

130 Another penny-drop book

As recommended by Colin Bearup (whom some of you will know from HT, Norwich days), I've just finished reading John Walton's 2009 book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* – yes, a whole book about one chapter of the Bible – but you'll have to admit, it's a very significant chapter.

I've found it really helpful because it continues themes that have transformed my faith of late: first, that God is all about relationship – God IS relationship – and that the Bible is totally inspired, brilliantly inspired, to help people of every age come into that relationship. (That's what started me off, three years ago, article [0], with Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance*.)

The second theme echoes my previous article [129] about Greg Boyd's *Cross Vision*: the Bible was written by all-too-fallible humans, but it is *infallible* – it will not fail us, it will never fail to point us to God-in-Jesus. Great! The trouble is that, like the authors, we too are fallible, so for the Bible to achieve the purpose for which God inspired it, we must try to interpret it in the right way.

We can never be 100% sure we're interpreting it correctly, and it's important to look at how the church has traditionally interpreted things, but both Walton and Boyd have been willing to say, "Maybe the church's teaching has been wrong for hundreds of years." Some of the conclusions I have reached through this sort of dangerous rethinking have totally re-enlivened my faith.

So, Walton has looked at the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 and has asked (in particular) what does the Hebrew word that we translate as 'create' (*bara*, with some funny accents) actually mean? Again like Boyd, he insists that we should first work out what it would have meant to people of the ancient Near East (ANE) and then, from that, work out how we should apply it to now.

So how much of Walton's book can I fit into usual my target of 'under 1000 words' – I've used up over a third in this rambling intro! But let's make a start...

Some have tried to make Genesis 'acceptable' to modern scientific readers – especially in light of biological evolution – by saying that it's a purely metaphorical description of how God 'made the universe', so the six 'days' of creation could just be 'periods of time'.

Walton feels this sort of approach is pointless and unhelpful. He asks more fundamentally, what did God inspire the author of Genesis 1 to tell (his original hearers and) us?

We've got this wrong, he says, because, knowing so much more than the original hearers about the material universe, we read Genesis as if it were describing how God 'made all this stuff', and that's totally not how the people of the ANE thought about and saw the world. To them, the sky was obviously a solid dome – how else could all that water up there be held back, and only some of it be allowed through as rain? Then there's the water under the earth (which comes up in springs), hence God has to separate the water above the earth from that beneath the earth – I never understood that bit in Genesis 1 before; call me stupid!

So what does 'bara' actually mean? In English, we've translated it as 'create', but even in English 'create' can have different meanings. We could 'create' a chair, and that's clearly a set of **material** actions, but we could also (and I did) 'create' a company; that's not a material action, it's an organisational or **functional** (to use Walton's word) series of actions.

Walton's claim is that, if you look at the way 'bara' is used in the Bible and in contemporary literature it has more the meaning of 'make something work' – it's about functioning, not about materially making something, which is how our modern minds think of it.

So how might that affect our reading of Genesis 1? Long story, but let's just say that, while affirming his view that God did actually materially 'create' the universe, at some stage and in some way, he believes that's **not** what Genesis 1 is trying to tell us. Rather, we're looking at a **functional** description of creation – how it was all made to **work together** (and Genesis 2 offers another, slightly different, description). What's more, he claims that God made it all work together for the **benefit of humankind**; God wanted us not just survive, but to flourish, and to live a life relating to God.

And the other thing that struck me strongly is the repeated use of the word translated as 'good' – 'he saw that it was good', and finally, when it was all organised, 'it was **very good**'. What does the Hebrew word actually mean? I asked Colin about this, and he said that, in Hebrew more than in English, the meaning of a word is often very much affected by the context.

So, could good in Genesis 1 mean morally good as in 'knowing good and evil'? Hardly. Humans and angels can be morally good/evil, but not creation. So, let's look at the other use of good in that passage: it says of Adam 'it is not good for the man to be alone' – in other words, it just **doesn't work**. This is confirmed by modern psycho-social research into the detrimental effects of loneliness – but talk about thinking God's thoughts after him!

Maybe it's my fanciful idea, but that made sense to me: it doesn't work for us just to have enough material stuff – enough to eat and a place to live – we need to live in relationship with one another and with God – and for me, and for John Walton, is what Genesis 1 is all about.

That's enough for now; maybe I'll follow on with some of the detail of how Walton sees the six days of creation, which I found really compelling – but then that doesn't mean it's right! And beware: this book is highly contested by a good number of theologians, especially in America, I believe.

Interested to hear what you think.

Paul Bev. 14.8.20