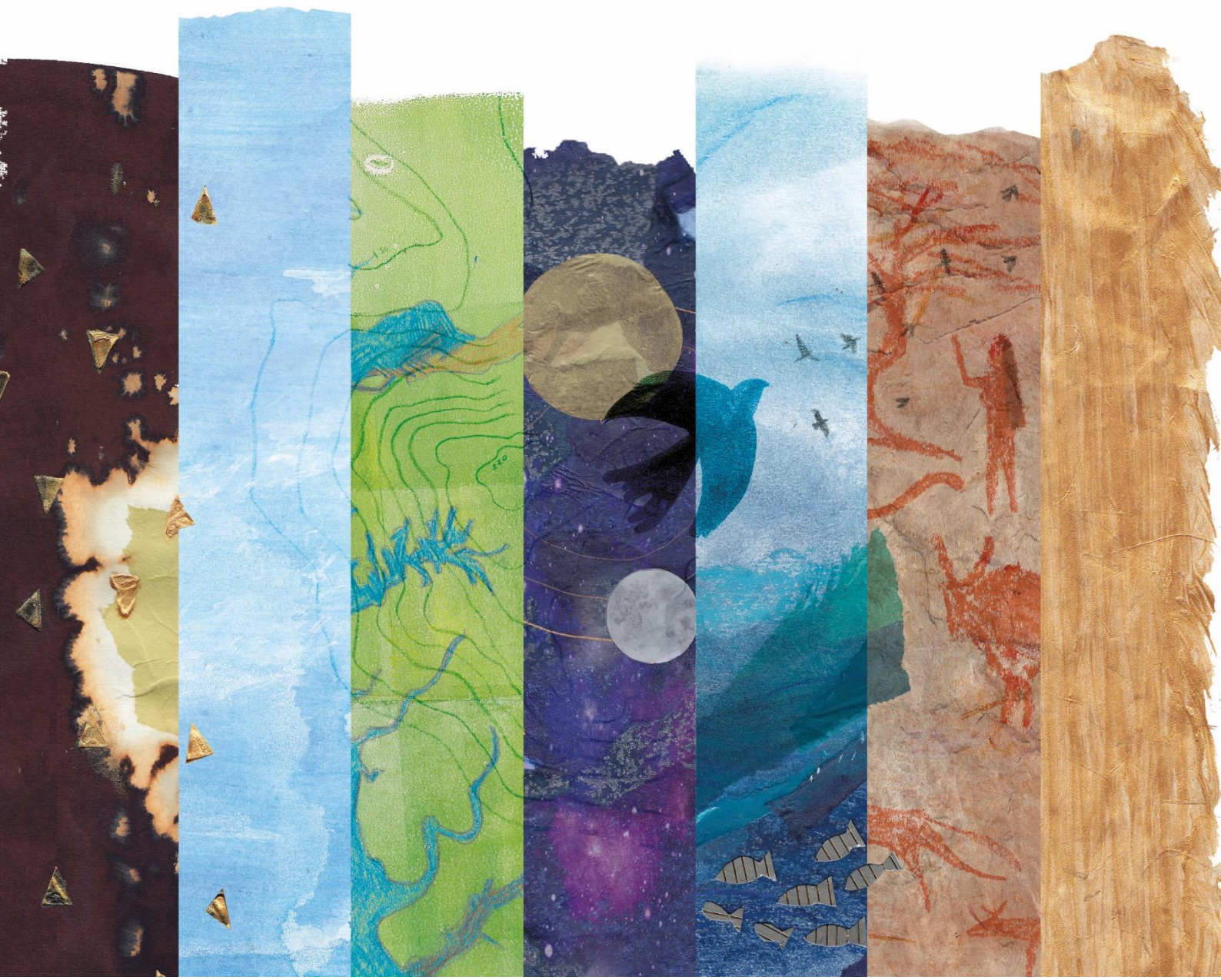


Genesis 1 is Ancient Cosmology

Extract from *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* by John Walton (IVP, 2009)



Genesis 1 is Ancient Cosmology

pp. 14-15, 19-20

So what are the cultural ideas behind Genesis 1? Our first proposition is that Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology. That is, it does not attempt to describe cosmology in modern terms or address modern questions. The Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their “scientific” understanding of the cosmos. They did not know that stars were suns; they did not know that the earth was spherical and moving through space; they did not know that the sun was much further away than the moon, or even further than the birds flying in the air. They believed that the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as to hold back waters. In these ways, and many others, they thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not at all like anyone thinks today. And God did not think it important to revise their thinking.

Some Christians approach the text of Genesis as if it has modern science embedded in it or it dictates what modern science should look like. This approach to the text of Genesis 1 is called “concordism,” as it seeks to give a modern scientific explanation for the details in the text. This represents one attempt to “translate” the culture and text for the modern reader. The problem is, we cannot translate their cosmology to our cosmology, nor should we. If we accept Genesis 1 as ancient cosmology, then we need to interpret it as ancient cosmology rather than translate it into modern cosmology. If we try to turn it into modern cosmology, we are making the text say something that it never said. ... Since we view the text as authoritative, it is a dangerous thing to change the meaning of the text into something it never intended to say.

Another problem with concordism is that it assumes that the text should be understood in reference to current scientific consensus, which would mean that it would neither correspond to last century’s scientific consensus nor to that which may develop in the next century. If God were intent on making his revelation correspond to science, we have to ask which science. We are aware that science is dynamic rather than static. By its very nature science is in a constant state of flux. If we were to say that God’s revelation corresponds to “true science” we adopt an idea contrary to the very nature of science. What is accepted as true today, may not be accepted as true tomorrow, because what science provides is the best explanation of the data at the time. This “best explanation” is accepted by consensus, and often with a few detractors. Science moves forward as ideas are tested and new ones replace old ones. So if God aligned revelation with one particular science, it would have been unintelligible to people who lived prior to the time of that science, and it would be obsolete to those who live after that time. We gain nothing by brining God’s revelation into accord with today’s science. In contrast, it makes perfect sense that God communicated his revelation to his immediate audience in terms they understood. ...

As we begin our study of Genesis 1 then, we must be aware of the danger that lurks when we impose our own cultural ideas on the text without thinking. ... [W]e must respect the integrity of the author by refraining from replacing his message with our own. Though we cannot expect to be able to think like they thought, or read their minds, or penetrate very deeply into so much that is opaque to us in their culture, we can begin to see that there are other ways of thinking besides our own and begin to identify

some of the ways in which we have been presumptuously ethnocentric. Though our understanding of ancient culture will always be limited, ancient literature is the key to a proper interpretation of the text, and sufficient amounts of it are available to allow us to make progress in our understanding.