

JOHN H. WALTON
WISDOM
for
FAITHFUL
READING



PRINCIPLES *and* PRACTICES *for*
OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION



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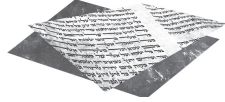
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SECTION A

INTRODUCTION



1—One Quest

The world looking in on Christianity has little understanding of the Bible. This is reflected in the questions skeptics pose interminably in the blogosphere. One permutation of it is reflected in the Peacock television adaptation of Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*. In one scene, Dr. Peter Solomon talks about the Bible to his protégé, Harvard Symbology professor Robert Langdon: “It’s a bizarre book of stories filled with contradictions, with outdated beliefs, with outright absurdities. . . . People sense there is a power in them that we have yet to understand.”¹ Christian insiders often do no better. It is not unusual for insiders to begin looking for a special code, just as Peter Solomon did. Many find it difficult to figure out what they should expect from the Old Testament and how what is purportedly the Word of God has relevance to their lives. They want to be faithful interpreters, but they don’t know how.

Faithful interpretation—that is the essential quest for anyone who takes the Bible seriously. If we believe the Bible is God’s revelation, carrying God’s message, then we must receive it as a trust over which we have a certain stewardship. When we talk about being faithful, we are acknowledging that we must submit to the authority that is inherent in the Bible—because it was given by God. Submitting ourselves means that we recognize

¹A similar conversation takes place in the book (chap. 131), but the television version puts it more succinctly.

our accountability to God and the human instruments that he used. We are not free to pursue our own meanings and message. We cannot be content with “what this passage means to me” as we seek to appropriate the message that is inherent in the text itself. God’s message is in the text, so we are accountable to the text. Nevertheless, the message was communicated by Spirit-led authors, writing with purpose and intention. So our accountability to the text cannot be separated from our accountability to the literary intentions of its authors.

2—*Two Caveats*

“FAITHFUL” RATHER THAN “RIGHT”

Note that I frame this quest by the word *faithful*—not by the word *right*. People who take the Bible seriously have perhaps spent too much time and energy trying to insist that their interpretation is right and the interpretations of others are wrong. This is not to say that interpretations cannot be right or wrong. Nevertheless, in the cases of the most controversial issues, “right” is precisely what is under discussion. Everyone cannot be right, but we should recognize what commends one interpretation over another. That is why I have framed this as “faithful” interpretation. Our methodology should be faithful even though sometimes we might arrive at different answers.

Simply put, an interpretation is the result of identifying evidence (for example, linguistic, literary, historical, theological, cultural) and assessing that evidence, then applying it to a base of presuppositions one holds. Such presuppositions may pertain to what readers believe about the Bible or to the theology they deduce from the Bible. They may be presuppositions held consciously, by choice, or subconsciously, adopted through long years of passive reception and tradition. In the process, interpreters prioritize and shape the various pieces of evidence to accord with their presuppositions and cultural locations to arrive at an interpretation. That interpretation, then, reflects what the interpreters consider having the strongest evidence in light of their governing presuppositions.

Unfortunately, it is common for all of us to consider the interpretation that we prefer, given our perspectives and presuppositions, as simply “right.” It is logical to conclude that the interpretation with the strongest evidence carries the highest probability. But for another reader who has different presuppositions, or who prioritizes the evidence differently, or who is not persuaded that one piece of evidence is legitimate, a different interpretation will take pride of place and be considered as having the strongest evidence.

Using the adjective “faithful” instead of “right” humbly recognizes that we all fall into the pitfalls of blind presuppositions and overlooked evidence. We can only seek to be as faithful as possible. No interpreter is infallible. Maybe sometimes we will even be right, but that is not our claim to make. Certain interpretations may be *disproved* by evidence, but interpretations cannot be *proved* true. Evidence *supports* an interpretation and therefore lends it a higher degree of *probability*.² The greater the evidence that supports a particular interpretation, the higher the probability we are understanding God’s message, and the higher our confidence in our conclusions can be.

COMMUNITY

Even though individual scholars often introduce an interpretation, I would contend that interpretation is ultimately the responsibility of the community. Unquestionably, communities can be misguided and misled just as individuals can. The point I want to make is that we all need each other. No person alone can make every observation that is needed for a strong interpretation. No person alone can assess all the evidence well. No person alone can rise above his or her blind spots and prejudices. Everyone in the community can make observations that others might not make—or can contribute important insights. I have experienced this over the years as I have interacted with my students.

The community should also be valued for vetting the results of a proposed interpretation, though consensus is not required. This is not to say that the community must approve all conclusions, because that would

²I am grateful to my science colleague, Kristen Page, for these important distinctions.

make the community the authority, not the evidence from the text.³ As a cautionary note, history has shown that at times the Christian community has been in general agreement on an interpretation that has later been recognized as inherently flawed.

We need the entire worldwide community of faith to achieve the desired faithfulness most successfully. Still, we can proceed with some modicum of confidence if we are making every attempt to ground our interpretation with three essential commitments: accountability, consistency, and controls.

3—Three Essential Commitments

ACCOUNTABILITY

First, and most importantly, readers of Scripture are accountable to God because we want to discern the message he intended to give, not our own message superimposed on his. But there is another link in the chain. God chose to use human instruments—including tradents, authors, editors, and compilers—through whom to communicate his message. For simplicity, I will group all these human instruments in the designation “author.”⁴ God vested his authority in these human instruments and therefore, since we wish to be accountable to God, we must be accountable to them. If we believe that their message was given and guided by God, our first line of accountability is to understand what those authors intended to communicate to their immediate audience. To turn that around, if the author cannot be shown to have a particular point in his message, then we should not have it in our interpretation.⁵ We are accountable to the author more than to our

³I recognize the early Christian community eventually recognized and designated which books carried authority, but I nevertheless believe that the authority they recognized was God’s authority imbued on the authors.

⁴Though some of the traditions that eventually find their way into the Bible would have been passed down orally, and scribes doing various tasks may have been included, we attach authority to the end literary result that became part of the canon. For further clarification, see chap. 14.

⁵When referring to the authors of Scripture (as broadly defined above), I will be using masculine pronouns since there is no hint that any females were part of the literary process. This simply reflects the realism of the ancient world.

modern communities or traditions. One way to express this is to speak of being tethered to the author’s literary intentions. This wording recognizes that we can neither get “inside his head” and read his mind, nor do we attempt to do so. Instead, we assume that he is a competent, effective communicator and that we can receive the communication he intends.

CONSISTENCY

Once we adopt the author’s literary intention as the focus of our accountability, we must consistently and mercilessly engage in purging our interpretation of anything that cannot be defended as a part of his intention. This is arguably the most important statement in this book. For example, if there is no indication that the author would have been aware of a possible connection between Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac and the crucifixion of Jesus (see below, chap. 15), then consistency and accountability demand that we not make that part of our interpretation of Genesis. If the Old Testament authors show no awareness of the idea that the serpent is Satan (see below, chap. 6), consistency and accountability demand that we not make that part of our interpretation of the Old Testament. Whatever connection the New Testament author makes between the serpent and Satan (itself subject to variable interpretations) would become part of our interpretation of the New Testament texts, not superimposed on the Old Testament. In other words, we should do a contextual reading before we do a canonical reading.

CONTROLS

We therefore need to accept controls on our interpretation willingly. Such controls are found in the methodology that I am proposing throughout the book. Doing so does not mean that we are restraining the Bible; we need to restrain ourselves. Without controls, interpretation becomes more subjective than it inherently is, and we risk losing God’s message entirely. Christian history is filled with examples of when this happened with devastating results: consider the Crusades, the Inquisition, Manifest Destiny, antebellum slavery, and the Holocaust, just to name a few of the

more prominent cases—all justified by biblical interpretation without adequate controls.

*4—Four Fundamental Concepts for Interpretation*⁶

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

We all know that to understand a communication, we must take it in context. Most of us have experienced the discomfort of a situation where someone takes a few words that we have said and twists them into something that we never intended, with negative consequences. In the field of journalism, the journalistic ideal is that quoting someone will take account of the context. Words, phrases, and even paragraphs and narratives can be subject to misinterpretation if they are not considered in the context in which they are given.⁷ A classic example of taking a biblical phrase out of context is when Genesis 31:49 is used for a benediction. The familiar text reads, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.” When we consider the context, easily understood from the surrounding passage, this verse is an expression of distrust that calls on God to monitor Jacob’s behavior for treachery and betrayal. The words cannot be commandeered and used for a blessing. Consider how much more disastrous this is when a couple has it engraved on their wedding rings!

Readers simply must consider contexts of various sorts. Here are summaries of the four most basic: linguistic, literary, cultural, and theological.

1. The *linguistic context* pertains to the task of understanding what a Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word meant to the person using that word and to the audience they addressed. Sometimes that cannot be reflected in a single English word. Moreover, sometimes there are particular nuances to its use in specific contexts, that is, authors and genres can each lend specialized meaning to particular words.

⁶These ideas are commonplace, but I was introduced to them as an entry point for interpretation by Nancy Bowen, Professor of Old Testament, Earlham School of Religion.

⁷For further reading, see Richard Schultz, *Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

Example A—*Hesed*: The Hebrew word *hesed* is translated in many different ways.⁸ The 1995 NASB renders it “lovingkindness” while the NIV uses a variety of English equivalents, such as “unfailing love,” “kindness,” “acts of devotion,” “favor,” and “mercy.”⁹ The problem here is a common one in translation. It is not that translators disagree over the meaning of the word. Rather, to our frustration, there is no true English equivalent to *hesed*. Consequently, no choice can be considered entirely accurate. To represent the word well, we would need a whole sentence, such as, “*Hesed* is an act that fulfills an obligation; whether formal or informal, stated and agreed upon or inherent in the normal expectations of human interaction or protocol. It involves conforming to an understood expectation and, as such, reflects commitment to propriety.” The closest English rendering may be “commitment,”¹⁰ but even that fails to do it justice. Any English word chosen to translate *hesed* adds nuances that are not in the Hebrew word and also loses nuances that are inherent in the Hebrew word. This cannot be helped—it is a hazard of translation (and, therefore, of interpretation). As faithful interpreters, we need to be aware of this variable.

Example B—*Torah*: The Hebrew word *Torah* is often translated “law.” A detailed analysis, however, recognizes that cultures in the ancient Near East were regulated by custom rather than by written legislation. This, added to linguistic analysis, suggests that *Torah* has more affinity to instruction that leads to wisdom than to legislation.¹¹ Again, the Hebrew word carries an array of nuances and connotations that are not present in any English word. These and many other examples that could be discussed demonstrate how important it is to understand the linguistic context of a text so that our understanding of the words coincides with what the ancient author and audience would have understood.¹²

2. The *literary context* pertains to issues of genre (such as proverbs), of form (for example, poetry), of rhetorical devices (such as metaphors), of

⁸Just check the variety of translations of Psalm 136, where it is used thematically in every verse, to see the variations.

⁹For a few examples, see Genesis 19:19; Exodus 15:13; 20:6; 34:6; Joshua 2:12; Ruth 1:8; 2 Samuel 7:15; 9:7; Psalms 23:6; 100:5; 136; Proverbs 19:22; Isaiah 54:8; Daniel 1:9; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:8.

¹⁰John Goldingay, *Daniel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 463.

¹¹For further reading, see John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

¹²For a list of sixty such words, see the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), xix-xxvii.

discourse analysis (how a section is arranged to make a point), and of rhetorical strategy (how a writer will string together individual narratives to develop his purpose across the book—for example, the cycles of the book of Judges). When we read English literature, we are correct to have different expectations of epic poetry, like Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” versus a journal article on the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War, which Tennyson immortalized. Likewise, Longfellow’s “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” must be evaluated differently than a college textbook’s account of the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

Example—Job: Consider the story of Job. The first observation is that this is a piece of Wisdom literature. Wisdom literature can use a variety of genres, and by its nature is not tied to the use of historical report (note that the parables are a form of Wisdom literature). Likewise, however, Wisdom literature could potentially use a historical figure. At the first level, then, a commitment to read literally does not resolve the issue of whether Job is a historical figure or not. Wisdom literature could go either way. But this is already an important observation in that it demonstrates that literal reading does not demand a commitment to the idea that Job is a historical figure.

Some have considered Job to be a parable, and that is not impossible, though it is not common for a parable to name its characters.¹³ An alternative is to consider the book of Job to be a “thought experiment.” Thought experiments engage a complicated discussion through the use of a hypothetical scenario. Parables are a form of thought experiment, but Job could be a thought experiment that is not a parable. Using a thought experiment is a legitimate rhetorical device for engaging in philosophical discussions.

Beyond the question of genre, narrators make choices when telling a story—which details are important and how should the story be told? Furthermore, in a series of stories, such as those found in most narrative books of the Old Testament, the stories have been selected and recounted with a purpose in mind. Consequently, an individual narrative should be considered in relationship to those around it, not just as an independent

¹³The only possible exception in the Gospels is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, though some interpreters are reluctant to consider that a parable precisely because of the named character, Lazarus.

story (see chap. 25). All of these considerations and more are essential to understanding the literary context.

3. The *cultural context* pertains to the shared culture between the author and audience. It is particularly of significance when readers are not part of that culture and are not well-informed about it. Every communicative act between cultural insiders benefits from a multitude of “things that go without being said.”¹⁴ The problem is that when cultural outsiders attempt to step into that conversation, ignorance concerning those things that go without being said can undermine their ability to understand.

Example A—The Tower of Babel: The story of the Tower of Babel is only nine verses long (Genesis 11:1-9). Interestingly, at one point, explanation is given to the original reading audience about building materials, presumably because that was important information that they did not intuitively know. Nevertheless, numerous other elements in the narrative are left unsaid, presumably because the original readers did not require explanations. Trouble arises when they are elements that we, as modern readers, do not know. Readers throughout the history of interpretation have, for example, been inclined to believe that the builders were constructing a tower to allow them to climb into heaven—that they were going to use the tower to go up. The author does not address this question of the function of the tower because his audience is well aware of its function—it is built for God to come down. Furthermore, outsiders have been inclined to think that “making a name” reflects an arrogant pride on the part of the builders. Here, however, the builders are guilty of greed more than of pride. If God comes down to dwell among them, the people believe that they will be able to take care of the God’s needs and that he will therefore shower them with blessing and prosperity.¹⁵

Many passages in the Old Testament have been misinterpreted because we are outsiders to the ancient Israelite culture and therefore important cultural nuances are lost to us. In our ignorance, we are inclined to read into such texts our own understanding based on our own culture.

¹⁴A phrase used by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

¹⁵For further reading, Tremper Longman III and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 129-42.

Example B—The Sun in Joshua: When we read Joshua 10:12-15, where the Israelite general requests that the sun and moon “stop” or “wait,” we are immediately inclined to interpret in terms of physics and the laws of motion. Moreover, we assume that they have reached the end of the day and Joshua requests more daylight to complete his victory. We have missed the detail that the sun is over Gibeon and the moon over Aijalon—thus, sun in the east and moon in the west. It is therefore morning, not approaching evening. If we read this in its cultural context, we will set aside issues of physics (heavenly bodies coming to a grinding halt) and read it in light of divination literature. Several omens from the ancient Near East describe the position of the heavenly bodies as “waiting” or “stopping” at particularly significant locations in the sky when observing conjunctions or oppositions. These omens were understood as a means by which the gods communicated their will and intention. Joshua 10:12-15 is describing an event that would have had the significance of a divine omen to its original audience.¹⁶ An insider audience would have recognized that; it did not need to be said.

We must recognize how distant our modern culture is from the ancient culture of Israel. In the globalization that is now characterized by more frequent interactions between cultures, we have recognized how challenging it is to communicate across those cultural boundaries. Furthermore, cultural change is happening so rapidly that we would find ourselves culturally challenged if we were to go back to live fifty years ago.¹⁷ How much more should we then expect that reading literature from the ancient Israelite culture will present significant challenges that we must seek to overcome.

4. The *theological context* pertains at this level not to the theology of the whole canon or to the theology of the interpreter, as important as they are. Neither does it refer to systematic theology (the collection of our modern theological conclusions). Rather, I am referring to the theological

¹⁶For detailed interpretation and evidence, download the free appendix from www.ivpress.com/the-lost-world-of-the-israelite-conquest.

¹⁷This concept was developed in a TV series in the first decade of the twenty-first century titled “Life on Mars.” A police detective in 2006 has been struck by a car and is in a coma. He nonetheless finds himself living in 1973 serving as a police detective. The plots frequently turn on how different police work and police conventions were in 1973—often producing a cultural vertigo for him.

presuppositions in the mindset of the ancient human author that often need to be distinguished from modern or New Testament theological ideas.

Example A—The Hope of Heaven: Though not all interpreters agree, many maintain that through most of the Old Testament, Israelites held no hope of salvation from sins or eternal life with God. If this is true, and I believe that it is, then Old Testament passages should not be interpreted with an assumption that Israelites had a hope of heaven (some individual passages will be addressed in chap. 29).

Example B—“The Devil”: Contrary to popular assumptions, Israelite theology had no knowledge of the figure that we refer to as the “devil.” The Hebrew term *satan* (“adversary”) eventually was adopted as a proper name for the devil, but that was not the case in the Old Testament. Consequently, the interloper in Job 1–2, called “the satan,” cannot be assumed to be the devil.¹⁸ Israelite theology had a different idea in mind. Furthermore, passages like Isaiah 14:12–15 cannot be interpreted as referring to the fall of the devil. The devil is not known to them and therefore there is no fall of such a being to discuss.¹⁹

INTERPRETATION MATTERS

Interpretation cannot be considered just a hobby or something that we can do without. Our translated versions had to be interpreted before they could be translated. Any reader is automatically and inevitably interpreting. Meaning can only be identified through an interpretive act. If we were just reading Shakespeare or Homer, it might not matter that different readers would arrive at different interpretations. But for those who consider the Bible to be God’s Word, interpretations of it can become the basis for life and faith, for action and belief, for values and priorities. Different interpretations and different methodologies can have significance not only for how an individual lives, but for how societies and movements take shape. The cost is high, and we cannot afford to treat interpretation lightly or to be nonchalant about it.

¹⁸The use of the definite article “the” serves as evidence that *satan* is not a proper name.

¹⁹For further reading, see John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 212–28; John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 196–207; John H. Walton and Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Job* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 50–56.

Example—The Ten Commandments: One of the topics I often speak about is the Ten Commandments, and one of the first points I make is that the Bible never calls them that. They are the “Ten Words” (thus “Decalogue”). Does this mean that they are not “commandments”? If they are “words” instead of “commandments,” how are we supposed to respond to them? We understand that “commandments” should be obeyed—but what about “words”? And it gets even more complicated when we begin looking at each of the ten “words.” When the text says that no other gods are “before” me, does it refer to priority (“more important than me”), chronology (“existed earlier than me”), or location (“in my presence”)?: Most modern popular interpretation follows the first; the Hebrew favors the last. When the text says not to take the Lord’s name in vain, does that mean that we should not treat it as having no real power (as people do when they use it in an exclamation, such as “Oh my God!”) or that we should not seek to exploit its real power (as people do when they seek to use it in magic or ritual)? Modern interpretation is inclined toward the former; Israelite context toward the latter. In these cases, we have vastly different interpretations of something as basic as the “Ten Commandments”—which arguably play a central role in our understanding of ethics and morality.²⁰ Interpretation indeed matters!

MIND THE GAPS

Interpretation calls for us to fill in some sorts of gaps, while attempts to fill other sorts will only lead us astray. Some of the gaps that we must be aware of have already been mentioned. For example, as cultural outsiders, we will experience gaps that an insider would not. As interpreters, we need to be aware of such gaps and do our best to fill those gaps by research into the culture as we become aware of things that go without being said.

Another type of gap is the result of the author’s focus. Authors are by necessity selective. They have chosen the story with a purpose, and they will tell it in such a way as to achieve their goal. That means that some elements of any reported event will be left out—with a reason. Interpreters may well be curious about some of those omitted details, but the

²⁰For further reading, John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 231-57.

interpretive task must focus on what the author *did* communicate. Trying to recover, or worse, speculatively provide that which the author has chosen *not* to communicate can mislead us. For example, we may be very interested in knowing how Abraham explained to Sarah what he was doing when he took Isaac to be sacrificed. But the author has not told us, and any ideas that we might have will not lead us to better interpretation.

Finally, we will encounter some gaps that represent literary art. Narrators at times purposefully leave something unsaid because they are expecting the audience to connect the dots successfully and draw conclusions. It takes careful assessment of subtle nuances to know how to fill these gaps because we can easily engage arguments from silence. Nevertheless, we want to do everything that we can to track with the author. That means that some gaps we work hard to fill, while others we resolutely allow to stand so as not to follow our own tangents.

IT'S COMPLICATED

Faithful interpretation is hard work because we cannot depend on our intuition. Interpretation of an ancient document written in another language and by those with a different culture is rarely straightforward. The task is complicated by many factors that must be considered, many of which this book addresses. Furthermore, many significant elements in interpretation depend on technical information. Some interpreters will be unaware of such technical issues and therefore not even know what they are leaving out of their consideration. Others will be aware of those elements but will find the details inaccessible to them. To some extent, this goes back to the idea of reading in community. Some members of a community may have more knowledge of technical issues than others will, but everyone will have something to contribute to the interpretation process. At the same time, we all have our own limitations.

Example—Genesis 6:1-4: When we consider the brief passage in Genesis 6:1-4, we discover how complicated interpretation can be. Obvious questions arise: Who are these sons of God? Why does it call the women “daughters of men”? Who are the “Nephilim” in verse 4? Are they the sons of God

referred to in verse 2? Are they their offspring? Who are the heroes? Other questions are less obvious. Most readers assume that the described events are taking place just before the flood and wonder how the flood is connected to them. Alternatively, the narrative style used in Genesis suggests that these verses take us all the way back to the time of Seth (“When human beings began to increase in number”).²¹ And it gets worse. In Yahweh’s short speech in verse 3, presumably indicating the explanation for what is happening, two of the key words are unknown to us.²² Furthermore, to what do the 120 years refer? Then we get to all the questions concerning the event itself. Are the sons of God heavenly beings who are marrying humans? Can that happen? Are we dealing with incubi? Are these heavenly council members? Are such beings real or mythological? The questions are unending and, for the most part, insoluble—and this is just a four-verse passage.²³

Interpretation *is* complicated, but that must be weighed against an important point: the message of the Bible as a whole is clear. Any reader at any level can grasp the essentials of who God is and be drawn to follow him. Thankfully, then, the most important message of the text regarding God’s plans and purposes, what he has done, and how we can become participants with him is all very clear for anyone who opens the Bible. The next section offers an introduction that focuses on what Scripture is doing and how it goes about doing it, which is developed in more detail throughout the book, and eventually revisited in the conclusions.

5—*Five Principles for Faithful Interpretation*

The basic ideas leading to faithful interpretation, which have been introduced in the preceding sections and will be developed in the remainder of the book, can be summarized as the following five principles.

²¹For further reading, see Tremper Longman III and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 122-28.

²²The two unknown words are the verb describing what God’s Spirit will not do and the preposition that leads into the sentence about being mortal.

²³See the three-hundred-page monograph exploring the interpretive issues, Jaap Doedens, *The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

- 1.** The author’s message carries the authority of Scripture, and of God. When we depart from his literary intentions, we are no longer submitting our interpretation to the authority of the text.
- 2.** The author’s message is couched in his language and culture. We therefore need to be alert to the dangers of reading Scripture through our contemporary language and culture. We may not be able to recover certain details of his language and culture, but we can often recognize when we are driven by our own language and culture.
- 3.** Our accountability in interpretation is to track with the author in the text that he has produced. It is what he says and what he means—his message—that matters because that comes with the authority of God.
- 4.** Our interpretation should be supported with evidence that can identify the author’s literary intentions. If an interpretation that we are considering cannot be defended as something the author could have meant, we should reconsider. As I have noted, that evidence is typically derived from analysis that is linguistic, literary, cultural, historical, and theological.
- 5.** Our task is to find our place in God’s story, which he has communicated so that we can know him and be in relationship with him, thereby becoming whole-hearted participants in his plans and purposes as he has revealed them in Scripture. Sometimes Christians wonder, “How can I know God?” We can find an answer to that if we think about how we come to know people in our lives. When you first meet someone, you introduce yourself—by telling a little part of your story. As you spend more time together, you each tell more of your story to each other. We know people through their stories—stories of their past, present, and future. The more of their story we know, and the more of ours we share, the deeper we grow in relationship. In the Bible, God has given us his story, and we come to know him and grow into deeper relationship with him as we encounter his story and share ours with him.

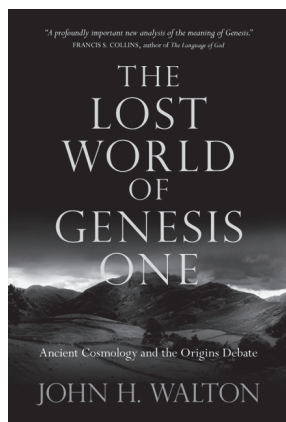
To be clear, in this book I am differentiating between “interpretation”—the process of determining what the authors of Scripture intended to communicate—and “application”—what we *do* with the message that is

actually in the text once we understand it. We need to engage in interpretation to the best of our ability, using all the evidence that we can garner. Once we have identified the message the author intended to communicate (interpretation), we then need to appropriate it for ourselves and prayerfully seek wisdom to apply it to our lives and our world. Such application derives specifically from the message of the text—it is tethered to the text.

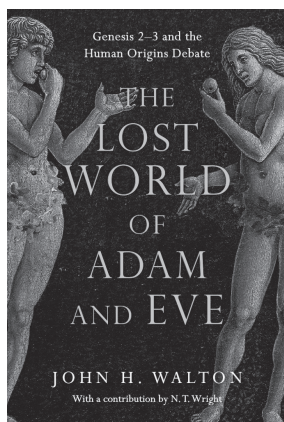
There is, however, a second type of application that is tangential to what the author was communicating rather than derived from it. Such untethered application may represent the Spirit's leading and can have great benefit. Much about Christian belief and the Christian life of faith is not addressed in Scripture, but it is important and should be addressed. My intention, therefore, is not to cut off all the insightful or inspiring thoughts that people have about Scripture that may not track with the author. But those thoughts should not be mistaken for biblical interpretation. The danger is that they will take the place of biblical interpretation and lead us to neglect the messages that carry the authority of the author and text.

If we neglect giving attention to the author's intentions and seek application only based on our intuitive reading of our translations, we risk running off the tracks to wander in the beautiful meadows of our own imaginations (see the illustration of *Tootle* in the preface). We may enjoy the meadows, but they don't get us where we need to go if we seek to understand the authoritative message of the Word of God (following the tracks). In contrast, so much stands to be gained when we follow the tracks laid down in the message of Scripture. Readers might understandably be interested in how we should go about doing application, but that is not what this book is about—I am going to focus my attention on doing interpretation.

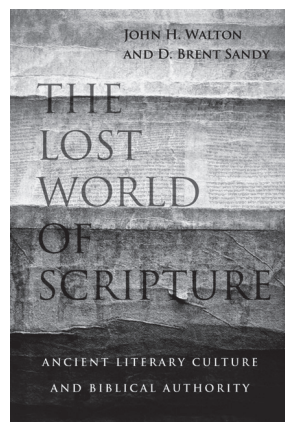
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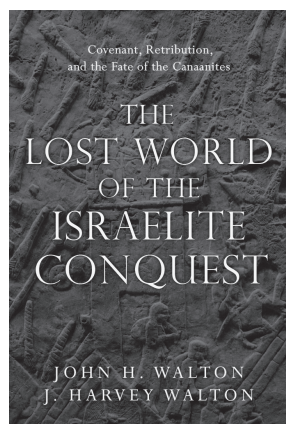
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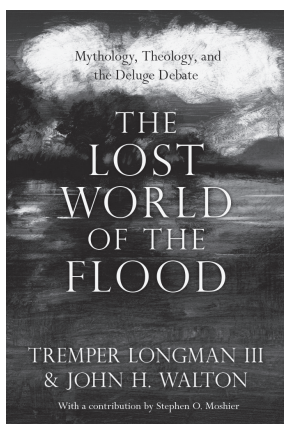
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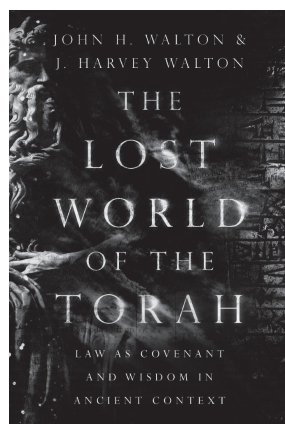
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