

## BOOK REVIEW

Walton, John H., and J. Harvey Walton, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology: Reading the Biblical Text in Its Cultural and Literary Context* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019). x + 338 pp. Pbk. \$40.00.

From the Garden to the Gadarenes, the Christian tradition has viewed Satan and demons as forceful beings that compete with the work of God in the world. This same perspective explains Job's suffering and Jesus' temptation, as well as Michael's warfare and the millennial peace. These spirits have been subject to complex theological systemization by spiritual warfare advocates, while also being identified as ancient world expressions of mental illness. Walton and Walton offer a new hermeneutical approach to this field of theology through ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman sources, seeking to understand the issue in light of the original literary function of demons and spirits. John H. Walton is professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and a familiar scholar on the cosmology of the ancient Near Eastern world, while J. Harvey Walton is a student at St Andrews University. Together, they write as father and son on both Old and New Testaments alike.

The authors employ C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* to frame two extreme theological views of demons and spirits: disbelief and over-belief. Disbelief is represented by demythologization, an attempt to salvage religious meaning from the myths constructing the biblical text. Existential theologian Rudolph Bultmann and liberation theologian Walter Wink are models of this approach. Over-belief is represented by spiritual warfare thinkers, a suspiciously viewed movement which the authors respectfully term 'conflict theology'. Theologians Clinton Arnold, Sydney Page and Gregory Boyd are representatives of this view, and the authors extensively engage the problems of conflict theology throughout the work. Walton and Walton propose a more historical hermeneutic that avoids these two poles, seeing spirit beings as a collective literary device in an ancient cosmological worldview. This worldview is documented in the ancient Near Eastern and

Greco-Roman sources, which use demons and spirits to frame the work of the divine within the physical world. For the authors, the biblical text reflects the original cultural setting where ancient readers understood God in their own 'cognitive environment' (p. 297).

Two parts provide a methodology for reading the ancient texts. The first is a framework for viewing demons within their biblical cognitive environment. The second is a treatment of a range of related passages. This second part comprises the majority of the work, including episodes of divine combat, the serpent, idolatry, warfare, the fall of Satan, the church age and the problem of evil. Of particular interest to *JGRChJ* readers is the extensive and detailed attention to Judaism of the Second Temple period. Walton and Walton provide a level of expertise in ancient Near Eastern culture that is not common in the literature of demonology and conflict theology. The emergence of interest in angels and demons in the intertestamental period leads to a recognition of the fall of Satan in the *Life of Adam and Eve* and the depiction of angels battling the gods of other nations in *1 (Ethiopic) Enoch* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The Qumran texts of the *Two Spirits* and the *War Scroll* offer narratives around the divine combat theme. An additional point of interest is that the authors recognize a developing Christian identity in the Greco-Roman world. Jewish and Christian interpreters looked to Philo and Platonists to better understand the tension between Yahweh as the divine Supreme and Satan as the source for 'cosmic mismanagement' (p. 93). The Messiah, the Logos and Michael the Archangel manage the divine effort in writers like Origen and the Manicheans, who recognize demons as competitors against the heavenly cause, including persecution of the righteous. Marcion represents an innovation of tradition by associating Yahweh with a demiurge. All these sources reinforce a motif of *Chaoskampf* in which evil gods and forces like demons must be defeated by angels and good forces. This theme finds expression in both an ongoing and anticipated final eschatological battle tradition in which prophecies around the post-exilic period are extrapolated into apocalyptic literature. The use of these ancient sources makes this work a valuable resource for scholars of Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman Christianity.

The enterprise of biblical theology is the greatest point of tension for Walton and Walton. The authors are opposed to the use of Scripture to provide propositions about demons and spirits. In fact, they do not believe that a conflict theology derives from the biblical text: 'In the end, we cannot offer any "biblical" conception of demons and spirits because our study has

indicated that the Bible does not contain one' (p. 298). In defense of this position, they insist that the biblical text does not affirm the beliefs of the original audience as being true, nor does it affirm their cosmology, but Scripture only uses spirits to explain a greater theology, and 'as such the portrayal fits well with other aspects of biblical theology' (p. 298). Demons are not to be used as a personification of evil, which is an understanding based on their nature. Demons are not to be viewed as a taxonomical device, which is an understanding of fallen angels as an actual phenomenon. They are not to be over-literalized for gaining theological propositions about spirits, nor are they to be demythologized, reduced to expressions of a pre-modern worldview. Fundamentally, for Walton and Walton, 'Demons are best conceived of as "cosmic or spirit beings that are not gods"' (p. 86), and any use of the text for rational support of a theological end is to be rejected. This hypothesis puts them at odds with the eras whose writings they marshal, placing them in opposition to interpreters like Philo, Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem. Instead, demons and spirits are to be treated like 'wild animals or viruses' and other 'physical structures of the cosmos' (p. 298), which are natural, not evil, not active everywhere and lack any power beyond what is allowed by God (pp. 298-300). This makes demons and spirits 'a means to an end' (p. 124), literary devices to reflect the culture's conception of evil divine forces, and a neutral framework to teach the purposes of God. Their hermeneutic posits a cosmological point of view whereby ancient writers did not attribute life to demons and spirits.

Despite the controversial and suppositional claim, their study elevates worthy literary motifs from the intertestamental, New Testament and early Christian periods. 'Exodus' becomes a paradigm that conceives of demons and Satan as an enemy to be overcome, recognizing a 'trajectory of interpretation embellished and integrated' from various sources (p. 123). Angels Michael and Raphael become protagonists in Judaism's battle against foreign oppressors and competing religions. For ancient Judaism and Christianity, spirits and demons offer trends and inclinations to 'persistent features of human existence' (p. 124), framing a worldview for the picture of the divine enterprise in creation.

This study also explores the problem of evil in this cosmological phenomenology, recognizing that 'conflict theology always doubles as a theodicy' (p. 277). The biblical and early church writers used this same framework to explore and justify good and evil activity in the world. Logically, angels should find a place in this cosmological biblical treatment, but they

are not explored here beyond their role in participating in the demonic phenomenology of the ancient writers. Otherwise, this phenomenological hermeneutical approach is thoroughly worked out, combing the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman contexts alongside the biblical terms and passages that shaped early religious worldviews regarding demons and spirits. For its deep scholarship on ancient sources related to the intertestamental period, Judaism scholars will find a reward, while conflict theologians will have a new hermeneutical challenge.

W. Brian Shelton  
Asbury University  
Wilmore, KY