

## Reading Genesis: ANE Hermeneutic vs. Plain Meaning

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### Terry Mortenson

How scholars like evolutionist John Walton pit academic assumptions about ancient Near Eastern mythology against the plain, historical account of the book of Genesis

How did the universe come into existence? How has the world developed since the beginning? What is mankind and how are we related to the rest of creation? Thinking people in every culture and every generation have asked these questions. Genesis 1–11 gives what appears to be a straightforward historical account of the origin and early history of the creation.

But some evangelical scholars today say that we cannot correctly interpret Genesis 1–11 without understanding the worldview of the Ancient Near East (ANE) pagan nations around ancient Israel.

### The ANE Hermeneutic

Dr. John Walton is arguably the leading promoter of this method of interpreting Scripture, which I will call the ANE hermeneutic. He is a well-known professor of the Old Testament at Wheaton College in Illinois. Walton has written many books advocating this ANE hermeneutic, including *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Walton 2009), *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (Walton 2015), and *The Lost World of the Flood* (Walton 2018, co-authored with Tremper Longman III). His way of thinking has influenced many scholars, students, and laypeople in the church in America and elsewhere.

The implications are clear. The ANE literature (which only scholars like Walton can read) “has made it possible” to correctly understand Genesis 1–11.

Walton is a theistic evolutionist and a writer and advisory council member for BioLogos, the most influential advocate of theistic evolution in America. Theistic evolution is the view that God used the big bang and billions of years of geological and biological evolution to create the universe and everything in it (including man from ape-like creatures). Regarding ANE literature, Walton says,

The worldview of antiquity was lost to us as thinking changed over thousands of years, and the language and literature of the ancient world was buried in the sands of the Middle East. It was only with the decipherment of the ancient languages and the recovery of their texts that windows were again opened to an understanding of an ancient worldview that was the backdrop of the biblical world. This literature and the resulting knowledge has [sic] made it possible to recover the ways of thinking that were prominent in the ancient world and has [sic] given us new insight into some difficult biblical texts. (Walton 2009, 171)

Of course, he thinks Genesis 1–11 is a difficult text. The implications are clear. The ANE literature (which only scholars like Walton can read) “has made it possible” to correctly understand Genesis 1–11. But notice Walton’s language. He speaks of “the worldview of antiquity” and “an understanding of an ancient worldview that was the backdrop of the biblical world” as if there were only one ANE worldview and the Israelites had the same worldview and the same cosmology as their pagan neighbors. He says the ancient Israelites “thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not at all like anyone thinks today” (Walton 2009, 16).

Does it really make sense to believe that a wide variety of ancient people groups throughout the Middle East held the same or very similar beliefs about our origins and the cosmos over the span of many centuries? Consider that even among first-century Jews, a wide array of beliefs could be found about the nature of God, his working in history (or lack thereof), the existence of angels, and the future resurrection of believers. If one people group in a tiny nation with a common history had such disparate views on key subjects, then it is extremely unlikely that everyone throughout the ANE shared the same view of the world.

Given this hermeneutic principle and his belief that everyone in the ancient world was focused on how the various parts of creation function, rather than on how the material creation came into existence, Walton contends that God did not make anything in Genesis 1 but only gave function to a pre-existing creation to transform it into a cosmic temple for God’s residence and the worship of God. As such, Walton says, the Bible tells us nothing about how and when God created the world. Therefore, we can accept whatever the scientific majority says on these questions (that is, Christians can accept evolution and millions of years).

## Why We Should Reject the ANE Hermeneutic

There are many reasons why we should reject this hermeneutic for understanding Genesis 1–11.

### 1. *Scripture is written for all people in all times and places.*

This makes the OT incomprehensible for all but scholars of ANE literature.

Walton says, “The Old Testament *does* communicate to us, and it was written for us, and for all humankind. But it was not written *to* us. It was written to Israel” (Walton 2009, 3). Of course, it is true that the Old Testament’s original audience consisted mostly of Israelites. It was written to them, as Walton stated.

However, it does not follow from this that one should adopt Walton’s ANE hermeneutic. He has set up a false dichotomy that goes something like this: since the Old Testament (OT) was originally written to ancient Israelites, then if one desires to understand the OT, he must either be an ancient Israelite or study the extant writings from their pagan neighbors. But this makes the OT incomprehensible for all but scholars of ANE literature.

Furthermore, the New Testament (NT) was written 1,500 years after Moses wrote Genesis and in a cultural setting quite different from the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt. But Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 say that the OT “was written for our instruction.” Paul also says that all Scripture is God-breathed and “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). And he clearly meant that it is profitable in these ways for all people in all times and places (obviously, if they seek the truth with a sincere heart).

Since the Bible was written over a span of 1500 years in three languages (of the common people) and on three continents, its message traverses many different cultural contexts and situations of life.

Ultimately, the biggest problem with the ANE hermeneutic and the Second Temple hermeneutic to a smaller degree (since it at least deals with the same people group in the same area) is that Walton and similar proponents assume the ultimate question in hermeneutics is “How did the original audience understand the text?” While this is surely an important question, it is not the most important. As with any communication, meaning is found in the mind of the speaker or writer. Thus, when interpreting Scripture, the most important question to ask is “What was/is the author’s intended meaning?” And we discover that by reading his words carefully in context and comparing Scripture with Scripture, since all of it has one divine author, the God of truth, who cannot lie or contradict himself.

Referring to the OT, Jesus said that people should not, indeed cannot, live by bread alone but by every word of Scripture (Matthew 4:4). Psalm 1:1–3 says that any person who delights in and meditates on God’s Word is blessed. Psalm 119:97–104 says that by learning and clinging to God’s Word, a believer has more understanding than his teachers, elders, and enemies. God commanded Joshua not to turn to the right or the left from following his Word (at that time, the first five books of the Bible) but to meditate on it continually and obey it faithfully (Joshua 1:6–9). Peter urged Christians to remember the words spoken before by the OT prophets and the NT apostles, and then he reminded them about creation and the flood (2 Peter 3:1–7). Furthermore, Moses, Asaph, and Paul taught fathers to teach their children the Word of God (Deuteronomy 6:6–7; Psalm 78:5–8; Ephesians 6:4; Titus 2:3–5).

### 2. *Scripture is essentially clear.*

Of course, learning from extra-biblical sources things about the historical and cultural background can enhance our understanding of certain passages, like adding color to a black and white photo (based on information outside the photo).

Since the Bible was written over a span of 1,500 years in three languages (of the common people) and on three continents, its message traverses many different cultural contexts and situations of life. And yet these verses above tell us that Scripture was written for all God’s people in all generations, not just for intellectual elites. Although Peter says “some things” in Paul’s letters are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16) and the OT prophets did not understand everything they wrote related to the coming Messiah (1 Peter 1:10–12), all the verses in the previous point and many more imply that the Scriptures are essentially clear and understandable to anyone in any culture and at any time in history if he reads with a sincere and honest heart seeking the truth.

Of course, learning from extra-biblical sources things about the historical and cultural background can enhance our understanding of certain passages, like adding color to a black and white photo (based on information outside the photo). So, for example, knowing something about the gods of ancient Egypt sheds light on the ten judgments that God executed on the Egyptians, their animals, their land, and their gods (Exodus 12:12) before Pharaoh let the Israelites leave with Moses. Every judgement happened just as Scripture describes, but the extrabiblical information adds color to the inspired account. But we must not treat those extra-biblical sources as inerrant and equal in authority to Scripture. And we must not let extra-biblical sources change the picture to be something other than the one gained by applying proper principles of interpretation.

One reason that the Scriptures have been translated into more languages than any other book in history is so that the “common people” (boys and girls, moms and dads, “simple” tribesmen, and university educated) can read Scripture in their mother tongue and thereby understand God, his great acts in history, man’s place in creation, and our relationship to God and others.

The Gospels record 11 times that Jesus asked, “Have you not read?” and 30 times that he said, “It is written,” before Jesus quotes Scripture. In each case, he in essence says, “The Bible means what it says. Just read and believe and obey it.” In particular, Jesus and the apostles clearly took Genesis as literal history (a six-day creation week about 6,000 years ago, a literal first man and woman created at the beginning, a literal Abel murdered by his brother, and a global flood at the time of Noah), (Mortenson 2011) as did virtually the whole church until the early 1800s (Mortenson and Ury 2008, chapters 1–3, chapter 11, chapter 12). Alternative, non-literal, old-earth interpretations developed only as Christians tried to fit the modern pagan myth of millions of years into Genesis 1 (Mortenson 2004).

### 3. *Walton’s view of the ANE people, cosmology, and worldview is seriously mistaken.*

As noted above, Walton asserts that the Israelites had the “common conceptual worldview” of their pagan ANE neighbors (Walton 2009, 13–14) and that they were focused on how the creation functions, not how it came into existence. He also insists that those ancient peoples were asking very different questions than people in our modern scientific age.

While the creation and flood myths in various ANE literature have some superficial similarities with Genesis 1–11, the contrasts are numerous and stark.

But this is false on all accounts. Certainly, rebellious, syncretistic, idolatrous Israelites shared a common conceptual worldview with their pagan neighbors. But this is no surprise. Many first-century professing Christians embraced false ideas of their Greek and Jewish neighbors, which needed to be corrected by the apostles. And many professing Christians today, including Walton, have accepted evolution and/or millions of years. But, as shown below, the biblical worldview of godly, faithful Israelites was radically opposed to the pagan worldview. And the ancients were just as concerned about questions of origins (for example, How did the world come into existence? Where did man come from?) as modern people are, evidenced by the fact that they had creation myths (just like modern evolutionists have), and they also had myths about Noah’s flood.

While the creation and flood myths in various ANE literature have some superficial similarities with Genesis 1–11, the contrasts are numerous and stark. For example, the Genesis creation account is monotheistic, but the ANE myths are all polytheistic. Genesis assumes the eternality and transcendence of God, whereas the ANE myths talk about the origin of the gods. God was in complete control and the original creation was very good (Genesis 1:31); but in the ANE myths, the gods fight, and there is much evil in the process of creation. The God of Scripture is a nonsexual being (though nearly always presenting himself as masculine, for example, as a king, father, shepherd), but the ANE gods are sexually active. Genesis 1–3 is history (like the rest of Genesis), but the ANE cosmologies devalued history. John Oswalt, who is well acquainted with ANE literature, concludes his analysis of twelve key differences this way:

When we compare the characteristics [of ANE myths] with what we find in the Bible, it becomes clear that on every one of these [12] points the biblical worldview differs—and not merely slightly, but diametrically. . . . Beneath any possible surface similarities are radically different ways of thinking about reality. (Oswalt 2009, 63)

The prophets and apostles knew the difference between truth and myths and always proclaimed the truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Titus 1:14; 2 Timothy 4:4; 2 Peter 1:16). In contrast, the pagan, idolatrous peoples living around ancient Israel (just like unbelievers today) were suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18–20) and thereby were darkened in their understanding (Ephesians 4:17–18). And as they worshipped idols, they knowingly or unknowingly worshipped demons (1 Corinthians 10:20; Psalm 106:34–38) who undoubtedly further distorted the truth and mixed it with lies in the minds of the pagans. The similarities between the ANE creation or flood myths and the inerrant historical account in

Genesis are explained by the fact that those ANE pagans preserved elements of the true history passed down from descendants of Noah and his family who were judged by God and divided at the Tower of Babel. But the differences between the ANE myths and Genesis are the result of human and demonic distortions over the subsequent years (Mortenson 2016, 445–458).

#### 4. *Scripture is supremely authoritative for determining truth.*

Not only is Scripture essentially clear, starting from the very first verse, but it is supremely authoritative above all the words of men, modern or ancient.

Not only is Scripture essentially clear, starting from the very first verse, but it is supremely authoritative above all the words of men, modern or ancient. Jesus repeatedly affirmed this when he answered his Jewish enemies or Satan. Luke commended Jews for examining the Scriptures carefully to see if the teachings of Paul were true (Acts 17:11). Isaiah 8:20 says that if people speak contrary to God's Word, they are in the dark. Since the Bible is the only book that is inspired by God and is therefore inerrant, it must be the supreme source of truth for evaluating all other truth claims.

The only way to correctly interpret Scripture is to carefully observe the words, grammar, and context of a text and to compare Scripture with Scripture. Scripture is to be its own best interpreter. But Walton unquestioningly accepts what the evolutionary scientific majority says about origins and assumes that a monolithic ANE pagan worldview was shared by the Israelites. He then uses those two extrabiblical sources as a grid for interpreting Genesis.

### Conclusion

In spite of Walton's affirmation of the authority of Scripture and his expressed desires to correctly interpret Genesis, (Walton and Longman 2018, 3) the ANE hermeneutic that he and others are teaching the church is in fact undermining both the authority and the clarity of the foundational truth of Genesis 1–11. According to these ANE scholars, the man in the pew, in the pulpit, or in the jungle cannot possibly understand the true meaning of Genesis 1–11 unless he reads and applies the hermeneutical principles that Walton and others derived from their study of ANE literature.

On the contrary, Christians need to read and believe what Genesis 1–11 so clearly teaches. We most certainly should not use the demonically influenced, sinfully distorted writings of ANE pagans or the similarly influenced and erroneous writings of modern evolutionist pagans to interpret the inspired and inerrant Word of God (For further understanding of the problem of using ANE literature to interpret Genesis 1–11, see <https://answersingenesis.org/creationism/creation-myths/genesis-the-original-myth-buster/>, <https://isgenesishistory.com/gnostic-world-of-john-walton/>, <https://answersingenesis.org/the-word-of-god/genesis-in-ancient-near-east/>, <https://answersingenesis.org/reviews/books/lost-world-adam-and-eve-response/> (similar to Mortenson, T. 2016. *Searching for Adam: Genesis and the Truth About Man's Origin*, 165–194), and Mortenson, T. 2008. *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*, 131–163).

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