

A Review of John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy.  
The Lost World of Scripture, Ancient Literary  
Culture and Biblical Authority

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F. David Farnell

The authors of *The Lost World of Scripture*, John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy state that their, “specific objective is to understand better 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” (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> They add, “part of the purpose of this book is to bring students back from the brink of turning away from the authority of Scripture in reaction to the misappropriation of the term *inerrancy*” (p. 9). They assert that as Wheaton University professors, they work “at an institution and with a faculty that take a strong

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stand on inerrancy but that are open to dialogue” and that this openness “provided a safe context in which to explore the authority of Scripture from the ground up” (p. 10).

Walton wrote the chapters on the Old Testament, while Sandy wrote the chapters on the New Testament. W/S have written this book especially for “Christian students in colleges, seminaries and universities” with the hopes that they will find their work “useful,” as well as writing for “colleagues who have a high view of Scripture, especially for those who hold to inerrancy” (p. 10). The book is also “not intended for outsiders; that is, it’s not an apologetic defense of biblical authority.” Rather, “we’re writing for insiders, seeking to clarify how best to understand the Bible” (p. 9). The writers also assure the readers that they have a “very high view of Scripture; “[w]e affirm inerrancy” and that they “are in agreement with the definition suggested by David Dockery that the ‘Bible properly interpreted in light of [the] culture and

communication developed by the time of its composition will be shown to be completely true (and therefore not false) in all that it affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author, in all matters relating to God and his creation” (David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture; An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: B & H, 1994, p. 64).

The central thrust of the book is that the world of the Bible (both Old and New Testament) is quite different from modern times. W/S claim,

Most of us are probably unprepared . . . for how different the ancient world is from our own . . . We’re thousands of years and thousands of miles removed. It means we frequently need to put the brakes on and ask whether we’re reading the Bible in light of the original culture or in light of contemporary culture. While the Bible’s values were very different from ancient cultures’, it obviously communicated in the existing languages and within cultural customs of the day” (p. 13). Such a recognition and the “evidence assembled in this book inevitably leads to the question of inerrancy.” (p. 13).

W/S also suggest that, “[T]he truth of the matter is, no term, or even combination of terms, can completely represent the fullness of Scripture’s authority” (p. 13). W/S then quote the Short Statement of the Chicago Statement on Biblical inerrancy of 1978 (p. 14). This creates the impression that they are in agreement with the statement. However, this quote of the Short Statement is deceptive because book constitutes an essential challenge to much of what the Chicago Statements asserted in the Articles of Affirmation and Denial. This uneasiness with the Chicago Statement can also be seen in those who are listed as endorsers of the work, Tremper Longman III who chairs the Robert H. Gundry professor of Biblical Studies, as well as Michael R. Licona who recently, in his *The Resurrection of Jesus*, used genre criticism to negate the resurrection of the saints in Jerusalem in Matthew 27:51-53 at Jesus crucifixion as apocalyptic genre rather than indicating a literal resurrection, and Craig Evans, Acadia Divinity

College, who is not known for his support of the Chicago Statements.<sup>2</sup>

The book consists of 21 propositions that seek to nuance biblical authority, interpretation and an understanding of inerrancy, with the essential thought of these propositions flowing basically from 2 areas: (1) their first proposition, “Ancient Near Eastern Societies were *hearing dominant* (italics added) and had nothing comparable to authors and books as we know them” [in modern times since the printing press] while modern societies today are “*text dominant*” (italics added) (p. 19, see also pp. 17-28) and (2) speech-act theory that they frequently refer to in their work (pp. 41-46, 48, 51, 200, 213-218, 229, 288). The authors qualify their latter acceptance of speech-act theory:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Craig A. Evans, “In Appreciation of the Dominical and Thomistic Traditions: The Contribution of J. D. Crossan and N. T. Wright to Jesus Research,” in *The Resurrection of Jesus, John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*. Ed.

We do not agree with many of the conclusions with speech act theory, but we find its foundational premise and terminology helpful and have adopted its three basic categories. The communicator uses *locutions* (words, sentences, rhetorical structures, genres) to embody an *illocution* (the intention to do something with those locutions—bless, promise, instruct, assert) with a *perlocution* that anticipates a certain response from the audience (obedience trust, belief) (p. 41).

W/S go on to assert that God accommodated his communication in the Scripture: “. . . [a]ccommodation on the part of the divine communicator resides primarily in the locution, in which the genre and rhetorical devices are included.” (p. 42). And,

[G]enre is largely a part of the locution, not the illocution. Like grammar, syntax and lexemes, genre is a mechanism to convey an illocution. Accommodation takes place primarily at the locutionary level. Inerrancy and authority related to the illocution; accommodation and genre attach at the locution. Therefore inerrancy and authority cannot be undermined, compromised or

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Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), fn. 30, p. 195 where he denies the resurrection of the Saints in Matthew 27.

jeopardized by genre or accommodation. While genre labels may be misleading, genre itself cannot be true or false, errant or inerrant, authoritative or nonauthoritative. Certain genres lend themselves to more factual detail and others more toward fictional imagination. (p. 45).

While admittedly the book's propositions entail many other ideas, from these two ideas, an oral dominated society in ancient times of the OT and NT vs. a written/text dominant society of modern times and the implications of speech-act theory cited above, flow all that W/S develop in their assertions to nuance their take on what a proper view of inerrancy and biblical authority should be. The obvious implication of these assertions is that Robert Gundry, who was removed from ETS due to his dehistoricizing in 1983, was wronged because value judgments about genre does not impact the doctrine of inerrancy. Gundry was perfectly in the confines of inerrancy to dehistoricize because, according to W/S, it was ETS that misunderstood the concept of inerrancy as not genre driven. It is the illocution

(purpose or intent) not the wording that drives inerrancy. Gundry's theorizing of a midrashic genre, according to this idea, had nothing at all to do with inerrancy. Gundry believed sincerely in inerrancy but realized the midrashic, not historical, nature of Matthew 2.

The review will give commendations of the book. First, W/S are to be commended for their affirmation of inerrancy and their sincere desire to explore the authority of Scripture. Second, W/S also recognize that nowhere exists any perfect attempt by theologians of representing the fullness of Scripture's authority. As the IVP "Academic Alert" (Winter 2014, volume 22, number 4) noted on the front page, "Where Scholars Fear to Tread, *John Walton and Brent Sandy take on the juggernaut of biblical authority in **The Lost World of Scripture.***" Since W/S have taken on this "juggernaut," their theorizing about inerrancy opens itself up to critique.

Unfortunately, W/S propositions create more problems for inerrancy than they attempt to solve. Their idea of the orality of the ancient near east in which the OT and NT often gives the impression W/S imagine that these ancients were not only different in approach (ear-dominant vs. text dominant) but also rather primitive as well as unscientific in what they held in terms of their concept of the material world around them. From an historical point of view, W/S work is reminiscent of Rogers and McKim, in their now famous, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (1979), *An Historical Approach*, who made a similar error in their approach to Scripture. Rogers and McKim also spoke of “the central Christian tradition included the concept of accommodation;” that today witnesses a “scholastic overreaction to biblical criticism;” “the function and purpose of the Bible was to bring people into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ”; “the Bible was not used as an encyclopedia of information on all

subjects;” and “to erect a standard of modern, technical precision in language as the hallmark of biblical authority was totally foreign to the foundation shared by the early church.” (R/M, xxii).

W/S similarly assert in their implications of an oral society that “The Bible contains no new revelation about the material workings and understanding of the Material World” (Proposition 4, pp.49-59) so that the,

Bible’s ‘explicit statements about the material world are part of the locution and would naturally accommodate the beliefs of the ancient world. As such they are not vested with authority. We cannot encumber with scriptural authority any scientific conclusions we might deduce from the biblical text about the material world, its history or its regular processes. This means that we cannot draw any scientific conclusions about such areas as physiology, meteorology, astronomy, cosmic geography, genetics or geology from the Bible. For example, we should believe that God created the universe, but we should not expect to be able to derive from the biblical texts the methods that he used or the time that it took. We should believe that God created humans in his image and that through the choices they made sin and death came into the

world. Scientific conclusions, however, relating to the material processes of human origins (whether from biology in general or genetics in particular) may be outside the purview of the Bible. We need to ask whether the Bible is making those sort of claims in its illocutions (p. 55).

They continue,

The Bible's claims regarding origins, mechanics or shape of the world are, by definition of the focus of its revelation, mechanics or shape of the world are, by definition of the focus of its revelation in the theological realm. (p. 55).

According to W/S, what the Bible says plainly in the words of Genesis 1 may not be what it intends. Immediate special creation cannot be read into the text; rather the door is open for evolution and the acceptance of modern understandings of science. Thus, Genesis 1 and 2 may well indicate God's creation but not the means of how he created, even when the locutions say "evening and morning"; "first day" etc. Much of what is in Genesis 1 reflects "Old World Science": "one could easily infer from the statements in the biblical text that the sun and moon share space with the birds (Gen.

1). But this is simply a reflection of Old World Science, and we attach no authority to that conclusion. Rather we consider it a matter of deduction on the part of the ancients who made no reason to know better.” (p. 57). For them, “[t]he Bible's authority is bound into theological claims and entailments about the material world. For them, since the Bible is not a science textbook, its "authority is not found in the locution but has to come through illocution" (p. 54). Genesis 1-2, under their system, does not rule out evolution; nor does it signify creation literally in six "days." Such conclusions press the text far beyond its purpose to indicate God's creation of the world but not the how of the processes involved. W/S conclude, "we have proposed that reticence to identify scientific claims or entailments is the logical conclusion from the first two points (not a science textbook; no new scientific revelation) and that a proper understanding of biblical authority is dependent on recognizing this to be true" (p. 59). They assert that “it is

safe to believe that Old World Science permeates the Old Testament” and “Old World Science is simply part of the locution [words, etc.] and as such is not vested with authority” (p. 300).

Apparently, W/S believe that modern science has a better track record at origins. This assumption is rather laughable. Many "laws" of science for one generation are overturned in other generations. Scientific understanding is in constant flux. Both of these authors have failed to understand that modern science is predominated overwhelmingly by materialistic philosophies rather than presenting any evidence of objectivity in the area of origins. Since Science is based on observation, testing, measurement and repeatability, ideas of origins are beyond the purview of modern science too. For instance, the fossil record indicates the death of animals, but how that death occurred and what the implications of that fossil record are, delves more into philosophy and agendas rather than good

science. Since no transitional forms exist between species in the fossil record, evolution should be rendered tenuous as an explanation, but science refuses to rule it out due to a dogmatic *a priori*.

While W/S quote the ICBI "short statement" their work actually is an assault on the articles of affirmation and denial of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Inerrancy. In article IX, it noted that "**We affirm** that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the biblical authors were moved to speak and write" and Article XII, "**we deny** that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood." Article XI related, "far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all matters in addresses."

Another area that is troubling is in W/S theorizing of text-canonical updating. The adoption of multiple unknown redactor/editors by W/S, who updated the text over long periods of time in terms of geography, history, names, etc. actually constitutes an argument, not for inerrancy, but for deficiency in the text of Scripture and hence an argument for errancy, not inerrancy. Due to the OT being a oral or ear dominated society, W/S also propose a text-canonical updating hypothesis: "the model we propose agrees with traditional criticism in that it understands the final literary form of the biblical books to be relatively late and generally not the literary product of the authority figure whose words the book preserves (p. 66). This while Moses, Isaiah, and other prominent figures were behind the book, perhaps multiple, unknown editors were involved in any updating and final form of the books in the OT/NT that we have. For them, in the whole process of Scripture, "[t]he Holy Spirit is behind the whole process

from beginning to end" in spite of the involvement of unknown hands in their final development (p. 66). W/S negate the central idea of inerrancy that would center around original autographs that were inerrant, or that such autographs even existed: "Within evangelical circles discussing inerrancy and authority, the common affirmation is that the text is inerrant in the original autographs . . . since all copies were pristine, inerrancy could only be connected with the putative originals ("p. 66). Modern discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has made it "clear that there was not only one original form of the final literary piece" of such books as Samuel and Jeremiah (p. 67). Which version is original cannot be determined.

Under W/S model it does not make any difference because "in the model that we have proposed here, it does not matter. The authority is associated with Jeremiah, no matter which compilation is used. We cannot be dependent on the 'original autographs,' not only because we do not

have them, but also because the very concept is anachronistic for most of the Old Testament" (p. 67). For W/S, "inerrancy and authority are connected initially to the figure or the authoritative traditions. We further accept the authority represented in the form of the book adopted by faith communities and given canonical status" (p. 67). "Inerrancy and authority attach to the final canonical form of the book rather than to putative original autographs" (p. 68). Later on in their work, W/S assert that "inerrancy would then pertain to the role of the authorities (i.e. the role of Moses or Isaiah as dominant, determinative and principle voice), not to so-called authors writing so-called books—but the literature in its entirety would be considered authoritative" (p. 281). For them, "[a]uthority is not dependent on the original autographs or an author writing a book. Recognition of authority is identifiable in the beliefs of a community of faith (of whom we are heirs) that God's communications through authoritative figures

and traditions have been captured and preserved through a long process of transmission and composition" (p. 68).

According to W/S, Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch "does not decide the matter" regarding its authority, for many may have been involved in the final form of the first five books of Moses (p. 69). The final form involved perhaps many unknown editors and updaters: "Our interest is in the identity of the prophet as the authority figure behind the oracles, regardless of the composition history of the book" (p. 72). Thus, while Moses, Jeremiah, for instance, were the originator of the tradition or document and names are associated with the books, this approach of many involved in the product/final form of the book and variations, "allows us to adopt some of the more important advances that critical scholarship has offered" (p. 74). For them, unknown editors over long periods of time would have updated the text in many ways as time passed. They argue "it is safe to believe that some

later material could be added and later editors could have a role in the compositional history of a canonical book” (p. 299). Their positing of such a scheme, however, is suggestive that the text had been corrected, updated, revised all which smacks of a case for biblical errancy more than inerrancy in the process. Again, orthodox views of inerrancy, like the 1978 Chicago Statement, were not so negative about determining the autographs as article X related, "**We affirm** that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographs of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy." W/S also assert that "exacting detail and precise wording were not necessary to preserve and transmit the truths of Scripture" (p. 181) because they were an "ear" related culture rather than a print related culture (Proposition 13).

In reply to W/S, while this may be true that the New Testament was oral, such a statement needs by W/S need

qualification in their propositions throughout. No matter what the extent of orality in the OT and NT as posed by W/S, the reportage in these passages is accurate though it may not be, at times precise. While they are correct that "exacting detail and precise wording were not necessary to preserve and transmit the truths of Scripture, two competing views need to be contrasted in that oral reportage that was written down in the text of Scripture: an orthodox view and an unorthodox view of that reportage. This important distinction is lost in W/S's discussion (see Norman L. Geisler, "Evangelicals and Redaction Criticism, Dancing on the Edge" [1987] for a full discussion):

<b><i>ORTHODOX VIEW</i></b>	<b><i>UNORTHODOX VIEW</i></b>
<b><i>REPORTING THEM</i></b>	<b><i>CREATING THEM</i></b>
<b><i>SELECTING THEM</i></b>	<b><i>CONSTRUCTING THEM</i></b>
<b><i>ARRANGING THEM</i></b>	<b><i>MISARRANGING THEM</i></b>
<b><i>PARAPHRASING THEM</i></b>	<b><i>EXPANDING THEM</i></b>
<b><i>CHANGE THEIR FORM</i></b> <b><i>(Grammatical Change)</i></b>	<b><i>CHANGE THEIR</i></b> <b><i>CONTENT</i></b> <b><i>(Theological Change)</i></b>
<b><i>CHANGE THEIR</i></b> <b><i>WORDING</i></b>	<b><i>CHANGE THEIR</i></b> <b><i>MEANING</i></b>
<b><i>TRANSLATE THEM</i></b>	<b><i>MISTRANSLATE THEM</i></b>

<i>INTERPRET THEM</i>	<i>MISINTERPRET THEM</i>
<i>EDITING</i>	<i>REDACTING</i>

Article XIII of the 1978 Chicago Statement was careful to note that inerrancy does not demand precision at all times in reportage. Any criticism of the Chicago Statements in this area is ill-advised. The Chicago Statement ARTICLE XIII, claims,

We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reportage of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

W/S's caveat on harmonization needs qualification: "it is not necessary to explain away the differences by some means of harmonization in order to fit modern standards of accuracy" (p. 151). While anyone may note many examples of trite harmonization, this does not negate the legitimacy or need for harmonization. Tatian's *Diatessaron*

(c. 160-175) is a testimony to the ancient church believing that the Gospels could be harmonized since they were a product of the Holy Spirit. From the ancient Christian church through to the time of the Reformation, the church always believed in the legitimacy and usefulness of harmonization. It was not until modern philosophical presuppositions (e.g Rationalism , Deism, Romanticism, etc.) that created the historical-critical ideology arose that discredited harmonization. The orthodox position of the church was that the Gospels were without error and could be harmonized into a unified whole. The rise of modern critical methods (i.e. historical criticism) with its accompanying low or no views of inspiration discredited harmonization, not bad examples of harmonization. For harmonization during the time of the Reformation, see Harvey K . McArthur, “Sixteenth Century Gospel Harmonies,” in *The Quest Through the Centuries: The*

*Search for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 85 -101).

On page 274, W/S assert “[o]ur intention is to strengthen the doctrine of biblical authority through a realistic application of knowledge of the ancient world, and to understand what inerrancy can do and what it can’t do.” They believe that the term inerrancy is a term that “is reaching its limits” and also that “the convictions it sought to express and preserve remain important” (p. 274). “Inerrancy” is no longer the clear, defining term it once was and that “has become diminished in rhetorical power and specificity, it no longer serves as adequately to define our convictions about the robust authority of Scripture” (p. 275). They cite several errors of inerrancy advocates in the past. Most notably are the following: inerrancy advocates, “have at times misunderstood ‘historical’ texts by applying modern genre criteria to ancient literature, thus treating it as having claims that it never intended.” Apparently, this

position allows W/S to read the findings of modern “scientism” into the ancient text that often conflicts with today’s hypothesis of origins (i.e. creation). “They have at times confused locution [words, sentences, rhetorical structures, genres] and illocution [the intention to do something with those locutions—bless, promise, instruct, assert”]. Inerrancy technically applies on to the latter, though of course, without locutions, there would be no illocution” (p. 279).

In these quotations, W/S confuse inerrancy with interpretation and understanding of a text with this supposition. Each word is inspired but the understanding or interpretation of those words may not be considered “inerrant” but a process of interpretation of those words in the context in which those words occur. If Genesis 1 says “evening and morning” and “first,” “second” day, it is tenuous to imply that these terms are so flexible in interpretation to allow for long periods of time to

accommodate evolutionary hypotheses. “They have been too anxious to declare sections of the Old Testament to be historical in a modern sense, where it may not be making those claims for itself.” Here, this principle allows W/S to negate any part of the Old Testament that does not accord with modern sensibilities. It creates a large opening to read into the text rather than allow the text to speak for itself. They assert that positions such as “young earth or premillennialism may be defensible interpretations, but they cannot invoke inerrancy as a claim to truth” (p. 282). For W/S,

. . . the Israelites shared the general cognitive environment of the ancient world . . . . At the illocutionary level we may say that traditions in the early chapters of Genesis, for example served the Israelites by offering an account of God and his ways and conveying their deepest beliefs about how the world works, who they are and how it all began. These are the same questions addressed by the mythological traditions of the ancient world, but the answers given are very different (p. 303-304).

One other area where the elasticity of W/S's concept of history centers in that they allow for hyperbolic use of numbers in the Old Testament: "It is safe to believe that the Bible can use numbers rhetorically with the range of the conventions of the ancient world" (p. 302). They claim, "we may conclude that they are exaggerated or even that contradictory amounts are given in sources that report the same event" (p. 302). These may well be inaccuracies or contradictions according to our conventions, but that doesn't mean that they jeopardize inerrancy. Again, numerical quantity is locution. Authority ties to the illocution and what the narrator is *doing* with those numbers" (p. 302). Whatever he is doing, he is doing with the accepted conventions of their world" (p. 302).

Finally, W/S argue that "our doctrine of authority of Scripture has become too enmeshed in apologetics . . . . If we tie apologetics and theology too tightly together, the result could be that we end up trying to defend as theology

what are really just apologetic claims we have made” (p. 306). W/S contend,

. . . ill-formed versions of inerrancy have misled many people into false understandings of the nature of Scripture, which has led to poor hermeneutics for interpreting Scripture and to misunderstandings of Bible translations. Even more serious, certain views of inerrancy have led people away from the Christian faith. Such views can also keep people from considering more important matters in Scripture. If there is a stumbling block to people coming to the faith, should it not be Christ alone rather than a wall that we inadvertently place in the way of spiritual pilgrimages? (p. 308).

This reviewer has one reply to the illogic of W/S. If the documents are cannot be trusted in their plain, normal sense (e.g. creation), then how can their testimony about Christ be trusted? If the documents have as much flexibility as hypothesized by W/S, how can they be trusted to give a reliable, accurate and faithful witness to Him? While W/S have wrapped their work in an alleged improvement of current concepts of inerrancy and its implications, they

have actually presented a system that is (1) quite inferior to that of the ICBI statements of 1978 and 1982 and (2) one that really is designed to undermine the years of evangelical history that went into the formulation of those documents against the onslaught of historical-critical ideologies that W/S now embrace. They treat that history and reasons of the formulation of ICBI statements in a dismissive fashion that is perilous for those who do not remember the events of the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes as evidenced in this work of W/S. A better title for this book would have been “The Lost World of Inerrancy” since W/S’s system undermines the very concept.