And the animals will serve the function of controlling the ecosystem by having a viable biosphere. And man will have a different function. On his view, what Genesis 1 involves is seven literal, consecutive days of just assigning functions to things, but they're not coming into being. That seems to me to be just utterly implausible.

Student: I recall in a debate awhile ago, you made a comment where your opponent was thinking of God more akin to an engineer as opposed to an artist. How would someone like Walton make sense of the ostensible waste?

Dr. Craig: OK, this does follow up on the last question. I wasn't endorsing the form-follows-function axiom. I was just explaining it. But you might say that the world involves a lot of excess decoration, doesn't it? Corals that grow on beautiful reefs that remain unseen. Wildflowers in the mountains that no one ever sees. Galaxies and stars that are beautiful but are never seen by anyone. So you might say that there is a lot of excess beauty and decoration in the universe that doesn't serve a function. There I am inclined to think that God is more like an artist than like an engineer in that he himself enjoys the beauty of creation and so creates a beautiful world that reflects him even though we human beings may not see a lot of it, and it might seem to be excessive. I think Walton could say something like that as well. His view isn't that these functions are

really narrowly defined like the function of a giraffe's long neck is to reach the leaves in the trees. It's not that type of function he's talking about. It's much more general than that. As I said, vegetation serves the function of food for the animals. But it's not implying that cacti have prickles on them or thorns on them as a way of warding off herbivores from eating them. He's not that specific.

Student: On his view, does he really think that God created the world at some point?

Dr. Craig: Yes, he does affirm that. He just says that the account of Genesis chapter 1 is not the story of that. If there was a creation of the world out of nothing, it took place sometime before Genesis 1.

Student: So God created everything but had no function.

Dr. Craig: That's what it seems to imply. That seems mad, doesn't it? That God created all this stuff and left it sitting around for eons with no function and then finally, in the relatively recent past, he took seven days and declared functions for these things. That just seems contrary to the nature of a wise and provident God. I agree with you. I think it's a bizarre view.

Student: Picking up on Wisdom and Wisdom is there before the depths, to have design you have to have an actualizer. Two things to consider. Where is the angelic creation in relation to this as far as timewise and how it is actualized? And is God just adding more function with this latest creation? Does the fact that the things that are seen are temporal but they depict the things that are really real like spiritual. You have asynchronous reproduction first before you have bisexual, which is symbolic of God giving new hope. That's how I see things. I could see how you could attribute this latest creation being a top one where everything's mapped to it and God's redeeming the prior fallen because the angelic fall.

Dr. Craig: Walton doesn't speak to those kinds of issues, and I think the reason is because he's not doing a systematic theology of creation. He is an Old Testament scholar who wants to interpret this particular passage in the book of Genesis. The question is very limited: what is *this* passage about? He thinks, when you read it against the ancient Near Eastern background, what it's about is the assignment of functions to things. He's just not addressing those sorts of deeper theological questions that you raised.

Student: I'm thinking about in order for something to be in existence, it seems like even if it's not functioning it would have the potential to function, like a light switch that's not turned on yet. In order for something to have potential to function, wouldn't it have to have other functions already in place? In other words, I'm struggling with the timeline here. Would Walton say that the creation of days were also the correct order of days for

things to function properly? Things like a dependent relationship would be involved here. I'm not sure if my question is clear.

Dr. Craig: I think you're raising a really good point. It's kind of related to an earlier point, I think. It is very difficult to see how these functions could be assigned to things that were wholly non-functional. It didn't have, for example, working parts. I agree. I think that's right. The view is so bizarre that I wonder sometimes have I misunderstood him? But if you say that Genesis chapter 1 involves not only the assignment of functions but also the coming into being of these things then, as I say, it just collapses to the typical view of creation over six consecutive 24-hour days. Those traditional creationists wouldn't deny that God also assigns functions to things like the sun and the moon and the stars on the fourth day. That's very clear. So I think these questions that you are raising are all powerful objections to the view.

Student: I don't agree with it, but couldn't it be that he's saying that when these things are made their function is trivial, and then when they are given an assignment then it becomes significant? It's like if I have a hydraulic servo on my desk that adjusts the flaps on an airplane. Trivially it could be used as a paperweight. But that's a trivial function.

Dr. Craig: I don't think that is his view. You're suggesting a way perhaps to amend the view or save it, because the kind of functions that he says God assigns are so general that it's hard to see how they couldn't have been there. For example, the function of the sun is to mark the difference between day and night. On day one, you've got the day and night, and on day four he assigns that function to the sun. Or the function assigned to vegetation to be eaten by animals. It's so general that it's hard to see how he could say what you just said.

END DISCUSSION

Let's go on. I suggested we need to ask then what evidence Walton gives for a purely functional interpretation of Genesis 1.

His first argument is that the Hebrew word *bara* – the Hebrew word for “create” – concerns functional creation. He provides a chart listing approximately fifty passages in the Old Testament where the word *bara* is used. The objects said to be created include things like the heavens and the earth, sea creatures, people, the starry host, a cloud of smoke, Israel, the ends of the earth, north and south, disaster, a pure heart, and so forth. Incredibly, from this list Walton concludes, “This list shows 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.”⁸ I should have thought precisely the contrary was true! Most of these objects in the list are easily identified as material objects. Now, admittedly, some are not material objects. For example, a pure heart –

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

“create in me a pure heart O’ God.” Or Israel. Or north and south. Those are not material objects. But these are the exceptions. The three objects of *bara* in Genesis 1 – the heavens and the earth, the sea creatures, and man – are all clear cases of material objects. Just because they’re not created *ex nihilo* doesn’t imply that they do not come into being at the moment of their creation. Apart from the possible case of Israel, none of the objects of *bara* in the Old Testament are existing things that are merely given a new function. Of the objects on the list, none of them (except perhaps Israel) is an already existing object which is then simply assigned a new function. Walton opines that the reason the functional interpretation of Genesis 1 is “never considered” by other scholars (itself a telling admission) is because they have been misled by “cultural influences of our material culture.”⁹ Hardly, I think. Such a claim impugns the credibility of scholars of the ancient Near East. I suspect that the reason that no one else has so interpreted the text is because it is such an obvious misreading of the text.

The Old Testament scholar John Collins says, “I agree with almost everyone else that Genesis records some sort of material origins, and I do not grasp exactly why Walton keeps making a distinction between material and functional.”

Walton’s next argument is that the creation account proper begins at Genesis 1:2. He says verse 1 (you will remember: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”) is just a summary of the whole week, not an initial act of creation prior to verse 2. He says creation does not involve bringing matter into being but just establishing functions.

It’s important to understand just how radical Walton’s interpretation is. We might think that he means that creation begins with the primordial waters in place and then over the next seven days God introduces order and functionality by making the dry land appear, having sea creatures and birds come on the scene, having vegetation sprout from the dry land, land animals come to be, etc. But that would not sustain his claim that only functional creation is involved. Even if these things are not created *ex nihilo* they would still be instances of creation just as the construction of a chair is the creation of that chair by a carpenter even though he uses material in the construction of that chair. No, if this account is to be exclusively functional as Walton claims then all of the plants and animals and even man must be there right from the start. So Walton, on page 169, affirms that prior to the seven days of Genesis 1, the dinosaurs and the hominids were alive and well only waiting to be given their respective functions. Even if we agree that creation-proper begins at verse 2, there’s nothing in the text to support so novel an interpretation.

⁹ Walton says, “This is not a view that has been rejected by other scholars; it is simply one they have never considered because their material ontology was a blind presupposition for which no alternative was ever considered. . . . Most interpreters have generally thought that Genesis 1 contains an account of material origins because that was the only sort of origins that our material culture was interested in. It wasn’t that scholars examined all the possible levels at which origins could be discussed; they presupposed the material aspect.” (*Ibid.*, p. 44.)

But is Walton right in thinking that verse 1 is not part of the creation process? He is not. And here I simply refer you back to our discussion of *creatio ex nihilo* earlier in the doctrine of creation. Walton does not, at least in this book *The Lost World of Genesis One*, interact with the exegetical arguments which support verse 1 as a statement of *creatio ex nihilo*. If that's correct then Walton's claim that Genesis 1 is purely functional collapses.

START DISCUSSION

Student: There's a blog that Walton has written that is BioLogos.org. Did you see this where he went through kind of point by point these objections?

Dr. Craig: No! I did not. Do you want to give us the link?

Student: He addresses here the questions of material objects non-functioning. He says that the idea of the sun existing but not burning or animals just lying in a comatose state are a misunderstanding of his position. He addresses what happened in the seven days. He says here the importance of *ex nihilo* – that's kind of a big heading here. He talks about that some believe that Genesis 1 must be interpreted in material terms lest we forfeit the important doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. This is not true. The first observation to be made is that other passages in the Bible affirm God as creator of the material world and either imply or affirm that creation happened *ex nihilo*.

Dr. Craig: Right. We've already said that. The point that I'm more interested in is his claim that the animals are not lying about comatose, that the sun is not burning and producing heat even though it exists. It's very important to understand – there's a difference between what a person says and what his view implies.

Student: Or what he means by what he says.

Dr. Craig: I'm not claiming that Walton says that the animals were lying about comatose or the sun wasn't burning. But it does seem to me that this is what his view implies. What I want to know is what is his view if these animals are not lying about comatose and the sun is not burning and heating things? He does seem to affirm that they existed. Right? But just lacked their assigned functions.

Student: He says that they were performing their activities of hunting each other for food and operating and all these things before God gave them their name and function. Like you said, it really just comes back down to the literal interpretation.

Dr. Craig: To me, that is either backward causation – they were exercising their functions given to them later – or else, I want to know what changed as a result of that week of declaring functions.

Student: He talks a lot here about what it began doing once God declared the name of the function. It started functioning as sacred space. So he talks about that God wasn't really there until he created humans and inserted himself into the creation. Before that it wasn't fully functioning the way it does now.

Dr. Craig: That is a very different take on it, and is related to his view which we'll talk about next time that the world functions as a cosmic temple in which God dwells. I'll say some things about that later, too. But thank you at least for alerting us to that website. I have corresponded with Walton personally and so was taking into account what he had personally communicated to me in his letter. But I had not looked at the BioLogos site. That would be very interesting.

Student: At least it seems like he's very aware of the objections and has at least made some sort of an attempt to answer them.

Dr. Craig: Yes, I'm sure he must be.

Student: What do you think Walton . . . it's such a bizarre view. It seems really hard to defend. He has to do all kinds of backflips logically in order to try to justify it. What do you think is his motivation for pushing this view? I mean what is he trying to accomplish with the view?

Dr. Craig: I can't speak to his personal motivations. That would be to try to psychoanalyze him. But in terms of what does it try to accomplish, I think what it tries to do is to give a literal reading of Genesis 1 without committing you to Young Earth Creationism. Young Earth Creationism is sort of the *bête noire* of biblical scholars and theologians. It's just got to be avoided at all costs because it is so massively in contradiction to modern science, history, linguistics, and so forth. So interpretations are sought that would help you to be faithful to the text but to avoid saying that a few thousand years ago God created the world in six literal days.

Student: It just seems like he has other options.

Dr. Craig: Right! I hope that's what this class has shown. We have been surveying all of these options, and one of my goals is to just broaden your thinking on this – not to make you come to a certain conclusion but just to realize there are a lot of options out there that are available to be considered.¹⁰

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