

## AN EXPANDED VIEW OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: A RESPONSE TO VAN KUIKEN

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In this article, the author has combined an evaluation of parts of *The Lost World of Scripture* and *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* with his own constructive suggestions that represent trajectories launching beyond the proposals made in the books. We appreciate some of the points made; others, though well intended, are inaccurate. The reviewer came to conclusions about our work that are not ours.

With regard to *The Lost World of Scripture*, Van Kuiken affirms our emphasis that God's truth was revealed in the context of pre-modern understandings of authorship and composition, as well as according to the way things appeared in the physical world. In other words, readers must not presume the Bible addresses issues of modern science or suppose it used historiographical methods common today. The reviewer also accepts our point that the Bible was rooted in an oral culture where differences in wording and small details were normative. It is especially encouraging to see the comment that *The Lost World of Scripture* may be able to bridge some of the divisiveness over inerrancy within the church. Many of Van Kuiken's comments about our book we agree with, such as our distancing ourselves from Kenton Sparks and Peter Enns.

Van Kuiken does not engage, unfortunately, with the central thesis of *The Lost World of Scripture*. We understand the authority of divine truth to span multiple stages of the transmission of revelation, from its first oral forms, then through the hands of various tradents (oral and written), and finally embraced by believing communities. Our thesis is that through all the stages, God's revelation—as expressed in various genres, preserved in various manuscripts, and accepted in the final form of the canon—was faithfully transmitted. As we state, “Authority is located initially in an authority figure or an authoritative tradition, and ultimately in the canonical product, and therefore is extended by the faith community to all the steps in between” (pp. 299–300; cf. p. 298).

We do not jump from hypothetical autographs, which for many are the focus of inerrancy, to the canon of the early church as if that is the only form of authoritative truth. You will not find anywhere in our book what the reviewer states: “*The Lost World of Scripture* recommends refocusing on the final form of the text as the goal of textual criticism and the standard for biblical authority.”

In contrast, note our reflection: “although one of the tenets of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*, we wonder whether tying authority strictly to written texts

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is rooted in print culture and misrepresents the evidence from Scripture” (p. 307). It is incorrect to say, as Van Kuiken does, that we “shift the standard of authority from the *autographs* to the *canonicographs* (the writings as canonized rather than as originally written).” (See our final chapter of conclusions, offering what is safe to believe, not safe to believe, and what is safe to ask.)

Now one could understandably argue that the written texts in the canon are the only thing we have, so inerrancy applies there alone. But as we state, “it is possible to work backward from the written forms and reconstruct some features of the oral forms” (p. 307). On the other hand, it is true that written text is the divinely given means of historical access to divine truth.

Van Kuiken also misrepresents us when he claims that our perspective on the long and short forms of Jeremiah “opens the door to accepting biblical material later classified as apocryphal or deuterocanonical.” This is the occasion for the reviewer to embark on an extended discussion of the supposed lack of limits to the biblical canon of which we are guilty. But he is barking up the wrong tree. Twice we state that “communities of faith determined that certain literary works at the end of the process ought to be accorded the status of canon. We have accepted those judgments as also happening under the supervision of the Holy Spirit” (p. 63; cf., p. 225; see also our comments about the books of Enoch and the Gospel of Thomas, p. 306.).

Our primary concern is that people might mistakenly infer that Van Kuiken’s own reflections on a more open canon reflect our position or suggestions in that regard. We do not discuss open canon at all, and though he does make a quick transitional statement to that effect, the way in which he introduces his ideas could potentially confuse readers about whether they are his perspectives or ours. To be clear, Van Kuiken’s ruminations do not reflect our position nor are they the inevitable or even logical implications of our position.

Further, I (Walton) would want to push back a bit on some of his characterization of my position in the *Lost World of Adam and Eve*. For example, he seems to think that I find pre-Adamites in Romans 5, which I don’t. My comments about accountability and the law from Romans 5 only pertain to the *concept* of accountability. I am well aware that Paul is discussing the distinction between pre-Sinai and post-Sinai. I am certainly not contending that Paul was discussing pre-Adamites. I am simply applying the principle of accountability that Paul establishes to a pre-Adamite discussion. I would agree with him that Paul does not envision pre-Adamites.

Another corrective I might offer is that Van Kuiken concludes that I believe that disorder is purely human in nature, not cosmic. That is not accurate. Though cosmic disorder is not easily discerned in the OT, Hellenistic thinking (already evident in the Wisdom of Solomon, which he cites) gives much more attention to it. It is in the Hellenistic period that demons begin to be portrayed somewhat differently; less morally ambiguous (though evidences of that ambiguity remain even in the NT). Beyond the complex question of demons, the existence of cosmic disorder is clear enough in the NT and certainly not something against which I would argue.

Finally, with regard to creation *ex nihilo*, it needs to be stated again that I have no hesitation whatsoever in affirming the doctrine. I find it expressed in the NT (as Van Kuiken notes), but also in broad statements in the OT about God laying the foundations of the earth. My resistance is not at the doctrinal level but at the literary level—i.e. whether Genesis 1 is recounting *ex nihilo* creation—and I don't believe that it is. Contrary to my interpretation of Genesis 1, I do believe that the NT references at least refer to the material cosmos as well as to the ordered, functional cosmos (e.g. the implications of Hebrews 1 and 11 using *aeon* rather than *kosmos*). I find Van Kuiken's own proposals about the functional vs. material question intriguing, but, of course, they go well beyond my own treatment.