

LISTENING TO THE PAST

Jesse W. Baker on the Value of the Ancients

In his work *The Lost World of Genesis One*, Old Testament scholar John Walton gets his reader in a proper frame of mind before diving in and exploring Genesis 1 in its ancient context by explaining how the Bible communicates. He writes,

The Old Testament *does* communicate to us and it was written for us, and for all humankind. But it was not written *to* us. It was written to Israel. It is God's revelation of himself to Israel and secondarily through Israel to everyone else. As obvious as this is, we must be aware of the implications of that simple statement. Since it was written to Israel, it is in a language that most of us do not understand, and therefore it requires translation. But the language is not the only aspect that needs to be translated. Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into the framework of a culture. Consequently, when we read a text written in another language and addressed to another culture, we must

translate the culture as well as the language if we hope to understand the text fully.¹

In other words, modern readers cannot open a biblical text and automatically assume that the ancient writers thought in exactly the same way we do, or are even asking the same questions that we might ask. Therefore, to gain a proper understanding of what ancient authors are conveying, those original writers need to lead the conversation; the reader, first, needs to listen.

While Walton's book and the included poem have as their immediate reference conversations regarding the relationship between the Scriptures and science, the implication of the need for listening between the two areas has effects which reach more broadly, especially as it relates to apologetics. The Christian apologist -- the cultural apologist in particular -- must begin as a listener. While a basic and simple principle, it is powerful in its application. Jesus knew what he was doing when he told us, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."² If we want to be heard, to share our own

¹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 7. Emphasis original.

² Matthew 7:12 (NRSV).

convictions, a good practice to begin with is listening. We should not assume we know why someone thinks the way they do, neither should we assume we know their conclusions ahead of time.

C.S. Lewis, in fact, suggests this is one reason why he reads good books. Reading the words and thoughts of others opens one to other perspectives. Lewis describes, “[I]n reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”³ Lewis is correct: transcendence can happen with great literature. Further, transcendence is all the more likely to happen when reading the ancient texts which comprise the Holy Scriptures. Yet, it will not happen against anyone’s will. To be open to the transcendence of literature and Scripture, one must first engage as a listener.

We cannot assume that non-Christians will enter into reading the Bible with the same sense of respect as Christians. While lamentable, perhaps our goal should not even be to instill that respect, at least

³ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 141.

not initially. I don't think that one will reach that attitude by direct argument. It may be a better course of action to request that the non-Christian also practice the art of listening, thereby (prayerfully) arriving at respect by that more indirect route. When read from our modern viewpoints and (assumed) places of certainty regarding scientific or historical findings, it may be understandable that skeptics might read Genesis and assume the writers are either crazy or downright ignorant. Another option, we might lovingly suggest, is that the ancients were trying to communicate something altogether different from what we assume and walk with them as they explore the thoughts of another time and place, all the while pondering the present relevance of those ancient thoughts.⁴

No one culture or generation can claim exclusive rights to all truth. To be sure, Christians (rightly) have an upper hand on truth with the person of

⁴ It is not my attempt here to flesh this statement out, as others do that more effectively and in more detail. I will leave the reader to explore these suggested works: Walton's *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) and others of his "Lost World" series; Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden's *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012); and, C. John Collins's *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science and Truth in Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

Jesus, self-described as “the way, and the truth, and the life,” but that does not mean we have nothing left to learn.⁵ We need not be afraid of scientific discoveries, nor should those who favor science over Scripture necessarily fear the Bible. They can work together to make more sense of the world around us. Lewis, on top of encouraging us to read great books, also encouraged readers to read old books. In an essay -- which, fittingly, was originally written as the introduction to a translation of St. Athanasius’ great work *On the Incarnation* -- he urges people to read old books, for precisely the reason stated above: no one at any period has cornered the market on all truth. We read ancient texts, Lewis says,

Not, of course, [because] there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the

⁵ John 14:6 (NRSV)

past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.⁶

One might be reluctant to put all of Lewis's words here as descriptors of the biblical authors. Rest assured, the reference is merely illustrative, not descriptive. Plus, Lewis himself did not have the biblical authors in view here, either. (If anything, we would need to be more cautious of the interpretations of the biblical texts given across the ages, not the text itself, which is what I have in mind.) Still, the larger and original point stands: we all write and think with limitations that others, even those writing millennia ago, can help us overcome. When it comes to discussions on science and faith, we need both ancients and moderns. The same holds true when thinking about conversations and debates more broadly. The apologist needs to listen, and the apologist needs to model listening. Those who engage with the Bible, whether sympathetic to its claims or antagonistic toward those claims, need to begin in a posture of listening. Whatever one's starting point, listening is the only way to truly receive what was being said. On top of being a loving

⁶ C.S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books" in *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.

way to engage with others, in listening we just might learn something.

Listening

They used to think, stated dismissively,
Is all that's needed for moderns to move
Beyond claims of divine creativity,
Favoring blindness and chance over love.

They used to think, quipped humorously,
Suggests ancient minds were underdeveloped,
Unable to comprehend reality,
And so settled for the fabricated.

They used to think, said curiously,
With a mind that's open, ears that listen,
Discerning what was actually spoken,
Leads to a more profound discovery:
It's not what ancients in ignorance knew not;
But, more, what we in ignorance forgot.

Bibliography

"Listening to the Past"

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