

Clarkson: Analysis of Genesis helps calm science vs. faith debate



John H. Walton, a professor of history at Wheaton College, spoke in Hinsdale about the book of Genesis. (NOVA SAFO/AFP/Getty Images)



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The question "Is science incompatible with Christian faith?" is way too large for the small space I am allotted, but it is a question that constantly interests me.

Recently I was able to attend a local lecture on the topic, specifically how to reconcile the first chapters of the Bible's Genesis to evolution and many of today's scientific questions. I approached it with some skepticism and left satisfied and, in fact, inspired.

The speaker was John H. Walton, a prolific author on the Old Testament and a professor at Wheaton College, and he insisted that in order to read the Bible better and more effectively, today's reader must be able to put it within the cultural context of its time, to understand that "the Bible is written for us, but not to us," he said.

It is like reading someone else's mail — we can learn a lot but the mail was not addressed to us. We are not Israelites living in the Ancient Near East. He also emphasized that when we read the Bible we are reading a translation. The Bible was not originally written in our language or in our culture. It was written to an Israelite audience.

Walton's talk was part of the Covenant Conversations series held at Hinsdale Covenant Church on Sunday afternoons as part of the church's adult formation program. He attracted a good-size crowd and spent a bit of time explaining what he called the "cultural river" of the time when the Old Testament was written.

In that time, the Israelite population lived with mythological reality; they observed the sky and felt it was solid; they saw the sun, moon and stars as playing a role in their society as did divination and identity

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Our own American, 21st century "cultural river" involves concepts like freedom, capitalism, an expanding universe, consumerism, social media, freedom and individualism. We may not like aspects of cultural river, but we are living in them.

Some of us, he said, want to read the Bible and "let it wash over us without thinking about its cultural context." But that is a mistake. For example, in the Ancient Near Eastern civilization, the biblical Tower of Babel as we understand it today was to bring man up to God, but in the thinking of that era's builders and architects, the tower would help lead God or the gods down to man. Those are two different points of view.

In no way did the authors of the Old Testament anticipate our future and what technology would bring.

"What does the Bible say about evolution?," Walton asked. "Nothing."

What about stem cell research? "Nothing."

Climate change? "Nothing," Walton said.

What God was creating in the first two chapters of Genesis, Walton argues, is not material, is not physical. Time is not a thing — so when God separates the day, a period of light, from the darkness, a period of no light, these were abstract. God is bringing order to the universe. He is naming the period of light "day" and the period of darkness "night," and so on.

When the Bible said "it is good," that means that it functions properly; there is order and purpose, and this interpretation is supported by reading the texts in their original language. The first few chapters of Genesis are not concerned with our cosmic origins but with our cosmic identity, Walton said.

To summarize a key point of the talk, science provides the mechanics that we use when building a house. It is the basis for the materials we select and the ways we configure that building and outfit it for usefulness. But, until people move in there, it is not a home. Science creates the house. Faith makes the home.

"Home is where your story comes to life," he said. Genesis is the story of a how a sacred space came to be ordered.

Walton did address Adam and Eve and the origins of humanity. He argues that Adam and Eve are archetypes of humanity. Their creation story has nothing to do with science or biology; it is not concerned with the material formation of the earth or the literal creation of populations, but with the ordering and identity of humanity. Men and women were created to work side-by-side in sacred tasks.

Much of Walton's lecture came from two of his books: "The Lost World of Genesis" and "The Lost World of Adam and Eve."

I found his talk inspiring. He is obviously a man of faith and hope, and yet he can live comfortably with science and how science impacts our lives today, while he can easily find great metaphysical truths in the Bible.

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