

Excerpted from:

Defending Concordism: Response to *The Lost World of Genesis One*

By John Walton

by [Hugh Ross](#)

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Since its 2009 release, John H. Walton's *The Lost World of Genesis One; Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*,¹ has consistently ranked among the best-selling faith and science books. It has received glowing endorsements from prominent theologians such as N. T. Wright, Bruce Waltke, Tremper Longman III, and scientists Francis Collins, founder of BioLogos and director of the National Institutes of Health, and Davis Young, professor emeritus of geology at Calvin College, all of whom identify themselves as theistic evolutionists or evolutionary creationists.

The book's title comes from Walton's belief that Genesis 1 "is not written to us" (p. 21) but rather to the ancient Israelites in the context of the worldview of antiquity. Walton, a professor of Old Testament theology at Wheaton College, suggests that until recently with the recovery of ancient world literature from the sands of the Middle East, it was not possible to come to a "right reading" of the text since "the worldview of antiquity was lost" (p. 171).

In his book, Walton agrees with young-earth creationists that of the four different literal definitions² of *yôm* (the Hebrew word translated as "day") the correct definition for the creation "days" in Genesis 1 is that they "are seven twenty-four-hour days" (p. 91). Nevertheless, Walton rejects young-earth creationism for its untenable science³ and for being "too narrow in their reading of words such as 'create' (*bara*) and 'made' (*asa*)."⁴ He writes, "The seven days are not given as the period of time over which the material cosmos came into existence, but the period of time devoted to the inauguration of the functions of the cosmic temple" (p. 92).

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Concordism

One reason for adding yet another review to the already long list is that many readers of Walton's book see it as a polemic against concordism and, in particular, the Reasons To Believe concordist view of Scripture. In my personal interactions with Walton he left little doubt that he opposes our attempts at RTB to integrate the book of nature with the books of Scripture. In the first of eighteen propositions presented in *The Lost World* Walton says this about concordism: "Concordists believe the Bible must agree—be in concord with—all the findings of contemporary science" (p. 19).

This definition marginalizes RTB's view. No scholar here holds that position. Walton's definition seems to target a subset of the concordist view: *hard* concordism.

What's the distinction? Hard concordists look to make most, but not all, discoveries, new and old, in science agree with some passage of Scripture. *Soft* concordists seek agreement between properly interpreted Scripture passages that describe some aspect of the natural realm and indisputably and well-established data in science. RTB holds the latter view.

RTB's soft concordism agrees with Walton that a literalistic hermeneutic does not apply to all Bible passages. It also agrees with Walton that we must always guard ourselves from reading more into the biblical text than what the text actually warrants. When we overreach, we set ourselves up for possible embarrassment and the church at large for possible ridicule. Scientific and/or historical research could prove our overreaching interpretation incorrect.

On the other hand, to read *less* into the biblical text than what the text teaches can also be a problem. Secularists often interpret such responses as believers conceding that Scripture cannot withstand objective testing. Either way, the Bible's truth claims are damaged. Furthermore, by reading less into the text, believers lose out on truth that they can apply for Christian living and for Christian witness.

What are Christian apologists to do, then, with the Bible? None of us can claim to have a complete, unbiased, and perfectly interpreted understanding of everything the Bible teaches. The same goes for the book of nature. We are human. But, the Bible calls us in our humanity to be good theologians and good scientists. We are to diligently and thoroughly research both of God's books and through careful application of the biblical testing method (a.k.a the scientific method)⁷ develop the best and most complete interpretations of God's books. If we overreach, we humbly back up. If we underreach, we courageously move forward. As we press forward to gain more truth, we submit our hypotheses of new truth to rigorous objective testing.

In proposition eleven Walton again seems to marginalize RTB's biblical creation model. He writes, "They [concordists] might conclude that if the big bang really happened as a mechanism for the origins of the universe, it must be included in the biblical account of the origins of the universe. So concordists will attempt to determine where the big bang fits into the biblical record and what words could be understood to express it (even if in rather mystical or subtle ways)" (p. 105).

Apparently, Walton is unaware of the details of how I became a Christian. I was not raised in a Christian home. When I first gave the Bible a serious read, I was expecting it to be like all the other holy books of the world's religions: skimpy on scientific details and largely incorrect in its descriptions of the natural realm. I was not looking for big bang cosmology in the Bible and at that time that cosmic model was far from being firmly established by astronomical research. I was surprised that the Bible taught the fundamentals of big bang cosmology (cosmic beginning including a beginning of space, time, matter, and energy; cosmic expansion, and constant physical laws including a pervasive law of decay) not in a mystical or subtle way but explicitly and repeatedly. At the time, I saw nothing inconsistent with what the Bible taught about the universe and what astronomers had firmly established about the beginning, history, and structure of the universe. I did wonder, though, how the Bible's specifically stated cosmological claims would fare as astronomical research advanced.

My point is that we soft concordists at Reasons To Believe have not tried to force-fit big bang cosmology into the Bible. But, neither are we embarrassed or unduly concerned to find it there. From our perspective it is plainly taught in the Bible, not just in Genesis but in many other Old and New Testament books. Thus, if astronomers were to prove beyond any shadow of doubt, for example, that the universe did not have a beginning (that it was not created), that truth would be catastrophic to our belief that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. It also would demand a major alteration in our theology of God.

Walton worries that big bang cosmology—like everything else in science—is too unstable, too changeable for any Christian to risk incorporating any of it into one's theological model. That concern and its implications will be addressed later in this response.

Why Genesis 1 Must Be an Account of Natural History

It is extremely contrived, if not impossible, to deny Genesis 1's description of a sequence of physical events, the passage of time, and natural history if one pays attention to the plain language and grammar of Genesis 1. The creation days are numbered and different components of the physical creation are described on each of those days. The repeated refrain, "and there was evening and there was morning," which concludes the description of each of the first six creation days, establishes that there was a point in time when each creation day began and a later point in time when that day ended. The fact that the seventh day, God's rest period, lacks the phrase "and there was evening and there was morning" in addition to other passages in Scripture, (such as Psalm 95, John 5, and Hebrews 4) that refer to God's seventh day as an epoch proceeding through the present and on into the future, adds more evidence that each creation day sequentially follows after the preceding one.

The grammatical use of the Hebrew *Waw-consecutive* throughout Genesis 1, decisively argues for the sequential and chronological nature of the creation days. Another decisive point in favor of Genesis 1 as chronological description of nature is the use of the word "beginning" in Genesis 1:1 and the words "completed" and "finished" in Genesis 2:1–2. In addition to the numbering of the creation days and the implication of the repeated evening–morning phrases (indicating that each day has a start time and an end time), throughout Genesis 1, we also find the repetition of the phrases "and God said," and "it is good."

Reading Genesis 1, whether in the original Hebrew or in the English translation, it seems like Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is doing everything he can possibly do to communicate the fact that Genesis 1 is a chronological account of natural history. Indeed, no other chapter in the entire Bible has so many embedded chronological cues. This wealth of sequential markers explains why individuals throughout all epochs of the Christian era—whether they be seekers or skeptics, who come to the Bible independent of any previous exposure to Christianity or the Christian community—so ubiquitously interpret Genesis 1 as a chronology of physical creation events.

During my youth when I examined the "holy" books upon which the major religions of the world are based, I was struck by how they all address material origins and material history. The Bible, however, stood head and shoulders above the rest in both the quantity and specificity of its science/creation content.

To conclude that interpretations of the Bible's science/creation content were wrong prior to the discoveries in recent times of ancient Middle Eastern literature seems to demean the inspiration of Scripture. If the Bible is indeed God's message to humanity, would He not inspire the human authors in such a manner that their writings would communicate truth, and nothing but truth, to all generations?

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Changeable Science?

In addition to demeaning the Israelites and respected Hebrew linguists, Walton diminishes the trustworthiness of scientists' accomplishments. He refuses to entertain concordance between the Bible and the record of nature because "science is in a constant state of flux" (p. 17) and "what is accepted as true today, may not be accepted as true tomorrow" (p. 17). Thus, he avows, "Divine intention must not be held hostage to the ebb and flow of scientific theory. Scientific theory cannot serve as the basis for determining divine intention" (p. 105). He doubts, for instance, the scientific permanence of big bang cosmology and, thus, feels compelled to deny biblical references to the universe's big bang features.⁴³ He

charges that concordists, like myself, are force-fitting changeable modern cosmology into the biblical texts.⁴⁴

In contrast to this charge, the God for whom it is impossible to lie or deceive⁴⁵ has ensured that both of His books, one made up of nature's record and the other the Bible's words, are utterly trustworthy, reliable, and inerrant. For both, the doctrine of *perspicuity* applies. That is, portions of both revelations will be unambiguous—crystal clear—to anyone who reads the record in sufficient depth with an adequate spirit of humility. So, for example, the second law of thermodynamics, a.k.a. the law of decay or the law of entropy, is both evident and perspicuous throughout the natural realm. It is scientifically rock solid. The law will not ebb and flow or change. It also is perspicuously taught in the Bible⁴⁶ thus offering an example refuting Walton's claims that the Bible is silent on material origins and explanations and that no overlap exists between Scripture and the modern scientific record.

Science, like theology, is a truth-building enterprise. The foundation of what is clear, evident, and undisputable can guide research into that which is partially explored and understood and, through a disciplined application of the biblical testing method⁴⁷ (a.k.a. the scientific method), can increase the size of the established truth foundation while pushing back the frontiers of ignorance and confusion. However, owing to human limitations and biases, the enterprise will never end. There is always more to learn and always the need to refine what we know.

In astronomy, careful measurements of the motions of Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus, and Mercury gave birth to calculus and Newtonian mechanics, which enabled more refined measurements of planetary motions, which led to the discovery of Uranus and Neptune and eventually to tensor analysis and special and general relativity.⁴⁸ General relativity confirmed big bang cosmology (more on this briefly).⁴⁹

Did relativity falsify or replace Newtonian mechanics? No. It only refined it. In fact, the refinements are so tiny that they are safely ignored for solar system space travel. Today, special and general relativity have been proven true to twenty-one and fifteen decimal places respectively.⁵⁰ In the future, when astronomers can make measurements to forty places of the decimal, relativity may need to be refined by another undiscovered theory. That discovery will not falsify either relativity or big bang cosmology.

I purposely stated that general relativity *confirmed* big bang cosmology. While Walton accuses me of using my hindsight as a modern-day astronomer to force big bang cosmology into the biblical creation texts, agnostic astronomer Robert Jastrow noted in his book, *God and the Astronomers*, that theologians beat astronomers to the discovery by many centuries.⁵¹ Christian and Jewish theologians clearly discerned the biblical proclamation of the most important elements of big bang cosmology at least seven centuries before any scientific evidence for it arose.⁵² Personally, it was seeing big bang cosmology in the Bible that (in part) persuaded me, against my initial will, that the Bible had the power to predict future scientific discoveries and, consequently, must be inspired by the Creator of the universe.

It was the obvious biblical implications of big bang cosmology that led unbelieving astronomers to oppose it so vehemently, an intensity that did not end until physical evidence for the big bang became overwhelming.⁵³ As that evidence was accumulating, atheist cosmologist Geoffrey Burbidge complained in 1992 that his colleagues were rushing off to join "the First Church of Christ of the Big Bang."⁵⁴

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For the remainder of the review and footnotes, see <https://reasons.org/explore/publications/articles/defending-concordism-response-to-the-lost-world-of-genesis-one>