

The Lost Truth of Genesis

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Abstract: Scholars such as John Walton have correctly identified the need for modern interpreters to understand the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context in which the Bible was written. What they have failed to do is follow their own reasoning to its theological conclusion by analyzing the context in which the ANE worldview developed. This study will demonstrate that the idolatrous ANE conflation of false gods with the material universe is fundamentally incompatible with the ontological distinction between the one true God and his material universe as revealed in the Bible. Even if ANE people did hold to a purely functional rather than material ontology, their ontological conflationism cannot form the interpretive basis for understanding the truth of the book of Genesis.

Key Words: John Walton, Ancient Near East, functional ontology, *Lost World*, conflationism

There is an ancient Sumerian proverb—not unlike many found in the biblical book of Proverbs—which says,

(He) who builds like a lord, lives like a slave.

(He) who builds like a slave, lives like a lord.²

Is this a theologically *neutral* statement? It certainly does not appear to take any position on the existence of God(s) or any moral or ethical implications that might follow. On its face this is nothing more than a tidbit of practical life wisdom, presumably gleaned from countless attempts to sort out what later generations

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² Qtd. in Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Man's Record History*, 3rd. ed. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981), 122.

would call a “standard of living.” In this world of limited resources, if a person spends all his money building the largest possible house (or, in contemporary society, buying the largest possible house), then that person won’t have anything left to live on. But if a person builds or purchases a more modest house, then that person will actually have some money left over to enjoy it. The proverb does not say anything about where houses come from or whether there should be different socio-economic classes or what people should and should not be doing inside their houses. It’s simply a pithy nugget of economic wisdom with which any reasonable atheist and any reasonable Christian would most likely agree because, as far as it goes, the statement is theologically *neutral*.

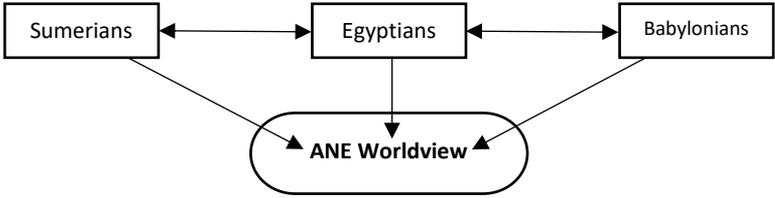
In recent years, much has been written on the issue of how to interpret the early chapters of Genesis. Authors such as Walton,³ Collins,⁴ and others have correctly identified the need for modern Western interpreters to understand the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context in which the book of Genesis was written.

However, this raises an additional question: What was the context in which the ANE culture and worldview developed? If it is necessary to understand the ANE context in which Genesis was written, then is it not also necessary, in order to interpret ANE writings correctly, to understand the context in which *they* were written? Of particular interest to this study is the question: Was the ANE context theologically *neutral*?

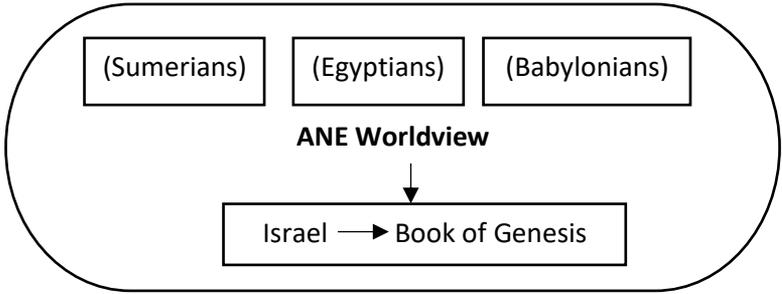
Walton, in his *Lost World* books, has analyzed numerous ANE writings in order to ascertain the most relevant features of the ANE context. His conclusion can be visually represented thus: the peoples of the ANE, in particular the Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, each had their own culture and belief system; and these systems had certain beliefs in common. The “sum total” of the commonalities among these cultures formed what will be termed the ANE Worldview:

³ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2010), 9-15.

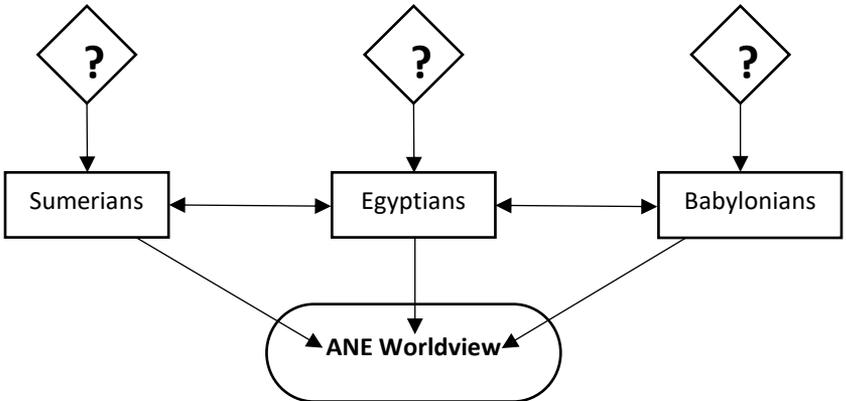
⁴ John C. Collins, *Reading Genesis Well* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 169ff.



Since the nation of Israel developed within this ANE worldview, their understanding of reality, including their understanding of God and descriptions of what they believed God did, was expressed from within the perspective of this worldview:



The foundational question to be addressed in the present study is "What was the context in which the ANE Worldview developed?" To put it another way, where did the ideas that formed the ANE Worldview come from?



In particular, to what extent were these ideas theologically *neutral*, like the aforementioned Sumerian proverb, and to what extent were they theologically *incompatible* with the biblical perspective about the nature of the one true God? To the extent that they were theologically *neutral*, they would certainly provide valuable and necessary insights into the meaning of the book of Genesis; but to the extent that they were theologically *incompatible*, they *cannot* form the interpretive basis for understanding the book of Genesis.

The Spiritual Context of the Ancient World

If the only way to determine what the earliest people groups believed is to analyze what they wrote, how would it even be possible to evaluate the context of the *earliest* known human writings? How would it be possible to determine where their ideas came from without some written record of the development of those ideas?

In the absence of first-hand accounts of early human pre-history, the most reliable source not squarely in the realm of mythology would most likely be the New Testament. What little the NT does say about early humanity is treated as historically factual and theologically relevant to its immediate audience; and to avoid any appearance of circular reasoning by using ANE writings (the OT) to analyze other ANE writings, this study will examine how the NT views the spiritual condition of the ancient world.

The worldview of the NT authors was primarily a composite of Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman influences. The apostle Paul, for example, was a foreign-born Jew (Acts 22:3) who was also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37) conversant in Greek poets and philosophers (Acts 17:28). Peter and John were Jewish fisherman (Luke 5:1-11), also conversant in Greek religious/philosophical terminology (John 1:1-5, 2 Pet 1:3). Therefore, whatever the NT authors wrote about the ancient world would not have been directly influenced by the worldview they were analyzing. Although they knew and at times quoted the book of Genesis (Eph 5:31, 1 Pet 3:6, 1 John 3:12, Heb 7:1-3), their knowledge of it as a finished product put them more in the

position of post-game commentators able to analyze the entire game rather than players on the field in the middle of the game.

According to Romans 5:12-14, sin was present from the beginning of humanity, and the earliest sin of Adam affected all of humanity until the time of Moses:

<p>(Rom 5:12) Διὰ τοῦτο ὡσπερ δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσηλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διήλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον·</p>	<p>For this reason, just as through one man sin came into the world, and through sin death, and therefore to all men death spread, because all sinned,⁵</p>
<p>(5:13) ἄχρι γὰρ νόμου ἁμαρτία ἦν ἐν κόσμῳ, ἁμαρτία δὲ οὐκ ἔλλογεῖται μὴ ὄντος νόμου,</p>	<p>for until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not accounted where there is no law,</p>
<p>(5:14) ἀλλ' ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ θάνατος ἀπὸ Ἀδὰμ μέχρι Μωϋσέως καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς μὴ ἁμαρτήσαντας ἐπὶ τῷ ὁμοιώματι τῆς παραβάσεως Ἀδὰμ ὅς ἐστιν τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος.</p>	<p>but death reigned from Adam until Moses even over those not sinning in the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the future one.</p>

As a result of the first sin of Adam, death spread to the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, because the Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians all sinned. Also, death reigned over the Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians even though they did not sin in exactly the same manner that Adam did.

According to 2 Peter 2:5-6, God sent the flood upon the ἀρχαίου κόσμου (“ancient world”) as a judgment against the ἀσεβῶν (“ungodly / impious”⁶):

⁵ All Scriptural translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

⁶ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 141.

<p>(2 Pet 2:5) καὶ ἀρχαίου κόσμου οὐκ ἐφείσατο ἀλλ’ ὄγδοον Νῶε δικαιοσύνης κήρυκα ἐφύλαξεν κατακλυσμὸν κόσμῳ ἀσεβῶν ἐπάξας</p>	<p>...and if he did not spare the ancient world but preserved the eight of Noah the herald of righteousness from the world flood brought on the ungodly,</p>
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Although this event occurred before the ancient Sumerian, Egyptian, and Babylonian civilizations developed, the text is clear about the cause of the κατακλυσμὸν (“cataclysm [flood]”)—the ἀσέβεια (“ungodliness”) that had spread to the entire world.

The next verse likewise confirms that God leveled the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes for the same reason:

<p>(2 Pet 2:6) καὶ πόλεις Σοδόμων καὶ Γομόρρας τεφρώσας καταστροφῇ κατέκρινεν ὑπόδειγμα μελλόντων ἀσεβεῖν τεθεικῶς</p>	<p>...and turned to ashes the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, condemning them to ruin as an example of what future ungodly ones will be consigned to...</p>
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From the time of the flood until the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which occurred during the lifetime of Abraham, ἀσέβεια (“ungodliness”) again multiplied to the point that it warranted a catastrophic divine judgment. Although this particular event happened after the ANE creation stories had been written, this is still clear evidence of deeply entrenched sinfulness in these ANE cities between the time of the flood and the establishment of the Sumerian, Egyptian, and Babylonian civilizations.

In Luke 17:26-29, Jesus drew comparisons between his second coming and both of the cataclysmic judgments mentioned in 2 Peter 2 (cf. Matt 24:37-39):

(Luke 17:26) καὶ καθὼς ἐγένετο ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Νῶε, οὕτως ἔσται καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου·	...and just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man:
(17:27) ἤσθιον, ἔπινον, ἐγάμουν, ἐγαμίζοντο, ἄχρι ἧς ἡμέρας εἰσῆλθεν Νῶε εἰς τὴν κιβωτὸν καὶ ἦλθεν ὁ κατακλυσμὸς καὶ ἀπώλεσεν πάντα.	they were eating, drinking, marrying, giving in marriage, until the day Noah went into the ark and the flood came and destroyed everything.
(17:28) Ὁμοίως καθὼς ἐγένετο ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Λῶτ· ἤσθιον, ἔπινον, ἠγόραζον, ἐπώλουν, ἐφύτευον, ὠκοδόμουν·	In the same way, just as in the days of Lot they were eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building;
(17:29) Ἡ δὲ ἡμέρα ἐξῆλθεν Λῶτ ἀπὸ Σοδόμων, ἔβρεξεν πῦρ καὶ θεῖον ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἀπώλεσεν πάντα.	but on the day Lot went out from Sodom, fire and brimstone rained from heaven and destroyed everything.

In both instances Jesus highlighted the fact that people in the ancient world were going about the ordinary business of living, completely unaware that cataclysmic judgment was just around the corner.

More to the point of the present study, Romans 1:18-25 goes into greater detail about specific sins of humanity since the beginning of the world, again using the term ἀσέβεια (“ungodliness”). This spiritual condition that was identified as the cause of the cataclysmic judgments against the ancient world was also identified as a defining characteristic, along with the related term ἀδικία (“unrighteousness”), of those who actively suppress truth about God:

(1:18) Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων,	For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who in unrighteousness suppress the truth,
(1:19) διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς· ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν.	because what can be known of God is manifest among them, because God has manifested it to them.

Knowledge of God has been accessible to humankind since the beginning of the world because God has made it accessible. Humankind is not ungodly and unrighteous because they are *unaware* of God but rather because they have chosen to *suppress* the knowledge of God that God himself has revealed to them.

(1:20) τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε αἴδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους,	For his invisible attributes from the creation of the world have been clearly discerned in what has been made, both his eternal power and deity, so that they are without defense,
(1:21) διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠύχαρίστησαν, ἀλλ’ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία.	because although they knew God, they neither glorified nor gave thanks to him as God, but rather became futile in their reasoning and their senseless heart became darkened.

The expression ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου (“from the creation of the world”) is similar to Jesus’ appeal to the marriage of Adam and Eve as God’s original plan ἀπὸ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως (“from the beginning of creation” [Mark 10:6, citing Gen 1:27, 2:24]). In Romans 1, Paul is clarifying the universality of human sinfulness—ever since the original creation God has made known

his θειότης (“deity / divineness,”⁷ “the fact that he is God”⁸) in clear enough fashion that humankind has no possible claim of ignorance. In fact, Paul makes exactly the *opposite* claim concerning humankind: they *did* know God yet refused to acknowledge and glorify Him as God.

(1:22) φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν	Claiming to be wise, they were shown to be foolish
(1:23) καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνοσ φθαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἔρπετῶν.	and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images in the likeness of corruptible men and birds and quadrupeds and reptiles.

Although the ancients may have had some claim to wisdom about theologically peripheral matters like economic practicality, the foolishness of their theological foundation was revealed in their exchange of the glory of the unseen God for man-made objects of worship. Verse 23 sounds strikingly similar to Psalm 106:20, in which Israel, in the course of repenting of her many sins, includes Aaron leading the nation to worship the golden bull:

(Ps 106:20) And they exchanged their glory for a similitude of a bull that eats plants.	וַיִּמְירוּ אֶת־כְּבוֹדָם בְּתַבְנִית שׁוֹר אֹכֵל עֵשֶׂב
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The nation of Israel was guilty of what humanity in general had been guilty of all along—exchanging the glory of the transcendent and incorruptible God for images in the likeness of just about any component of God’s creation.

⁷ Ibid., 446.

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 139.

(1:24) Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς.	Therefore, God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to the uncleanness of dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,
(1:25) οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὃς ἔστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.	who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation rather than the creator, who is blessed forever, amen.

Verse 25 elaborates further on verse 23 using an additional set of opposites. In verse 23 the contrast was between the ἀφθάρτου (“incorruptible”) God and φθαρτοῦ (“corruptible”) creation. Here the contrast is between the ἀλήθειαν (“truth”) about God and the ψεύδει (“lie”) of worshiping the κτίσει (“creation”) rather than the κτίσαντα (“creator”).

Though relatively few in number, these NT passages dealing with the ancient world paint a fairly clear picture. From Adam onward, humanity has been guilty of ungodliness and unrighteousness characterized by the active suppression of the truth God has revealed about himself. From its earliest generations, humanity has been exchanging the truth of God’s transcendence for the lie that God’s creation is somehow worthy of worship; and the consequences of this idolatrous exchange have worked themselves out not only in Sodom and Gomorrah but even at times among God’s people (Judg 17-21).

Ancient Near Eastern Creation Stories

The NT paints a fairly grim picture of ancient humanity in general, but to what extent do any of these passages apply specifically to the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians? The aforementioned Sumerian proverb proves that the ancients were certainly capable of speaking (and writing) truth, so how can the overall truthfulness of the ANE Worldview be evaluated?

One of the most revealing windows into any people's worldview is its cosmology. A people's beliefs about how and why the universe came to be the way it is are essentially the cornerstone upon which its entire worldview is built. Walton's analysis of ANE creation stories has led him to a number of propositions that he believes form the foundation of the ANE worldview. The most basic and foundational of these propositions is that the ANE creation stories offer accounts of *functional* origins rather than accounts of *material* origins:

If we follow the sense of the literature and its ideas of creation, we find that people in the ancient Near East did not think of creation in terms of making material things—instead, everything is function oriented.... Creation thus constituted bringing order to the cosmos from an originally nonfunctional condition. It is from this reading of the literature that we may deduce a functional ontology in the ancient world—that is, that they offer accounts of functional origins rather than accounts of material origins.⁹

A number of authors have attempted to refute this proposition,¹⁰ but in the present study such attempted refutations are unnecessary. This study will assume that Walton's proposition is correct but then raise an additional question: Where did this “functional ontology” originate? How did the people of the ANE arrive at this exclusive interest in functional origins and non-interest in material origins?

The relevant features of ancient Egyptian cosmology are well summarized by Egyptologist James P. Allen:

... the Egyptians lived in a universe composed not of *things* but of *beings*. Each element is not merely a physical component, but a distinct individual with a unique personality and will. The sky is

⁹ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 35.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Lydia McGrew, “Review of John H. Walton's *The Lost World of Genesis One*,” http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2015/03/review_of_john_h_waltonsthe_l.html; Dominic Statham, “Dubious and Dangerous Exposition,” <https://creation.com/review-walton-the-lost-world-of-genesis-one>.

not an inanimate vault, but a goddess who conceives the sun each night and gives birth to him in the morning. The atmosphere that separates sky from earth is not an empty void, but a god. The Duat is not merely a mysterious region through which the sun passes at night, but the god Osiris. Even the vast and lifeless outer waters have an identity, as the god Nu.¹¹

In the minds of the ancient Egyptians, there was no distinction between the gods and the universe. As Allen explains, it's not that the sky goddess created the sky, but rather that the sky *was* a goddess. This appears to be different from the later Western philosophies of pantheism¹² and panentheism.¹³ Perhaps a more accurate term would be “conflationism.” The ancient Egyptians conflated the gods and the universe to the point that there was no distinction between them. Walton comes to a similar conclusion:

...it is important to note that in the Egyptian descriptions of cosmic geography, all of those elements that we might consider cosmic structures (firmament, sun, moon, air, earth, etc.) are depicted as gods. This is strong evidence that the Egyptians were more

¹¹ James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1988), 8 (emphasis original).

¹² “Pantheism may be understood positively as the view that God is identical with the cosmos, the view that there exists nothing which is outside of God, or else negatively as the rejection of any view that considers God as distinct from the universe” (William Mander, “Pantheism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, rev. July 7, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/>).

¹³ “Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world. Panentheism seeks to avoid either isolating God from the world as traditional theism often does or identifying God with the world as pantheism does. Traditional theistic systems emphasize the difference between God and the world while panentheism stresses God’s active presence in the world and the world’s influence upon God. Pantheism emphasizes God’s presence in the world but panentheism maintains the identity and significance of the non-divine.” John Culp, “Panentheism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, rev. June 3, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/>.

interested in the functions of these gods than in the actual material structures. The gods represented authority and jurisdiction. The attributes of the deities were manifested in the cosmic elements. The cosmos functioned as an extension of the gods, and the gods functioned within the cosmos.¹⁴

This last statement is particularly telling. In the minds of the Egyptians, the gods functioned *within* the cosmos, which was itself an extension of the gods and a manifestation of their attributes. Although this sounds similar to both pantheism and panentheism, it sounds more like the “conflationism” of which Allen speaks—the cosmic structures were depicted as gods, thereby blurring, if not completely eliminating, any distinction between the gods and the cosmos.

The pioneering Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer analyzed a number of Mesopotamian creation texts and reached the following conclusions about the cosmology of ancient Sumer:

1. First was the primeval sea. Nothing is said of its origin or birth, and it is not unlikely that the Sumerians conceived it as having existed eternally.
2. The primeval sea engendered the cosmic mountain consisting of heaven and earth united.
3. Conceived as gods in human form, An (i.e., heaven) was the male and Ki (i.e., earth) was the female. From their union was begotten the air-god Enlil.
4. Enlil, the air-god, separated heaven from earth, and while his father An carried off heaven, Enlil himself carried off the earth, his mother. The union of Enlil and his mother earth set the stage for the organization of the universe – the creation of man, animals, and plants, and the establishment of civilization.¹⁵

Kramer identified the Sumerian goddess of the primeval sea as Nimmu, who was described in a list of Sumerian gods as “the

¹⁴ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 30.

¹⁵ Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, 82-83.

mother, who gave birth to heaven and earth.”¹⁶ As with the ancient Egyptians, the Sumerians did not appear to draw any distinction between the gods and the material universe—they conceived of heaven and earth as gods in human form.

The cosmology of ancient Babylon is similar to that of ancient Sumer. Jastrow identifies Apsu and Tiamat as essentially the god and goddess of the primeval waters:

Apsu and Tiamat are, accordingly, synonymous. The combination of the two may be regarded as due to the introduction of the theological doctrine which we have seen plays so prominent a part in the systematized pantheon, namely, the association of the male and female principle in everything connected with activity or with the life of the universe. Apsu represents the male and Tiamat the female principle of the primeval universe.¹⁷

Jastrow also notes that the Babylonians did not appear to conceive of any point in time before the primeval waters. Rather, they conceived of Apsu and Tiamat as the earliest gods who sexually procreated all subsequent gods in order to bring the primeval chaos into order.¹⁸

If these ANE scholars are correct, then the most reasonable explanation for this alleged ANE non-interest in the material origin of the universe is that they did not believe the universe *had* a material origin. Since the Egyptians believed that all the major components of the universe (e.g., sun, earth, sky) were gods and the gods had no material origin, therefore the universe had no material origin. Since the Sumerians and Babylonians traced all of their gods back to the gods and goddesses of the primeval waters, they would not have had any concept of what came “before” the primeval waters since the gods and goddesses have always existed.

These ANE creation stories provide the clearest possible examples of exactly what Romans 1:18-25 is talking about. The

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

¹⁷ Morris Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1898), 411.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 412-13.

fact that they deified certain elements of the creation is clear proof that they had exchanged the truth about the God for a lie and were worshiping the creation rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). By conceiving of the waters, sky, and earth as gods who engage in human activities like procreation, they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images in the form of corruptible men (Rom 1:23). These ANE creation stories are not the uninformed observations of people who once thought the earth was flat—they are an idolatrous usurpation of the glory of God (Rom 1:21-23).

Is the One True God Concerned with Material Origins?

Although the ANE cosmology / ontology has been shown to be inherently idolatrous, there is still the question of whether or not the material origin of the universe was of any concern to the biblical authors. It is possible that the inspired writings of the one true God have a functional rather than material cosmology for reasons other than idolatry; and if God did not intend for his people to be unnecessarily interested in the material origin of the universe, then there is no reason to expect that he would have revealed anything about it to his people. Deuteronomy 29:29 teaches that God has not revealed *everything* he possibly *could* have to his people and that he is under no *obligation* to reveal anything *beyond* what he already has.

The question is this: Is the one true God concerned with material origins? Perhaps more to the point, is God concerned that his people know at least something about the material origin of the universe, or is this not a topic that is even worth mentioning in his special revelation? God's revelation to humanity is never based on what *humanity* is or is not interested in—it is based on what God decides that humanity *needs* to know. Does the Bible give any reason to think that humanity needs to hear about its material origin?

The answer from Scripture is a clear and unequivocal yes. God is unquestionably concerned that his people know about the material origins of the universe in order to understand and maintain the *ontological distinction* between God the transcendent Creator and his creation. The first two of the Ten Commandments deal specifically with this distinction:

<p>(Exod 20:3) You shall not have for yourself other gods in my presence.</p>	<p>לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל- פְּנֵי</p>
<p>(20:4) You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or what is on the earth below or what is in the waters under the earth.</p>	<p>לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ מִתְּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתְּחַת לָאָרֶץ</p>

The term אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (“other gods”) appears more than sixty times in OT passages ranging from Moses’ initial reception of the command to prophetic passages and historical accounts all the way up to the Babylonian exile (e.g., Jer 44, 2 Chr 34). Beyond the simple command to uphold a monotheistic belief in the one true God is the theological corollary that anyone or anything other than God is by definition a *created* thing. A number of OT passages clearly teach that in reality there is only one God and no others. In the first part of Isaiah 45:5 God declares:

<p>(Isa 45:5) I am YHWH and there is no other; besides me there is no God.</p>	<p>אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד זוּלָתִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים</p>
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The declaration אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד (“I am YHWH and there is no other”) is repeated in Isaiah 45:18, and the similar declaration אֲנִי-אֵל וְאֵין עוֹד (“I am God and there is no other”) occurs in Isaiah 45:22 and 46:9. Similarly phrased declarations occur in Deuteronomy 4:35-39, 1 Kings 8:60, Isaiah 45:14, and Isaiah 45:21. Since there is only one actual God, any אֲחֵר (“other god”) is not an actual transcendent deity, but nothing more than part of the creation—either an angelic being (Col 2:18), a component of the material universe (Exod 20:4), or an immaterial concept within the creation such as science or materialism. Therefore, to create and worship any kind of false god rather than believe in and worship the one true God is to deify the creation.

The second commandment (Exod 20:4) prohibits idolatry in the opposite direction. Whereas Exodus 20:3 prohibits *elevating* creation to the level of deity; the second commandment prohibits *lowering* the one true God to the level of creation. The most glaring violations of this were the golden bulls built at different times by Aaron (Exod 32) and Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:25-33).

In Deuteronomy 4:15-19, God expands on the prohibition of the second commandment using terminology nearly identical to that of Genesis 1:

<p>(Deut 4:15) You shall watch yourselves diligently, for you did not see any form on the day YHWH spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire,</p>	<p>וּנְשַׁמְרֶתֶם מְאֹד לִנְפְשֵׁיכֶם כִּי לֹא רָאִיתֶם כְּלִ-תְמוּנָה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲלֵיכֶם בְּחָרֵב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ</p>
<p>(4:16) lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves an image in the form of any figure, in the similitude of male or female,</p>	<p>פְּוֹת־תִּשְׁחַתּוּן וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם פְּסֹל תְּמוּנֹת כְּלִ-סֶמֶל תְּבֻנִית זָכָר אוֹ נְקֵבָה</p>
<p>(4:17) in the similitude of any animal that is on the earth, in the similitude of any winged bird that flies in the air,</p>	<p>תְּבֻנִית כְּלִ-בְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ תְּבֻנִית כְּלִ-צִפּוֹר כָּנָף אֲשֶׁר תִּעוֹף בַּשָּׁמַיִם</p>
<p>(4:18) in the similitude of any creeping thing on the ground, in the similitude of any fish that is in the water under the earth,</p>	<p>תְּבֻנִית כְּלִ-רֶמֶשׂ בְּאֲדָמָה תְּבֻנִית כְּלִ-דָּגָה אֲשֶׁר- בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ</p>
<p>(4:19) and lest your eyes be lifted up to the heavens and you look at the sun and the moon and the stars, all the hosts of the heavens, and you are seduced and bow down to them and serve them which YHWH your God has apportioned as signs to all the peoples under all the heavens.</p>	<p>וּפְוֹת־תִּשְׂא עֵינֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְאֶת־ הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶת־הַכּוֹכָבִים כֹּל צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנִדַּחַת וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לָהֶם וַעֲבַדְתֶּם אֲשֶׁר חָלַק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֹתָם לְכָל הָעַמִּים תַּחַת כָּל־ הַשָּׁמַיִם</p>

Israel was forbidden from rendering YHWH in the image of any זָכָר (“male”) or נְקֵבָה (“female”) person (Gen 1:27), בְּהֵמָה (“animal / livestock” [Gen 1:24-25]), כְּנָף (“bird” [Gen 1:20-22]), רֶמֶשׂ (“creeping thing” [Gen 1:24-25]), or דָּגָה (“fish” [Gen 1:26]). Israel was likewise forbidden from allowing themselves to be seduced into thinking that the אֲתֵרֹת הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֲתֵרֹת הַכּוֹכָבִים (“sun and moon and stars”), which God had created for the benefit of people on earth (Gen 1:14-18), were to be considered objects of worship. By covering every “creation category” from Genesis 1, the author is clarifying beyond any possible exception that no part of the creation is to be thought of as any kind of deity.

The Creation Event

Walton consistently emphasizes that he does believe in creation *ex nihilo* and that the Bible does teach creation *ex nihilo*, although not in the early chapters of Genesis.¹⁹ He affirms Christological creation texts such as John 1 and Colossians 1 as well as the theological principle of the non-contingency of God.²⁰ However, if Walton and the NT texts are correct that God created the material universe *ex nihilo*, then that event would have occurred before any humans were created and therefore before any human worldviews were formed, ANE or otherwise.

Since the creation event occurred before any human worldviews developed, any description of it is by definition not bound within any human worldview. If someone wished to describe an historical event such as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, some knowledge of 19th century American history and culture is necessary in order to communicate meaningfully about the event. Without at least a basic knowledge of the United States of America, the office of the presidency, and the American Civil War, it is not possible to even speak about the event in any meaningful way. The creation event, on the other hand, did not

¹⁹ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 44.

²⁰ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2015), 33.

occur within any human country or culture and is therefore not bound by any particular worldview.

Since the conflationism of the ANE worldview cannot have any bearing on the intent of the divine and human A/authors of inspired Scripture, is there any reason to *exclude* the material origin of the universe from the text of Genesis 1? Walton addresses this question in his tenth proposition (“The Seven Days of Genesis 1 Do Not Concern Material Origins”):

In a last effort to cling to a material perspective, they ask, why can't it be both? It is easy to see the functional orientation of the account, but does the material aspect have to be eliminated altogether?²¹

Notwithstanding the unnecessary rhetorical flourish (since when is raising a perfectly logical question some sort of desperate “last effort to cling” to something?), Walton’s reasons for answering his own question in the affirmative do not withstand serious examination. The first problem with Walton’s reasoning is a simple logical fallacy: a functional ontology does not by definition *exclude* a material ontology. Even if Walton is completely correct that ANE people were interested in functional rather than material existence (which they may not have been), and even if this view were not inherently idolatrous (which it is), functional existence *presupposes* material existence. A material object cannot have a function unless it materially exists. To say that the ancients were concerned primarily with functional origins does not by definition *exclude* the possibility of them being equally concerned with material origins, and to argue that the reason the ancients were *not* interested in material origins is because they were *only* interested in functional origins is illogical on its face. Walton is trying to prove a negative which is not logically excluded.

Walton lists four evidences for his proposed “exclusively functional” ontology in the first chapter of Genesis²²:

²¹ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 92-93.

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

1. The nature of the governing verb (*bārā'*, “to create”) is functional.
2. The context is functional (it starts with a nonfunctional world in Gen 1:2 and comes back to a functional description of creation after the flood in Gen 8:22).
3. The cultural context is functional (ancient Near Eastern literature).
4. The theology is functional (cosmic temple).

In response to point 1, it is not entirely clear that **ברא** is the “governing verb” of Genesis 1. Most of the individual “creation events” in Genesis 1 use the verbs **אמר** (“to say”) and **היה** (“to be / become”). The “formula” was **וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים... וַיְהִי־כֵן** (“And God said.... And it was so” [Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 14-15, 24]). As far as the verb **ברא**, even Walton concedes that in many of its OT uses there is some ambiguity about whether its focus is on functional or material creation.²³ But even if the ambiguous uses *suggested* a functional focus, this would not by definition *exclude* a material focus.

In response to point 2, even if Genesis 1:2 describes the initially created world as non-functional, this does not exclude the fact that God did create it *ex nihilo*, nor does it exclude the possibility of God subsequently creating the celestial bodies, plants, animals, and initial humans *ex nihilo* with functionality in order to bring order to the cosmos.

In response to point 3, the ANE cultural context was idolatrous at its foundation and therefore not relevant as an interpretive basis for inspired Scripture. The falsehood of conflating the Creator and his creation cannot serve as an interpretive basis for divinely inspired truth.

In response to point 4, the idea of the creation as a cosmic temple is also a product of the “conflationist” ANE context in which the gods and the cosmos were ontologically indistinguishable. The idolaters of the ANE may have believed that the cosmos was the grand temple in which their false gods dwelled, but the Bible is clear about the fact that the one true God

²³ Ibid., 43.

does not dwell within the cosmos (1 Kgs 8:27). God’s earthly temple was a post-fall institution necessitated by the fall; and even though God caused his name to dwell there (1 Kgs 8:29) and manifested his presence there (1 Kgs 8:10-11), reading a post-fall institution back into the pre-fall creation is the very definition of eisegesis.

Walton correctly states that those who believe Genesis 1 *does* concern the material origin of the cosmos need to provide an *affirmative* argument for this belief rather than just assume that it is true because that is what they have always believed.²⁴ Is there an affirmative argument in favor of a material as well as functional interpretation of Genesis 1?

The answer is yes, although the argument is more theological than textual. As was argued in the previous section, the consistent and repeated OT prohibitions against idolatry reveal a compelling theological reason for the one true God to make clear from the very beginning that he is not to be conflated with his creation. At the time of writing of the book of Genesis, every other ANE people group had a deeply rooted conflation of their false gods and the cosmos woven into the very fabric of their worldview. What more strategic place would there be than the very beginning of God’s inspired Scripture to clarify in writing, once and for all, that the one true God is neither a material object nor any other kind of human creation, material or immaterial?

As far as the text, the connections between Genesis 1 and the NT creation *ex nihilo* texts that Walton affirms are fairly straightforward. John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1 (LXX) both begin with the phrase Ἐν ἀρχῇ (“In the beginning”).

(Gen 1:1 LXX) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.	In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.
(John 1:1) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.	In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²⁴ Ibid., 93.

Verses such as Genesis 1:6 describe God (the Father) *speaking* the creation into existence; John 1:1 identifies God the Son as the *Word* who was with God and who was God.

Colossians 1:16 and Genesis 1:1 both use “the heavens and the earth” to refer to the entirety of creation:

(Gen 1:1 LXX) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.	In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.
(Col 1:16) ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς	By him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth.

John 1, Hebrews 11, and Genesis 1 (LXX) all use forms of the verb γίνομαι (“to be / become / come into being²⁵”) to describe how the creation “came to be”:

(Gen 1:3 LXX) καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός Γενηθήτω φῶς, καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς.	And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.
(John 1:3) πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν	Through him all things came into being, and without him nothing came into being that has come into being.
(Heb 11:3) Πίστει νοοῦμεν κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ, εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγενῆσθαι.	By faith we understand that the universe was prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen did not come into being from what is visible.

The statement in Hebrews 11:3 speaks specifically against the idea that Genesis 1 is referring to pre-existing material that God brought into order and function—the φαινομένων (“visible things,” i.e., the material universe), the text tells us, did *not* come into being from what was already there.

The Greek verb γίνομαι and the Hebrew verb הָיָה that it translates in Genesis 1 both refer to “existence” or “being” or

²⁵ Arndt, et al., 196-197.

“coming into being²⁶”; but Walton argues in his second proposition that in the ANE, even existence itself was viewed in functional rather than material terms:

In this book I propose that people in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system* Unless something is integrated into a working, ordered system, it does not exist. Consequently, the actual creative act is to assign something its functioning role in the ordered system. That is what brings it into existence.²⁷

By this reasoning, the Hebrew and Greek verbs used in the text and translation of Genesis 1 would be limited to the assignment of function rather than (material) creation *ex nihilo*; but, again, the question is not what ANE people thought it meant to “exist” but what God thinks it means to “exist.”

God’s concept of existence as he has revealed it in the Scriptures does not appear to be so limited. God defines “being” or “existence” first and foremost in terms of himself and his own existence. When Moses asked God’s name, God’s reply was:

(Exod 3:14) And God said to Moses, “I AM who I AM.”	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־ מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה
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God’s use of the verb **היה** to refer to his completely non-contingent and self-referential existence does not appear to be limited to his “function” (whatever that may be). Since God “existed” before his creation of anything that could be considered to have “function,” God’s conception of what it means to “exist” does not appear to be *limited* to function *only*. Certainly, the contingent and derivative “existence” of the creation *includes*

²⁶ Ibid.; Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 243-44.

²⁷ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 26-27 (emphasis original).

whatever function God intended; but the alleged non-interest of ANE idolaters is not sufficient reason to *exclude* creation *ex nihilo* from the biblical accounts.

Although Walton does acknowledge that interest in material origins had begun to increase by the time the NT was written (meaning, therefore, that NT texts such as Colossians 1:16-17 might include both the material and functional²⁸), he does not appear willing to acknowledge the similarities of terminology and usage between these texts and Genesis 1 (LXX). If the authors of the inspired texts of John, Colossians, and Hebrews were referring to creation *ex nihilo* using nearly identical terminology to the text that formed their entire theological foundation (Gen 1-3 [LXX]), then there appears to be even less reason to exclude creation *ex nihilo* from Genesis 1.

Which Came First, the Distortion or the Truth?

Scholars such as John Currid have identified and analyzed the polemical nature of much of the OT. Currid applies the idea of polemical theology to the OT in this way:

The primary purpose of polemical theology is to demonstrate emphatically and graphically the distinctions between the worldview of the Hebrews and the beliefs and practices of the rest of the ancient Near East. It helps to show that Hebrew thought is not a mere mouthpiece of other ancient Near Eastern cultures.²⁹

As Currid explains, the manner in which Genesis 1 in particular was put into writing strongly suggests a corrective against competing ANE religions. He cites three examples in which Genesis 1 appears to speak against ANE creation myths: the תַּיִן וְתַיִם (“great sea creatures”), which are rebellious deities in ANE mythology but mere creations of YHWH, the celestial bodies (Gen 1:14-18) that have divine significance in ANE mythology but are material objects created by YHWH for mankind’s benefit, and the מַיִם (“[primeval] waters”) which

²⁸ Walton, *Lost World of Genesis One*, 96-97.

²⁹ John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 25.

represent primordial chaos in ANE mythology but are nothing more than the starting point of YHWH’s creation.³⁰

Although Currid’s argument about the polemical force of Genesis 1 is well-reasoned, the question still remains of how the Sumerian, Egyptian, and Babylonian creation stories originated. With all the similarities between each other and the early chapters of Genesis, it appears highly unlikely that the ancients could have all made up the same story independently of each other. But how could they have all borrowed from a text that would not be written for at least another thousand years?

Any proposed answer to this question would be mostly in the realm of speculation, but Genesis 9 does provide a possible clue. Once the flood waters had subsided and Noah’s family had left the ark, God made a covenant with Noah and the rest of humanity using terminology nearly identical to Genesis 1. In addition to God’s repetition of humanity’s creation in his image (Gen 9:6, 1:27), God also reiterated the (pro)creation mandate:

<p>(Gen 9:1) And God blessed Noah and his sons, and he said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”</p>	<p>וַיְבָרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־ נֹחַ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ</p>
<p>(Gen 1:28) And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.”</p>	<p>וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּ</p>

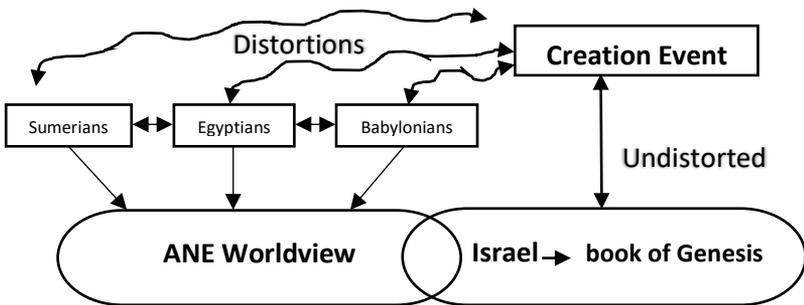
God’s ongoing provision of food for man and beast is similarly echoed with some slight modifications:

³⁰ Ibid., 44-45.

<p>(Gen 9:3) Every moving thing that is itself alive will be for you as food; As I gave to you the green plant, I give all.</p>	<p>כִּלְרִמֶּשׂ אֲשֶׁר הוּא־חַי לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ כִּי־רַק עֵשֶׂב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל</p>
<p>(Gen 1:29) And God said, “Behold, I give to you every plant bearing seeds that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree in which is the fruit of the tree bearing seeds; it will be for you as food.”</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־ כָּל־עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ פְּרִי־עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ</p>

One reasonable (though speculative) possibility is that YHWH communicated to Noah and his sons the *entire* creation story during the course of his post-flood communication with them in which he established his covenant (Gen 9:1-17). Noah’s sons then began the oral transmission of what would become Genesis 1-9, and somewhere along the way it began to get distorted by idolatrous humanity (Rom 1:18-23) until these distortions were eventually written down in the form of the various ANE creation stories. Then, once YHWH had chosen and established a nation for himself (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 19:4-6), he then revealed to his people the actual un-distorted creation story that had been twisted along the way.

In that case, the relationship between the ANE worldview and the book of Genesis would be more accurately depicted thus:



Since all truth ultimately originates in the one true God, the truth of the creation event would by definition have to precede any

subsequent distortions of it. Impossible though it may be to determine exactly how much the ancients knew about the actual creation event (or at what point the distortions began), both the event itself and the truth about it that eventually became Genesis 1 have both *theological* and *chronological* priority over the ANE distortions of it. Without truth there can be no suppression of truth (Rom 1:18), and without possession of truth there can be no exchange of truth for a lie (Rom 1:25).

Conclusion

Walton correctly warns against reading modern cultural perspectives back into ANE texts. In particular, he consistently claims that the modern Western preoccupation with materialism and the material world has *a priori* ruled out any option other than a material ontology:

Most interpreters have generally thought that Genesis 1 contains an account of material origins because that was the only sort of origins that our material culture was interested in. It wasn't that scholars examined all the possible levels at which origins could be discussed; they presupposed the material aspect.³¹

Walton may be correct that modern Westerners are far more concerned with material origins than ANE peoples were, but materialism is not the only kind of eisegesis. There is also a modern Western cultural value called *pluralism* that tends to treat all religions as morally and theologically equivalent and therefore all possessing an equal claim to truth:

...the views of deity in the ancient world served as the context for Israel's understanding of deity. It is true that the God of the Bible is far different from the gods of the ancient cultures. But Israel understood its God in reference to what others around them believed.³²

³¹ Ibid., 44.

³² Ibid., 13.

By evaluating the God of the Bible and the deities of the Ancient Near East in terms of *similarities* and *differences* rather than *truth* and *falsehood*, Walton is reading modern Western pluralism back into the text of Scripture; the God of Israel may have been different from ANE deities, but ANE concepts about deity formed the basis of Israel's conception of who God is. By this reasoning, the ANE was nothing more than a marketplace of religious opinion, and the Israelites just wanted to be different from everyone else.

This is exactly the opposite of what the Bible teaches. The one true God is not understood in reference to anyone or anything other than himself (Exod 3:14), and any competing claim of deity is false by definition since there is only one actual God (Isa 45:5). The point that has consistently been lost in discussions about the book of Genesis and ANE literature is not where the similarities and differences are *located* but where the similarities and differences *came from*.

The lost truth of Genesis is simply this: the ANE worldview was *not* theologically neutral. Even if it is correct to say that ANE people were interested only in functional origins and not in material origins, this corresponding interest/non-interest was the result of the most fundamental rejection of God: worshiping the creation rather than the Creator and thereby blurring, if not completely obliterating, the ontological distinction between the two. Any worldview that rejects such a foundational truth of Scripture is by definition incapable of forming its interpretive foundation. There is no middle ground between light and darkness. There is no "third way." Either the one true God is transcendent and ontologically distinct from his creation, or some number of false gods are ontologically conflated with the creation.

While the Bible is certainly clear that the one true God wants his people to understand how the universe functions in all of its various types of created order, the Bible is equally clear that the one true God also wants his people to understand and uphold the ontological distinction between the material universe and its transcendent Creator. Regardless of whether ANE people (or even God's people) were interested in material origins or not, God *is* interested in his people understanding the material origins

of his creation so that his people do not fall into the same kind of idolatry that darkened the Ancient Near East.