Ancient context to enduring doubt

Old Testament Theology for Christians: From ancient context to enduring belief

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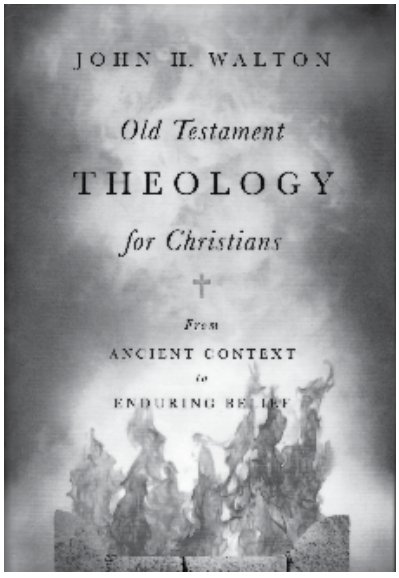

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I begin with a confession: I have found preparing a review of this book an altogether depressing and distasteful process. It is on one hand so full of concessions to liberal and secular scholarship, yet comes from one who on the other hand claims to be a Bible-believing evangelical, a claim that rings hollow on a detailed examination.

Walton's basic position is that the Old Testament was written *for* us, but not written *to* us, since its authors spoke classical Hebrew and not any modern language, and more importantly, they spoke from within a particular cultural framework which is alien to our own (p. 5; emphasis in original). He is insistent on this point throughout, as in this assertion towards the close of the book:

> "Since the Old Testament *is* an ancient text written to another culture, it is possible, if not likely that we will misunderstand some of what is going on as we navigate ancient language and culture [emphasis in original]" (p. 269).

Hence to understand it properly we need to 'think into' and understand the cultural background of the Ancient Near East (ANE) and extract its message from that background and framework (pp. 14–18). While this sort of perspective has become quite fashionable, even standard, in our post-modern times, it needs to be challenged, for a number of reasons, as outlined below.

However, to make good on this claim, Walton's thesis on Old Testament theology is that the ancient Near Eastern literature is essential to understanding that theology, such that without it we misunderstand the latter. He states this clearly:

> "... I believe that the Old Testament cannot properly be understood without taking the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment into account. The Israelites were embedded in the ancient world, and they thought like ancient people" (p. 15).

This statement is fully in line with his parallel series of books, under the general theme of "The Lost World", in which he insists that the ANE literature provides the key to understanding the relevant biblical narratives.[1] Moreover, Walton insists that it is no excuse to point to Christians of the past who had no access to the ancient Near Eastern literature. On the contrary, we must utilize the tools now available, and resist the temptation to read the Old Testament only in the light of the New Testament. We must see through the lenses of the ancient Israelites, and not our own.

To reinforce this point, Walton uses the metaphor of a 'cultural river' (p. 74), which flowed through all the various cultures, including Israel. These Israelite intermediaries for divine revelation, to whom we often refer as 'the authors', were "fully immersed in the cultural river" (p. 75), and the hearers were likewise immersed.

However, so that he may not be misunderstood (or perhaps to allay fears for his professed orthodoxy on the part of his evangelical readers), Walton does not affirm that all interpretations of the Old Testament prior to our access to ancient Near Eastern texts were flawed, but he points out that the Church Fathers and the Reformers were not trying to discover authorial intent, nor trying to compile a theology of the Old Testament (pp. 16–17). However, that said, Walton goes on to decry attempts to "universalise" the Bible's theology and ethics, and insists that by contrast we must understand that it speaks in the language of accommodation to a culturally "cognitive environment", i.e. the ancient target audience. Hence it cannot be universalised *simpliciter*.

Accordingly, while he occasionally cites some conservative scholars such as W.C. Kaiser, for the most part the scholars he quotes with approval and relies on are definitely from the liberal-secular side of ancient Near Eastern studies. This is as it must be, he insists, since it is to the literature of the ANE that we must go in order to understand the Old Testament, and it is the secular critics who in the main are conversant with this literature. By contrast, there can be no going back to the studies of

Old Testament theology prior to the discovery of this body of texts.

At the outset, Walton helpfully lists his basic assumptions before he sets out on his theological quest (pp. 3–13). These can be summarised as follows:

- Interpretation that is authority-based, on one hand seeing the Bible as God's authoritative revelation, but at the same time presenting us with the "complicated endeavour" of discerning just what that authoritative message is (p. 3).
- Recognizing the ancient context of the audience to which God spoke: "We are not in the implied audience of the human author" (p. 5), so we must understand the ancient context as best we can, so as to avoid reading our modern thinking into the text.
- A consistent and sustained "theological impulse" must attend interpretation. This applies to all literary genres in the Old Testament: the goal is always theological.
- The centre and goal of the Old Testament revelation is God's presence among His people and their relationship with Him. This sounds good until we read on and find that he downplays emphasis on personal salvation; rather, he seeks a broader 'cosmic' perspective (p. 8).

However, unhelpfully, he has omitted to state certain vital presuppositions:

- As much a claim as an assumption is the constant assertion of "how an ancient Israelite would understand X" or "the questions an ancient Israelite would ask"—neither of which in his view correspond to the (mistaken) understanding of the average, well-informed Christian as he reads the Old Testament. One finds this constantly throughout the book, as for example with this assertion regarding Genesis 1:26 and a divine council: "this conclusion suggests that Genesis 1:26 not only would have been understood to refer to the council (not the Trinity) by the Israelite audience, but also that it is theologically unsubstantiated to impose a Trinitarian interpretation …" (p. 42).

  But how does he know that the Israelites would have understood the text in this way? How does he know how the Israelite mind worked? Has he been back in a time machine to interview "an ancient Israelite" hearer? While this type of claim is all too familiar from scholars of the liberal-critical outlook, it still remains that mere assertion is in no sense proof.
- Another oft-repeated assumption is that the ANE literature provides the key for unlocking the meaning of the Old Testament, i.e. that this material reveals the "lost world" of the Old Testament.

  However, one gets the impression here, from Walton's discussion, that these texts from the ANE are of fairly recent discovery. I'm sure he does not believe this—but the bold claim that he is now revealing "the lost world" of the Old Testament does create that perception. In reality, it is about 150 years ago that the *Gilgamesh Epic* was first discovered and translated, and likewise *Enuma Elish*, the alleged Babylonian creation story, in which Marduk emerges victorious from a bloodthirsty war, and receives fifty adulatory names (cf. figure 1), came to light at about the same time. While other texts are of somewhat more recent publication, many of the texts he cites have been around for at least a hundred years, as one can gather, e.g. from Heidel's *The Babylonian Genesis* (1951) or Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1969). So there is nothing essentially new about their availability. Meanwhile, many Old Testament theologies by conservative authors have appeared, but Walton appears to disregard them.[2]

Intended recipients

The first point of response to these various claims, in particular in regard to Scripture being written "not to us, but for us", this could equally be said of the New Testament: the apostles too wrote to their own readers and generation, even if secondarily they wrote for us, but that their message must likewise be extracted from its 'cultural environment' and background, that its theology and ethics must not be universalised, etc. Is he prepared to go this far? It is quite evident that many others of the post-modern outlook do indeed reach that conclusion, but in so doing they part company with any sort of Reformation affirmation of the plenary, God-given inspiration of Scripture, the supreme and transcendent authority of Scripture, and most importantly in the present context, the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture, along with the principle of *Scriptura Scripturae interpres*: "Scripture (itself) interprets Scripture". In this respect Walton appears to want to have his cake and eat it too.

Secondly, if we must recognise that the Old Testament can only be understood by taking into account the 'cognitive environment' of the ANE, who is to extract the message of Scripture from its ancient Near Eastern cultural background and framework? Why, the scholars of course, especially those with skills in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies, who are able to guide us through the 'complicated endeavour' of finding the authoritative message. So, in effect, we have a new *magisterium*, not of an ecclesiastical hierarchy this time, but of academics. Where does this leave the ordinary Christian? Here Walton seems rather disdainful of "popular evangelical piety", with its individualistic piety and simplistic understanding of Scripture (p. 69), and thus rather skeptical of its ability to discern the real message of the Old Testament.

Thirdly, the apostolic testimony as to the intended audience of the Bible's message and instruction would appear

to contradict Walton. Consider the following examples:

> "… my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of *the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past*, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been *made known to all the nations*, leading to the obedience of faith [emphases added]" (Romans 16:25–26).
>
> "Now these things happened to them [the Israelites in the wilderness] as an example, and *they were written for our instruction*, upon whom the ends of the ages have come [emphases added]" (1 Corinthians 10:11).
>
> "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries … . It was revealed to them that *they were not serving themselves, but you*, in these things which have been announced to you through those who preached the Gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven [emphases added] …" (1 Peter 1:10–12).

In the first of these passages Paul declares that the Gospel was hidden from the people during Old Testament times, that its message was indeed obscure, i.e. a mystery; but a new era has now arrived such that the Gospel of Christ is now revealed—from the OT Scriptures—and published to the nations at large. Hence the intended audience for the Old Testament message was not so much for the prophets' contemporaries in their cultural environment, but for the Gentile recipients of Gospel in this Messianic age.

In the second passage Paul recounts incidents in the wilderness wanderings and presses home for his Gentile audience the moral implications of these incidents; that they were written for their instruction in this Gospel era.

The passage from 1 Peter is particularly apposite: the prophets inquired and searched regarding the Gospel of grace, and (contrary to Walton) he insists that they were not serving themselves—or presumably their contemporaries—but Peter's Christian readers in the Gospel age! Thus the prophetic message is to be discerned from the Spirit-directed preachers of the Gospel (the Apostles in particular), and by the Holy Spirit who gave the Scriptures in the first place, and who interprets them in turn to the humble believer (2 Peter 1:20–21). Whatever relevance the 'cultural context' and background may have, if they serve any purpose, they are secondary to the Spirit-given Gospel message contained in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). Significantly, Walton does not discuss any of these texts in his assertion of 'intended audience'.

Figure 1. Hymn to Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, who emerges from the conflict described in the Enuma Elish myth

In summary at this juncture, despite his claims to an evangelical commitment (p. 9), Walton's constant emphasis—especially in his insistence on the relevance of the Near Eastern background—is on the human character and dimension of the Bible, and its symbiosis and concomitance with the milieu of the ANE. Meanwhile, its character as God's Word, which transcends time and culture, tends to be lost in the miasma of cultural background, the time-bound authorial intent, and the motifs and themes of ancient Near Eastern texts. Contrary to Walton, the primary character of the Bible is that it is God's Word, and as such it addresses every reader directly in every age, culture, and place. I might add, regarding Walton's outlook, that we have heard all this before, i.e. from liberal-secular scholars who had no commitment to the divine origin of the Old Testament, still less to its Christ-centred message.

Here our Lord's post-resurrection ministry comes in, wherein He opened the apostles' minds "to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). We can be sure that in this connection He did not acquaint them with Near Eastern mythology or Mesopotamian literature! Indeed, the use we observe being made of the Old Testament in the writings of Paul and the Catholic epistles we can legitimately trace back to our Lord's ministry in general, but to His post-resurrection ministry in particular.

Walton's handling of the ancient Near Eastern texts

Moving on from strictly biblical and theological issues, we must inquire as to how reliable is Walton's use of the ancient Near Eastern literature. For one who insists on its importance, and relies on those texts so heavily, one would expect that his understanding and interpretation of these texts would be on the mark. However, this is not the case, as can be seen from the following examples:

1. In regard to monotheism, in his discussion of "I AM who I AM" (Exodus 3:14), he not only denies that this asserts God's eternal self-existence, but appeals to an Egyptian text to deny its uniqueness (p. 49). However, in so doing he cites a secondary source for the text,[3] and not the text itself so that one can ascertain the context. It is in fact a magical text, and the relevant lines appear as part of a spell to be recited over the picture of a cow, while the

arrangement of Re and his son Shu are precisely described.[4] The relevant line reads: "I am who I am, and I will not let them take action [i.e. foment a rebellion]", that is Re (if the reference is to him, as seems likely) is simply declaring that he remains himself and is determined that he will act at the present just as he has done in the past.[5] Hence, contrary to Walton, this line has nothing to do with the Exodus declaration; he has rushed to a conclusion. Thus the burning bush declaration is indeed unique.

2. Another egregious misconception concerns human origins and the image of God in man, as in Genesis 1:26–7; 2:7. Walton contends that the ancients were not interested in material origins but human identity (p. 92), and cites in this connection the depiction of the Egyptian god Khnum crafting a child (actually Amenhotep III) on a potter's wheel, along with his *ka'* (k_3) or spirit-double (figure 2).[6] He alleges: "Biological origins are not in view; identity is what is considered important" (p. 93).[7]

But surely the Khnum painting expresses *both* the physical origin and that of the spiritual double, the *ka'*. Add to this the fact that the physical was conceived of as essential to the identity of the person, as evidenced by the need for mummification after death and the consequent preservation of the body, plus the continual food offerings (*ka'u*, the plural of *ka'*) for the *ka'* of the deceased. Walton proposes a false contrast. Moreover, can such an esoteric conclusion seriously be drawn from a simple painting in an Egyptian tomb?

Walton's comment on kingship in the Ancient Near East likewise betrays a sweeping generalisation, all too familiar in critical literature: "In the rhetoric of the ancient Near East, kings regularly identified themselves as the sons of one god or another" (p. 232). Then he relates this conclusion to the royal psalms (Psalms 2; 110), and also to Jesus' identification as Son of God, that it is "far removed from the idea of God incarnate".

But his observation on royal ideology is not at all correct. The term "son of god" was not a widespread title for a king or a concept of kingship in the Ancient Near East. In Egypt it was indeed part of both the titulary and the royal ideology of the king, and did identify him as the sun deity Re (*sa Re*, the fifth name of the royal titulary), but that was not the case elsewhere. In Mesopotamia the king was the vice-regent of the national deity, e.g. of Aššur in Assyria, whom the king regularly referred to as "my lord" (*bēliya*), but he was not "son of Aššur" or of any other god. In the standard royal titulary which prefaces the royal annals there are many epithets, but "son of god X" is not one of them. The king was not divine.

Then in the Hittite treaties the king introduces himself as "the Great King, King of Hatti, Hero, Beloved of Tešub", but not "son of god X".[8] Moreover, the king was under the jurisdiction of the *panku* or council of state. Far from being an absolute monarch, as in Egypt or in Mesopotamia, the role of the *panku* was to confirm according to a formula of succession the accession and legitimacy of the king. Legitimacy was always an issue, but it became acute in the case of Hattušili III, when he seized the throne from his nephew Urhi-Tešub, such that Hattušili found it necessary to issue an apology to declare his legitimacy to the palace officials.[9]

In the light of this Near Eastern background, the declaration of the Lord to His anointed, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (Psalm 2:7), is not a mere honorific title, on a level with kings of the ANE. Since the historical books give no hint that the Israelite king was invested with this title at his coronation, we are left with Psalm 2:7, which must then be interpreted that way. But if then that interpretation is used as evidence we have circular reasoning, which Walton apparently adopts. Likewise, Jesus' adoption of the attribute "Son of God" is indeed a metaphysical claim, and not merely an honorific title. His Jewish opponents saw this clearly, as John 5:18 and John 10:33–36 testify.

On the subject of Israelite monotheism, Walton appeals *inter alia* to an Egyptian hymn to Amun-Re to deny that the *šema'* of Deuteronomy 6:4 is any sort of metaphysical statement that only Yahweh exists (p. 36). Here again we encounter the claim as to how an Israelite would have understood the statement. It is certainly not how Jewish exegetes have understood what is for them a confession of faith. Hence Walton would criticize not only Christians but Jews also for their misunderstanding of the *šema'*.

In summary, Walton sees a basic continuum between Yahweh and the gods of the ANE, with a few spikes of uniqueness and contrast here and there. With this estimate he sides very much with the secular, critical scholars who come to a similar conclusion. However, to arrive at this conclusion he misreads the Near Eastern texts, and empties the biblical references of their profound theological content.

Creation and Genesis 1

Although this topic receives relatively little treatment in his volume, he sides with those interpreters who deny that Genesis 1:1 explicitly teaches or implies a creation *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing" (p. 10). Moreover, he alleges that only in modern times has the doctrine of *ex nihilo* been applied to the material cosmos, the implication being (apparently) that this application is something of an innovation, as it originally applied to discussion about the origin of the soul. While space forbids a full investigation of this allegation, it is evident that Walton has erred again. Tertullian in *Against*

Hermogenes, xx and xxi, affirms about creation that God made all things from nothing, that no previous matter existed prior to God's creation—and he is talking there about the material universe, not the human soul.[10]

For Walton, scientific questions are "a distraction" (p. 27). Not only is he not interested in a harmony of Genesis and science, and certainly not from a creationist perspective, but any such quest is for him a sidetrack from a proper understanding of Genesis. The proper understanding of Genesis 1 he sees as "God ordering the cosmos to serve as sacred space where he can be in relationship to his creatures", and where Eden is the centre of his place of rest. From this rather oblique statement it would be easy to conclude that God somehow needed the creation, and man in particular, to complete his own happiness. If this is his meaning it is certainly not the case: God never needed the creation for any purpose, but it was a free expression of His own will and good pleasure.

Then when it comes to the image of God in man, Walton dissociates himself from any traditional understanding, and opts for a 'corporate' interpretation. "The image is a status, not a set of capabilities" (p. 87) and "none of us individually is the image of God; we are all part of corporate humanity, which is the image of God" (p. 88). With this corporate status one can choose to identify—or not (p. 86), but the status remains. Walton then blithely assumes that this corporate aspect is re-affirmed in Genesis 5:1–3, whereas the text surely teaches that just as Adam (the individual) was created in the likeness of God, so Adam begat another individual, Seth, in his own likeness (Genesis 5:3). Hence the image was transmitted from father to son, and so on. Further, God ordains the death penalty for murder in the Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:5–6), precisely because the murdered *individual* bore the image of God. Moreover, Walton does not discuss the renewal of the image of God through the redemption of Christ in Ephesians 4:22–24. This 'putting off' is the task of the individual Christian.

Eschatology

In regard to life beyond the grave, or what theologians call the intermediate state, Walton rejects any view that this is part of Old Testament teaching. While space forbids a full account of his discussion, I can mention that Psalm 49:15 ("You will ransom me from the power of Sheol, for you will receive me") and Psalm 73:24 ("You will afterward receive me to glory") are rejected as holding out hope for the life beyond (pp. 248–249). Moreover, Jesus' refutation of the Sadducees (Matt 22:31-32 and parallels) by appealing to the present tense of the verb "to be" in Exodus 3:6, i.e. that God *is*—not *was*—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is similarly ignored.

What is far-fetched is his view of Elijah's translation in 2 Kings 2:11–12 (pp. 249–50). Because the Hebrew *šāmayim* can mean simply 'sky' he concludes that Elijah simply went into the sky, and not into heaven (about which, on his view, the Old Testament says nothing). To the inevitable question, "Who then appeared on the mount of Transfiguration?" Walton does not even mention the passages in the Gospels (Matthew 17:3–4; Mark 9:4–5; Luke 9:30–33), let alone explain them.

As a footnote, I have heard this kind of 'explanation' of Elijah's translation from those sects which deny the heavenly intermediate state and assert soul-sleep after death: Elijah went into the sky and came down again at some undisclosed location! Walton appears to align with these groups. While this is not itself a refutation, such a position, apart from his decidedly liberal leanings otherwise, takes him out of the arena of orthodox Christianity and into the realm of sectarian heterodoxy.

A scholar just as skilled in ancient Near Eastern texts as Walton claims to be was Alexander Heidel, who gave a very different assessment of the Old Testament's view of the afterlife—compared with the Near Eastern material—in his *Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, in the chapter entitled, "Death and the

Figure 2. The Egyptian god Khnum crafting a child on a potter's wheel, while the goddess Heqat imparts life via the *ankh*-symbol

Afterlife".[11] Heidel's discussion has never been bettered, yet Walton simply ignores it without even a mention.[12] Likewise, Walter Kaiser's albeit brief discussion,[13] or the more extensive discussions by Geerhardus Vos,[14] and J.B. Payne,[15] are similarly bypassed.

The final point of this review concerns resurrection. In brief, Walton has difficulty acknowledging that the Old Testament envisages a resurrection of the bodies of individuals from dust, to an afterlife. The classic texts such as Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 are interpreted otherwise: the former as a national resurrection, "much like Ezek 37"; and the latter as indeterminate and difficult to define, in the light of the differing views among Jewish groups (pp. 253–55). He concludes, "The Israelite doctrine should not be equated with the doctrine eventually formulated in New Testament theology and church history" (p. 255). However, Jesus' clear allusion to the Daniel text in John 5:28–29 clearly indicates that He understood it as referring to the resurrection of individuals in their bodies, from 'the tombs', at the last Day. Walton is unwilling to affirm what Jesus affirmed.

Conclusions

1. In respect of the Ancient Near Eastern literature, on which he places so much store, he reveals what can only be described as sloppy scholarship. I have given a few examples; more could be produced. This does not inspire confidence in his hermeneutics or exegesis of the Old Testament itself.
2. In his effort to dissociate himself from traditional understandings of Old Testament themes Walton employs abstract philosophical categories such as identity, relationship, community, functionality, sacred space, and the like. Then, having explored such themes in the Ancient Near Eastern literature he proceeds to claim that "the Israelite understanding" was similar, albeit with some differences. This wafty, philosophical air is, contrary to Walton, foreign to biblical expression.
3. Walton sums up with a series of denials of what Old Testament teaching is (pp. 289–91), which should warn the devout Christian reader who handles this book. In view of these many denials, and the above elucidation, this is a highly dangerous book, not least because it professes to sit within the evangelical, Bible-believing context when in fact it does not. All Walton's affinities are with those of the liberal, secular outlook, while his affirmations of orthodoxy are often oblique and ambiguous. At best, his trumpet gives an uncertain sound.
4. With his insistence that we cannot read New Testament themes back into the Old Testament, he certainly rejects the maxim attributed to Augustine: "In the Old is the New concealed; in the New is the Old revealed." In short, with all his denials of what Christians from earliest times have found so precious in the Old Testament, one wonders what ultimate value the Old Testament is then supposed to still have.

References

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2. See further my recent article, Paradise and the antediluvian world: Genesis and the ANE literature compared, *Reformed Theological Review* **78**(2):89–116, 2019.
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4. As depicted in a painting in the tomb of Seti I. See G. Burkard, Conceptions of the cosmos—the universe: in: Schulz, R. and Seidel, M., *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*, Tandem Verlag, Königswinter, Germany, p. 448, 2007.
5. So comments in de Moor, ref. 3.
6. The painting comes from a series of birth reliefs in the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari. See Lurker, M., *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, Thames & Hudson, London, p.74, 1980.
7. In the "Instruction to Merikare" it is said of Re, "He made breath for their noses to live, they are his images (*snnw.f*), who came from his body (*ḫ'w.f*)." Thus we have man coming from the flesh of a god, a motif similar (to some extent) to that in Mesopotamia, where man is manufactured from the blood of a slain god, duly mixed with clay. For the text of Merikare see Lichtheim, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. I, University of California, Berkeley, p.106,1975; For discussion see Hoffmeier, J.K., Thoughts on Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology, *J. Ancient Near Eastern Society* **15**:47, 1983.
8. See e.g. the treaty between Šuppiluliuma I and Aziru of Amurru, and that between Šuppiluliuma I and Šattiwaza of Mitanni; in: Beckman, G., *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2nd edn, Atlanta, pp. 37 and 42 respectively, 1999.
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12. See his list of 'important sources', p. 237, note 9. None of these works can be classed as evangelical.
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