

Meeting Adam and Eve Again for the First Time

*Following his bestselling **The Lost World of Genesis One**, John Walton, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, turns his attention to the texts concerning Adam and Eve in Genesis 2–3 and the fascinating question of human origins with **The Lost World of Adam and Eve**. David McNutt and Alisse Wissman interviewed Walton to discuss his latest efforts to interpret Scripture in a way that is faithful to the meaning of the text and can shed light on a complex topic.*



Author
John Walton

IVP: What made you dive into the discussions and controversies surrounding Adam and Eve and Genesis 2–3?

Walton: I have always been interested in Genesis, in ancient Near Eastern backgrounds and in issues of science and the Bible, so there is no better text to work on. This is a topic of great interest today and of great import to the church, especially with all the new information that is coming from mapping genomes.

Interpreters of Scripture must always be willing to be prompted by science to go back to the text and make sure that we have read its claims rightly.

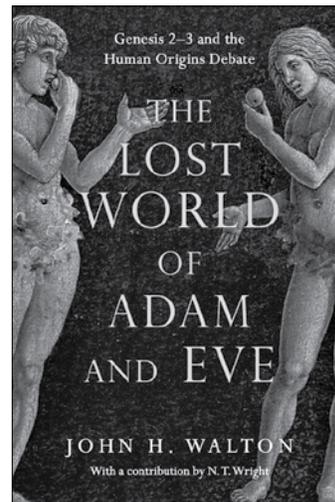
IVP: What surprised you most as you were researching for this book?

Walton: I think what surprised me most was that even far back in church history the issue was varied and controversial. The interpretation of these texts is far from monolithic.

IVP: What challenges do contemporary readers face in seeking to read Genesis as an ancient text, and how can we overcome those challenges?

Walton: Contemporary readers first of all face the challenge that they don't realize they need to divest themselves of their modern views. They don't realize how much of their interpretation is affected by their modern perspectives. We can overcome that obstacle by persuading them and showing them that it's necessary if we're going to track with the author's intention. The second obstacle is that even once people recognize the importance of penetrating the ancient world, they have no way of knowing how to do that. That obstacle can be overcome by scholars who can give them the help they need to actually read the text that way.

IVP: In *The Lost World of Genesis One*, you argued for a functional view of Genesis 1 rather than a material view. How do you think



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your view has been misunderstood or mischaracterized?

Walton: Critics of my views have generally misunderstood what I mean by a functional focus in the narrative of Genesis 1. They somehow have concluded that “non-functional” refers to the physical operations. In contrast, I use the concept of being made functional to refer to the cosmos being ordered as sacred space. In that sense, in Genesis 1 God is creating sacred space. The Bible offers us general statements that God is the

Creator of the material world—fully responsible for both human and cosmic material origins—but I don't think that is the story that the early chapters of Genesis are telling.

IVP: How did the responses you received to *The Lost World of Genesis One* and *The Lost World of Scripture* shape the arguments and questions you tackled in this book?

Walton: The more I deal with controversial issues, the more I learn of ways to try to avoid potential controversy. It is always important to measure the rhetoric level carefully and not to overstate a case. I have learned that through experience. The more I write and speak, the more I learn to identify the core issues that trouble people and the more I can try to offer information that might allow them to resolve those issues.

IVP: In this book, you seek to maintain both that Adam and Eve were historical figures and that they serve as archetypal figures. Can you explain how you came to that conclusion and what difference it makes?

Walton: I come to both of those conclusions through my particular reading of the biblical text. Of particular importance was when I came to the realization that the biblical narrator was making statements in Genesis 2 that pertained to all of us, not uniquely to Adam and Eve. This is extremely important if we want to read the text well and make good decisions about the relationship between the text and modern science related to human origins. We need to do our best to ascertain what the Bible

is actually claiming.

At the same time, the conversations swirling around Genesis 2 have often treated three issues—material human origins, his-

torical Adam and the origins of sin—as if they are one and the same. In this book, I tried to demonstrate that they are three different (though not entirely unrelated) issues that have to be dealt with individually rather than bundled together.

IVP: One of your major points throughout the book is that the threat posed by the current ideas surrounding human origins is overestimated. Why do you think it's important to address this issue now?

Walton: We should always be constantly ready to address new information coming to the table so that our interpretation is taking account of every piece of evidence. Genomics has brought important new information to our attention that needs to be taken into consideration. While it is appropriate to let Scripture speak for itself rather than being driven by the modern world (e.g., scientific discovery) or the ancient world (e.g., ancient Near Eastern texts), we should always be open to being prompted to reconsider the validity of our interpretations and willing to scrutinize them from a different vantage point.

IVP: You write that “Christianity has been forced to be content with a number of alternatives on the table for interpreting the early chapters of Genesis. It is sadly true that some have adopted a view that only their particular parochial reading is legitimate for a ‘real’ Christian. We must confess to our corporate shame that blood has even been shed.” Can you unpack that?

Walton: We too easily believe that the world of biblical interpretation is a black

and white world—that whatever view we have adopted is right and everyone else is wrong. Such a view is too facile. In many cases, we do our best to be faithful interpreters, but the Bible just doesn't offer enough information to give irrefutable confidence. Even as evangelicals with a common core of theological affirmations, we work with varieties of hermeneutical presuppositions and we weigh the evidence differently. Consequently, we develop different preferences based on which view has the preponderance of the evidence supporting it. Though ultimately one position undoubtedly is right and others wrong, we are not always positioned to see that well. That being the case, it is uncharitable to simply label those who disagree with you as wrong, and even as less than Christian, when they have done their best to engage in faithful interpretation based on orthodox theological presuppositions and a defensible hermeneutic. Theoretically, people will know we are Christians by our love, and I am not sure that we always do a good job of that if we are constantly engaged in denouncing

others who are simply trying to be faithful to the text.

IVP: Your propositional style, which you've used in each of your Lost World books is somewhat atypical. How did you develop that style?

Walton: I adopted this in order to build a logical and coherent case for the position I was developing. I suspect that it has to do with my personality. I was a business/economics major trained to be an accountant. My brain categorizes information

in certain ways and follows a particular kind of logic that is represented in the logical flow of the propositions that characterize the Lost World books.

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IVP: What kind of responses have you received to your interpretation of Genesis 2–3 thus far, both within the academy and within the church?

Walton: Overall, the responses have been good. People are intrigued and hopeful more than they are suspicious or angry.

IVP: How has writing this book informed your own view of Scripture and your faith?

Walton: In every book I write I am refining my method and re-examining my exegesis of biblical passages. This one is no exception. When we get to the point when our approach to the Bible becomes static rather than dynamic or when we can no longer be surprised by the text, we are in an unhealthy place. No one has all the answers; no one gets it all right. Therefore we have to remain pliable as we constantly try to make new observations and process new information and insights. ■