§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity
Lecture 9

A Critique of John Walton’s Functional Creation Interpretation, Part 2

Today we will wrap up our discussion of the functional interpretation of Genesis chapter 1. According to that interpretation, you'll remember, the six days of creation do not represent days during which God actually brought these things into existence, but rather these are six literal consecutive days during which God specified functions for various existing things.

On this view, according to John Walton (its principal proponent), days 1 to 3 establish various functions, and then days 4 to 6 establish functionaries, that is to say things that will carry out the functions established on days 1 to 3. So there is a kind of parallelism here such as we saw in the literary framework view but it's interpreted differently. Walton argues that days 1 to 3 serve to establish the basis for time measurement (day and night), weather (the waters above and the waters below), and then food (the vegetation). Time, measurement, weather, and food – these functions are established on the first three days. Now, I don't think that we need to dispute the point that those things are created for these purposes, but that obviously does not imply that the creation of the dry land, the firmament, and the vegetation is not also affirmed along with the specification of their functions. Walton has a particularly difficult time with the firmament. He thinks that ancient Israelites believed that there literally existed a solid dome in the sky which held up the waters that were above the Earth. He says if we take Genesis 1 as an account of material creation then it implies the existence of something, “that we are inclined to dismiss as not part of the material cosmos as we understand it.”¹

He says we can “escape from the problem” by interpreting the text purely functionally.²

Wholly apart from Walton's mistaken claim that the ancients thought of the sky (or the heavens) as a hard dome, I think here Walton has clearly allowed modern science to intrude into his hermeneutics. The hermeneutical issue here is not whether the firmament is part of the material cosmos as we moderns understand it but whether it was part of the material cosmos as the ancient Israelites understood it. Trying to justify a functional interpretation by appealing to modern scientific knowledge that the firmament does not exist is an example of concordism, that is to say letting your biblical interpretation be guided by modern science, which Walton himself rejects.

START DISCUSSION

²Walton says, “We may find some escape from the problem, however, as we continue to think about creation as ultimately concerned with the functional rather than the material” (Ibid., p. 57).
Student: Are we really looking at what the early Hebrews believed as the intent of the written word here? Or are we looking for truth?

Dr. Craig: That may be a false dichotomy, but we're looking for what they really believed. Let me back up. Let me not say what they believed; let me say what we're looking for is what the text affirms. Some people are willing to say that these ancient Israelites may have believed, for example, that the sun goes around the Earth, that the Earth is flat, and other sorts of things. That's what they believed, but that's not what's taught by the text. So what we're interested in is what did these ancient texts teach? What did they affirm? Walton thinks that if you interpret this text as involving the creation of material objects then you're committed to saying that there is this firmament – that there's this solid dome over the Earth like an inverted bowl in which the astral bodies are embedded, and therefore we should interpret this purely functionally, not as material creation. The point that I'm making here is that that's an illegitimate hermeneutic – that's concordism. It's letting modern science guide your interpretation of the text rather than what these people themselves affirmed and thought.

Student: Is there any relation between this and what some scientists have proposed as the water canopy above the Earth? The water canopy theory – is there any relationship?

Dr. Craig: I don't think that they would identify the canopy with the firmament. Indeed, some defenders of the view that the sun and the moon were already there before the fourth day would say that the canopy collapsed at some point and the waters crashed in upon the Earth. But they wouldn't say that the firmament was gone and the sun and the moon and the stars were no longer embodied in them. I think that that would be different – they are two separate things.

Student: Actually there are some Young Earth Creationists who take that position.

Dr. Craig: Thank you! OK. You mean they will identify the canopy as the firmament?

Student: They will identify the waters above the canopy as being a vapor canopy at one point, but most of the Young Earth Creationist organizations have rejected the idea now because they realize that if there was a canopy there you wouldn't be able to see the sun, moon and stars which was the purpose of the sun, moon and stars – to be able to be seen to mark time. So they've rejected the idea.

Dr. Craig: Now, then, correct me if I'm wrong here but, in that case isn't it true then that the canopy is something distinct from the firmament? Because the sun and moon and the stars are in the firmament so they would be beyond this canopy that then collapsed.

Student: It would be the waters above. They see the firmament as the space between. “Firmament” is often in most translations not the most favored word. “Expanse” is usually the word that's favored these days. They see the expanse as the space between
them and the waters above as having – some of them see – the waters above as having collapsed and being the flood waters. But, again, most of them have rejected the idea now.

Dr. Craig: That wouldn’t be identifying the firmament as the canopy. They would still be two realities. But Walton takes it to be a material object – a hard surface – which would be different than what someone earlier was talking about.

END DISCUSSION

Walton then argues that on days 4 to 6 the functionaries are established – the things that carry out these functions. Walton's view differs from Blocher’s literary framework view in that days 4 to 6 are not the creation of inhabitants of the domains or the realms that were created on days 1 to 3. But rather days 4 to 6 involve the specification of things which carry out the functions whose basis was established on days 1 to 3. So this is an interesting and different interpretation of the parallelism than Blocher’s view. I think it is in some ways more plausible than Blocher’s in that we saw that the things created on days 4 to 6 don't really occupy the domains on days 1 to 3. But it does seem that they carry out functions related to the things on days 1 to 3. The sun and the moon in particular seem to be established as functionaries for time measurement. But notice that this doesn't do anything to rule out the material creation of these objects along with the specification of their functions, which is what Walton would have to prove.

Walton also argues that the Genesis account represents God's coming to reside in the world as his cosmic temple. He notes that in the ancient world gods were conceived to reside in temples. So God's resting on the seventh day indicates that God comes to reside in the cosmos as his temple. The seven days of the creation week are a reflection of the seven days of dedication that were part of the inauguration of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

What should we make of this suggestion? I think the problem with this suggestion is that there's just no evidence in the text of Genesis that the author thinks of the world as God's temple or of God's resting as his coming to reside in his temple. In Genesis 2:2-3 we read,

> And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.

There's nothing there to indicate that on the seventh day God came to reside in the cosmos as a temple. Walton's view depends upon, I think, making a false equivalence between God's resting and his residing. On the functional interpretation, God doesn't need to rest because he hasn't been creating anything during the previous six days, and
therefore this notion that resting must equal residing is a result of this functional interpretation. Since God hasn't been working, he cannot cease from working on the seventh day, so it's simply his residing in the temple which is read into the text and is dependent upon this functional interpretation. On the traditional interpretation, the seventh day is a day in which God rests. It is the archetype for the Sabbath day during which we cease from work. So to justify his interpretation, Walton has to go outside of Genesis since it's not in the text of Genesis, which is, I think, in and of itself a dubious procedure. Different authors who are separated by perhaps centuries can have different perspectives. Walton appeals, for example, to Isaiah 66:1 to support his view. This says, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.’” I don't think that that supports Walton's view at all! What it says there is that it is heaven that is where the throne of God is (where God is seated), and the Earth is just his footstool. It doesn't support the view that God comes to reside in the Earth or the cosmos as a temple. Yahweh had a temple all right, and it was in Jerusalem. Look at Psalms 132:1-8,13-14.

Remember, O Lord, in David’s favor, all the hardships he endured; how he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, “I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.” Lo, we heard of it in Ephrathah, we found it in the fields of Jaar. “Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool!”

…

For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation: “This is my resting place for ever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

Here you have the temple in Jerusalem described as the place where Yahweh dwells, not the cosmos as a whole. In fact, at the dedication of the temple as it’s described in 1 Kings chapter 8, Solomon recognizes that in a sense the temple itself was not a place where God actually dwelt – that the temple would be a place where God is manifest, but it is not a literal dwelling place of the Lord. 1 Kings 8:27, 30:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built! . . . . And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant and of thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, forgive.

Here, again, Solomon, in dedicating the temple, recognizes that really heaven is the Lord's dwelling place, and he says, When we turn to this temple and pray wilt thou please in heaven hear our prayer and answer.
So I'm not persuaded that it's legitimate to read this into the text of Genesis 1 that it represents God's coming to reside in his temple.

As for the seven day motif, I think this is more plausibly connected with the practice of the Sabbath observance than it is with the dedication of the temple. It is because of the practice of Sabbath observance – resting on the seventh day – that you have the creation account in terms of a seven-day week. It may be well that the seven days of temple dedication reflect the Sabbath Day observance rather than the other way around.

So, in sum, I find Walton's purely functional interpretation of Genesis 1 to be implausible, not to say outlandish. The account, I think, is naturally taken to involve both material and functional creation.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* One of the other points that Walton makes is that on the last day to complete the analogy of a temple – it being a temple – is that the ancients would have installed an image of the god – of God – in the temple. The parallel to that he uses is man – creating man in God's image.

*Dr. Craig:* There isn't an image of God though in the temple. Right? What are you thinking of there? There is no image of God. Those are forbidden. With respect to man's being God's image, this leads to another point that I had thought to make but I omitted and that is: why think that if God is creating here a dwelling place that it's the whole world – that it's the cosmos – rather than the Garden of Eden? A lot of commentators have said that in creating the Garden of Eden there are a lot of similarities between the Garden and the tabernacle where God's presence dwells in the Holy of Holies. As you say, man is created as God's image that lives in the Garden of Eden. So if you do want to have this idea of God's resting being his residing, why not identify it with the Garden of Eden rather than with the cosmos as a whole? I'm not persuaded that that's right for the Garden of Eden either. It seems to me that the Garden of Eden is created as a habitat for man, but not as a place for God. It's not referred to, interestingly enough, as the Garden of God in Genesis, but it's a garden created as a fit place for humans to be. So I'm very skeptical of reading this into the text that we have here the creation of some sort of temple or dwelling place for God whether it be the Garden of Eden or the cosmos.

*Student:* I wanted to explore another possibility about this functional perspective. Could it be since God is spirit and he is showing us a progression of a spiritual-to-physical process? In the beginning the first day he actually separated life from darkness, and that is his intention to bring our dark spiritual state into the light. And the second day, he separated the heavens and Earth which he separated the position of Creator and creature so that we understand where we stand in reference to him in heaven. The third day, he separated land from the sea, and he commanded Adam and Eve to cultivate the land.
There's cultivating area that are separated from non-cultivation (that's just my guess). And the fourth day he set in the rhythm where we are going to observe the rhythm of seasons and days and months. Then he moves on with the creatures of the sea and creatures that fly – that started to show us his design in the biological system. There are common systems with the sea creature and the flying creature. Then the sixth day, the animals. All this intricate design in biological systems that he kind of . . . and Chinese people learn all kind of things, martial arts as well from the animals or their survival skill or something. I don't know whether he just did that for our learning. Do you think that is a functional . . . ? And then he rested on the seventh day – he rested on his design and he rested on this progression. What do you think about that possibility?

Dr. Craig: I think we have to be very careful about spiritualizing this account. I don't think that this is in any way a sort of spiritualized account. It seems to me to be a very physical description of the way the material world comes about. Particularly, at the very beginning, the darkness doesn't seem to represent in Genesis 1 a force of evil. There's nothing sinister about darkness in this context. It's just nighttime, and God creates a world in which there's day and night. There doesn't seem to be anything in the darkness that would connote evil or something in opposition to God. With regard to the separation of the heavens and the Earth, although the word “heaven” can be used as God's dwelling place, in Genesis 1 it seems to be describing the part of creation where the sun and the moon and the stars and so forth are above us. It's not heaven in a spiritual sense. So it seems to me that the account from beginning to end is a very physical account of creation. It certainly does manifest God's cosmic design – that's certainly true – and it climaxes in man as the crown of creation. But the rest – the resting of God – it says very explicitly he's resting from the work that he had done during those six days. So I take it that on the traditional account he has been creating various things and on the seventh day he's finished. He's done.

Student: From Proverbs 8 that we read last week, apparently God has a blueprint of this design in his mind before anything happened. To bring that blueprint to reality, there is this process. It doesn't have to be this, but there has to be some kind of process to bring from unseen to the seen. So I thought this is a great way that he kind of expanded his Wisdom into his design.

Dr. Craig: I do think that you're quite right in thinking of Wisdom’s role in creation as being a sort of blueprint on which creation is built. It's not as though he sort of made it up as he went along. That may not be in Genesis but, as you say, in Proverbs you certainly do have this notion of the creation of the world in accordance with God's Wisdom. So I do think that's an important part if we want a full-orbed doctrine of creation.

END DISCUSSION
Let me wrap up by looking at the question as to whether or not creation in Genesis 1 cannot be both material and functional. This is what most people believe – that it's not an either/or; it's a both/and. But Walton resists this. He gives four objections against the view that Genesis 1 teaches both material and functional creation. But I think that on the basis of what we've already said, these objections can be fairly easily dismissed. Here they are.

Number one is that days 1, 3, and 7 have no statement of creation of any material component. Answer: This isn't surprising for day 7 – that's the day of God's rest! So of course he's not creating anything then. But on day 1, light is created. So that would be a material component. And on day 3, vegetation and fruit trees are created, and those are material components of creation. Remember, they don't need to be created ex nihilo in order to be created.

The second objection: Day 2 has a potentially material component (namely the firmament) but, “if this were a legitimate material account then we would be obliged to find something solid up there.” Answer: This is concordism! If the ancient Israelites thought that the firmament was a solid dome (which I don't think they did, but if they did) then they would have no problem relating such an account of material creation, and it would be illegitimate to use modern science to guide your interpretation of the chapter.

Objection number three: Days 4 and 6 deal explicitly only with material components on a function level. Answer: This might be the case for the sun, moon and stars admittedly, but it's clearly false for the animals when God says, *Let the earth bring forth living creatures.* And it's probably false for man as well when God says, *Let us make man in our image,* since man was not among the animals. He didn't exist at that time, and so needed to be created by God. So I think that days 4 and 6 do deal with the creation of material objects and not just functions.

Finally, objection number four is that on day 5 functions are mentioned and the Hebrew word for create (bara) is used. Answer: *Bara* is efficient causation – the production of the effect. And the material origin of birds and sea creatures on day 5 is clearly in view. Again, the creation of material objects like birds and sea creatures doesn't require that God created them ex nihilo.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Could you go over the third objection again please? What was created?

*Dr. Craig:* What he says is on days 4 and 6 the account is dealing with material objects only in terms of functions. It's not talking about God's bringing them into being; it's just talking about their functions. And I am willing to concede the point for the sun, moon and stars – that it may well be that on day 4 God simply specifies the functions that these
already-existing astral bodies are to fulfill. But I don't think you can say that about the animals and man created on day 6. The animals are clearly brought into being on day 6 when he says, *Let the earth bring forth, etc.* And since man isn't among the animals, the creation of man must have involved the bringing into existence of something new as well. So while I'm willing to grant that day 4 deals only with the functions of the astral bodies, it seems to me on day 6 you just have indisputably the material creation of animals and man.

**END DISCUSSION**

There's so much more that one would like to say about Walton's view, but I think that this is sufficient to show that the functional interpretation is just not a plausible option.

Next time we will turn to the final interpretation which is, as I'm calling it, the Hebrew myth interpretation.³