

## John Dickson (studio)

Hey, John Dickson here. We're hard at work preparing Season 13 of the Undeceptions podcast. In the meantime, I wanted to share with you a great conversation I just had with Professor John Walton. He's the Old Testament legend who walks the walls of Wheaton College as he enjoys his retirement by researching, writing ... and answering all my Old Testament questions!!

John's the author of a huge number of important works, including the major textbook *Survey of the Old Testament*, published in its 4th edition earlier this year by Zondervan Academic. It's the one stop shop for everything literary, historical, and theological behind that first part of the Bible.

An idea popped into my head the other day for a rapid-fire rundown of this difficult part of Jewish and Christian Scripture. I buzzed John (up on level 5), asked him to pop down to my office (on level 3) ... and with about 5 minutes notice we started this fascinating conversation!!

Enjoy!

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Well, I love having you just upstairs that you can walk down the stairwell and have a quick chat. So let's do the impossible. Let's summarize the entire Old Testament. Um, and what I'd love is for you to give us rapid fire, the keys to reading the different parts of the Old Testament. It might be for someone who, who believes it.

It might be someone who doesn't believe, but what, what should they hold in mind as they pick up this scary Old Testament book and start reading? So let's begin at the beginning, how to read the creation stories.

**John Walton:** We have to recognize always that we're reading ancient text. And, therefore, one of my big things approaching interpretation is that we have to think about how they would think about these things.

Realizing that Israelites thought a lot more like Babylonians than they do like us. So, when we ask about creation, we should immediately wipe from our minds all of our scientific questions and scientific lenses because we want to try to read it as they would. When we read the creation narrative in Genesis, uh, we find that, uh, it often doesn't deal with issues of materiality.

Sometimes it looks like it could be doing that, but other times God creates day and night. God creates light. These are not material objects. And so we start to ask, what kind of creation account is this? And so in this case, what we find both in the biblical text and supported in the broader ancient Near East was that they were most interested not in material, but in order. They were And so to read the creation narrative as God bringing about order.

We can understand that today. We're interested in order today. We like our lives to be ordered in the way that we understand order. We, uh, think about law and order. Uh, order is a big word. And it was important both as they understood the cosmos, that it was ordered, everything working the way that it should, and on the, the ground level, uh, society and how it's ordered.

**John Dickson:** Is this partly why that, uh, Genesis 1 is such an orderly passage?

**John Walton:** Exactly. Um, the, the whole idea of seven days, uh, came from the idea that when they built a temple, uh, that was the center of the cosmos, where God ordered the cosmos, and temple dedications were in seven days. And so they would naturally think of a seven day structure.

That really doesn't have to do with the chronology of the origins of the universe, it has to do with how God goes about establishing order.

**John Dickson:** Hm. Okay, so the creation is like a, like a temple. It's like divine space, as it were, and where to live in it with what sense sanctity.

**John Walton:** And god is the one who brings order to it.

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## READING

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*

*And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.*

Genesis, Chapter 1

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**John Dickson:** Okay, so let's move forward. Um, a huge part of that early part of the Bible is what they call the patriarchal narratives. It just follows a family. And, you know, it's got to be more than a soap opera. So what's happening in those patriarchal narratives?

**John Walton:** Well, the, the core at the foundation of the patriarchal narratives, you have the concept of covenant and that comes into play. We

have to see how that works out because in Genesis one through 11, after it talks about how God established order, then it has 10 chapters of people seeking order.

How is order to be found? Is it found in being like God? Is it found in agriculture? Is it found in civilization? Is it found in communities? Is it found in city building? Where is order to be found? And you get to the end of Genesis 1 through 11 and it dumps you into these Ancestor stories in Genesis 12, which opens with the covenant.

And the covenant is the contrast. The covenant is, here is where you will find order. So, those ancestral narratives are not really about the ancestors. They're about the covenant. And as God forms a covenant, he forms a relationship. which a covenant is, and eventually that's going to lead to his presence, but that's not till Exodus.

And so we have, again, order being a main theme. Now, how does God bring order to the human world? In contrast, all the ways that people in the ancient world, and lots of us, would think about where order is found.

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## READING

*The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

*"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;*

*and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”*

Genesis, Chapter 12

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**John Dickson:** The end of the patriarchal narrative is pretty disordered, isn't it? Like, so you've got Abraham and he has Isaac and then Jacob and Jacob has the twelve sons and Joseph has the technicolor coat and all that. But eventually at the end of it, it's pretty depressing. They're all in Egypt. That's not where they were meant to be. They were meant to be in some beautiful land, but there they are in Egypt. Tell us about the Egyptian, um, uh, slavery period and Exodus.

**John Walton:** Again, we find here that there's a, a long waiting period. Uh, the order that God was going to bring was through a family, through land, and through being a blessing. And [00:06:00] you're right, you get to the end of Genesis and it looks like we're kind of 0 for 3 here. Now we have, we have a family, so we're, we're 1 for 3.

**John Dickson:** Seventy.

**John Walton:** Right? So, we, we have that aspect, but God's still working toward the end goal of establishing order, but God's, God's plans are, are long term, and so eventually, of course, he brings them out, uh, in the exodus, what we call the exodus, and out of their [00:06:30] slavery. Again, now we're moving toward Order, um, God bringing order for his people, Israel, in light of the covenant. And so the exodus is God's next step in that big program.

All of this is helping us to see how God is working out his plans and purposes. We are observers. And we're observers kind of on the, the landscape, uh, of history, uh, to see how [00:07:00] God is working out his plans and purposes to bring order for his people. And that's to help us to get

to know God and his story better.

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## READING

*Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."*

Exodus, Chapter 14

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**John Dickson:** Okay, so they get out of Egyptian slavery and then they're given a law, Ten Commandments and all that. And I suppose you're going to tell me it's more order. Oh, boy, it's law and order.

**John Walton:** You're catching on. Um, there's a good reason why you have a podcast. So, so Torah is the word we translate law. And that really is misleading to us. Because again, in our modern [00:07:30] world, through our modern lens, as we think of law with legislation and legislative bodies and rows of books and court cases, and that's how we tend to think of it.

In the ancient world, they don't have any of those things, none of those things, uh, constitute kind of how society works.

Uh, so for them, law is customary law, and the main fabric of it is wisdom.

And so the Torah is God giving Israel wisdom of how to bring about order in their society. It's not an ideal order. There is no ideal order, uh, when humans are involved. Um, but this is an order in the ancient world in their covenant, um relationship.

And so God is helping them to understand how to bring about order. So it assumes things like slavery and monarchy and, um, certain gender roles, things that are not familiar to us and are not comfortable for us. But it's not saying this is for everybody, it's saying this is how Israel, in its world, in its context, can bring about order in ways that will be recognized by the peoples around them, because they are a light to the nations.

**John Dickson:** I mean, that is one of the things that is stated that that people will surrounding nations will look on Israel and think how marvelous those laws are.

**John Walton:** Exactly. And again, to think of it not in terms of law, but order. We talk about law and order, right? And, and

**John Dickson:** How wise those people are. Maybe I should say.

**John Walton:** Yeah. Law is just a wisdom means for achieving order.

**John Dickson** Yeah. Okay. Um, And then there's more disorder because after they get the law and they wander around the desert for 40 years, they go and take someone else's land. Now that isn't very orderly. Indeed. How do I read The Conquest?

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## READING

*“But you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to*

*all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.*

Deuteronomy, Chapter 20

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**John Walton:** Yeah, uh, well, it's, it's tricky because there's some of the key words that are difficult to translate. Uh, so lots of times we read in our Bibles about, Utterly destroy, know, annihilate, things of that sort. Um, but the term that's being translated there doesn't really mean that. Sometimes it's translated, put under the ban, which actually gets closer, but is meaningless to us. Basically, when something is treated in this way, it's eliminated from human use. And that's why God tells the Israelites, you can't marry them, you can't enslave them. They are Eliminated from human use.

And God talks about it, He says, You need to drive them out. Driving out is not a punitive action. Driving out is often a clarifying action, or sometimes a purifying action. It's Yahweh's land.

It's not Israel's land. It's not the Canaanites land. It's Yahweh's land. And He's making a space for His presence. And there are certain, you Um, elements, which the Canaanites represent, which are going to be non conducive, not really promoting what God's presence needs to be and being of bad influence on Israel, who are supposed to be the hosts to the presence of God.

So this is all about relationship and presence. It's not about politics. It's not about genocide. It's not about Jihad. not about holy war. Warfare was not supposed to be how this happened. But of course, if people refused to clear space for God's presence, then there's going to be some force involved.

This is not something that was unusual in the ancient world. After all, they, they cleared territory to build a temple. And people who might have lived



there have to be moved out. And this is a matter of clearing the land more than conquering the land.

**John Dickson:** Hmm. It is a strange thing, isn't it, that the Israelites, once they had the land, they weren't a conquering people like many in the ancient Near East. They didn't go down and try and take Egypt and then go and take, you know, Babylonia or whatever.

**John Walton:** Uh, David certainly expands the, the borders, um, so he might be, uh, an, an example of that but that was also still in the process of trying to clear the land that was part of the covenant given.

**John Dickson:** But never thought they were meant to invade other nations and, you know, becomes like the world power. They always saw themselves as having power. Some kind of, yeah, not an empire, some

**John Walton:** though we call it the Davidic Empire.

**John Dickson:** Yes, indeed. Um, okay. So, uh, Conquest, all right. Um, and after the Conquest, you've got this period of the Judges followed by the period of the Kings. I mean, that's a huge period. It's a lot of books of the Bible. Are you able to sum up how we should read that period?

**John Walton:** Sure. So, we start with the judges period, and the recurring theme is, in those days, there was no king, and everybody did what was right in their own eyes. I wonder what that's contrary to.

**John Dickson:** Order? Ding ding!

**John Walton:** exactly. can see the idea. And, and it's also tied in, of course, remember the covenant was the instrument of order. And so it's tied in that they are violating the covenant. They are unfaithful to the covenant. And therefore they are not experiencing order, not just because they didn't have a king, but because they were not following the covenant. So these issues

of, of relationship with God, which is what the covenant established, they were violating that.

And so Judges documents these centuries of time where the people were unfaithful, but God was faithful and patient. Again, in these we're trying to learn God's story. We're not trying to use these stories as examples for us to follow. We have to remember that when we read these Old Testament narratives, um, it's not the characters who deliver the message. It's the narrator who delivers the message. And so we're not supposed to figure out if we're supposed to be like Deborah or not, be like Samson or not, be like Gideon or not, be like David or not. We want to see what the narrator's doing with those characters to show us God's story unfolding so we can understand how God works in the world and how his plans and purposes are carried out, sometimes over long periods of time, through periods of deep crisis like the Judges period.

**John Dickson:** Dear listeners, I'm going to pause there because that's probably the most important one minute of how to read the Bible you've ever heard. Okay, ten seconds anyway. I mean, honestly, yeah, that is, that is extraordinary. Now, right through this King's period, especially toward the end of the King's period, you've got these, um, crazy characters who pop up, and we call them prophets. Um, and, uh, there were loads of them, some of whose writings we don't have, but some of whose writings we do have. And, um, so, you know, from Isaiah, they're sort of the big, big prophets, right through to the, you know, King's period. Little, little prophets, as it were, or, or, or whose, you know, not many of whose words are left to us. Um, who knows how little they were. Um, but tell us about the prophets.

**John Walton:** Okay. So the prophecy comes into play in a different form in the middle of the monarchy period. So let's, let's get into it with the monarchy period. Once we have kings, now God sets up the covenant with David, and that becomes an additional element of order through kings. God's order through God's chosen king. And so we have kingship, which is supposed to be an instrument of order, but it's still driven by covenant.

And we find then the prophets begin, uh, as advisors to the king. We have people like Nathan, who advised David, Samuel, uh, we have Elijah, Elisha, who were not appreciated advisors but advisors nonetheless. But then we get to a point, uh, in the 8th century where, uh, change takes place and now we start getting the prophets whose books, collections of oracles we have.

And these are called the classical prophets. And these classical prophets are still talking about ideal. future Davidic king, because that's not what they've been experiencing. Uh, and that's connected to the covenant with David. But for the most part, they are champions of the covenant, God's covenant with Israel.

Uh, so when they give indictment, here's what you're doing wrong, which they do a lot. Here's what you're doing wrong, that has to do with the covenant. When it talks about judgment, that has to do with the covenant curses. If they didn't Uh, remain to the covenant, then God would bring judgment. They talk about instruction, and the instruction is always covenant focused.

And then they talk about a future, hope and restoration. And again, that God is still going to be faithful to his covenant people even through judgment and punishment. So these prophets are not predictors of the future. They are spokespersons for God. They are giving messages from God to try to bring the people to respond and become faithful to the covenant again so that God can carry out his plans and purposes.

So, they're guardians of the covenant, they're champions of the covenant, they're proclaimers of God's plans and purposes, past, present, future. And we make a mistake if we think of them You know, predictors of the future.

**John Dickson:** Yeah. One of their biggest warnings was that, um, Israel in the north would be exiled, Judah in the south would be exiled, and this indeed happened in the 720s in the north and the 580s eighties in the south.

## READING

*The LORD said to me, "From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the LORD.*

*"Their kings will come and set up their thrones  
in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem;  
they will come against all her surrounding walls  
and against all the towns of Judah.*

*I will pronounce my judgments on my people  
because of their wickedness in forsaking me,  
in burning incense to other gods  
and in worshipping what their hands have made.*

Jeremiah, Chapter 1

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What was the meaning of this so called exile?

**John Walton:** Well, again, the exile, uh, unlike the Canaanites who were driven from the land. That was not punitive. Israel being taken from the land was punitive. It, it says this is God's judgment on them. And the prophets explain that this is for purification. Um, and so that's, that's what it's looking at. They realize that the land that God gave them, again, it is Yahweh's land, and if they fail to honor him in his land, they're going to be removed.

**John Dickson:** Okay. So there's a, a huge part of the Old Testament, um, that seems not to fit, but of course you're going to show us how to read it so that it does. And it's the so called wisdom literature. Uh, tell us what those books in the wisdom literature are and then how to read them.

**John Walton:** Okay. so the ones most commonly recognized as wisdom literature are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Uh, there are wisdom psalms as well, and so we can't rule that out, although not all psalms are psalms. Uh, and then we usually include in that group the Song of Songs, uh, which is interesting. Um, and a very different sort of book, but which I believe also is intended to be a wisdom book.

That is, these love poems are being used to give a wisdom message, which you get at the end of the book, of how powerful love is, uh, and can influence us to bring disorder, uh, when, when it's misunderstood or misused. But at any rate, the wisdom books, um, are, um, Giving us a pathway to order, because wisdom, by definition, is a pathway to order.

And, with Proverbs, of course, it's wisdom with regard to society. You know, how you live, how you make choices, how you speak to one another, how relationships take place, all trying to help us understand a better pathway to order. And of course, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. So, the claim of wisdom literature is you really can't understand the best pathway to order, unless you've got God at the, at the foundation of it.

Uh, Job talks about wisdom in a different way, because Job, the wisdom is, how do you think about how God works in the world? Especially, how should you think about how God works in the world when things are going terribly wrong?

So, the book of Job is not trying to explain suffering to us. It's trying to help us understand a wise and orderly way of thinking about God when everything seems out of order. And one of the things that God says, of course, is that there's more order than what you know. Um, and that's what he tells Job. Ecclesiastes is talking about order at a different level because that's asking the question, we all experience this thing That's, things feel like we haven't arrived, we haven't gotten to where we want to get to.

What's the meaning of life? How can I find self fulfillment? What, what's this all about? And, um, that, the message of Ecclesiastes is, it's all Hevel. Hevel

is the word that just says, we translate meaningless or vanity. And I think it's really the opposite of self fulfillment. That is that we have this difficulty achieving self fulfillment, which we feel is a constituent part of order. And God's telling them through Ecclesiastes, that's not the way to find order. None of those things work. You've tried them. They don't work. So how do you find order? Wisdom for order. As you think about Kind of the, the big things in life, the direction of life. And of course the message that he has to give is, don't look to all of your accomplishments, or all of your achievements, or all of your pursuits to bring that.

They, none of them resolve Hevel. What you have to understand is that we receive good gifts from God. Enjoy them while you have them, appreciate them when they come. But we also receive adversity, also from the hand of God. And wisdom and order suggests that we accept those as from the hand of God. So it's an interesting perspective on trying to help us to understand, again, God's plans and purposes in the world, how he works, how we should think about God, how we should seek order in the covenant and in relationship and understanding God's presence with us.

**John Dickson:** The book of Psalms, I mean this is a massive book in the Bible, um, and it's unlike, it seems unlike any part of the rest of the Bible because they're words mostly that humans are to say to God. So, tell us how to read the Psalms.

**John Walton:** So I think we can see some comparisons. So, um, we, when we read Torah, we say this is a collection of legal provisions, let's call them, uh, legal provisions to help us understand God better.

We look at narrative. This is a collection of narratives. Judges, Samuel, Kings, a collection of narratives to help us to see and understand how God is working in the world. We look at Proverbs, collections, right? We look at the prophets, collections of oracles, uh, apocalyptic collections of visions, uh, all, all to help us try to see more clearly how God is carrying out His plans and purposes.

Psalms, of course, also a collection. Um, so, If we think of it that way, still, you're right, it's talking about now how we talk to God instead of how God is talking to us.

So, Psalms is talking a lot about our response. Sometimes those responses are responses of praise. Sometimes we're really upset and we don't know what's going on and we have questions to God and even shaking our fists and not knowing, um, not knowing what to do.

But in that sense, the Psalms are not trying to tell us this is how you should pray. Remember when Jesus disciples asked, how should we pray, he didn't say, you've got the book of Psalms, right, instead he gives them a prayer to, to pray.

And so, it's not a collection that says this is how to pray, but it's a collection that talks about how important it is to pray. And I think so often we misunderstand prayer Giattani's book, What If Jesus Was Serious About Prayer, and he talks about the fact that prayer, and this includes the Psalms, of course, is not so much about results Answers, it's about relationship.

And it's not so much about communication, it's about communion. And so in Psalms we can see how the relationship of people with their God, uh, proceeds as we communicate with God and as we listen and see how he works in the world to try to understand.

**John Dickson:** In the history of Judaism and Christianity though, those psalms were actually prayed. You know, they're laid down, you know, regularly to pray. You're not saying anything different that, are

**John Walton:** uh, they can be used that way, although not all of them very well. There are some that I would not recommend praying. Um, but, yeah. But some of them, um, many of them have been used for prayers and they can be used that way. But, when we ask what is the authority of them?

What is the revelation that God is giving? It's not revealing your prayer book that you should choose from when praying. You can pray them. Absolutely. Um, because we are all engaged in trying to be in a workable relationship with God. We can understand him better. And these kind of flesh that whole process out.

**John Dickson:** Final question, um, how does the Old Testament help us understand the New? You have 30 seconds.

**John Walton:** Sure. Well, it's God's story. Do you want to know God? Okay, you, you can say, well, Jesus came, and that's wonderful, and Jesus taught us many things, and God saves us through Jesus, and that's great. But, but lots of people say, you know, I don't know how to know God.

You say we should know God. I don't know how to know God. Well, the way we know people is by hearing their story. That's how we know people. by hearing their story, by knowing their story, by sometimes becoming part of their story. so people say, I want to know God. You know God by knowing his story. And that story doesn't start with Jesus. It doesn't start with a cross. It doesn't start with a church. That story starts with God.

And know God, we have to know his story, and the Old Testament gives it to us.

**John Dickson:** John Walton, thank you so much for coming down all the way to level three to talk with me.