# BIBLICAL STUDIES

## THE BIBLE AND THE "UNIVERSAL" ANCIENT WORLD: A CRITIQUE OF JOHN WALTON

### Noel K. Weeks

What distinguishes John Walton's approach from those of others who attempt to explicate the Bible from outside contemporary sources is that rather than comparing specific items attested in some external text or object with a claimed biblical parallel, he sees the biblical text as a product of, and hence explicable in terms of, a mentality that the biblical authors shared with their contemporaries, irrespective of religious differences. In an earlier article[1] I considered the assumptions frequent in comparative endeavors, but Walton's approach raises additional questions.

He earlier applied this method to the creation narrative in Gen 1.[2] More recently he has teamed with D. Brent Sandy to apply a related methodology to the whole of the Scriptures, NT as well as OT.[3]

### I. *Methodological Issues*

Their[4] methodology involves setting the ancient world over against the modern world, with the biblical authors necessarily part of the ancient world. By recognizing the universal modes and habits of that ancient world we can recognize what has come into the Bible from that background. Since Walton and Sandy do not want to dismiss the biblical text as without relevance to us, what is needed is a process of translation. What is the text saying in the language

---

*Noel K. Weeks is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Sydney in Australia.*

[1] Noel K. Weeks, "The Ambiguity of Biblical 'Background,'" *WTJ* 72 (2010): 219–36.

[2] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

[3] John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

[4] Since I am dealing with a number of works, two by Walton alone and one by Walton and Sandy together, I have chosen to refer to both authors when it is a question of their joint methodology, or to the work authored by both, and to Walton alone when referring to the works that are his alone.

of its time and what does that translate to in the language of our time? In the more recent work, *The Lost World of Scripture*, that translation process is explicated in terms of a theory of human communication.

The moment one claims that the Bible reflects a common something, which can be set over against the modern equivalent, questions arise. Has the modern been given some normative function so that whatever the Bible says that does not correspond to the modern can be discounted? If so, are we talking just about Amish buggies or something more important?

How do we establish the uniform view of antiquity or even just of the ancient Near East (hereafter ANE)? Suppose we have two proof texts coming from one ancient society; can we make generalizations about all other ancient societies? If we are dealing not with concrete physical things such as motorcars or atom bombs, but with more elusive things such as attitudes to the universe or the meaning of life, can we make sweeping comparisons between ancient and modern times? As one of his examples of the difference between ancient and modern societies, Walton uses the fact that we moderns are necessarily part of "consumerism."[5] Even granted that it may have not been the best-chosen example, it raises a fundamental point. How close would an example of "consumerism" in the ancient world need to be to show that the comparison was invalid? If I were able to prove that most societies in the ANE had communal economies but there was one example of an economy driven by individual consumption, would I have disproved his point about consumerism being a difference between the ancient and the modern worlds? And having disproved that one case, would I have disproved his whole case for seeing the Bible as the product of a fundamentally different world?

Obviously behind this discussion is a fundamental point of methodology or philosophy. It is very similar to the question of whether a single non-conformity disproves a scientific law. If it is granted that the Bible is distinct in being monotheistic, and Walton and Sandy certainly grant that characteristic, how do you prove that in some other feature it is not distinctive? Examples to prove the difference between the ancient and modern world can use very concrete and physical things, but the substantive discussion in these works concerns far less tangible things such as beliefs and attitudes.

The crucial weakness of the works in question is the apparent belief that the difference between ancient and modern is so obvious that careful distinctions and reasoning are not needed. If the ancient is so universally and uniformly different, then the fact that the Bible conforms to the ancient can almost be taken for granted. Of course attempts are made to show that a certain biblical feature occurs elsewhere in the ancient world, but because the methodological questions have not been addressed there is no reflection on whether cited evidence constitutes conclusive proof of *universal* ancient ways. The comprehensiveness of our data in time and space is not established. Material presented to the reader

---

5  Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 14.

is well documented. However, in works intended for a more general audience, I would expect an attempt to lay out the scope of our evidence. If one's appeal is to a uniform practice, to which biblical authors might be expected to conform because it was so uniform, then we might expect a survey of the available evidence to establish that we are able to say that it was indeed uniform.

## II. *The Nature of the Evidence*

Therefore I plan to attempt a brief panorama of the state of our evidence. I will concentrate on the ANE because that is where Walton established his methodology, it is crucial to the further application of the methodology in the joint volume, and it is the area I know best.

Our ANE written evidence is crucially biased towards one particular area: Mesopotamia, the land of the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. That is because of the durability of texts written on clay tablets. We have hundreds of thousands of texts. To make the extremes more graphic, compare the richness of Mesopotamian sources, with hundreds of thousands of texts, with the few dozen texts from the land of Israel that have some claim to contemporaneity with the OT.[6] In addition, the texts from Israel tend to be quite brief. That is why, when scholars attempt to provide background for the Bible, they generally cite Mesopotamian texts. Yet the question must be asked: how much relationship should we expect between the two cultures? Obviously when Mesopotamia impinged upon Israel, in the time when there were Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of Palestine, there was overlap; but Walton and Sandy are not dealing with historical details but rather with claimed conceptual overlaps. The problem is that since we have no comparable Palestinian sources—once we exclude the Bible—it is almost impossible to say whether the mental world of Mesopotamia was similar to the mental world of Palestine. If we included the Bible and the stark contrast between monotheism and the highly developed and complex polytheism of Mesopotamia, we might conclude that there was very little overlap. Yet methodologically the interpretation of the Scriptures is itself in question. Further, to be fair, the biblical text attests to considerable amounts of polytheism in Israel itself.

Within the Mesopotamian sources themselves there is once again a considerable bias. They are disproportionately the texts of everyday life with a very great bias towards economic and administrative records. Well over 90 percent are of that sort. However, most of what is used for comparison with the Bible is not of that sort. If we turn to the remainder we once more find a considerable bias. Manuals of divination and rituals of exorcism are a major part of the remainder. An example of the proportions may be given by records of what we would call "accession lists" for the libraries established by the Assyrian king Assurbanipal

---

[6]  I mean coherent texts rather than practice abcedaries and the like.

at Nineveh. During a period in which over two thousand tablets were added,[7] fewer than ten were of the sort that are commonly used for biblical comparisons, such as myths and epics. The vast majority of the rest fell into the area of divination and rituals.[8] So we can add to our concerns about whether Mesopotamia is a valid comparison for elucidating the biblical text, the question of whether we are using what is central to that culture as a basis of comparison. These are particular questions for the methodology of Walton and Sandy because they are not making a claim about a specific feature of the ancient world, but rather claiming that the biblical text can be shown to reflect a uniform ancient mind.

If the texts that really interest us as pathways into the ancient mind are such a small proportion of Mesopotamian literary production, what can we say about how Mesopotamians used or saw them? We are able to reconstruct how the Mesopotamian scribe was taught to read and write.[9] The higher levels of that education involved the reading and copying of literary texts. From that we might reasonably conclude that these texts were seen as classics of literature. Whether it means that the scribes shared the views and attitudes reflected in the texts is a question to which we have no answer. Even if they did, we would not know if that represented general or elite attitudes. We have no good measure of literacy in ancient Mesopotamia.[10] In any case we would have to distinguish degrees of literacy. The merchant who might be able to understand a commercial text, even though he employed a scribe to write texts for him, might struggle with a literary text.[11] The modern scholarly conviction is that literacy rates were low and there may have been attempts to keep it that way.[12]

––––––––––––––––

[7] The tablets consisted of texts written on clay tablets and on wax-covered writing boards. Longer literary and professional texts required many tablets for the whole composition. For example, the great astrological corpus *Enuma Anu Enlil* covered about seventy tablets. (Walton and Sandy's claim that "only a few pieces required multiple tablets in Mesopotamia" [*Lost World of Scripture*, 26] is strange.)

[8] Simo Parpola, "Assyrian Library Records," *JNES* 42 (1983): 1–29. See also Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 192–93. Walton and Sandy (*Lost World of Scripture*, 22) are aware of the rarity of literary texts in Assurbanipal's library but do not see the problem it creates for their method.

[9] Petra D. Gesche, *Schulunterricht in Babylonien im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, AOAT 275 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001); David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17–46.

[10] An attempt has been made to come to a measure of literacy in Egypt. The estimate was a 1 percent literacy rate. It has not received universal assent, partly because of difficulties with the method and partly because of varying definitions of literacy. See John Baines and Christopher J. Eyre, "Four Notes on Literacy," *Göttinger Miszellen* 61 (1983): 65–96.

[11] For a possible example and discussion, see Simo Parpola, "The Man Without a Scribe and the Question of Literacy in the Assyrian Empire," in *Ana šadî Labnāni lū allik: Beiträge zu altorientalischen und mittelmeerischen Kulturen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Röllig*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Hartmut Kühne, and Paolo Xella, AOAT 247 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; 1997), 315–23.

[12] Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "New Light on Secret Knowledge in Late Babylonian Culture," *ZA* 82 (1992): 98–111.

It is commonly claimed that Mesopotamian literary culture was diffused throughout the ANE. That is because Mesopotamian cuneiform texts from the second millennium and even earlier have been found in Syria, Anatolia, Palestine, and even Egypt. While the diffusion is not in question, its significance is. In the second millennium the cuneiform script was adapted to write Hittite and Hurrian. Furthermore, Akkadian was adopted as the language of international diplomatic correspondence so that the Egyptian Empire and its Palestinian and Syrian vassals corresponded in adapted forms of Akkadian.[13] Since the cuneiform script and Akkadian were taught using literary texts, that means that scribes being taught to write would be copying Mesopotamian texts, and such instructional texts have been found in Egypt.[14] It is a reasonable assumption that all across the area between Mesopotamia and Egypt scribes were copying Mesopotamian texts. There was at least enough interest for some Akkadian texts to be translated into Hittite.[15] We have no idea how deeply these Mesopotamian texts penetrated into the mind and ethos of the locals.

In the first millennium BC, however, we find a different situation. Cuneiform and Akkadian are not attested outside the homeland, aside from monuments reflecting Assyrian and Babylonian conquests.[16] Our suspicion is that Akkadian had been replaced as the international language by the much easier to write Aramaic which, because of the perishable materials used, has not survived. Since the majority of scholarly opinion—whether rightly or wrongly is not the issue at the moment—would place the writing of the OT in the first millennium and even late in that period, the existence of cuneiform texts in Palestine a millennium earlier may not be relevant to theories of its composition.

Within the corpus of Mesopotamian texts there are other important distinctions. While the language of the very earliest texts is still a matter of discussion, the earliest texts we can read with some certainty are Sumerian, a language with no certain cognates. The general belief is that that language, having shared Mesopotamia with Akkadian for some time, was dying out around 2000 BC.[17] Scribes, however, continued to learn Sumerian, and the bulk of our Sumerian literary texts come from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BC). Sometime in the middle of the second millennium the dominance of Sumerian literary texts in the curriculum ended, to be replaced by Akkadian texts, and

---

[13] Akkadian is the general term we use for the Semitic language of ancient Mesopotamia. Besides a number of peripheral dialects, its main branches were Babylonian and Assyrian.

[14] Shlomo Izre'el, *The Amarna Scholarly Tablets* (Groningen: Styx, 1997).

[15] Gary Beckman, "Mesopotamians and Mesopotamian Learning at Hattuša," *JCS* 35 (1983): 97–114.

[16] Would locals have been able to read such texts written in a strange script and a strange language? Biblical scholarship often assumes that the existence of such a text means its content would be generally known. That is to read the ancient world as though it is the modern.

[17] I am using conventional dates. The debate over the reliability of dates is not relevant to this exercise.

many Sumerian texts were no longer copied.[18] That means that it may be valid to use a Sumerian text to establish background to the Bible, if it can be shown that the text contains something that can be found in later texts also, but by itself a Sumerian text may be a doubtful source for biblical background.[19]

When all these reservations and qualifications are taken into consideration, the simple quoting of a Mesopotamian text as *the* background to the OT is implausible. Of course there are genuine overlaps. The flood story is an obvious one, and I will come to another later. My basic point is that citing texts without concern for the unresolved questions is not good scholarship.

In terms of bulk of records, Egyptian texts rank next in importance. Once again there is a significant skewing of the evidence. We suspect that Egypt produced abundant records of everyday life, but very few of these have survived simply because they were written on perishable papyrus. Some papyrus records survive particularly from later periods, but the breadth of evidence is much smaller than from Mesopotamia. What was written on stone is more likely to survive, and that is disproportionately the religious records of temple walls and funerary texts. Hence, our impression of Egypt is as an exceedingly religious culture and one fixated on death. There may be some validity in those impressions, but once again we have to be aware that accidents of survival warp our impressions. It may be because so much less has survived from Egypt that we turn to Mesopotamia rather than Egypt for our biblical background.

Concentrating on literary texts, we find a curious difference between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Written myths go back almost as far as we can read texts into the third millennium in Mesopotamia. We know that Egyptian myths go way back because there are allusions to myths in early religious eras such as the Pyramid Texts.[20] Actual written texts of those myths are comparatively late, however, not appearing until the late second millennium. That might be an accident of discovery, but other early literary texts do exist even if copies are rare. The reason may be that myths were not part of the Egyptian school curriculum. What that says about the difference between Egyptian and Mesopotamian minds I have no idea. My concern is simply that any thesis to establish a common mind across the ANE must cite both Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts. Should we expect a common approach between the two? Religiously and politically and probably in other ways the differences are great. We may find things that look superficially similar between Mesopotamia and Egypt, but in the context of each, are they really alike?

---

[18] Mark E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Potomac, MD: Capital Decisions, 1988), 1:11–13.

[19] Since Walton and Sandy are postulating uniformity, not just across all ancient cultures but also across the whole time period of the Scriptures, counter examples from any culture or period threaten their thesis.

[20] The Pyramid Texts are spells written on the walls of the small pyramids of the fifth and sixth dynasties (ca. 2300 BC). For translations, see *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts,* trans. R. O. Faulkner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

Next in volume come Hittite texts. Generally Hittite texts are not considered in biblical comparisons. The Hittite approach to writing history, however, is generally closer to the biblical one than either the Mesopotamian or Egyptian styles.[21] Once again our collection of sources is biased with ritual texts in greater proportion. However, there are also some myths. The Hittite corpus attests interaction of cultures with, besides Akkadian texts, religious rituals in the language of the previous inhabitants (Hattic), texts in the related Luwian, and texts from Hurrian sources, some translated into Hittite and some in Hurrian. The Hittites are an interesting example of a people who clearly absorb some things from outside, but yet retain some very distinct characteristics of their own.

Once more a methodological issue intrudes. I think there were huge differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt, but if there were not, would it be valid to cite the evidence of just these two cultures as revealing the universal mind of the ANE? Could the likenesses derive from the fact that both are economies built upon artificial irrigation systems? Might peripheral, non-irrigation societies be different? Should a really conclusive case for the common mind of the ANE have to have an example from a non-irrigation society? The problem is that we have many fewer texts from such societies.

Whether we like it or not, the closer we come geographically to ancient Israel, the poorer our external sources. I have already referred to the paucity of sources from Palestine, and what is today Jordan is similar. We must turn to Syria for a greater volume of texts. There we find that rich deposits of texts are restricted to just a couple of sites. The early texts from Ebla are largely commercial and of little relevance to this discussion. Texts from Mari were the center of former attempts to interpret Israel in terms of its supposed nomadic roots, but as that fad has passed their continuing relevance for biblical studies lies largely in references to prophecy, which is not the subject of this discussion. Since myths figure prominently in the sources used in the works being discussed, we have to turn to a site that gives us myths: Ugarit on the Syrian coast. Besides many texts in Mesopotamian cuneiform, texts were found at Ugarit where cuneiform had been adapted to write an alphabet, and that alphabet was used to write texts in a West-Semitic language. These texts include a number of myths and stories. Even more relevant is the fact that many of these myths are about the god Baal, well known from the Bible.

The general consensus, on which scholarship has proceeded, has been that Ugaritic is practically equivalent to Canaanite.[22] Therefore these texts have been seen as the crucial background to the OT. While I think that there is an unjustified jump in assuming that the mythology of Baal of Ugarit is necessarily the same as the mythology of Baal of Tyre or as that of Baal of Samaria, for our

---

[21] Hubert Cancik, *Grundzüge der hethitischen und alttestamentlichen Geschichtsschreibung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976).

[22] For a dissenting opinion, see William J. Jobling, "Canaan, Ugarit and the Old Testament: A Study of Relationships" (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 1976).

purposes here there is another problem. There are no accounts of creation from Ugarit. Some scholars have tried to rectify the gap by claiming as creation texts, texts about a different subject,[23] but the gap is real. That means that for study of the biblical creation account, comparisons still have to be made with Mesopotamia or Egypt.

## III. *Creation in the ANE*

If the lack of creation accounts were just a matter of Ugarit we would be justified in claiming accidents of discovery. There are also no Hittite creation accounts. Once again that could be just accidents of discovery, but since many Hittite myths are known,[24] the lack looks a little more interesting.

The premise with which the biblical creation story has been approached has often been that all peoples are naturally interested in origins, and therefore all cultures have creation stories.[25] Is that a valid assumption? Or are we reading our expectations into the ancient world? By putting together various allusions and reference to beginnings in stories about something else, we can give the impression that creation accounts were common in the ANE, but the reality is more complicated. Egyptian accounts tend to be more concerned with the coming into being of the gods than the coming into being of the present universe. Early Mesopotamian accounts tend to be concerned with the separation of heaven and earth and are quite varied and confusing.[26] The creation of

---

[23] Richard J. Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Or* 53 (1984): 183–201; Loren R. Fisher, "Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," *VT* 15 (1965): 313–24; Jakob H. Grønbæk, "Baal's Battle with Yam: A Canaanite Creation Fight," *JSOT* 33 (1985): 27–44.

[24] Harry A. Hoffner Jr., *Hittite Myths*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World 2, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

[25] Walton (*Lost World of Genesis One*, 14–15) sees mythology as primitive science. How do we know whether that is reading our mentality back into the past, the very thing that Walton criticizes? Does the religious importance of the search for origins in the modern world lead us to expect things of the ancient world that simply were not there? Do the scholarly attempts to reconstruct the "view of creation" of this society, or that society, from scraps and vague allusions flow from a false expectation that they must have thought like us and had a developed theory of the origin of the universe? When we then attempt to explain Gen 1 on the basis of "what they must have believed though they did not say it clearly," are we in fantasyland?

[26] Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 169–201, 281–401. See also Joan G. Westenholz, "Heaven and Earth: Asexual Monad and Bisexual Dyad," in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tsvi Abusch*, ed. Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara N. Porter, and David P. Wright (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2010), 293–326. This article deals with the tendency to conceptualize heaven and earth in sexual terms. While also seeing early Sumerian cosmology as involving a sexual union of heaven and earth, Jan van Dijk tries to explain the confusion as arising from the integration of systems from various cities ("Le motif cosmique dans la pensée sumérienne," *AcOr* 28 [1964]: 1–59). For further on the theology of different Sumerian cities, see William W. Hallo, "Enki and the Theology of Eridu," *JAOS* 116 (1996): 231–34. In view of the tendency of some writers to claim that the watery beginnings of Gen 1 simply represent the universal ancient view, it is important to note that many early stories have a solid heaven and earth that was separated at some time. The one allusion to creation in a Hittite text seems to presuppose that model. (See *The Song of Ullikummi*, in Hoffner,

man does occur in some Mesopotamian stories, but there are quite different versions.[27] It is only with the late Babylonian story *Enuma elish* (The Babylonian Creation Epic) that we have something of a coherent creation story.[28] That is why attempts to trace the biblical account to something outside turn particularly to that story. There are major difficulties in the way of that attempt. The main subject of *Enuma elish* is not creation. That is the reading we give it coming from Genesis. The main subject in the Mesopotamian context is the superiority of Marduk, god of Babylon, over all other gods and the prime role of his temple in Babylon and hence of the city of Babylon itself.

All our copies of *Enuma elish* come from the first millennium but, judging from the concepts involved, the likely date of composition is late second millennium.[29] That dating means that for anybody who connects a historical Moses with Genesis, a connection between *Enuma elish* and Gen 1 is implausible. Scholars who discount the historicity of Moses often place a connection between *Enuma elish* and Genesis as being written during the Babylonian exile. Even ignoring the issues of the historicity of Moses, the plausibility of such theories depends on assuming that the biblical author(s) overlooked the main point of the Babylonian story of the establishment of Marduk, his temple, and his city, and wrote a creation story.

## IV. *Walton's Theory on Genesis 1*

Walton, however, is not one who tries to make Gen 1 derivative of *Enuma elish*. Rather he sees Gen 1 as reflective of the general mentality of the ANE. The

---

*Hittite Myths*, 64, which alludes to the cutting apart of heaven and earth with a copper tool.) Note also the evidence that the present heavens and earth, including what was created according to *Enuma elish*, may have been inserted between a now separated original heaven and earth. See Frans Wiggerman, "Mythological Foundations of Nature," in *Natural Phenomena: Their Meaning, Depiction and Description in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Diederick J. W. Meijer, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen Verhandelingen, Afd. Letterkunde, N.R. 152 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1992), 279–306.

[27] The two basic versions are that people spring from the ground like plants and that people are created by a process involving the blood of a slaughtered god. See Giovanni Pettinato, *Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen*, Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1971, 1 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1971).

[28] There are many translations available, e.g., William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:390–402; Wilfred G. Lambert, "Mesopotamian Creation Stories," in *Imagining Creation*, ed. Markham J. Geller and Mineke Schipper (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 15–59; Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 50–133.

[29] Wilfred G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *JTS* 16 (1965): 291; Wilfred G. Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion," in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T. J. Meek*, ed. William Stewart McCullough (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 3–13; Walter Sommerfeld, *Der Aufstieg Marduks* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1982), 174–213; Géza Komoroczy, "The Separation of Sky and Earth," *ActAnt* 21 (1973): 30; Benjamin R. Foster, *Akkadian Literature of the Late Period*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 2 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007), 24–25.

clues to the interpretation of Genesis are therefore to be found in understanding that mentality.

Thus his approach raises a series of important questions. Is a broad conceptual contrast between the modern world or mind and the ancient valid? Walton is critical of people who read modern assumptions back into ancient texts, but has he escaped the trap himself? Does one have to be an expert in the ancient world to read the Bible properly? How can one establish what was the uniform view of the ANE, given the partial and skewed nature of our sources? Walton cites an array of ancient texts, whether in context or not is a matter for further discussion; the more substantive question is whether even ten references over two thousand years and two cultures is enough to establish a uniform mind, especially when citations from outside Mesopotamia and Egypt are rare. I mention ten references, but on some crucial points Walton is more likely to have two than ten. He makes some sweeping claims about the ANE, which can be falsified by contrary examples. This raises the methodological point of whether one contrary instance is enough to disprove a theory. That question becomes more pressing when we keep in mind that we really have comparatively few texts with which to assess an ancient mentality, especially considering the span of time involved.

## 1. *Creation and Function*

Walton has several key positions that require thorough examination. One is that the ANE was not concerned with the nature of material objects in themselves but only with their function.[30] Hence we should not read days in Gen 1 as the day on which a certain item was created but rather as the day on which it was assigned a function.

This is an excellent example of the difficulty we have in putting modern questions to ancient texts. If we exclude the OT, then we lack texts that by self-reflection, dialogue, or polemic tell us what they meant and what their mental processes were. We have texts that tell us that certain things are morally or legally wrong but not texts that tell us that certain things are conceptually or theologically wrong. Is this lack due to the fact that the ancients were not yet philosophically sophisticated enough to address such questions, or does their mentality make our questions meaningless, or is this a reflection of the fact that polytheism cannot clarify without destroying itself? We do not know. Discerning the ANE mind is therefore an exercise in seeking typical patterns of expression.

Certainly we can say that their life and expression had a practical bias, but is that saying they could not concern themselves with the materiality of objects? For example, we cannot imagine an ancient Babylonian saying, "Rocks are solid because they are composed of atoms." Yet does that mean he could not say something equivalent to "Rocks are solid because it hurts when you kick

---

[30] Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 26–27.

one with your toe"? Walton is putting a proposition to the evidence that the evidence is poorly equipped to answer. I can give two instances, which, it seems to me, point to an ability to conceptualize existence without function. One is the test that was put to the god Marduk where he had to show the ability to destroy a constellation and then recreate it, both by simply speaking.[31] Surely the point here is the existence of the constellation rather than its function. The second is the drunken competition between the gods Ninmah and Enki where the test is whether one can create a human so deformed or restricted that the other cannot assign a role to that specimen of humanity.[32] Surely here there is a conceptual distinction between existence and function. That is not to say they engaged in philosophical discussions about the nature of existence, but what societies typically do and what they are capable of doing are two different issues. Certainly they usually did not think of bare existence, but once we have exceptions Walton's argument is crucially weakened. Why could not a biblical author also be an exception?

This question is important because Walton wants to narrow the gap between the Bible and the surrounding cultures. He affirms that he believes God is creator but that is not to be found in Gen 1. Genesis 1, just like pagan accounts, shows God shaping already existing material. Part of his argument concerns the meaning and usage of the Hebrew word we translate as "create." That is an argument internal to the biblical text and, while I find it unpersuasive, I will not go into it because my concern is use of ANE evidence. Walton likes to describe certain scholars as "arguing against the grain of the text." I think it is an apt metaphor for some that he criticizes, but I wonder if it sometimes applies also to him. The Bible does seem to be saying that God was bringing new things into existence.

## 2. *Creation of Functions*

Consistent with Walton's interpretation of the biblical account as being about function and not existence, he takes each of the days as being the establishment of crucial functions and not the creation of new things. In this discussion he comes up against the above-mentioned fact that there is not a multitude of creation stories to quote from. Since there are allusions to creation in a number of texts, he can pick out a particular statement from this or that text. The result of this approach is that the reader is not forced to wrestle with why the biblical text gives an account that works systematically through the various parts of creation and has creation of the cosmos as its focus, rather than creation of the gods, kingship among the gods, or some other emphasis where change in the world of the gods is central rather than change in the material world.

---

[31] *Enuma elish* IV, 19–26.

[32] *Enki and Ninmah*, in Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 1:517–18; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once ... Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 158–66.

The functions he sees as created on the various days,[33] have a very abstract nature. Day 1 is about time, day 2 the architectural design of cosmic geography, day 3 fecundity. If we remember that Gen 1 is supposed to conform to the ancient mind, which is claimed to be incapable of thinking of existence apart from function, it is an interesting paradox that the days are really about such abstract concepts. Walton has to do this because only at that abstract level can he find parallels to the biblical text.

He misses a crucial aspect of many of the Mesopotamian stories. Some of the Sumerian ones are concerned to show that Sumerian culture and society were established in full and developed form by the gods. As the *Sumerian King List* puts it, "kingship descended from heaven."[34] An even more elaborate form of this is found in a story where almost a hundred *ME,* which are listed as the crucial institutions and experiences of Sumerian society, are provided by the gods for human society.[35] In the myths of Ninurta, that god is responsible for establishing the irrigation system.[36] In trying to read the biblical account in terms of these accounts Walton obscures a crucial difference. In making the institutions of society the gifts of the gods, the Sumerians were giving a divine sanction to the form of their contemporary society. The biblical text shows that the forms of society develop in history. That does not mean societal forms are necessarily wrong, but it does mean that they do not have divine sanction. To put it concretely: one may live in a city but one does not have to live in a city; one may be a nomadic herder but one does not have to be a nomadic herder. I suspect that this is connected to the fact that the Bible alone in ANE texts gives a prehistory of its people. For the other societies, the importance of divine approval of their developed form meant that prehistory had to be suppressed.

Walton's reading of the creation story in terms of the establishment of functions is directed towards a conclusion. The account of Gen 1 is not an account of absolute creation but an account of the shaping of the cosmos into a temple from which God will rule as king. That is why it was important for him to argue that the statements of things accomplished on the individual days were statements of function and not of coming into existence.

## 3. *Creation as the Temple of God's Rest*

Once again appeal to the uniform mind of the ANE is crucial in establishing this case. Walton argues that God is said to rest at the completion of creation

---

[33] Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology,* 152–78.

[34] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List,* Assyriological Studies 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 71.

[35] Gertrud Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos "Inanna und Enki" unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Liste der me,* Studia Pohl 10 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1973).

[36] Claus Wilcke, "Vom altorientalischen Blick zurück auf die Anfänge," in *Anfang und Ursprung: Die Frage nach dem Ersten in Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaft,* ed. Emil Angehrn (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 10–17.

and that would be universally understood as meaning he entered into a temple because gods rest only in temples. In developing this case he argues that temples were seen as the dwelling houses of the gods, from which they exercised their rule over the world.

My previous discussion of limitations of evidence and methodology becomes very relevant at this point. Walton is undoubtedly correct in saying that temples were depicted as dwellings of gods. Yet I can cite at least one case of a god who rested outside of a temple. In the story of Inanna and Shakaletuda, the goddess Inanna became tired and lay down to sleep under a Euphrates poplar, with the consequence that a human raped her.[37] Of course it could be argued that, as the unfortunate consequences showed, this was not the normal: it is an exception that proves the rule. That of course raises the question of what evidence we have for the "normal." There is a very early Sumerian hymn where a temple is called a "reposeful house."[38] Walton's main evidence, however, comes from *Enuma elish*. There the god Ea builds a temple on the defeated Apsu and rests in it.[39] After Marduk's victory over Tiamat and Marduk's proclamation as king of the gods, his temple, Esagil, is built in Babylon. It is then said that when the gods come down from heaven and up from the *apsû*[40] to meet at Marduk's temple, they will be able to rest there. Thus, gods rest in temples but not in their own temple.[41] The presupposition seems to be that the gods normally dwelt in heaven or the *apsû*.[42] If so, Walton's thesis has met a significant obstacle. It is

---

[37] Konrad Volk, *Inanna und Šukaletuda: Zur historisch-politischen Deutung eines sumerischen Literaturwerkes*, SANTAG Arbeiten und Untersuchungen zur Keilschriftkunde 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995).

[38] Walton quotes from the "Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature" translation of the *Kesh Temple Hymn*, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section4/tr4802.htm. This translation notes that the section from which he quotes is an addition found in one particular manuscript. An older publication of the hymn lists at least six manuscripts that are sufficiently preserved for comparison. See Gene B. Gragg, "The Keš Temple Hymn," in *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns*, ed. Åke W. Sjöberg and Eugen Bergmann, Texts from Cuneiform Sources 3 (Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1969), 165–66. From the fact that Gragg does not mention the additional section, I would conclude that the manuscript containing it was not recognized at the time of his publication. I do not know how many more copies of the hymn were discovered after Gragg wrote. Yet just on available evidence, it is one manuscript of the hymn with the significant phrase against at least six without. And this is just one hymn. That is hardly evidence for a universal ancient mind.

[39] *Enuma elish* I, 75.

[40] This is generally the term for the water under the earth.

[41] *Enuma elish* V, 125–28

[42] Walton (*Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 102) quotes a statement from Victor Hurowitz where Hurowitz is making the point that the names of temples in *Enuma elish* are also cosmic regions (*I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in the Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings*, JSOTSup 115 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992], 333). That of course fits neatly with the fact that gods dwell in temples and elsewhere. However, I do not think Walton realizes the complexity of the Mesopotamian view or what that complexity does to his theory. His theory makes a straight equation between the pagan god's earthly temple and the cosmos as the biblical God's temple. That straight equation ignores the fact that pagan gods have multiple locations. This bias towards focus on the earthly temple also shows in his quoting the theory that

clear that the meeting which is being spoken about is the meeting of gods at the Babylonian New Year Festival. Yet at that festival the images of gods, principally that of Nabû, were brought from their temples in other cities. Is *Enuma elish* effectively claiming that only Marduk has a permanent position on earth and the other gods lived elsewhere? It would contradict the normal process of care and feeding of the gods in their earthly houses, but such contradictions are common. Whatever the answer to such elusive questions, this text does not support Walton's thesis that mention of a god resting necessitates a temple, since the gods here do not rest in their own temples. Walton also refers to the statement that the Egyptian god Ptah rested after making the gods and other things.[43] However, his rest is not said to be in a temple.

### 4. *A Complex Example*

If one selects certain passages from ancient texts it is possible to conclude that the ancients had rather simple, even naive, views on certain subjects. An example would be what is being discussed in this context: gods live in earthly temples. Another would be the one commonly used to illustrate the scientific naiveté of the ancient world: they believed in a three-story universe. It is not hard to find "proof-texts" for such claims. The texts cited as "proofs," however, existed alongside other texts that refuse to fit into any simple mold. If there was a uniform ancient mind, then all texts should fit into one neat system. They simply do not. My concern is that biblical scholars who are intent on finding a way to explain the Bible as a product of its time are hindering the difficult task of understanding these ancient cultures on their own terms.

A good example of the difficulties to be overcome in understanding the "ANE mind" is the Hittite *Song of Ullikummi*.[44] In this story Ullikummi is a stone

---

the point of the Babylonian New Year Festival was the reinstallation of the god in the temple, as though it was the only explanation (*Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 119). In reality the texts do not tell us the reason for the festival, and there are a number of scholarly theories. See Julye Bidmead, *The* Akītu *Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia*, Georgias Dissertations, Near Eastern Studies 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Georgias, 2002); Karel van der Toorn, "The Babylonian New Year Festival: New Insights from the Cuneiform Texts and Their Bearing on Old Testament Study," in *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989*, ed. John A. Emerton, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 331–44; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina Šulmi Īrub: Die kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozesson in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr. (*Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994); Jeremy A. Black, "The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon: 'Taking Bel by the Hand' and a Cultic Picnic," *Religion* 11 (1981): 39–59.

[43] Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 113. For a translation of the "Memphite Theology," see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 1:55. Note also that translations of the crucial phrase vary and Lichtheim is one who translates that Ptah "was satisfied" rather than "rested."

[44] Hans G. Güterbock, "The Song of Ullikummu: Revised Text of the Hittite Version of a Hurrian Myth," *JCS* 5 (1951): 135–61; 6 (1952): 8–42; Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 55–65; Franca Pecchioli Daddi and Anna M. Polvani, *La mitologia ittita*, Testi del Vicino Oriente antico 4.1 (Brescia: Paidea, 1990), 142–62.

monster born of the mating of the god Kumarbi and a large rock. The purpose of the making of the monster is to defeat the current king of the gods, Tessub. The purpose of Ullikummi is given by the father Kumarbi as "Let him go up to heaven to kingship. Let him suppress the fine city of Kummiya. Let him strike Tessub.... Let him scatter the gods down from heaven like birds."[45] Ullikummi is described as growing up straight out of the water, which must be the Mediterranean Sea on the basis of geographical indications in the text. It is likely therefore that he is envisioned as butting against the sky and thus disturbing the gods. The description of that event is badly broken but enough remains, when combined with Kumarbi's statement of purpose, to draw the reasonable conclusion that that is what happened.[46] If the result of this shaking was that the gods fell down from heaven, as the text states, then a reasonable conclusion is that the gods were seen as being in heaven. There would be many other references from ANE texts to support the location of the gods in heaven.

Yet note that Kumarbi's purpose is also stated as being directed against Kummiya, which was the city in which Tessub had his temple. The exact location of Kummiya is uncertain, but it was certainly not on the Mediterranean coast. In the context immediately following where Ullikummi impacted the heavens, he is described as standing at the gate of Kummiya. We might understand how a stone colossus rising out of the Mediterranean could be thought to impact the heavens, but how is it thought to impact also an inland city? What sort of concept of space is involved? For our purposes here we have to ask about the location of the gods. Are they in heaven? The text appears to answer in the affirmative because they fall down from heaven. Are they in Kummiya? Once again the text appears to answer in the affirmative because Ullikummi's standing at the gate of Kummiya affects the gods of that city. Thus questions of spatial understanding and of the location of the gods both arise. A simple resolution of both questions would be to say that the earthly temple is conceptualized as being in heaven. That fits this text and others, but it destroys completely all modern claims that the ancients had a simple three-story conception of the universe.

The challenges of the Song of Ullikummi do not end there. Ullikummi was placed on the shoulder of a figure, Ubelluri, who is described as if of human form. Ulikummi grew up through and out of the waters from there. Heaven-and-earth had been formerly built upon Ubelluri and had been cut apart with a copper cutting tool.

Picture then the cosmology involved. There is a figure, presumably a giant, upon which heaven-and-earth stands. Heaven and earth were once together as a solid mass but were cut apart. Since Ullikummi grows from the shoulder of Ubelluri, then Ubelluri presumably stands in the water. On what does Ubelluri stand? However one answers these questions, this is not a simple three-story cosmology. We may make pronouncements about our understanding of the

---

[45] Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 58.
[46] Compare Hoffner's translation (ibid., 62) with Güterbock's ("Song of Ullikummu" [1952], 19).

"ancient mind," but when one grapples with ancient texts it becomes obvious that there are parts of their conceptual world that we do not understand.

The Song of Ullikummi is one of a group of myths in the Hittite language in which the principal gods, such as Kumarbi and Tessub, are Hurrian.[47] The Hittites lived in central Anatolia and spoke an Indo-European language.[48] Since the principal gods in these myths are Hurrian and the place names mentioned are in southern Anatolia and further east, it has often been claimed that these myths are translations from Hurrian. However, Mesopotamian gods such as Anu and Ea play leading roles and many of the themes have affinities with Hittite themes. Hence Pecchioli Daddi and Polvani[49] suggest that elements from various quarters have been combined by Hittite scribes to form these myths. Furthermore there are clear affinities of these myths to Greek myths.[50]

What this example shows is that the stories involving Kumarbi have every right to be considered as part of the ANE. Whoever wrote them, the Mesopotamian and Hurrian influences are clear. Yet their cosmology has elements that do not remind us of anything else in the ANE but rather of the Greek world. In placing the gods both in heaven and in temples the text fits with the polytheistic cultures of the ANE. Yet it is very difficult to understand how they conceived that dual location of the gods and how they conceived the structure of the universe. What is very clear is that nobody coming out of the world of this mythology would think that a god could rest only in a temple or that the universe was a simple three-story structure.[51] Walton has to create a falsely simplistic model of a conceptually very different and difficult world in order to claim that in the ANE all believed the same simple things.

There is a mystery involved in the description of the gods of surrounding polytheist nations. As dwelling place and as place to which humans can direct offerings and communications, the earthly temple plays the major role. However, when the god is depicted in stories as acting, the god moves from place to place. He does not just sit in his "office" and give orders. I suspect that this idea came out of the belief that gods have an important connection with various aspects of the world. The sun god's connection with the sun is a good example. The god is conceptualized as moving as the sun moves. Yet the sun god also has residence

---

[47] The Hurrians were a people speaking a language that was neither Indo-European nor Semitic. They are attested in the second millennium BC in a wide area encompassing parts of Anatolia, Syria, and northern Mesopotamia. The language is related to the Urartean language of eastern Anatolia in the first millennium BC. For background and history, see Gernot Wilhelm, *Grundzüge der Geschichte und Kultur der Hurriter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

[48] For a history, see Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[49] Pecchioli Daddi and Polvani, *La mitologia ittita*, 19–21.

[50] Hans G. Güterbock, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myths: Oriental Forerunners to Hesiod," *AJA* 52 (1948): 123–34.

[51] For other problems with the common claim of a simple three-story universe, see my "Cosmology in Historical Context," *WTJ* 68 (2006): 283–93.

in various temples. In short, there is a strong tendency both to merge the god with the aspect he rules and to distinguish the two. Further complicating the situation is the fact that the same god can have multiple temples. Thus Shamash has temples at Larsa and Sippar, and the Ishtars of Nineveh and Arbela can be listed as though they are separate deities.[52]

I suspect that these "confusions" are integral to the very nature of polytheism. In order for humans to be able to acquire leverage with the god, there must be an earthly residence to be built and provisioned.[53] Yet in order for the god to have a function worthy of respect, that god has to be conceptualized as acting and so he acts in some mysterious way as part, or in part, of the cosmos.

## 5. *Pitfalls of Comparative Studies*

While Walton's appeal to universal views sets him apart from many others engaged in trying to explain the Bible by comparison to surrounding cultures, the problems he encounters and the questionable conclusions reflect more general difficulties. When one reconstructs how Walton reached his theory of Gen 1 being about how God was installed in his creation temple from which he would rule the universe he had created, and then based that upon the supposed universal view of the ANE, it comes out something like this: Walton has taken the biblical picture of God as king ruling his creation. Contrary to his attempt to move the biblical conception closer to that of surrounding nations, the biblical God is distinct from the creation. Hence the biblical God can be viewed as existing apart from the world and ruling it. Walton then places that point of rule within the cosmos conceived as a temple. He further claims that that fits the universal mind of the ANE. The problem is that the ANE mind has a more complicated picture. The god both lives in a temple and in an aspect of the cosmos. How they put those two conceptions together we do not know because they never attempt to explain it. Maybe they could not explain it.

A recurrent phenomenon in ANE studies is the interpretation of new texts or phenomena in terms of what is already known. That is a natural habit of the human mind and, so long as the tendency is recognized, something which can be accommodated. In many instances the known, which forms the precondition for interpretation of the unknown, is biblical. That means we constantly have to ask whether we are seeing a real "parallel" in something outside the Bible or a product of interpretation. This problem applies just as much to attempts to "prove" that the Bible is historically accurate as attempts to "prove" that

---

[52] Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13–14.

[53] Yet even in this general statement one must allow for exceptions. There are gods who are regarded as having a permanent position in the Underworld. For the sake of such gods offerings were directed into the ground (O. R. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 29–30). Once again this goes against the idea that a god always lived in a temple.

the Bible is a typical product of its time. The tendency to read the non-biblical text in terms of the Bible is particularly strong when we are sure, for whatever reason, that there must be comparable evidence outside of the biblical text. Effectively Walton has made his description of the surrounding culture more like the biblical one than it actually was.

There is the further problem of whether he has enough examples to prove that anybody with the mind of the time, which the biblical writers are claimed to have had, would have jumped from the statement that God rested to the conclusion that the author must be talking about the creation of a temple. The weakness of evidence on that crucial point is obscured by bringing in the abundant evidence that pagan gods lived, in some respects, in houses made by men. However, we must not confuse two distinct questions. What is the evidence of a universal view that mention of a god resting implies a temple? It is limited to a passing reference in one version of one early hymn, multiple references in an idiosyncratic text where the temple in question is not necessarily the god's own temple, and a reference where there is no mention of a temple. Against that is one doubtfully relevant counter-example. Surely this is insufficient evidence for such a sweeping claim.

6. *The Number Seven*

Walton makes a point of the fact that the number seven plays a significant role in texts related to temple building. He cites two cases where that number appears in connection with temple building, this time from two different cultures. One case is from the most detailed description of temple building that we have from the ANE, the cylinders of Gudea, ruler of the Sumerian city of Lagash around the end of the third millennium BC. Though this is the most elaborate description of temple building we possess, very little space is devoted to the actual building phase. More space is given to the god's instructions to build the temple, the acquiring of materials, the consecration of the building, and the accompanying celebrations. It is in connection with the last that seven days appears, specifically as the period that peace reigned in the city, which by implication would be the period of the celebration of the building when the gods were treated to a great feast, which humans also enjoyed.[54]

The second case occurs as part of the Ugaritic myth of Baal. We are told in connection with building a temple for Baal that after the precious materials had been assembled, fire raged in the accumulated material for seven days, at the end of which the temple was revealed in magnificent completion.[55]

_____

[54] For translation of Gudea Cylinder B, xvii, 18–21, see Dietz O. Edzard, *Gudea and His Dynasty*, The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia 3/1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 98; E. Jan Wilson, *The Cylinders of Gudea: Transliteration, Translation and Index*, AOAT 244 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1996), 180–81.

[55] Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 1:261; Mark M. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, VTSup 114 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 593–94 (text), 615–18 (discussion).

Once again the question arises of whether this is adequate evidence of the universal ANE mind. Strictly speaking, the seven days of Gudea are not days of building but days of celebration. Walton can somewhat nullify the force of that fact by claiming that the biblical text is not about the building of the cosmos but about the devotion of various parts of it to functions. Nevertheless the seven days with Gudea appear to be after the building is fully equipped and occupied by its divine householders. It is not as though the seven days are a major theme of the text: they occur in one line referring to what happens in the city during the period of celebration, rather than what happens in the temple. The building of the temple is the theme of an inscription on a statue of Gudea, and once more the seven days appear in connection to what happened in society rather than with the temple.[56] No other Mesopotamian temple building text mentions seven days. The inscriptions of Gudea are not of a style that points to cultic use.[57]

Actually the Baal text appears more significant because the seven days were connected this time to the formation of the temple. Once it was created by this miraculous means, Baal would have occupied it. Yet if we exclude the Gudea text as isolated and not really relevant, is this one instance in a Ugaritic text sufficient evidence of the universal ANE mind? There are many cases of the use of seven as a significant number throughout the ANE.[58] The connection of those uses of seven to the biblical usages is a difficult question. The seven days in the Baal text may belong to this general tendency for seven days to appear as a significant period in ANE texts, rather than to a specific connection to temple building. Once again this is insufficient evidence of a general ANE mentality.

Walton gives little attention to the biblical texts, which seem to give God an alternate throne room. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple goes out of its way to place God in heaven (1 Kgs 8:22–53). If there is one topic on which the biblical and the ANE view of the temple come together, it is preservation from defilement. Is Walton to have us believe that God makes this fallen and defiled creation his throne room?

### 7. *The Conceptual Background to God's Rule*

Walton tries to link his thesis of God now dwelling within the cosmos as his temple and ruling the universe with some ANE concepts. Since it is a case of

---

[56] Statue B vii 29–33; Edzard, *Gudea and His Dynasty*, 36; Lucien-Jean Bord and Remo Mugnaioni, *Les statues épigraphes de Gudea: Musée du Louvre* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 2002), 37.

[57] For a case that the cylinder inscriptions of Gudea were the beginning of a genre of Sumerian hymns concerned with the building and dedication of temples and sacred objects, see Jacob Klein, "Building and Dedicatory Hymns in Sumerian Literature," *ASJ* 11 (1989): 27–67. None of these later hymns mentions seven days.

[58] For example, seven-day feasts occur in connection with festivals in the Syrian city of Emar that have nothing to do with temple building (Daniel Fleming, "The Emar Festivals: City Unity and Syrian Identity under Hittite Hegemony," in *Emar: The History, Religion and Culture of a Syrian Town in the Late Bronze Age*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas [Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1996], 90–91).

concepts and not a concrete particular, the probability that the concept will be widely represented in texts is far greater. However, the probability that the concept will be closely linked to the conceptual world of a particular culture is also far greater. There is the additional complication that the culture in question is a polytheistic one. All cultures probably have some notion of what it is that maintains order in the universe and the nature of that order. What Walton effectively does is to take the ordering notions of quite separate cultures and make them the common concept, which can then be used to argue that the Bible reflects the common mind of the ANE.

In Sumerian culture that ordering notion is *ME*. There have been a number of attempts to conceptualize what the Sumerians meant. The quest may not be helped by the fact that there were Akkadian translations, but it may be that Akkadian speakers were trying to fit the concept of *ME* to their own different conceptual structure. The complication with *ME* is that it can refer to quite different things. Some are very concrete such as the insignia that mark ruling gods and kings. Some are typical experiences of ancient humanity such as "destruction of cities and lamentation." Others are offices such as "kingship." Various gods bestow the *ME* on other gods, kings, cities, or temples. The land of Sumer can bestow them on its people. The *ME* can be destroyed and remade. Modern attempts to understand the concept essentially range from seeing them as a divine force pantheistically present within parts of the creation, to seeing them as a "prescription" that shapes that particular aspect of being, to seeing them as the "essence" of something.[59] While *ME* are never deified, they are closely connected with the gods and bestowed by the gods. The fact that the distinctive and defining aspects of Sumerian society are named and given, in some mysterious sense, by the gods may correlate with the tendency to give developed Sumerian society divine sanction. As both concrete things and the "essence" of abstract concepts, they may fit the way gods are both individual personalities and the physical entities they control.

With respect to Akkadian texts, Walton sees the background he needs in the custom of the gods "decreeing the destinies" of lands and rulers. This custom is particularly useful for his theory of God ruling from within the cosmos as his temple, in that in the Babylonian New Year Festival the decreeing is done by the gods in the temple of Marduk at Babylon. Yet closer attention to that festival raises questions. The decreeing is done once per year. It is carried out, not in

---

[59] Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos "Inanna und Enki"*; Yvonne Rosengarten, *Sumer et le sacré: Le jeu des* Prescriptions (me), *des dieux et des destins* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1977); Antoine Cavigneaux, "L'essence divine," *JCS* 30 (1978): 177–85. Jean-Jacques Glassner argues that the list of the *ME* in the myth *Inanna und Enki* are all things connected to Inanna and thus in some sense represent her "essence" ("Inanna et les Me," in *Nippur at the Centennial*, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14 [Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1992], 55–86). Walton's interpretation of *ME* as a control attribute (*Lost World of Genesis One*, 64) is another case of obscuring the complexities of a very different thought system to make it fit his version of the biblical.

the cella of the god Marduk, but in a temple courtyard,[60] probably because the gathering of the gods from other cities is crucial to the ceremony and that gathering is accommodated in the courtyard. The natural inference is that it is not the temple that is so crucial to the decreeing but the gathering of the gods. This understanding is reinforced by *Enuma elish* because in that story the gathering of the gods is crucial for their decreeing Marduk's destiny.[61] Thus polytheism, with its council of major gods, is the underlying concept. That is why it occurs once a year at the great festival because then the gods come together. Of course Walton could argue that the biblical version would be shorn of these polytheistic elements. However, his particular thesis is that there is such a uniform conceptual background that Genesis readers would immediately know that the description implies that God has entered his temple within creation, from which he will rule the heavens and the earth. If decreeing the destinies is intrinsically linked with the gathering of the gods, and the Bible excludes such a thing, how will the readers know they now have to move to a polytheistic mentality to interpret the text?

The other concept posited as background is Egyptian *maat*. While clearly *maat* is connected with concepts of order, it is very far from any idea of God establishing order through his rule. Rather *maat* points to an underlying order of relationship and reciprocity, "connective justice": the order that exists in society because the whole is bound into a set of mutual obligations, where right secures its own reward and is also reinforced by the gods because the gods belong to that same order.[62] Thus it is not uniquely linked to temples.

Just to take the two extremes, it is clear that the Egyptian concept is very different from the Sumerian. It is hard to believe that Walton obtained his idea of God ruling in the temple of the cosmos by seeing what is overwhelmingly similar in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian conceptual systems. Rather he has clearly sought a background for his version of the Bible in the surrounding cultures, and to do so he has to suppress what is unique and distinctive in each culture.

## V. *The Application of Walton's Method to the Composition of Scripture*

The methodology developed by Walton of appeal to the universal mind of the ANE is adapted and developed in combination with D. Brent Sandy into an appeal to universal practice with reference to Scripture. The result is a significant modification of the evangelical doctrine of Scripture.

---

[60] Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina Šulmi Īrub*, 57–60.

[61] *Enuma elish* III, 129–38. Note that this happens before the temple is built for Marduk.

[62] The definitive treatment is Jan Assmann, *Maat: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995). The concept arises pervasively in the same author's *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

1. *Authorship*

Walton and Sandy claim that the notion of individual authorship was un-
known in the ANE.[63] Later that assertion is modified to the claim that it was
not significant.[64] They say that the individual names and figures connected with
various biblical books played a significant role in the tradition that crystallized
in the book connected to that figure but much material was added later. They
are clearly making an attempt to cling to the historicity of major events and
figures but not wanting any insistence on details. One of the major advantages
they see in this view is that it eliminates arguments about errors and contradic-
tions in details.[65] So one can see a parallel with the treatment of creation. A
position with obvious apologetic advantages has been adopted on the basis of
appeal to "universal" ancient practice. Of course they are aware that it is hard
to argue lack of claimed authorship for parts of the Bible, such as the letters
of Paul. However, their direction becomes obvious in the way they treat those
letters. Mentions of co-writers and scribes of the letters are developed in the
direction of communal authorship.[66]

Walton and Sandy appeal to the existence of variants at different levels: the
different OT text traditions quoted in the NT, the variants between gospels,
later manuscript variations. If these variations did not worry the NT authors
or the early church, why should they worry us?[67] Surely this argument ignores
the point they have been making about the realities of the times. Were people
of Jesus' day or in the early church in a position to compare multiple versions
and decide on the "best" one? In a predominately oral culture without printing
presses, texts were rare and expensive. The people used what they had and God
was pleased to bless.

Tensions are obvious in the positions taken by Walton and Sandy; whether
these are tensions between authors or within an author is unclear. Saying that
the biblical text was conforming to ancient practice opens the door to claims
of pseudepigraphy. The response is confused.[68] Affirming that the people who

---

[63] Walton and Sandy, *Lost World of Scripture*, 25.

[64] "The concepts of 'authors' or 'books' was largely unknown, or at least less significant" (ibid.,
298).

[65] Ibid., 48. While they insist that we should not impose modern assumptions on the biblical
text, in accepting the reality of the errors and problems in the text that the critics find, they are, in
many cases, accepting the imposition of modern assumptions upon the text. See the elaboration
of this point in my *Sources and Authors: Assumptions in the Study of Hebrew Bible Narrative*, Perspectives
on Hebrew Scriptures and Its Contexts 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011).

[66] Walton and Sandy, *Lost World of Scripture*, 237–41.

[67] Ibid., 143–51, 180. In view of all the scholarship that has gone into textual criticism, it is surpris-
ing that they make no attempt to distinguish obvious scribal errors from less explicable variation. I
suspect it is because they want to move away from the text itself to what they think is behind it.

[68] Note the refusal to affirm the authorship of 2 Peter (ibid., 259n). Saying that we want to
take seriously the claims of the author raises an issue with 2 Peter because the author claims to
be an eyewitness of Jesus. There is an analogous problem with prophecy after the event, which

stood at the origin of the traditions that led to the various books were real historical figures does not clarify how much of the books is historically accurate. Walton and Sandy affirm the historicity of key biblical characters. Since the intent of the writer is important in this method of interpretation, they claim that the biblical text means to affirm the real existence of its characters. There are a number of cases in ANE studies where it has been claimed that real people have had fictitious novels written about them.[69] Surely one could claim the same for the Bible, based on the Walton and Sandy methodology.[70]

2. *The Disunity of the Bible*

In arguing for a uniform ancient world Walton and Sandy do not distinguish periods in ancient history. I suspect that they see the modern world as so obviously different to anything prior that there is no need to make distinctions between ancient periods. That should imply that OT writers had the same views as NT writers. On that point, however, they follow the recent tendency to argue that the NT used the OT contrary to its original meaning and intent. Logically this concession, that the ancient mind was not so universal, threatens their thesis.

They claim that the NT interpretation of the writings of the prophets may introduce a meaning different from the original meaning of the prophecy. This claim is put forward on the basis that the apostles had their own authority.[71] Such an approach effectively removes any prospect of using NT use of the OT as a guide for interpretation.[72] I think the apostles would be surprised to learn that their interpretations were a new theology. It looks like a desperate attempt to save the Walton and Sandy approach to the OT from criticism on the basis of the NT, but I suspect that it arises from a basic presupposition I will discuss below.

3. *The Growth of the Biblical Text*

The depiction of the biblical text as originating by a process of accretion until the community granted that text canonical status, and even continuing

---

Walton and Sandy are happy to accept (ibid., 231–32). In Isaiah, one of the books they are happy to see grow by accretion, God's ability to predict the future is affirmed as one of the things that distinguishes him from pagan gods. See my *Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 200–223. In the discussion of Daniel (*Lost World of Scripture*, 305) Walton and Sandy appear to be saying that, as long as Daniel started the tradition, attribution of later material to him would not be pseudepigraphy.

[69] E.g., Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

[70] Having asserted the historical reality of Abraham, Moses, and David, Walton and Sandy appear to hesitate on Noah (*Lost World of Scripture*, 211–12). I suspect that the less than clear discussion is saying that Noah was real but the flood may not be.

[71] Ibid., 229.

[72] If followed consistently it would mean the end of the discipline of Biblical Theology because the NT understanding could not be seen as a development upon an OT understanding.

to grow after that point,[73] will be familiar to all who work in the biblical field. It is the standard model of biblical formation in critical scholarship. Walton and Sandy are dismissive of particular forms of that model, such as the old Documentary Hypothesis and its offshoots; nevertheless, their own thesis is of that sort. Yet their work contains a significant admission. It is that we have no real idea of the mode of composition of the biblical text.[74]

### 4.  *A Simple but Serious Error*

Reigning theories are basically theoretical constructs. We simply do not have all the postulated proto-texts and documents. The power of theoretical constructs in this area is the likely cause of a major factual error in the work of Walton and Sandy. They claim that the ANE had no concept of authorship. That used to be said about Mesopotamia but is now known to be wrong. A cuneiform tablet of purported authors of various texts was published years ago.[75] Many other cases are known.[76]

### 5.  *Comparative Studies Bite Back*

One of the dangers in comparative studies is that the scholarly perception of the material used for comparison may change as more data become available. As with the claim that authorship was unknown or insignificant in the ANE, one can recognize other appeals to past views. The comparative studies model is of a text growing by accretion as the result of named figures and

---

[73] Surprisingly Walton and Sandy raise the growth of the Pharisaic tradition as a comparable model to theirs (*Lost World of Scripture*, 34) without seeming to realize that it creates a problem considering the NT criticism of Pharisaic tradition. One might have also expected some reflection on the debate between Protestants and Catholics over the relative priority of Scripture and church. Their position, that the Bible grows until the community recognizes it (ibid., 68), and even after that, fits better with traditional Catholicism than with evangelicalism.

[74] Ibid., 187.

[75] Wilfred G. Lambert, "Ancestors, Authors and Canonicity," *JCS* 11 (1957): 1–14. The fact that we might be skeptical about many of the purported authors makes no difference. One does not make false ascriptions of authorship in a society without the notion of authorship.

[76] For other Mesopotamian works with named authors, see Markham J. Geller, "Astronomy and Authorship," *BSOAS* 53 (1990): 209–13; Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*, 179; William W. Hallo, "New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature," *IEJ* 12 (1962): 14–16; William W. Hallo, "On the Antiquity of Sumerian Literature," *JAOS* 83 (1963): 174–75; Wilfred G. Lambert, "The Gula Hymn of Bullutsa-rabi," *Or* 36 (1967): 105–32; Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005), 19. Many works of the Egyptian scribal curriculum were connected with an author, e.g., The Instruction of Hardjedef (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:58), The Instruction of Ptahhotep (ibid., 61–62), Instruction of Amenemhet I (ibid., 135–36), Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb (ibid., 145–46), The Satire on the Trades (ibid., 184–85). For a Hittite text with an author, see Gary Beckman, "The Anatolian Myth of Illuyanka," *JANESCU* 14 (1982): 11–25; and Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 11. For named authors to Hittite magical texts, see Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion*, 44.

very many unknown hands until it was finally canonized by the community. That is not the image that we have of ANE literary texts.[77] Once again our best evidence comes from Mesopotamia. As mentioned above, literary works were linked to the scribal curriculum. Already during the second millennium there was a tendency to standardization of the text of these works, and that tendency became more dominant in the first millennium.[78] Various works were mined and utilized to produce new literary compositions. For example, at some point various Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh were utilized in forming the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic.[79] However, this looks like an individual creative endeavor rather than a work of gradual growth. It has been plausibly argued that recitation and memorization played a key role in the use of these texts in education. The texts were also part of the shaping and enculturation of the literate elite of society. Both the difficulty in reading the script and the need to enculturate made oral learning and memorization very important. Walton and Sandy complain that we tend to see the biblical world as like our world when in reality it was dominantly an oral culture. Their point is valid but what they draw from it is incorrect. A culture of scribal training and enculturation by memorizing texts needs written texts as a base, and thus a tendency to stabilize the text was the actual consequence.

No one is claiming any idea of formal canonization of texts outside of Israel. Rather the oral domination of learning was what tended to stabilize texts. Whether the whole picture we develop of Mesopotamian literary history can be applied to Israel is disputable. If the biblical text is seen as the Word of God then that of itself would canonize the text. The difference in economic and political structure might produce a lesser role for scribes and scribal education in Israel. However, Walton and Sandy are building everything on the "uniform" surrounding practice, and that makes it harder for them to claim Israel was exceptional.

In their appeal to ancient practices and genre of texts there is a huge omission. The clearest case of an overlap between OT stories and external texts is the flood story. The clearest case of overlap in the form of texts is in the relationship of biblical covenants and ANE treaties.[80] For this discussion the significant thing

---

[77] For a summary, see Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 17–46 (Mesopotamia), 63–90 (Egypt). Foster denies that there is any evidence of a prior oral phase to Mesopotamian mythology (*Akkadian Literature of the Late Period*, 49). John Baines denies the existence of Egyptian oral epic ("Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society," *Man* 18 [1983]: 588).

[78] Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*, 51.

[79] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

[80] When this relationship was first recognized, the available data created the impression that differences in the form of a treaty reflected its time of composition, and this conclusion was used to date biblical texts. As more texts became available it became clear that different cultures were responsible for the differences. See my *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, JSOTSup 407 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

about the covenant-treaty form is that the text is held to be unchangeable.[81] If we couple that fact with the biblical warnings against changing the text, we then have a counter model to the one proposed by Walton and Sandy. It has better claim to being based on external evidence of the time, and it has the support of statements within the biblical text.

## VI. *Further Reflection*

In summary I am not impressed by the whole approach outlined above. There is no recognition of the difficulty of discerning a uniform mind of the ANE. Individual extra-biblical texts are turned into representations of the whole huge chronological and cultural span. Even more striking are claims that are simply false.

We might read works of Walton and Sandy as an attempt to remove hindrances to the acceptance of the biblical text. Certainly Walton and Sandy present that possibility as one of the advantages of their method. However, I think there is another significant factor. Walton indicates quite openly that he sees the approach of Immanuel Kant as what is needed today.[82] A lot of his thesis becomes more understandable in the light of that admission.

Kant has a religious dimension and an empirical physical dimension, but they cannot meet. It is interesting to think through the items in the biblical text that concern Walton and Sandy in that Kantian light. The very act of creation and the inspiration of biblical writers are points where the divine has impacted the physical. Yet to the credit of Walton and Sandy they are trying to maintain something of the substance of biblical teaching. Hence they maintain that crucial events happened, but just what happened is unclear. Surely the door is opened for the events to happen without any impact of God on the physical. Of course, if they go to the logical consequence they have ceased to be Christian, and they do not want to do that. The tendency of their system is to push any real impact of God on the world further into a grey area. In some sense God's activity is affirmed, but it is unclear in what sense. They reject Deism with its exclusion of God from the world, but their system has the same tendency. Walton's model of God sitting in his cosmic temple somehow directing the universe is not anti-Kantian. The points of interaction between the deity and the physical world are postulates of faith without tangible physical evidence. The biblical text is clear that when God interacts with the physical, the physical is actually, visibly changed.

---

[81] The requirement for unchangeable texts is common in treaty documents (Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 29–31). Note also the tendency to have human witnesses, presumably to verify the process, when the actual text needed to be replaced or amended (Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, 76–77). Texts could not be changed at will.

[82] Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 115. On that page he distinguishes the level of divine causation from that of natural causes. In the note on p. 184 he acknowledges that the distinction comes from Kant.

1. *The Text and the Real Text*

Walton and Sandy put forward a model of the biblical text in which there is a surface verbal level. This level conforms to the modes and thought patterns of the surrounding world. It is inspired by God, but it is of no practical relevance today because it is expressed in obsolete terms. Behind that is a second level that is the real message. Structurally this approach is very similar to the neo-orthodox thesis of a Word of God within the Scriptures but not synonymous with the Scriptures. The obvious problem is how one knows what the message within the Scripture is. In an attempt to prove that their approach does not ignore the proof-texts of evangelical orthodoxy, they engage in exegesis of passages such as 2 Tim 3:16.[83] Whether it is good or bad exegesis is not relevant at the moment. What is important is that it is exegesis. Yet on their own theory surely they are giving significance to words and structures infused with the concepts of that time and not our time.[84]

In other words they make no attempt to set forward a method by means of which we might climb out of the language of an ancient time into the message for us. I suspect that they do not tell us because they already know what parts of the text are objectionable. Whether it is the parts that do not fit Kantianism or the parts that make the modern unbeliever scoff, it is modern problems that really drive them. I fear they have fallen into the trap they wished to avoid.

2. *God and the World*

Walton claims that the ancient world did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural.[85] That is so great an oversimplification as to amount to error. The whole science of omens, which dominated Mesopotamia, rested on the fact that a certain event or appearance, as distinct from others, was a specific message from the gods. Assyrian royal inscriptions carefully distinguish defeats of the enemy achieved by the king from the impact of the gods on that same enemy.[86] Biblical passages such as Num 16:29–30 and 1 Sam 6:8–9 single out events as particular actions of God.

The distinctive thing about the biblical approach is that it describes the relationship between God and creation in covenant terms. Jeremiah 31:35–36 uses covenant terminology to describe the order that results from God's rule over the cosmos. There is a regular order because God commands and creation obeys. There are situations, however, where God issues different orders and

---

[83] Walton and Sandy, *Lost World of Scripture*, 267–73.

[84] The same point could be raised with reference to their word studies of *bārāʾ* (Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 127–33) and *logos* (Walton and Sandy, *Lost World of Scripture*, 121–27). Why are those words not to be dismissed as taken over from the universal concepts of their time? Where it suits them the authors want to argue from the text, and where it suits them they want to dismiss the text.

[85] Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 20.

[86] See my "Causality in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *OLP* 14 (1983): 115–27.

things change. Walton is struggling with how to address an age where many infer from the regularity of that covenant order that God does not exist. His solution effectively leaves the regularity to be explained naturalistically and excludes those special interventions when God lays aside the usual commands. This approach is neither biblical nor useful. Walton attempts to use material from cultures that are almost at the opposite pole to the modern world. The uncertainty of life, explained in terms of the capriciousness of the gods, shows through the Mesopotamian sources. That is possibly why the science of omens, which gives a false promise of being able to control the uncertainty, so dominated Mesopotamian intellectual life. Egypt tried to solve the same problem in a very different way, by making the connection to the gods, as manifested in the divine pharaoh, so much closer. We need to see that the Bible stands over against both the ancient world and the modern world. It does so because God is distinct from the creation he made and yet he impacts upon it.