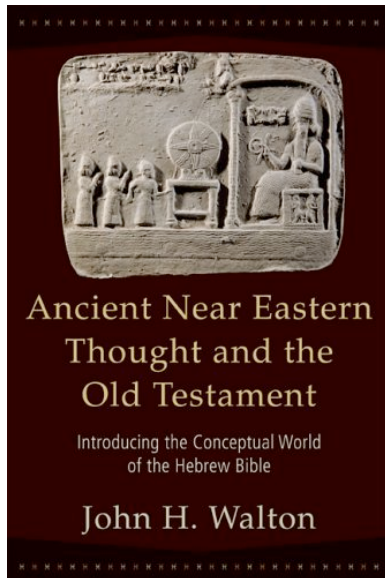


RBL 10/2007



Walton, John

Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006. Pp. 368, Paperback, \$24.99, ISBN 0801027500.

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Comparative studies abound in our field. Discussions of the “Bible and,” focusing on a particular theme or text from the ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean world, are commonplace. What is unusual is a one-volume, comprehensive treatment of how the Hebrew Bible participates in and differs from the cultures of the ancient Near East. Drawing from a wide array of scholarship on the textual remains of the ancient Near East (archaeology rarely factors into his discussions), John Walton’s new volume offers just such a rare synthesis. His analysis demonstrates many conceptual similarities between the Hebrew Bible and its ancient Near Eastern neighbors and locates the Bible’s uniqueness in covenantal theology and its portrayal of Yahweh’s divine nature. Ultimately, Walton believes, Yahweh, unlike all other ancient Near Eastern deities, desired a relationship with his people and revealed to them—in the Hebrew Bible—not just his will but also his character.

Walton is very well informed in both primary and secondary literature, writes clearly, and offers several interesting comparative suggestions throughout the book. As a work of synthetic presentation, the book is primarily geared toward students and the interested public. But given its narrow theological orientation and problematic methodology, this

book, unfortunately, cannot be recommended for the university classroom or for library purchase.

Walton divides his work into five thematically oriented parts: comparative studies (chapters 1–2), literature of the ancient Near East (chapter 3), religion (chapters 4–6), cosmos (chapters 7–8), and people (chapters 9–14).

Part 1 contains the methodologically foundational chapters “History and Method” and “Comparative Studies, Scholarship, and Theology.” Because these chapters orient the entire volume and are seriously flawed, they will receive more substantial comment below.

Part 2 offers thumbnail summaries of a generous selection of texts (arranged according to genre) from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant, and provides references to accessible translations. Alongside the works usually included in such lists, Walton includes lesser known texts like Shurpu as well as some notes about various ancient Near Eastern archives (e.g., Emar, Mari, and Ebla).

Parts 3, 4, and 5 form the heart of the book (chapters 4–14). In each of the constituent chapters Walton provides descriptions of various aspects of the ancient Near Eastern “cognitive environment” (Walton’s term for “worldview,” used to refer to concepts or beliefs shared by all or some of the ancient Near Eastern cultures as well as those that are distinctive to each). His treatment shows sensitivity to the differences in the individual cultures, often treating Egypt separately from Mesopotamia and/or the Hittites.¹ Part three (87–161) presents ancient Near Eastern concepts of ontology and deity, the role of temples and rituals, and the ideas of state and family religion. Part 4 covers cosmic geography and cosmology/cosmogony (165–99). Part 5, the longest in the book (203–329), treats human origins and the role of humanity in the universe, historiography, divination and omens, the ideology of cities and kingship, the concepts of law and wisdom, and finally death and the afterlife. Walton commendably roots his syntheses and generalizations in frequent references to and quotations from primary documents.

Throughout these chapters Walton uses gray-shaded text boxes called “Comparative Explorations” to take up a point from the main text and compare it with the Hebrew Bible. These occur about every three or four pages and vary in length from less than one to several pages. In chapter one, for example, there is a comparative discussion of “ontology and theogony in Israel,” (91) “Yahweh’s council” (94–95), and a particularly

¹ One suspects Jan Assmann’s *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (trans. Andrew Jenkins; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) has influenced the title of Walton’s book and its “cognitive environment” theme. (See <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2004/2004-06-51.html> for a review of Assmann in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.)

interesting box on “How is Yahweh different from the gods of the ancient Near East?” (110), among others. Walton offers many useful comparative interpretations and several provocative suggestions. Concerning the latter, for example, Walton reads Jer 31:33 in light of Mesopotamian divinatory notions of the gods writing their will on the exta of an animal (257–58); the notion of divine writing from this perspective, Walton suggests, changes the human heart in Jeremiah into a medium of revelation that can inform others about Yahweh. He also presents a celestial divinatory background for understanding the stopping of the sun and moon in Josh 10:12–15, which he interprets not as an account of an astronomical miracle but as a report of the manifestation of an unfavorable omen (262–63)—if only Galileo had known Enuma Anu Enlil!

But Walton’s comparisons are sometimes controversial or even entirely unacceptable. For example, according to Walton, Mesopotamia had exteriorized ethics (actions) while the Hebrew Bible developed interiorized morality (right and wrong) (152–54 [main text]); the gods of the ancient Near East acted on whim at times but Yahweh never did so (despite appearances, 141); the ancient Near Eastern gods existed in the cosmos, Yahweh above it (98 and 195, n. 2); ancient Near Eastern ritual was the result of common sense and experimentation, the Hebrew Bible’s came from revelation (142, 137 [main text]); ancient Near Eastern law and wisdom attempted social control whereas the Hebrew Bible instilled a value system (singular; 299). There are indeed many distinctive ideas in the Hebrew Bible and these should provoke interpretation and explanation. But Walton’s attempts often seem overly influenced by his theological predisposition to distinguish the Hebrew Bible from its historical matrix. In the following treatment of Walton’s opening two chapters, one will see that this evaluation also applies to the methodological foundations of the book.

Walton’s first chapter (15–28) looks at the history and method of comparing biblical materials to the ancient Near East. His brief overview of the history of comparative studies (15–18) highlights the well-known fact that critical polemics and confessional apologetics have steered the intellectual enterprise of comparison from the very beginning. Although apparently wanting to offer an alternative to this impasse, Walton explicitly returns to this intellectual dichotomy throughout the remainder of the book, very clearly takes a side (see below), and thereby perpetuates the dichotomy that he wants to bridge. This is the book’s most problematic aspect.

The rest of the chapter (18–28) treats “methodology,” but most of its text is devoted to justifying comparative study and only alludes to principles of comparison *inter alia*. Walton effectively demonstrates that biblical authors were fully ensconced in the ancient Near Eastern “cognitive environment” and must be read in light of that environment if one wants to appreciate their significance in ancient times and avoid imposing one’s own

modern worldview on them. (The latter idea comes up several times and will require further comment.) But given the fact that the section's concern is establishing a methodology for comparison, one wonders why he concludes with only a very brief enumeration of ten general principles of comparison (e.g., "both similarities and differences must be considered"; "careful background study must precede comparative study"; "similar functions may be performed by different genres in different cultures") without further explanation. These implicitly inform Walton's comparative practice in chapters four to fourteen—and thus give the reader a view of his principles in practice, but a more explicit and sophisticated methodological discussion is needed.

Chapter 2, "Comparative Studies, Scholarship, and Theology," is the most revealing chapter methodologically. Walton begins with an elaboration upon the critical vs. confessional dichotomy introduced in the opening pages. The author shows how comparative studies have posed challenges to both critical and confessional scholars, have met resistance from each, and have been employed by both for polemical purposes. He then presents what seems to be a mediating position, what he calls the "integrated role" of comparative studies, to which he assigns three aspects: 1) critical analysis, which "serves to provide a wide range of information by which we can understand in more advanced ways the history and literature of the biblical world"; 2) defense of the biblical text, which even non-confessional scholars can contribute to; and 3) exegesis, about which Walton warns, "if we do not bring the information from the ancient cognitive environment to bear on the text, we will automatically impose the parameters of our modern worldview, thus risking serious distortion of meaning."

The chapter concludes with a flow chart illustrating "Roles for Comparative Study" (40). According to this chart, general cultural studies inform comparative studies. Comparative studies flow into critical analysis, where one engages in historical reconstruction and literary comparison. Positive assessment of the biblical text leads to exegesis or may contribute to apologetic purposes. Negative assessment in the critical analysis stage shunts the information to apologetics, which goes on the offensive to prove the Bible true or on the defensive to deflect criticism. In other words, critical analysis in Walton's "integrated role" of comparative studies *never* offers a "negative" assessment of the Bible ("Negative" is defined, one surmises, as anything that may detract from the fundamental truth[s] of the Bible.) If one compares this chart to the conclusion of the earlier section called "Challenges to Confessional Scholarship,"² one will see that Walton's mediating position is really nothing but a slightly disguised confessional one. Thus, there are two reasons to

² "Scholars engaged in this work use their research to challenge the conclusions of critical scholarship and in the process to authenticate the biblical text. Such studies intend to exonerate the Old Testament and defend against spurious attacks on its integrity" (36).

do comparative analysis according to Walton: to understand the “positive” things about the Bible and to defend it against those who would point out its purported “negative” features. For anyone engaged in teaching students to think critically and independently, this view of comparative study and caricature of critical analysis is unacceptable.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Walton’s integrated comparative method violates his own principle of *not* imposing one’s modern cognitive environment onto the Bible, a warning he intones throughout the book. But modern imposition on the data is of course unavoidable not only in one’s descriptions but in one’s very approach to the comparative task—everyone commits a theoretical imposition. Analysis requires a circumscription of a body of data, a delimitation of context, the formulation of questions from interaction with the data, and the construction of categories through which to analyze the data. All of these come from the interpreter. Walton realizes this tacitly, for example, when talking about the analytical difficulty of distinguishing “religion” from “life” in the ancient Near East (87) and explicitly in his treatment of historiography (217–37, esp. 220). But his resistance to embrace self-consciously and address in a methodologically explicit manner the role of the investigator leaves the reader with a rather naïve impression of the comparative process: one takes the “givens” and sifts the data through the ancient context with a few general rules as guides, all the while trying not to think too much like a modern, in order to gain information about the truth of the Bible. A look at other comparative enterprises in the humanities will show that this is a woefully inadequate approach.

Two representative ideas in the book, myth and historiography, will demonstrate how the critical/confessional dichotomy and the resistance to embrace a self-consciously constructive analytical approach to comparison creates problems in the text.

Walton defines “myth” as “stories in which the gods are the main characters” that many people consider “fanciful and fictional” since they do not believe in the reality of the deities (43). However, given the fact that some people still believe in the god of the Hebrew Bible, “myth,” Walton observes, can present problems. But, as he notes, “it is irrelevant whether the modern reader believes the gods of the Babylonians or the God(*sic*) of Israel exist. The significance and nature of the literature are not dependent on *our* assessment of their reality. These accounts serve as important sources for coming to understand the worldviews of the ancients” (44, emphasis original). This is a commendable, middle-path distinction to help ease the problems some readers will have with “myth.” Moreover, this kind of reflection demonstrates how one’s analytical categories can identify with or undermine certain ideological positions. This is all methodologically and pedagogically solid. There is a problem, unfortunately, because Walton causally uses the words “myth” or “mythological” throughout the remainder of

the book only in relation to non-Israelite materials. Therefore, despite the fact that he actually introduces a well-established comparative analytical category in the study of religion³ and reflects upon it, he deploys it elsewhere in such a way as to underline a confessional theological agenda and undermine his own statement about the irrelevancy of modern ideas about the gods (essentially, if only briefly, espousing methodological atheism). Walton neither upholds a mediating position nor avoids imposing his own modern assumptions.

Despite much that is praiseworthy in his general discussion of historiography, Walton's treatment is equally problematic. In his treatment of the role of deity in historiography, he writes: "The denial of supernatural causation by many [!] of today's historians means that any ancient document used in reconstructing a history that conforms to present-day standards needs to be 'adjusted' by the modern historian to delete its non-empirical data and eliminate its supernaturalistic bias. Such may be considered necessary in order to present ancient history to a modern reader, who will want to read history expressed in the context of his or her own cognitive environment, but it represents cultural imperialism" (220–21). Later, in assessing how proper historiographical concerns complicate both critical and confessional uses of the biblical materials, Walton says "critical scholarship needs to rethink its imperialistic and anachronistic imposition of modern standards and values on ancient texts" whereas he challenges confessional scholars "to rethink precisely what constitutes the truth of the text that they seek to defend" (235). Even allowing for the dubious assumption that recent critical scholarship is actually guilty of *not* being concerned with understanding ancient documents through indigenous historiographical practice, this rhetorical juxtaposition virtually vilifies the critical scholar and associates truth with confessionalists. Moreover, his whole treatment of historiography implies that one may read ancient historiographical testimony in its *ancient* cognitive environment—and I think one should—but that it is unacceptable to then translate that reading into a *modern* (or post-modern [?]) historical interpretation. Invocation of the derogatory "imperialism" ensures that no one would dare try.⁴ On the other hand, because Walton defines Israelite historiography as "theological history" that reveals Yahweh's character and legitimates his covenant, it seems the confessional approach, though slightly scolded, finds an implicit vindication.

³ See, e.g., William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 69–92.

⁴ This invocation of imperialism, in my opinion, is an example of a "faith-based" approach to scholarship appropriating the rhetoric of post-modernism in order to fashion themselves as oppressed and thereby find legitimacy, alongside other historically marginalized groups, in the secular, post-modern academy. See Johannes C. Wolfhart, "Postmodernism," in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (eds. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; New York: Cassell, 2000), 388–92.

Perhaps, instead of exploiting the critical/confessional dichotomy for rhetorical purposes and concluding his comparative discussion with the rather weak statement that the Bible “offers a different sort of testimony [i.e., than empiricism] that we must respect” (236),⁵ Walton could have enhanced his presentation by discussing how an informed historiographical reading of the biblical testimony, that is, one that factors in all the historiographical conventions of the ancient context, can be appropriated into our own, no-less ideologically motivated historical concerns. Maybe he could have even offered brief examples of Marxist, positivist, feminist, and Evangelical contemporary historical interpretations.

There are several other issues that one might discuss in the context of a review, but there is simply not enough space to go into them all. On a practical note, the author uses short titles in footnotes after an item’s initial reference, but the bibliography, though not marked as such, only lists selected works. Tracking down a full citation can be time consuming.

In conclusion, Walton shows considerable erudition in this volume and has used it to produce another confessional contribution to the comparative debate. Despite much that is useful, the book is not an appropriate adoption for classrooms outside the Bible college or conservative seminary.

⁵ This statement occurs right after Walton affirms that there is no empirical means to prove or disprove the deity’s involvement in historical events or outcomes—again, he affirms methodological atheism. But, Walton seems to believe that this inability lends historical credibility to the Israelite historiographical tradition whereas most historians and religious studies scholars see this as reason to focus on humanistic explanations. See Seth D. Kunin, *Religion: The Modern Theories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 74.