

131 Genesis transforms the Sabbath

I'm now reading, for a second time, John Walton's 2009 book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, and in [130] I looked at the purpose of this account of creation. It now seems very clear to me that it was not – as we have tended to assume since the Enlightenment – to tell us about how the **universe** was **materially** created. Rather it was to tell its original hearers – and us – how God made the **cosmos** actually **function**. That understanding can change the whole way we view it.

Today, let's look at why Walton uses the first word of each of those two word pairs. Here are the OED's definitions, which serve well to illustrate the important distinction (my *italic*):

universe – *All existing matter and space considered as a whole*; the cosmos. The universe is believed to be at least 10 billion light years in diameter and contains a vast number of galaxies; it has been expanding since its creation in the Big Bang about 13 billion years ago.

cosmos – The universe seen as a *well-ordered* whole.

I'll look in my next article at the first six days of creation but I want here to think: What did God do on day seven? To be honest, I think I've always read it as something like: God worked hard for six days and was pretty exhausted, so on the seventh day he had a rest; therefore, we too should work hard for six days and then we should have a rest for a day – and, conveniently, that gives us the chance to go to church.

Walton's reading of Genesis transforms that into something more glorious and much more significant. The Sabbath becomes a wonderful celebration of what God has done for us – that's its purpose, not just "to have a rest". And this was true even before Jesus came along and so his resurrection makes our Sabbath even more special.

I can't go into the details of Walton's careful exegesis, but remember that it's based strongly on trying to understand the meaning of the words *as the author spoke/wrote and his hearers heard*, i.e. in the cultural context of their time, and to try hard (it's difficult) **not** to view it in terms of the culture of our time.

To get themselves inside the culture of the ancient near east (ANE) theologians can now use the growing body of ANE literature (thanks to archaeology) and our greater knowledge of ANE languages. This helps us see how they viewed their gods – and that then helps us to see the starting point from which **the** God had to lead Abram and his family into a truer appreciation of God's love for them. (How incredibly fortunate we are to be living AD, not BC – we now **know** what God is like: God is exactly like Jesus.)

So one principle that Walton notes is that the gods of the ANE had temples (though some lived atop a mountain), and the temple was where their god(s) dwelt, but they would only come and dwell in that temple if people did as they were told: the people had to provide offerings and sacrifices – food for the gods – as a condition for the gods' favour.

How different is the God that Abram knew! In the words used in Genesis 1, Walton sees that the writer presents God as having the most glorious temple that any god could ever have – the whole

universe, the cosmos. The cosmos is God's glorious temple! What's more, that temple is set up for the **benefit of the humans**.

(Walton also shows how the *physical* temple which they eventually built echoed, in the way it was constructed, the glorious greater cosmos-temple that God had created.)

Sorry, this sounds a bit of a set of bald statements, but read the book and catch the excitement of the wonderful plan our God has – and there's more to come...

What does God do on day seven? Our better understanding of the words used, such as the word we translate as 'rest', actually implies more like: God came into the universe/cosmos/temple that he had created and then God sat down at the place of power – to rule and reign, not to just have a lazy Sunday (Saturday?).

So in the functional (not material) description of Genesis 1, we see 'creating' as meaning more like creating a functioning company, rather than creating a material chair [130]. On day seven then, it's as if God takes his place in the boardroom of that company; he's there to run the company and to see it prosper – except that it's a 'mutual' company, i.e. the company is run for the benefit of the humans with whom God is seeking to have a relationship. (Do you see how much of a shift in mindset this was for Abram? God really had his work cut out – still has!)

Walton suggests that, yes, God materially created the universe, but that's not what Genesis is trying to tell us. Rather it's about how God took the chaos and darkness of the cosmos and wonderfully made the whole thing function properly as a suitable place to put his prize creation, humankind, and then **God came to dwell** in that "temple". So that's something really to celebrate on the Sabbath!

Sorry, but these ideas are so different from "what we've always been taught" that it's difficult to get them across in a few words. But I have such a strong feeling about it – it all makes such sense – so I would encourage you to look into it. And many biblical scholars are arguing **against** it and saying he's mistaken. So, if like me you have a heretical streak, I would urge you to get a copy of the book.

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