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Matt H. Hamilton
Liberty University, mhhamilton@liberty.edu

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Abstract

Much ink has been spilled over the interpretation of Gen. 1:1, particularly in modern times. While these interpretations are diverse, two authors that deviate away from most identifiable norms are John Sailhamer and John Walton. Sailhamer thinks Gen 1:1 is a literal event that took place over an indeterminate block of time preceding the rest of creation. Walton, on the other hand, questions the presupposition of material ontology present in many contemporary accounts of creation, arguing instead that God's creating should be understood as assigning function. This essay will seek to compare both scholars' views, summarizing them, finding possible convergences, and areas of divergence. Having established these positions, it will be argued that Sailhamer has the stronger case to make.

Keywords

John Sailhamer, John Walton, Gen. 1:1, Creation, Historical Creationism, Functional Creation, reshit, bara

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹ Few verses have generated such controversy as this unit of text within the scope of contemporary times. There are almost innumerable ways to approach Gen 1:1, from interpreting it as metaphorical versus literal history, to understanding it as a title to the rest of Genesis 1, questioning its relationship to creation *ex nihilo*, etc. This paper will attempt to narrow this massive topic to a singular point of discussion by comparing and analyzing the views of John Sailhamer and John Walton, both of whom are respected scholars with a history of making valuable contributions in their fields. Sailhamer offers a novel way of examining Gen. 1:1 by grammatically and syntactically breaking down the verse, centering his discussion on the meaning of the Hebrew word רֵאשִׁית. Walton, meanwhile, argues that instead of comprehending Gen. 1:1 as detailing material creation, we should understand it in a functional manner, as is the case in its ANE contemporaries. In some areas, Sailhamer and Walton complement each other, but in many more areas, they diverge. This paper will seek to investigate these relationships between the two views while at the same time evaluating their claims.

View 1: John Sailhamer and Historical Creationism

As a sort of prolegomena, Sailhamer denies the idea that Genesis 1:1 is a title/summary connected to the rest of the creation story. Instead, he believes it to be an event that took place. It is an act of God, and the rest of the chapter goes on to detail the further work of God that is “subsequent to that creation.”² It is not a title telling of everything that happens later in the chapter, but a real and important undertaking by God that plays a key role in creation. Sailhamer justifies this view with three points.

Number one is that in the original Hebrew (“בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ”³), the first verse is a statement. However, titles in Hebrew are not formed as statements. Rather, they consist of simple phrases. Take, for example, Genesis 5:1, which reads, “This is the book of the generations of Adam” or Genesis 2:4a, “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” These, according to Sailhamer, clearly represent how titles look in Genesis.⁴ Both are different than Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the

¹All Scripture references will be taken from the NASB, unless otherwise indicated.

²John Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 103.

³*The Lexham Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ge 1:1.

⁴Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 102.

heavens and the earth.” If Genesis 1:1 was a title, it would state “‘God’s creation of the heavens and earth.’ Or at least, ‘This is an account of God’s creating the heavens and the earth.’”⁵ However, this is not the case. Both of the other “title verses” differ from Genesis 1:1, as they are simple phrases instead of statements. Also, as Sailhamer notes, “Judging from the author’s style in Genesis, summary statements at the beginning of a narrative are, as a rule, nominal clauses (e.g., Genesis 2:4a; 5:1; 6:9; 11:10). When verbal clauses serve as summaries, they are attached to the end of the narrative (e.g., Genesis 2:1; 25:34b; 49:28b)”⁶

Number two is that there exists the conjunction “and” at the beginning of Gen. 1:2. This would make it very unlikely that Gen. 1:1 is a title/summary. In Hebrew grammar, the conjunction “and” is used very carefully.⁷ A conjunction is a word that links words, phrases, clauses, etc., together. As such, it acts as a sort of joiner between speech.⁸ Since Genesis 1:2 isn’t a title, it would not make sense for Gen. 1:1 to be a title as well. Sailhamer also notes, the fact that there is a conjunction at the beginning of 1:2 indicates that the following text (1:2-2:4) is coordinated with 1:1, instead of being appositional. If the first verse was written with the intention of being a summary, then it would be appositional and not possess the conjunction (like in Gen. 2:4a;5:1). Elsewhere in Genesis shows the role of the conjunction in coordinating clauses. For example, Gen 2:4b-7, “the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven (2:4b)... now (the conjunction) no shrub of the field (2:5)... the Lord God formed man (2:7).”⁹

Number three is that Genesis 1 has a summary title at its conclusion. The question that Sailhamer poses is essentially this, “Why would Genesis 1 have a summary at its *beginning* and one at its *conclusion* (Gen. 2:1 provides this conclusion, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts”)?” This would be unexpected and unneeded. Sailhamer thinks that having a summary statement at the end of chapter one suggests that Gen. 1:1 has a purpose other than being a title/summary. That purpose would be an event in God’s creation.¹⁰

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 253.

⁷Ibid., 103.

⁸Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 411.

⁹Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 253.

¹⁰Ibid., 103.

Now that Sailhamer has established the idea of Gen. 1:1 being an actual act of God, he moves on to deciphering the narrative purposes of Gen. 1:1. The first narrative purpose that it holds is the fact that it identifies the creator of the universe. This is the biblical God, Elohim. Beyond this statement, the biblical author does not appear to be much effort to provide further description. Perhaps this is because the author was not afraid of people mistaking other gods with Elohim. Later, in the Pentateuch, more description is given to God, such as being the one who called the fathers, Yahweh, etc. This identification served to distinguish the God of the covenant from other gods, according to Sailhamer. God alone created the universe. This idea is later reinforced by further verse, which declares: “Thus you shall say to them, ‘The gods that did not make the heavens and earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens,’” (Jeremiah 10:11) “For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the Lord made the heavens” (Psalm 96:5). The identity of the creator God was a useful theological distinctive for biblical writers. Creation also has been crucial in showing God’s deity and power.¹¹

The second narrative purpose is to reveal the origin of the world. When left alone to be read in its natural sense, Gen. 1:1 reveals that God created the entire universe. Everything in that universe owes its existence/beginning to God, and by implication, appears to confirm that God alone is eternal. Creation had a beginning, but God does not. There also are *creation ex nihilo* connotation’s to be drawn out as well.¹²

The next part of Sailhamer’s view is his exegetical conclusions drawn from Gen. 1:1. These have to do with the Hebrew word for “beginning” and the merism, “the heavens and the earth.” At this point, he has already established that Gen. 1:1 is a real act of creation, and not only that, but it precedes every other action God has related to the world. This is because of its position in the chronological order of events. Sailhamer contends that “beginning” has been misunderstood when read in English. Its Hebrew counterpart, *reshit*, has a much more specific sense when used in Scripture. “In the Bible the term always refers to an extended, yet indeterminate duration of time – *not* a specific moment.”¹³ It is an unlimited duration or block of time that *precedes* a string of time periods/events. To get a feel for this word, it would be helpful to look at the

¹¹Ibid., 103-104.

¹²Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 104-105.

¹³Ibid., 38.

contexts in which it is used in Scripture. Some of the relevant verses are Job 8:7, Genesis 10:10, and Jeremiah 28:1.¹⁴

In Job 8:7, *reshit* refers to the early duration in Job's life where he grew into maturity, raised a family, and became renowned for prosperity/wisdom *before* his misfortunes took over. It was a lengthy and undecided period of time. Genesis 10:10 uses this word to refer to the early part of Nimrod's kingdom. Also, whenever the Bible speaks about the reigns of Israel's kings, *reshit* is used as part of a unique reckoning system.¹⁵ In this reckoning system, the first period of a king's rule was not counted towards the official length of his rule. The origin of this practice is unknown, but an unspecified period happened where the king reigned, but that time was not officially counted. Scribes would begin counting years only after this indeterminate period (which could be months or years), which was referred to as, "the beginning [*reshit*] of his reign."¹⁶

There are cases in the Bible where this "beginning" lasted multiple years. For example, Jeremiah 28:1 has the *reshit* of King Zedekiah's reign happening over the span of four years. Sailhamer contends that the use of this word is vital in determining the relation of Gen. 1:1 to the overall scheme of creation. He says, "the text does not say that God created the universe in the first moment of time... it says God created... during an indeterminate period of time *before the actual reckoning of a sequence of time began*"¹⁷ (italics added). This sequence of time after the "beginning" would be the seven-day week. Sailhamer claims that the author was uninterested in the "beginning" but rather the time periods that follow. The chronological framework of reckoning used in 1:1 is the same system of reckoning that later was used for the chronologies of Israel's kings. Sailhamer also further points out that *reshit* is not the only word for "beginning" in the Hebrew vocabulary. There exist other words that can be used that have the meaning of "initial point" or "start." If used in 1:1, they would give the sense that everything had been created in an instant. Since the author did not use these words, an "instantaneous" beginning is not in mind.¹⁸ Instead, Sailhamer posits that while we cannot get an exact period of time from the text, given what we know about the universe, it is likely that millions or billions of years transpired during *reshit*.¹⁹

¹⁴Ibid., 38-39.

¹⁵Ibid., 39.

¹⁶Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 39.

¹⁷Ibid., 40.

¹⁸Ibid., 40-41.

Sailhamer now focuses his attention on the end of Gen. 1:1 where we see the word “the heavens and the earth.” They combine to form a figure of speech that is referred to as a merism. When two words are fused to express a single idea, that is a merism. When a merism combines two extremes/contrasts, it expresses totality. This can be seen in Psalm 139:2: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up.” By blending the opposites, “sit down” and “rise up,” the merism indicates that the Lord knows everything about David. Back to Genesis 1:1, “heavens” and “earth” represent two different extremes in the world. The Hebrew language does not have a word for “universe.” But by linking “the heavens and the earth” together, “the Hebrew language expresses the totality of all that exists.”²⁰ It is only by merism that the Hebrew language can communicate the concept of “universe.” Totality here means everything that exists in the universe: stars, planets, earth, undiscovered parts, etc.²¹

To sum up, Sailhamer has made an important exegetical claim. The “beginning” of the universe was an indeterminate amount of time in which all of the universe was created. Not just a little bit. All of it. This would include not just inorganic objects but organic objects as well (such as animals). Humans are the one exception, as the sixth day of creation contains the explicit creation of man and woman. Sailhamer, however, is not unaware of possible critiques that could be launched against his idea. He takes the time at the end of his chapter to answer to such charges. The first has to do with Exodus 20:11. After all, does not God in six days “make” the “heavens and earth” (merism). Would this contradict what he has said thus far? Sailhamer’s answer is in the negative. Exodus 20:11 only appears to say that God created all of the universe in six days. It does not actually do so. Instead, the verse reads, “heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them.” This is not the merism “heavens and earth.” This is a list of God’s distinct works that he made six days, not the totality of the universe. Exodus 20:11 finds its basis in Genesis 1:2-2:4, not Gen. 1:1. The list of things made in Exodus 20:11 – heavens, earth, and seas – all fit better with God’s activity in Gen. 1:2 onward.²² Later references to these events in the Pentateuch are most likely just abbreviated forms of Exodus 20:11.²³

Finally, Sailhamer answers why God has to make the heavens, earth, and seas during Genesis 1:2-2:4 if they have already been created in 1:1? However,

¹⁹Ibid., 105.

²⁰Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 56.

²¹Ibid., 55-56.

²²Ibid., 106.

²³Ibid., 106-107.

there is a difference in how the author of Genesis uses the Hebrew word for “create” in 1:1 and “make” in Gen. 1:2-2:4, Ex. 20:11;31:17. Sailhamer states, “When the text says that on the second day God “made” the sky and the land, it means the same as the English expression “to make” a bed.”²⁴ The same word for “make” also means “to appoint”/“to acquire,” and is used to describe cutting fingernails, washing feet, and trimming one’s beard (Deut. 21:12, 2 Sam. 19:24;25). It means to put it in good order or to make it right. God created the heavens, earth, and seas in Gen. 1:1, but he fixed or prepared them in Gen. 1:2-2:4. This was in preparation for humanity on the sixth day.²⁵ Now that we have adequately covered John Sailhamer’s view, we shall move on to John Walton.

View Two: John Walton and “Functional Creation”

The position that John Walton takes on Gen. 1:1 is embedded in his overall argument for how the creation story goes. Considering that, we will begin by describing Walton’s overall thoughts on creation before moving into his individual pointers on 1:1. Walton argues for a more “face-value” reading of Genesis, where “face-value” means how it would have been understood in its original context. He does this by using a method of comparison that relates the similarities between Genesis and other ancient near-east (ANE) cosmogonies. To properly understand Genesis, Walton contends, one needs to read it the light of the ANE context.²⁶ When this is done, one gets a far different reading than what has been traditional among Christianity.

ANE cosmogonies explain the origin of function and the transition from a cosmos in a non-functioning state to one that is ordered. These cosmogonies take matter’s existence as a presumption, although their interest is not in material origins. Their ontology then is a functional one, where “something exist[s] not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system.*”²⁷ With this ontology, the act of creating “is to assign something its functioning role in the ordered system.”²⁸ This concept in mind, Walton argues that the first six days that God is installing functionaries and creating functions,

²⁴Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 107.

²⁵Ibid., 107-108.

²⁶Scott Ashmon. “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and Origins Debate.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (January-April 2013): 185-188.

²⁷John Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 24.

²⁸Ibid., 25.

then on the seventh day, God rests in his cosmic temple.²⁹ In this way, Walton's interpretation differs from the traditional one (creation in seven literal days) in terms of ontology, as the creation is functional instead of material.

In Walton's view, God "creates" (further analysis of this word in future paragraphs) the foundations for life on days one through three and the principal functionaries on days four through six. Earth is pre-existent at the time of the first day and in a non-functional state. God proceeds to assign the sky as the basis for weather, light for time, and land/vegetation as the basis for food. The stars, moon, and sun distinguish night, day, years, seasons, etc. serve as functionaries for time. Birds and fish on the fifth day are functionaries to multiply in the sky and sea. Animals and humans on the sixth day are functionaries of land. In ANE cosmogonies, the making of the cosmos is occasionally concluded with the building of a temple in which the creator God resides to do various things in the universe. Walton draws this comparison for the seventh day, where it is, therefore, a cosmic temple inauguration. There are several verses in the Bible to back this idea up. "God ceasing... from the work of creation in Genesis 2:2 leads to God resting...in Exodus 20:11. This rest alludes to God's rest...in his temple in Zion (Ps. 132:7-8, 13-14)."³⁰ Therefore the seventh day would seem to suggest that God, after ceasing in his work, rested in his temple ("Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? "For My hand made all these things. Thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD." Isa. 66:1-2). Walton believes that God was establishing functions and assigning functionaries in His cosmic temple as opposed to any material creation in the Genesis "creation" account.³¹

Next, we will move onto Walton's specific conclusions pertaining to Genesis 1:1. He devotes less time to this verse than Sailhamer, but the issues he brings up are no less important. The first issue he addresses is how to interpret *bara*, the Hebrew word for "create". Usually, this word is used to support the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, Walton sees a different use for this word. One of the reasons why *bara* is said to support *creatio ex nihilo* is because the material from which something is created is not stated. Hence, creation out of nothing. Instead, Walton interprets this reticence to signify that *bara* refers only to function rather than material creation (for example, Is. 45:7).³² This would make

²⁹Ashmon, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 186.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ashmon, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 186.

³²Ibid.

sense if, as Walton reasons, that the material world pre-existed the creation account. Then the use of *bara* would fit nicely with other ANE cosmogony accounts and refer to the “creation” of God’s assigned function. This is also supposedly backed up by the fact that within all uses of *bara* in the Old Testament, there is no clear example that demands associating materiality to it. Walton extrapolates: there is “no clear example... that demands a material perspective for the verb, though many are ambiguous. In contrast, a large percentage of the contexts require a functional understanding.”³³

The second issue Walton brings up has to do with the “beginning” in Gen. 1:1. Walton concurs with Sailhamer that *reshit* introduces a period of time rather than a moment in time. He believes that this first period refers to the seven days of creation. This is because Job 8:7 references Job’s early life, Jeremiah 28:1 refers to the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, and the fact that Egyptian/Akkadian texts have similar concepts. Because “beginning” refers to the seven-day period, it would imply that Gen. 1:1 is an introduction to the rest of the chapter. Walton believes that this is backed by the fact that Gen. 2:1 finishes the seven days of creation with, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed.” This would seem to suggest that the creation of the heavens and the earth were the work of seven days and not a block of time that preceded them.³⁴

The overall structure of Genesis as a book would also seem to support this conclusion about the “beginning” in Gen. 1:1. The transitional formula “This is the account of...” is used eleven times throughout Genesis to mark out the sections within the book (Walton remarks that this proves the author of Genesis used initial statements as introductions). Gen 2:4 is the first of these transitions, moving from the creation account to the Garden of Eden. Transitional phrases, by definition, link what comes before it to what comes next. The transitional formula used in Genesis cannot begin a sequence of transitions; it can only continue it.³⁵ Walton believes that *reshit* in Genesis 1:1 would be the most logical place to begin the series of “This is an account of...” As he states, “It would indicate the initial period, while the *tôlêdôt* sections would introduce successive periods” (*tôlêdôt* means “account”).³⁶ Instead of eleven sections, Genesis would have twelve sections, which is more logical given the symbolic nature of numbers in the Bible.³⁷ We have now finished explaining Sailhamer’s and Walton’s

³³Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 43.

³⁴Ibid., 43-44.

³⁵Ibid, 44.

³⁶Ibid.

viewpoint surrounding Genesis 1:1. This paper will next shift to analyzing the various way these two authors complement and contrast each other.

Complementing and Diverging Factors

There are very few differing positions where there is not at least some form of agreement between the two. Sailhamer's and Walton's views would hold this quality. They have some, although not much, convergence. The first point that they complement each other is their rejection of a traditional/common view of creation. The traditional view of creation argues that the correct approach to Genesis 1-3 is to take a literal, historical reading of the text. This would result in the Christian's view of creation having occurred in a literal six-day week.³⁸ Sailhamer would most likely not have any significant issues with this view, although he would delineate from it. Instead, he would most likely charge that those who hold to the traditional view have not interpreted *reshit* correctly in Gen 1:1. The concept of "beginning," meaning an indeterminate period of time, is usually not present in traditional/common interpretations, and certainly not Sailhamer's idea that this undetermined period of time lasted billions of years. Those of the traditional/common view also can read Gen 1:1 as a title or summary of Gen. 1:2-2:1 of the creation account. As was stated in a previous paragraph, Sailhamer does not agree with this notion at all. He believes that Gen 1:1 is a true act of God that is followed by Gen. 1:2-2:1 and does not merely describe it. This factor is key for his argument to work.

Walton, on the other hand, has significant disagreements with the traditional/common view. He disagrees heavily with the idea that Genesis should be read literally, instead proposing that one reads it in light of the ANE accounts. When this is done, the interpreter will understand that the creation account refers to functional creation instead of the past presumed material creation. He also disagrees with those who hold to literal six-day creation in the meaning of the word *bara* (create). Walton, of course, thinks that the lack of material from which something is created in Gen. 1:1 indicates that word refers to creation in terms of making assignments. Traditional/common view adherents would vehemently disagree. They believe that *bara* involves real, physical matter. Sailhamer and Walton are united in that they do not hold to a traditional/common view.

They are also united in that they both believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Neither of them doubts that any verse in the Genesis account is false or

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Todd Beall. "Chapter Two: Reading Genesis 1-2: A Literal Approach," In *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, edited by Daryl Charles, no page (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2013), no page.

uninspired; they differ in their interpretation. This is important because although they are opposites on many issues, they still agree on the inerrancy of Genesis. A final point of agreement is how they interpret *reshit* in Genesis 1:1. Both believe that it applies to an undetermined duration of time rather than a single point of time.

But beyond these few cordial areas of agreement, these two authors could not disagree more on virtually everything surrounding Gen. 1:1. They diverge on their basic ontology, the way to interpret the word *bara* (create), and most momentously on what action God took during the “beginning.” We shall begin by examining the ontology debate, where the nature of being for Sailhamer’s view of creation (the material was generated) and Walton’s view of creation (function was generated) are entirely distinct.³⁹ As was stated before, Walton believes that because Genesis is an ANE cosmogony, it should be read considering this fact. Since ANE cosmogonies were concerned with functional rather than material origins, one should view the creation in Genesis as God assigning something to a functional role within a system. This stands in stark contrast to Sailhamer, who firmly believes that Genesis refers to material creation. This is evident seeing how he thinks that the creation of the universe is a genuine act of God in the “beginning” and that God prepared the land for His people in 1:2-24.⁴⁰

So, whose idea is the most correct on this issue? It would seem that a large number of Old Testament scholars oppose Walton on this issue.⁴¹ Richard Averback notes that it is simply untrue that material creation was not a concern of the ANE world. Mesopotamian and Egyptian cosmogonies provide many examples of material creation. The Egyptian *Memphite Theology* discusses Ptah making everything (divine speech, the god’s towns/nomes, etc.). At the end of Tablet IV of the Epic of Creation in Mesopotamia, Marduk splits Tiamat’s body to create the heavens and underworld. Tablet V describes the creation of landed earth. At the beginning of Tablet VI, humans are created out of the blood of Qingu. This epic also starts off with a deep, dark, watery abyss where the gods do not exist, only Tiamat and Apsu. There are similarities here to Gen 1:2.⁴² One

³⁹Richard Hess, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 3 (2010): 435.

⁴⁰Paul Copan, “Genesis Unbound: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 49, no.1 (March 1997): 65.

⁴¹Lamoreux et al., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), np.

⁴²Richard Averback, “Four Responses to Chapter Five,” In *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, edited by Daryl Charles, no page (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2013), no page.

should conclude from this that material creation was indeed a concern of other ANE cosmogonies, and thus Genesis should not be read purely as functional.

A second argument is made by C. John Collins. Collins admits that comparisons of the Bible to ANE literature are helpful for many reasons but objects to a so-called “forced parallelism.” Just because there appears to be a parallel, it does not mean one always exists. We should distinguish which parallels we use based on their particular justification. The Bible writings are coherent Hebrew texts, not instantiations of other ANE people’s beliefs. These parallels, according to Collins, should be assessed for how they fit into Hebrew words, sentences, paragraphs, texts, etc., not the other way around. People could theoretically not be interested in material origins, but that does not preclude the Hebrew people from not being interested (if it fits the communicative purposes of the whole book). God portrayed as the transcendent and powerful creator, which is shown in His defeat of Pharaoh, fits the audience’s needs—if Israel will be God’s method to spread blessing to the rest of the world, then having a unified origin of humanity suits this well.⁴³

The above paragraph leads to another point, material and functional origins do not have to be opposed. Genesis 1 might indeed be very concerned with the functions of creation, but in no way does the rule out any interest in the material. The material is what performs the functions, after all.⁴⁴ Material origins and functional origins are not mutually exclusive. There are certainly verses that highlight function (Gen. 1:11,14,20), but there are also verses (Gen. 1:3,7,9,14,15,16) where God does appear to create materials.⁴⁵

The next clash that occurs between Sailhamer and Walton has to do with the verb *bara*. Walton, if we remember, believes that *bara* refers to God’s assigning function because the material from which God creates is not stated in Genesis 1:1. He further claims that there are no clear examples of this verb that demand a material perspective in the Old Testament and that a large amount of them necessitate a functional understanding. Because Genesis is an ANE cosmogony, this understanding of “create” will work well with the literary context at the time. Sailhamer believes in the traditional doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* as associated with *bara*. This is because of (1) the lack of pre-existing material in connection with *bara*, (2) the fact that God is the subject of the verb and it

⁴³C. John Collins, “Four Responses to Chapter Five,” In *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, edited by Daryl Charles, no page (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2013), no page.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Douglas Becker, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Themelios* 34, no.3 (November 2009): 359.

appears without analogy, (3) it appears to refer uniquely to divine activity, and (4) *bara* is associated with the whole of creation, that it has been historically attributed to “creation out of nothing.”⁴⁶ Sailhamer, like other Old Testament scholars, would scale back the certainty of knowing *creation ex nihilo* merely from an examination of *bara*, saying, “we would be hard pressed to prove that the idea from the use of the Hebrew word “created” in this context—there is no single word in biblical Hebrew which expresses exactly that idea.”⁴⁷ However, he also says, “we can say that the word used to express the idea of God’s creating the world was deliberately chosen to give this text a sense of a special act of God, one in which something entirely new was created and which God alone was capable of doing.”⁴⁸ Walton views creation as assigning function, while Sailhamer believes it was a special act of God where something new was created. The issue of ontology again rears its head, this time concerning *bara*.

Whose ontology is correct? As was stated above, most scholars are decidedly against Walton. In his book, Walton lists off fifty examples of *bara* in the Old Testament with the declaration that most of them refer to functional creation. However, as many scholars point out, most of these examples refer to material objects. Words have multiple meanings depending on the context. The context is what ultimately determines the sense of the word. One cannot derive the idea that *bara* refers to material creation from the word itself, as Walton seems to do. “Create” in and of itself neither entails nor implies material creation. The implication is drawn from the corresponding noun of the object that is being created. For instance, when it is said that mountains/heavens are being made in Genesis, it is the concrete objects that determine material creation, not the verb itself. The term being referred to sets the context that decides the use of the verb, not the other way around. Genesis 1 continually connects *bara* to material objects, man, sea creatures, etc.⁴⁹ It is thus hard to believe that Israel’s ontology of creation was purely functional, especially when the other uses of *bara* in the Bible are brought into play. In Isa. 4:5, we have God creating fire, cloud, and smoke to show God’s presence. Isa. 40:26 contains God’s making of the heavenly host, which indicates God’s power. Water and trees are constructed by God in Is. 41:17-20 for the poor who thirst. Also, in Isa. 42:5, God creates the heavens and

⁴⁶William Lane Craig and Paul Copan, *Creation out of Nothing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 49-59.

⁴⁷Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 105.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹William Lane Craig, “John Walton’s View of Genesis, Part One,” Reasonable Faith, October 14, 2019, accessed November 21, 2019,

stretches them out.⁵⁰ As Scott Ashmon states, “In each instance. God creates a material object-often from another material object-that can be sensed, used, or altered; has a name; and usually has a function.”⁵¹ Because *bara* in itself does not always refer to functional creation, one can be open to interpreting this verb as relating to material objects in Gen 1:1. This is especially true when one considers the fact that the noun connected to the Hebrew word “create” is the totality of matter in the universe (the “heavens and earth” merism).

The last place of disagreement between Sailhamer and Walton discussed in this paper is their thoughts surrounding *reshit* (“beginning”). This is perhaps the place where they disagree the most. While both authors agree that the “beginning” in Gen. 1:1 refers to an indeterminate period of time, they diverge on its application. Walton believes that the following seven-day creation account takes place during the “beginning.” Sailhamer fundamentally disagrees, as a key part of his theory is *reshit* as a duration of time that precedes the creation week. Part of Walton’s justification for his view is the positioning of Genesis 2:1. Because it is a summary ending the creation week, it most likely points to the act of creating occurring during the “beginning” instead of anything else. This would render Gen. 1:1 to be an introductory verse. Sailhamer specifically challenges this notion. He claims the exact opposite. Having a summary verse at the end of Genesis 1 makes it unlikely that Gen 1:1 is an introduction, as it introduces unneeded repetition. It creates a “heaven was as thus” (1:1) and “heaven was as thus” (2:1) dynamic that serves to add more literary confusion. Walton also further cements his case by claiming that the “time periods” (to use Sailhamer’s wording) after the beginning were the *tôlêdôt* transitional formulas. The seven days of creation happened during the “beginning” and the time periods that proceed from it are the transitional phrases littered throughout Genesis. The net benefit of holding this view is giving the transitional phrases a beginning point and being able to split Genesis into twelve sections. Even though Sailhamer does not talk about this issue in his book, he no doubt would disagree with it, seeing as he thinks the “time periods” after *reshit* were the days in the creation account of Genesis 1.

In the evaluation of this paper, Sailhamer has the stronger case. Walton has two warrants to back up his assertion that Gen 1:1 is an introductory verse. Those are his claims we touched on briefly in the previous paragraph: (1) Having Gen. 2:1 as a summary makes it probable that Gen. 1:1 is an introduction and (2) the overall structure of Genesis dictates that Genesis 1:1 is most likely an introduction. We will start with number (1). Walton’s justification for this claim

⁵⁰Ashmon, “The Lost World of Genesis One,” 187-188.

⁵¹Ibid., 188.

simply is that 2:1 is a summary of the creation week. Therefore it only makes sense that Gen. 1:1 is an introduction. “This suggestion is confirmed...Genesis 2:1 concludes with the seven-day report with the statement that the “heavens and earth were completed,” indicating that the creation...was the work of seven days, not something that preceded them.”⁵² Sailhamer’s response to this is effective. Why would Genesis 1 have an introduction that summarizes the seven-day period and ending that does the same thing? Genesis 1 would not be expected to have two summaries for one chapter. This would be completely unneeded for the narrative. Sailhamer believes that the obvious summary for Genesis 1 is Gen. 2:1. For this reason, one can be certain that Gen. 1:1 is an event.

Walton’s second point is trickier. He argues that there are eleven *tôlēdôt* (“This is the account of”) transitional formulas in the book of Genesis. Gen. 2:4 is one of these transitions. Because transitions link what comes before to what comes after, and transitional formulas cannot begin a sequence of transitions, Gen. 2:4 must have an initial period before it. Gen. 1:1 as an introduction would provide this period, with all the *tôlēdôt* acting as the “time periods” after the *reshit*. This would also serve to divide Genesis into twelve sections, which has greater symbolic value. As mentioned before, Sailhamer does not have a specific answer to this in his original argument (the symbolic part, at least). But there are certain answers that can be given. The first is that Genesis 1:1, unlike 2:4, has its main verb in the perfect.⁵³ C. John Collins argues that when at the beginning of a narrative there is a Hebrew perfect tense, that verse denotes an installment that follows.⁵⁴ Gen. 2:4 lacks this feature. Second, the typical cases in which Hebrew discourse has a heading give clear indications that there is a heading. The transitional formulas have the wording to justify the classification of heading (see Exod. 1:1, Deut. 1:1, Jer. 29:1, Prov. 1:1, Eccl 1:1). All of these, by their special form, reveal they are headings. Gen. 1:1 lacks this special form. With there being a lack of signals, it is best to take Gen. 1:1 as an event.⁵⁵ Sailhamer argues that introductory phrases are not formed as statements but rather as simple phrases. If Genesis were a simple phrase, it would look something like, “This is an account of God’s creating the heavens and the earth.” Sailhamer also notes that introduction/title/summary statements at the beginning of a narrative are nominal clauses as a rule. Gen. 1:1 is neither of these. This would serve to indicate that

⁵²Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 44.

⁵³Vern Poythress, “Genesis 1:1 is the First Event, Not a Summary,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 120.

⁵⁴C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 51-52.

⁵⁵Poythress, “Genesis 1:1 is the First Event, Not a Summary,” 120.

Gen. 1:1 is not in the string of “transitional formulas.” There is also no reason to suggest that Gen. 1:1 is an introduction just because that is more symbolic.

Sailhamer provides additional evidence to ascertain that Gen 1:1 is an event mentioned previously in this paper. The fact that a conjunction exists between 1:1 and 1:2 is excellent evidence that 1:1 is not an introduction. Sailhamer’s view on the relationship of Gen. 1:1 to the rest of Genesis also finds support in contemporary scholars. Several lines of evidence will be briefly stated. Vern Poythress makes the argument that there is a close relationship between 1:1 and 1:2. This is because “earth” is the last term in 1:1 and the first main term in 1:2. A waw-conjunctive (which forms the syntactic linkage) that, when followed by a noun and then the main verb of the clause, introduces circumstantial information. In other words, because of syntax, Gen 1:2 specifies the state of the earth *as already mentioned* in verse 1:1. It is in reference to the earth in Gen. 1:1, meaning the 1:1 cannot be an introduction.⁵⁶ As mentioned before, C. John Collins argues that when the perfect is in the beginning of a narrative, the verse refers to whatever is its antecedent.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Walton and Sailhamer make powerful and unique cases for their positions concerning Gen. 1:1. While disagreeing with each other in terms of their ontology of creation, meaning of *bara*, and interpretation of *reshit*, both can agree in their deviation from the traditional/common view of creation and their belief in the Bible as the Word of God. This convergence and divergence have provided rich grounds for further pedagogy and exegesis on Gen. 1:1. Despite such contributions, in the evaluation of this paper, Sailhamer has the stronger case to make. This is because of various philosophical and exegetical arguments that can be wielded in his favor. Such debate between the two will not cease to continue and will inspire the works of scholars for generations to come.

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