

“Why Didn’t God Call the Light, Light?”

by Dr. John Walton

This is a rough paraphrase of a sermon given at Blackhawk Evangelical Free Church by Dr. John Walton on September 18, 2005. Dr. John Walton is a professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Studies at Wheaton College. This sermon was given as part of Blackhawk’s “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Bible” series. If you would like to hear the sermon itself, you may download it as an MP3 file. If you would like to read more about Dr. Walton’s interpretation, I would strongly urge you to buy The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis. It contains a much more in-depth look at this issue. What follows are Dr. Walton’s thoughts, as closely as I can reproduce them.

Genesis 1 is a text that is filled with controversy and misunderstanding. Much of this controversy and misunderstanding exists because of the way our contemporary culture leads us to think about the world, the Bible, and God. We’ve learned to talk about the natural world, although it isn’t natural. There is nothing about the world that is natural. In the Bible, in the ancient world view and the Israelite world view, the world is supernatural. The natural / supernatural distinction is a modern dichotomy that did not exist in the ancient world. If we try to read the Bible through that natural / supernatural dichotomy, we’re going to run into trouble.

Our world likes to talk about God intervening. God can’t intervene, He’s in it, He’s doing everything. That would be like saying I’m going to intervene in this sermon. I can’t, I’m doing it. We talk about the miraculous as if God is doing things sometimes, but not doing things other times. God is always doing things. This world is supernatural. Anything that looks natural only looks that way because it is supernatural in regular patterns. The idea that we live in a natural world, sometimes graced with the supernatural, is a modern dichotomy.

A second part of the problem is that we’re used to taking the Bible on our **own** terms instead of on **its** terms. We read the Bible as if it was written to us, but it wasn’t. It was written **to** Israel, **for** us and for everyone. It is **for** us, but not **to** us. If we try to take it on our own terms as if it was written to us in our language and our culture, we’re going to miss some important things. This is a modern indulgence, to treat the Bible that way. It is a modern presumption, perhaps a modern arrogance.

Thirdly, our culture has taught us to think that God is distant. We believe that God works in our lives, that God works in this world, that God drives history. Those are theological statements that we would agree with. But there is still some extent to which we have banished Him to the outside. We see God as distant when we talk about this world around us and His role in it. That’s our modern heresy.

Our culture, then, has led us to a modern dichotomy when we think about the world, to a modern indulgence when we think about Scripture, and to a modern heresy when we think about God. These are things we must seek to rectify. We want to do that today as we look at Genesis 1.

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First of all, we must see the world the way the text sees the world. We must be able to look at the text through its own eyes and to accept that picture. Remember that when the Bible is communicating, it is communicating a world view. When we submit ourselves to the text, we commit to embracing that view. We have to start to see the world the way the text sees the world.

Secondly, we must begin to see the text the way the Israelites saw the text. Again, it was written to them. The fact that it was written in a foreign language, Hebrew, demands that it was also written to a foreign culture. Language and culture are inseparable. Therefore, the text is not embracing all cultures in the way that it communicates. It’s written to [the Israelites]. We shouldn’t expect it to address our culture and our time in the same way. Again, it is for us, but it is not to us. So we have to make some adjustments. It’s like we’re sitting on the outside and watching this communication between God and the people of Israel. We have to find ways to get inside that circle. The more we can do that, the more we can understand the text on its own terms.

We want to take the Bible seriously. We need to take the Bible seriously. But sometimes we don’t know quite how to do that. It’s hard to break into that circle, especially when we’re dealing with the Old Testament. Today I hope we can get a fresh glimpse of some of the ways to do that, so that we can start understanding the Bible on its own terms.

When we get to Genesis 1, we find a story about Creation. Duh. I mean, that sounds like a simple enough statement. But, already, that’s filled with the possibility of misunderstanding. To create something means to bring it into existence. If we’re going to understand what it means to create something, we need to agree on what it means to exist. We have to know what it means to exist. For most of us, we don’t even think about that, unless you happen to study philosophy and think about those things or enjoy reading philosophy, you don’t even ask that question.

We know intrinsically what it means to exist. Something exists when I can touch it, see it, hear it, bump into it, knock it over, trip on it — it exists. And that’s intriguing, because what it demonstrates is that our modern ontology — how we understand existence — is very physical and material. Things exist because they have a material structure. We normally naturally think that way and don’t even question it. When we talk about creation, we’re talking about God then bringing things into existence which means He manufactures physical things. Now I don’t deny that God does that. Everything that is, physically exists because God made it. BUT we’re not asking that question. We’re asking the question: what is it that the Biblical text is telling us in Genesis 1? What story is being told here? To answer that, we have to ask how they thought about existence in the ancient world What did existence mean to [the ancient Israelites]?

The concept of existence was not the same for them as it is for us. And, therefore, their concept of creation is not the same thing as it is for us. In the ancient world (and I don’t have time to demonstrate this this morning, although the demonstration is available) and

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in the Bible, something exists when it functions, when it works, when it’s part of an orderly system, and when it has a role to play. Both the ancient near-Eastern literature and the Bible describe this in terms of giving a name, separating it out from other things, naming the function and the role that it will play. And, of course, we see that throughout Genesis 1 as God gives names, as God separates things from one another, giving everything a function and a purpose.

The Greeks persuaded people that the material structure of the cosmos was discernible. The ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Canaanites, and Israelites did not think this way. The physical world was not discernible, they could not penetrate it. The Greeks persuaded us that it was. The Enlightenment persuaded people that the material structure of the cosmos was most important. And the post-darwin era persuaded people that the material structure was all there was to the cosmos. And step by step, the church has followed. The church has agreed to think in the same terms. We agreed with the Greeks that it was discernible. We reveled in it, because Christians took the forefront, eventually, in trying to understand this world that God has made. That [the physical] was most important was another step. And yet, in a sense, we bought it. We said that is the central focus of our understanding our world. And when the post-darwin era dawned on us, we resisted and said that [the physical] is not all there is. Yet in many of the ways we act and think, we act as if it were. Even though our theology is still in place, there in the background.

We have to struggle with our own modern world view and try to set it aside so that we can think about the Bible in its own terms, to think in terms of functions instead of structures. Now, function is an interesting concept. In our modern world view, we think about functions, certainly. But typically in our way of thinking, function is a consequence of structure. Things work the way they do because of the physical properties they have. That is what causes them to function. And you get this close, tight relationship between function and structure. That is our modern world view.

The ancient world view saw function differently. For them, function is a consequence of purpose. Ah, now there’s a difference and an important one. In the ancient world view, and the Biblical world view, things function the way they do because God is working with purpose. That is what causes things to function. God is the one who set it up to work, God is the one that sustains that operation. Not just day by day, but moment by moment. And God’s role is to set up those functions and to maintain them. That is the most important thing that can be said about God’s role in our world. It works because He set it up to work and He’s behind its operations.

If God were to unplug Himself from our world, it is not that we would somehow then become less loving, or that we would have more wars, or disease, or that somehow we would lose knowledge of Him. If God unplugged Himself, we would cease to exist along with everything else around us. God sustains His creation. Creation then, in the functional sense, is something that goes on and on and on. It’s funny, the Egyptians even thought of

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that. They saw creation taking place anew every morning, as the sun rose. We don’t have to think in those terms. But the idea that creation — setting up those functions for the first time — is sustained and extended throughout history, as the world continues to function under the grace of God, is an important aspect of theology that we’ve lost.

We need to try to rectify these distortions. I want to take you through Genesis 1 with a functional eye and let you see the differences that that makes in reading the text and understanding God’s Word. I suppose we should start with the title of today’s sermon. The title for today is “Why Didn’t God Call the Light, Light?” And it would seem obvious, wouldn’t it? Why does it have to tell you that God called the light something and didn’t call it something else? Didn’t that ever strike you? It probably didn’t. I taught Genesis for decades and it never struck me. But once you ask the question, it’s kind of a nagging one. And that’s because he’s not naming a thing. We think of light as a thing. We think of light as physicists think of light — even if you never had physics or didn’t like physics, or weren’t good at physics. We still have adopted the idea that light is a thing. When we talk about God creating light, we think about Him manufacturing the thing that we call light.

The Israelites didn’t think of light as a thing. God didn’t call the light, light, naming a thing. What’s going on? Let’s look at verse five, you have to start in five and we’ll work backwards. (This is Hebrew after all.) “God called the light day and the darkness He called night and there was evening and morning, the first day.” If you’re thinking of things and you somehow managed to escape “God called the light day” unscathed, you would still run into trouble, as a physicist, on the second part: God called the darkness, night. Nobody thinks that darkness is a thing. It’s the absence of a thing. What’s going on here? This verse is not talking about the naming of things.

What is it talking about? We can tell by what it says. God called the light, day. Light is not a thing, what is it? What is it that He’s naming day that has anything to do with the word light? You could all come up with it easily enough. God called the *period of light* day. Well, of course he did. That’s a logical thing. “God called the period of light day and the period of darkness he called night.” Language works that way, it’s okay, it’s all right.

Now we’ve breathed our sigh of relief and we back up to verse four. God saw the light was good and he separated the light from the darkness. Now, again, the physicist in us would have a little trouble here. You can’t separate these things, they were never together and that’s a problem. But of course we’re not talking about **things** here.

Now, we take the lesson we learned in verse five and we apply it to verse four. “God called the period of light day”, we got that already. “God separated the period of light from the period of darkness”. Ok, that makes sense. He set up periods for each one of them. Ok, that’s just right. Ok, we’re good. “God separated the period of light and the period of darkness, day and night”.

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With me so far? And I’ve got you. Verse three: “God said let there be light”. What must that mean? God said “let there be a period of light”. That my friends is a far different statement than how we usually read that. Because now God is not calling a thing — physicists’ light — into existence, necessarily. That’s not the point. “God said let there be a period of light. And He separated that period of light from the period of darkness. And He called that period of light day and that period of darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, day one”.

What then, did God create on Day One? Our conclusion must be that, on Day One, God created the basis of Time. God created Time on Day One. It’s not about light. It’s about Time. And that’s the first step in bringing order to the cosmos. And I don’t think that any of us would disagree that it’s probably the most important foundational function of the cosmos: Time. Our lives are ordered by it, dictated by it, driven by it. God set it up. That’s how the world works, that’s how He made it to work.

Now, if we back up to verse two (we’re still moving backwards) it demonstrates what we’ve been talking about. The earth was formless and empty. Those two words in Hebrew speak of non-functionality, non-purposefulness. This is what non-existence is for Israel, and the ancient world. Even Egyptian texts talk of the non-existent, by which they refer to who knows what. They refer to the desert wilderness as non-existent. They’re non-existent: not because they don’t exist physically or materially, but because they’re non-functional. And what we have described here is proof of the fact that the text is not talking about physical structures. We have a description of a non-functional world. It is formless and empty; darkness is over the surface of the deep. See, there’s material stuff there (the deep) but it’s non-functional. The text therefore is not trying to describe how things came into being, but how functions came into being. That’s their ontology and that’s far more important in their way of thinking. **Things** are immaterial. They don’t matter.

We have to go back to verse one. What does it mean when it says that “in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”? Heaven and earth is the cosmos. We have that picture. “In the beginning” (I can’t take time to explore it) talks not about just a point in time. Always in the Bible it talks about an initial period. This beginning that it speaks of, this initial period, is the 7 days. In that way, verse one is an introduction to this chapter. In this beginning period of seven days, God created the cosmos. Now, we’re back to that critical word create. We have to talk about it a little bit. The Hebrew word is *bara*. We need to explore it a little bit, so we can understand it.

Words mean what they mean because of how people use them. If we’re going to understand *bara*, we have to look at how it is used in the Biblical texts by the people who understood the word. Now, we all know that about language. We use words to communicate to one another because they have certain meaning based on the way we use them. Even Christians use certain words differently with each other because they have certain meanings to them. In families, some words have special meaning and they use

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them among themselves because they each know what the meaning of that is. Teenagers have words they know what the meaning is, but none of the rest of us understand, and once we think we’ve got it and start using them, they won’t use the words anymore. But the idea is that words have an agreed upon meaning, and if you want to know what the meaning is, you have to see how it is used.

We do Bible the same way. There is no word for Moses, that has a dictionary, that tells what all the meanings are that he had. We have to figure it out from the text. And for a word like *bara* we have to look through the Old Testament and find out how it’s used. Well, we first of all find out that there are about 50 occurrences. That’s not a huge amount, but it’s enough to work with. We can start by observing its usage. Our first observation is that for the subject — who does this kind of *bara* activity — it’s only God. God is the only subject the verb ever has and so we understand that this is a divine activity. That’s good enough and most of the commentaries have that piece of information. But there’s another critical piece of information that very few of them talk about.

What is the object of this verb? God is always doing the *bara*-ing, but what is it that He is always *bara*-ing? What’s the object of those verbs? You’ll be amazed to find out that it is not physical things. The things that God *bara*-s typically are things such as people groups. God *bara*-s Jerusalem, that doesn’t mean that he created the stone and built it, no there’s something else going on. God *bara*-ed phenomenon like wind or fire or destruction or calamity or darkness. Those are not physical things. God *bara*-s abstractions: righteousness, purity, praise. When He actually does have an object that could potentially be material or structural, God *bara*-s people — ah, gotcha. Read the text. God *bara*-s them male and female: functions.

Bara speaks of assigning functions, establishing roles. That’s how God creates. He brings things into existence by giving them a role and a function and putting them in the order of His cosmos. Making them operate. That is the creative activity. Now it’s interesting if you think about it and (of course this is not determinative) think about in English, how you would use the word create. Think of the objects you would put with it. One could create a curriculum. You could create a committee, you could create a masterpiece. You could create havoc, you could create all kinds of functions. When the Bible talks about this act of *bara* it’s talking about God setting up functions. Our conclusion then: in Genesis 1 the text asserts that in the seven day initial period, God brought the cosmos into operation by assigning roles and functions. That’s a really very long, expanded paraphrase of verse 1. That’s what He was about. That was His creative work.

In that sense, the text has no interest in the physical, material cosmos. That’s just not what it’s talking about. That doesn’t mean that God didn’t also create the physical material cosmos, but that’s not what the ancient mindset is concerned about. That gets back to us wanting the text on our terms. We want to know about about the physical cosmos because that’s our ontology, that’s our world, that’s our concepts. That’s what we

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want to know about. We can’t indulge ourselves in that way with the Genesis account. Again, there’s no question that God did those things, but that’s not what this text is about. God makes it work.

Now we’ve only talked about Day One and the lead up to it. The first function that he gives us then in Genesis 1 is the function of Time.

On Day Two, God sets up an expanse — that’s what NIV does with it in verse six. It’s a tough word to translate — the Hebrew word *raqea* — because there’s nothing that fits really well. The Israelites, like all the people of their time, believed that there was something fairly solid in the sky, holding up waters that were up there. They knew that water had to be up there, because it came down from the sky. Again, they can’t penetrate or discern the physical cosmos. They figure that there must be something solid up there. That’s what they use the word *raqea* for, that’s what it meant to them, holding the waters up there and the text describes it that way.

Now, if you think that the text is giving us a description of God’s creation of the physical, structural, material cosmos, you’ve got problems here in Day Two because the astronauts didn’t bump into anything when they flew up in the rocket ships. If you think that the Bible is talking about the structure of our cosmos, suddenly there’s trouble. NIV fudges a little bit with “expanse”. Good try, but it doesn’t work. Once you understand that the text is talking about functions, we can allow it to talk in the structural terms of the ancient world and that’s okay.

God never, not once, in the pages of Scripture, changes their view of science. Their science, their world. Let me give you an example: When you read in the Bible something about keeping the Law “with all your heart and mind and strength”. That word “mind”, translators are doing what they can with it, but actually the word is “your innards”, “your gut”. In the ancient world, that’s what they believed people thought with: heart, liver, kidney, intestines. You thought with the stuff down here. There’s not even a Biblical, Hebrew word for “brain”. They didn’t know what the brain did. God did not say, “this is a blood pump, this is what you think with, let’s get it straight”. God does not reveal that information. In fact, He seems quite content to talk to them about thinking with their hearts or their guts or their innards. That doesn’t damage His reputation, or somehow taint the truth of His word. He communicated to them in their terms. He didn’t need to change their science.

So when God gets to Day Two, He’s not talking about the physical structures. He’s just using the terms that are familiar to the Israelites. Something semi-solid or solid, stretched out holding up the waters in the sky. He uses the description of their system because he’s talking about a function. What function is it? It’s weather. God created the systems by which weather works. And he can talk to them about the *raqea*. That’s all right. We don’t have to fly up there and get a piece of it for that to be okay. We talk in terms of high-pressure systems and low-pressure systems, that’s all right too. Today, that’s our way of

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talking about weather. On Day Two, God created weather. And He described that in terms that his audience would understand. God is a God who communicates.

Day Three seems a little odd to us sometimes, because it looks like he’s creating two things when you think of material structures. The sea and the dry land on one hand and the vegetation, seed-bearing plants, on the other. It looks like two things. Well, it’s not once you understand the function behind it. The idea, certainly, that plants bear seeds that grow other plants of the same sort. That’s important. That’s how we get food, that’s how the system works for agriculture, for irrigation. You need water, you need dry land, soil. You need the principle that things would grow from other things. So God set up that system. On Day Three, God created vegetation.

There are the three main functions that dominate our world: Time, Weather, Food. I’ll pretty much guarantee it, that when you sit at the bus stop, stand in line at the supermarket, or ride the train and talk to somebody next to you you don’t usually talk about molecules or quarks. You talk about Time, Weather, and Food. Those are the functions that dominate our lives. And no matter what culture you’re in, what time period, what part of the world, Time, Weather, and Food are going to be the principal issues. And Genesis 1 has something important to say: God set it up to work that way, and God is the one who makes it work.

In the first three days, we have the three central functions of our world. That the text tells us God did. In Days Four, Five, and Six (we’re not going to go through them), you can see the functional element. Sun, moon, and stars somehow now are not flaming balls of gas or bits of rock. That’s not their function. Their function is “signs, seasons, days, and years”. All functions, all related to people. These are the functionaries that serve in God’s purpose for carrying out the functions. Then, you have birds and fish that operate in the sphere of Day Two. You get animals and people that operate in the spheres set up in Day Three. Functionaries operating in spheres of certain functions.

Now there’s still an important part of Genesis we need to hit. And we need to do it quickly. What about the seven days? How does that come into all of this? Good question. And not hard to answer. The key is on Day Seven, God rests. We sometimes probably thought of that as almost an appendix. It’s like the credits at the end. We’ve got the main thing, the thing has come to its conclusion, the grand climax: people were created. And now, oh yeah, God rests. Any Israelite, any Babylonian, any Egyptian, any Canaanite, any Moabite reading this text would read God rests and they would say immediately (in the word association game which they played all the time) “temple”.

Because, to the ancient person, that’s what temples were for: for God to rest in them. That is why they built temples. Now, why are gods resting in temples? Resting is not an act of disengagement. When the gods rested that meant they could rest because everything was secure, everything was setup, everything was ready to go. That’s like taking your seat at the helm, at the controls, ready to run. God tells the Israelites He’s

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going to give them rest from their enemies on every side. The idea is security. Everything is as it ought to be. When God rests on the seventh day, that means order has been established. The functional cosmos is ready to roll.

The reason temples are so important to people in the ancient world is God sat in his temple and, from there, He ran the world. This is Oval Office folks. This is where it happens. Decisions are made, actions are carried out. God is in his temple and all is right in the world. God’s rest is an act of ownership and control. Authority. Now what does that have to do with the seven days?

Once we understand that we’re dealing with the temple picture here, we understand that this is God’s cosmic temple that he has been creating. A cosmic temple that operates, that works. Temples in the ancient world were dedicated in a process of dedication. They had to go through the building of everything: building the structure, building the furniture, weaving, preparing the priests, getting everything ready. Then there would be a dedication of that temple that lasted seven days. A seven day dedication of the temple.

During those seven days (and we have the text to demonstrate this, even Biblical texts) you would first of all proclaim the functions of this temple. This is what’s it’s going to do. This is how it serves, this is how it works. You could proclaim the functions. Then you install the functionaries. Priests, furniture, everything getting ready. Functions, functionaries. Seven days. Dedication of the temple. And then at the end of that seven day dedication, in the ancient near east, that which represented the deity (whether it’s the Ark of the Covenant or an image), would be brought inside in a grand procession to take up its rest in the temple.

Point: This cosmos is God’s temple. He built this temple, this cosmic temple, and made it functional, with people as his priests. With all of its functions and functionaries set in operation by His hand, sustained by His hand, as He sits in the control room in His rest, running this world.

This is the truth of Genesis 1, the point to be made. And yet we speak of the natural world and banish Him to the far reaches of the cosmos. This should change our understanding of the world, of how we think about it, about how it came to be. Once these seven days are seen as days dealing with functions, the whole controversy about the age of the earth gets put where it belongs. This text doesn’t say anything about the age of the material, physical things. Because it’s not about the making of those. Again, there is no doubt that God did them, but that’s not this story.

This changes our view of God as we think about His creation as a living, happening thing. We come to understand God as active in every part of our lives, day by day, moment by moment sustaining His creation, desiring to be in residence among us. Having a present relationship with Him is what creation was all about to begin with. God didn’t create because he needed us, or because he was lonely, or even just because he

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could. He created us to be in relationship with Him. He created this place where His presence could be, and we could come into his presence and be in relationship with him. That’s how we need to think about our world and how great our God is.