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BOOK REVIEW

John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy. *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2013. 320 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0830864989.

In *The Lost World of Scripture*, John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy analyze “how both the Old and New Testaments were spoken, written and passed on, especially with an eye to possible implications for the Bible’s inspiration and authority” (9). This analysis is uniquely organized around twenty-one propositions on the composition of biblical texts and the modern terms used to denote their authority (e.g., inerrancy). Despite the tendency of such studies, Walton and Sandy assure the reader that they hold “a very high view of Scripture” and affirm its “inerrancy” (12). They merely wish to understand how ancient literary composition methods might impact one’s understanding of biblical authority.

In the first set of propositions (one through four), the authors investigate the means of textual composition in the Old Testament era. For instance, in proposition one—“Ancient Near Eastern Societies Were Hearing Dominant and Had Nothing Comparable to Authors and Books as We Know Them” (17)—the authors argue that, in the Ancient Near East, the oral transmission of information was considered both normal and reliable. Rather than writing for oneself, it was often a scribe who might commit an individual’s tradition to writing in a single document or even a set of documents. Consequently, Walton and Sandy close this set of propositions by suggesting that those who attach inerrancy to the original autographs are misled. Such a view is “anachronistic for most of the Old Testament” as it does not reflect the reality that a biblical author’s work was often promulgated in oral

form first and sometimes initially copied into a variety of parallel documents. Instead, the authority of the biblical authors should rest on “the beliefs of a community of faith that God’s communications . . . have been captured . . . in the literature that has come to be accepted as canonical” (68).

The means of textual composition in the New Testament era are considered in propositions five through thirteen, where the authors assert that the Greco-Roman world, like the Ancient Near East, was hearing dominant. This reality resulted in numerous variants in the oral tradition of Jesus’s words and deeds, as the transmitters of this tradition sought an “informal controlled oral tradition” in which details changed but the core content remained the same. According to Walton and Sandy, some of these textual variants may be seen in the accounts of the placard placed on Christ’s cross, which is rendered in four slightly different ways in the Gospels. However, given that none of the placard accounts is significantly different, this example shows that a biblical account may be accurate and yet differ slightly from another biblical account (or extrabiblical account) due to the flexibility allowed by ancient oral tradition. The authors then conclude: “For many of us, a text of divine revelation accepted as having full authority though not word-for-word exact is a contradiction in terms. Yet the evidence points precisely in this direction . . . Differences in wording and details [do] not put truth at risk” (196).

In propositions fourteen to seventeen, Walton and Sandy consider the impact of ancient literary genres on biblical authority. One of the major discussions in this section regards the distinction in speech-act theory between locutions and illocutions. Locutions refer to words, sentences, and genres, while illocutions refer to the intention to “do something” with locutions (whether instructing, rebuking, etc.). Given that biblical locutions are not authoritative apart from their illocutions, Walton and Sandy argue that the existence of parallel texts and genres in the extrabiblical literature should not affect one’s belief in the authority of Scripture.

Walton and Sandy conclude their book by providing some final propositions on biblical authority and a brief exhortation to

their readers. They suggest that the term “inerrancy” may be reaching its limits for contemporary biblical scholarship. However, they clarify this remark by stating, “If we question the continued sufficiency of the term inerrancy, it is not that we now admit that the Bible has errors—it is rather that the term inerrancy may no longer be clear enough, strong enough or nuanced enough to carry the weight with which it has traditionally been encumbered” (275). This interest in progress and orthodoxy in Walton and Sandy’s argument leads them to provide a concluding discussion on safe beliefs about Scripture (i.e., it is inspired, inerrant, oral in origin, without exact wording), unsafe beliefs (i.e., inerrancy is falsified by orality, biblical accounts are forgeries), and safe questions to ask (i.e., how might biblical authority be better communicated to the body of Christ?).

The positive characteristics of Walton and Sandy’s *The Lost World of Scripture* are many. This book is particularly laudable for its breadth of inquiry and the unique way in which it tackles the issue of biblical authority. In an academic world where biblical studies and theology often speak past one another, Walton and Sandy have successfully applied their biblical expertise to a theological issue. This special combination of historical data and theological sensitivity has a synergistic effect upon one’s learning as one reads the book. Furthermore, there is perhaps no topic in the evangelical world in greater need of ancient historical context than the concept of biblical authority. Walton and Sandy should be commended for recognizing this.

Another positive aspect of the book is its format. As mentioned above, rather than detailing their argument in prose form in each successive chapter, Walton and Sandy have organized their book by a series of propositions. This format makes the book’s argument and flow extremely lucid for the reader. It also makes the book more valuable as a reference tool, because one can easily identify a proposition of relevance to a particular task and hone in on the ensuing discussion.

However, this book is not without its weaknesses. For instance, Walton and Sandy regularly argue that insights into ancient literary culture, particularly its orality, should reform the doctrine of inerrancy (e.g., 60–74, 255–62). Although this may

be true, Walton and Sandy's development of this thesis does not involve engagement with perhaps the greatest defender of classical inerrancy—B. B. Warfield. Warfield was an excellent scholar in his own right and he would have been acquainted with Hermann Gunkel's then ground-breaking studies on the oral traditions behind biblical texts (ca. 1901–10). Nonetheless, Warfield was willing to promote the term inerrancy without much deference to the orality of the ancient world. This suggests that Walton and Sandy could have strengthened their study by engaging with Warfield and thus demonstrating why his synthesis should now be seen as incorrect.

Another possible concern for Walton and Sandy's volume is the manner in which they articulate biblical authority. At certain points in the book, the authors suggest that biblical authority is based on "beliefs" rather than the facts of the text (e.g., 68). They also declare that "biblical authority is found not as much in the facts that are affirmed and the instruction that is given (though those are important); it is found in how each genre of Scripture reveals God to us, and what that revelation is" (278). This articulation of biblical authority seems noteworthy because it does not heavily emphasize authority emerging from properties within the biblical texts themselves (i.e., the relational proximity of the author to Christ or the cohesion of the text's instruction with the rest of the canon). Of course, Walton and Sandy are far removed from questioning the integrity of canonical texts. But the way in which they articulate biblical authority may depend more on ecclesial belief and tradition than some evangelicals would like.

In terms of recommendation, this book is best suited for students and scholars due to its in-depth discussion of social background material. However, Walton and Sandy have kept their volume helpful for the clergy by providing a variety of prescriptions for the evangelical world's understanding of biblical authority.

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