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Posted: 05 Jun 2011 06:53 PM PDT

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January 30, 2011
By Nicholas Miller (Department of Church History, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)

Last weekend a scholar from Wheaton College, Prof. John Walton, came to Andrews University to share his thoughts on the question of how Genesis 1 (ESV) should be read and understood. The crux of his argument was a historical one, and thus worth discussing on this history blog. Walton is viewed in the larger evangelical community as a relatively conservative scholar who believes in the authority of Scripture in spiritual and moral matters, as well as in its claims of miracles and the supernatural. For those not at the event, a brief summary of his presentations and claims follows.

Prof. Walton’s Presentations and Ideas

On Friday night, Walton spoke to students and faculty in a lecture sponsored by the University and the Science Department. He dealt with the question of the general interpretive approach to the Old Testament. He argued that we can only understand the meaning of the stories in the Bible if we understand the worldview of its immediate intended audience. It was written to their worldview, not to that of the 21st century. While its spiritual and moral messages were also intended for today, we should recognize, Walton argued, that its authority does not lie in its claims about the physical world and material reality. He claimed that the Bible makes no scientific claims, i.e., that its observations on the natural and physical world were no different than the existing worldview(s) of the surrounding cultures.

On Sabbath afternoon, Walton spoke to the Adventist Forum group, and applied this model to the issues of the ‘found’ world of Genesis 1. He described the world as theologically natural, meaning that it was created in a way that is consonant with the creative act of God. The world was created in such a way that it is consistent with the biblical account and the existence of a world as theologically natural is therefore consistent with the biblical account.
issues of Genesis 1. He observed that on day one, God did not actually create light, but rather put it to the use or function of marking off periods of light and dark. From this insight, he posited that the Hebrew mind was actually concerned about the function of things, and not their material origins. He argued that this was the model of all the days of creation, and that while he could accept that they were seven literal days of time, as we know them today, that nothing was necessarily materially created on those days. Rather, the functions of all these items—the earth, the sea, the sky, plants, animals, and humans—were instituted, and the whole was inaugurated as a temple, or sanctuary for God.

What was Walton’s view on when plants, and animals, and humans were actually, materially created? He did not say in his presentations. He suggested that one cannot answer these questions from Genesis, as it was not written for that purpose. In the Q & A sessions that followed both presentations, and from his writings on the topic, it appears that Walton is very open to accepting most of the current scientific evolutionary story. He is not a classic theistic evolutionist, in that he believes that God intervened directly in the evolutionary process, certainly at the development of life, and probably at other critical steps. But his model is essentially a modified version of theistic evolution, and very different from a traditional Adventist understanding of the creation account. Has he presented a package that should cause Adventists to reconsider their opposition to theistic evolution, or a meaningful modification of their seven-day, material creation model? I think not, for the following reasons. (Read more)

Adventist Forum has invited John Walton to speak at their “Genesis & Beyond: Celebrating Faith in a Polarized” conference Sept. 2011.
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Theology, Science, or Philosophy?

What can a historian contribute to this apparently theological/scientific account and discussion? Well, first, it is worth noting that the vast majority of the presentation on Friday night was neither theological or scientific, but philosophical.
noting that the vast majority of the presentation on Friday night was neither theological or scientific, but philosophical and historical. Walton presented himself as an expert in Old Testament languages and literature, and as having a biochemist wife who helped guide him on matters of science. But he spent most of his time in neither Old Testament texts nor on scientific matters. Rather, he made claims about the nature of reality, the division between the natural and supernatural, and the implications of communication “word/act” theory—none of which appeared to be based on Old Testament texts nor on scientific studies or research.

He then took these “findings” from what appeared to be contemporary popular philosophy and communication theory, and applied them back to the Bible. He asserted that there were no “scientific claims” in the Bible and that “metaphysical claims” were outside the realm of science and nature because he appeared to rely on widely accepted modern definitions of these words and concepts, without asking whether they were accurate or not. Those familiar with the history of the philosophy of science know that the definition of science is highly contested. You will get a much different answer as to whether the Bible makes scientific claims, depending on which definition you use.

But Prof. Walton made no attempt to meaningfully define his technical terms. When he did provide a diagram of his philosophical view of the nature of reality and the relation between the natural and supernatural, it was a remarkably contemporary diagram. He rejected the notion that reality was a like a pie, cut into pieces of natural and supernatural. Under this model—essentially a “God of the gaps” view—the more we discover about nature, the smaller the slivers of supernatural become.

Walton rather proposed that reality was like a layer cake, with a layer of “natural” world on bottom, and a layer of “supernatural” on top. We can explore all of the natural world, he proposed, and make all the discoveries we wish, and will never threaten the top layer, the supernatural, which is over all, and guides all. We are merely discovering the mechanisms and materials that the Creator uses to develop and guide his creation.

As Adventists, we would agree that scientific discoveries do not threaten God. Rather, it is the philosophy that is used to interpret the nature of these studies that is the problem. But what Walton overlooks is that the layer-cake model he proposes is essentially a version of German Philosopher Immanuel Kant’s divide between the noumena (supernatural world) and the phenomena (natural world). This divide provides part of the explanation of what has driven the sharp break we have in our world today between the disciplines of science, philosophy and theology.

It is this post-Kantian model—that says there is no meaningful connection or bridge or integration between the natural and the supernatural—that lies at the base of many of the 20th century isms that have led to a devaluation of Scripture, including liberalism, scientism, materialism, and the formation of higher critical methods of Bible study. It is a model which certainly does not flow from the Bible, which envisions a much closer connection and overlap between the two realms. God, his existence, power, and eternal nature, can be seen in the creation argues Paul. (Rom. 1 & 2, ESV). The heavens declare the glory of God, the Psalmist tells us. (Ps. 19, ESV). Both Testaments paint the physical world as a place where angels walk with men, walking staffs break out into bloom, and burning bushes beckon us to remove our shoes and reflect upon the holy that surrounds us.

Their “lost” world or our modern world?

Walton seeks to uncover the “lost world of Genesis 1” (the title of Walton’s recent book). But it is remarkable how much the world that Walton “found” in Genesis reflects modern philosophical thought. He appears to have run afoul of the old historical pitfall of peering down the well of history and describing his own reflection at the bottom, or at least the reflection of the preferred worldview of our time.

Walton’s layer cake model bears striking resemblance to the NOMA model described by Stephen Jay Gould, the late Harvard University agnostic and evolutionary zealot. NOMA stands for “non-overlapping magisteria,” and is shorthand.
The problem with NOMA is, essentially, that it leaves no room for truly historical religions like Judaism and Christianity. These religions say that the supernatural has invaded, and will invade, the natural world from time to time. Indeed, Walton himself would not be willing to accept NOMA, because it would exclude all the miracles of the Bible, including Christ’s incarnation, miracles, and resurrection. Neither Walton nor his church is willing or wanting to go that far. Walton would seem to reserve his “layer-cake” model particularly for the early chapters of Genesis. In the New Testament, he would want to treat it much more like a “marble-cake,” (which he referred to in his talk) with the supernatural more obviously intruding into the natural world.

On the face of it, this approach to the different sections of the Bible appears inconsistent. But could Adventism afford to take Walton’s approach, even if they could swallow the inconsistency? I believe the answer is an unequivocal no. It is an answer based in part on the profound theological differences between Walton’s reformed tradition and the Adventist theological heritage, and it revolves around a core pillar of Adventist theology—the Great Controversy framework of history.

**Theological Frameworks: Reformed versus Adventism/Arminianism**

In nothing I write here do I wish to imply that I accept Prof. Walton as anything less than a sincere and believing Christian. But he comes from a different theological heritage than Adventism. In seeking to resolve the tensions and apparent conflicts between the Bible and science, the Reformed (Calvinistic) and Adventist heritages work with very different concerns about God.

The Reformed thinkers are most concerned with God’s sovereignty, and secondarily with his character of love. The Adventist/Arminian heritage is most concerned with God’s love and character, and secondarily with his sovereignty. This means that when faced with the dilemma between God’s sovereignty and human free will, the Calvinist will choose God’s sovereignty—even allowing God to be the author of evil and the dammer of those with no choice but to sin. (Whether this is Walton’s personal position, I don’t know, but it is that of the majority of the community that he works within.)

Adventism, on the other hand, allows God’s sovereignty to be voluntarily limited by his respect for our free choice, because this is a clear manifestation of His character of love. Indeed, the whole Great Controversy theme is about God being willing to put His government on trial so that all beings will see that he acts justly, fairly, and most importantly, with love towards all.

How does this divide work out in approaches to Genesis 1? Well, the Calvinist who believes that God created most of humanity to damn them to everlasting torment in hell, will have no qualms with God creating through a process that requires death, i.e., evolution with its main mechanism of survival of the fittest. If Adventists, on the other hand, were to accept some form of theistic evolution, they would see their whole, defining theological framework of the Great Controversy basically splinter apart.

A God who would create through the use of sin and suffering is one who would not work well even under imperfect human standards of fairness and kindness. The Bible goes out of its way to affirm that death came into the world through man’s sin (Rom. 5:12, ESV), and that even suffering and death in nature and the animal world is connected with the attempt to bring back fallen humanity. (Rom. 8:18-21, ESV). The “good” that God saw throughout creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31, ESV) teaches that death was not a part of it. Adventism cannot accept theistic evolution, or any variant of it that allows death on earth before Adam’s sin, because it has staked its theological framework to the revelation of God’s.
allows death on earth before Adam's sin, because it has made its theological framework to the revelation of God's character of love in the Great Controversy history of the world.

One may be able to be a good Christian and fine Calvinist, and hold some version of theistic evolution. But that option is simply not open for Adventists. I'm not saying that all Adventists that believe in theistic evolution are not sincere Christians. Rather, I would say that they hold belief systems that are inherently in conflict, and they need to re-examine more closely the coherency of their beliefs about origins and the character of God. Is Walton's exclusive functionality view of Genesis a mess of potage that would cause us to trade our birthright of the Great Controversy story of God's loving engagement with His created beings? I sincerely pray not.

Conclusion – Fairer Forums

In closing, I would express my concern about the nature and timing of these lectures. As a Christian university, we should be open to hearing and considering ideas that we may not agree with. I have no trouble with having Prof. Walton being on our campus and lecturing. But I do have concerns about the format that was put into place for the presentations. They were basically two, one hour lectures, with a period of half an hour or so for Q & A. No single questioner had the time or opportunity to seriously engage with or respond to Prof. Walton's claims, and his argument was thus not seriously or meaningfully challenged in systematic way.

When the University sponsors a Friday night lecture, for students, with one main speaker, it creates the appearance that the University is endorsing that speaker in some way. It would have been much better had one or two persons been given the opportunity to respond at some time and length to Prof. Walton's views. Some may object to having our guests subjected to critique, and yet this is the nature of a university after all. We should listen to opposing views, but those that bring them, should be willing to listen in return. There are a number of persons who could have provided thoughtful, polite, respectful, but meaningful critiques.

The decision to privilege Dr. Walton's presentation on a special, Friday evening program was, I believe, short-sighted, especially in light of other controversies on other Adventist campuses concerning this very topic. I believe that our scientists at Andrews are generally faithful supporters of Biblical creation, but programs like this can raise the appearance that this is not the case. I have expressed my hope to the leadership of the Science Department, and now do so more broadly, that we can develop a greater dialogue on campus between our departments of science and theology. This hopefully will cause future programs on science and religion—and I hope that many will occur—to have greater balance and a more meaningful exchange on these important ideas.