

## TECHNOLOGY

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**AI SHEPHERDS AND ELECTRIC SHEEP: Leading and Teaching in the Age of Artificial Intelligence** by Sean O'Callaghan and Paul A. Hoffman. Baker Academic, 2025. 208 pages. Paperback; \$24.99. ISBN: 9781540968012.

What should educators and ministry leaders know about artificial intelligence (AI)? How should AI alter the way they carry out their responsibilities? What uses of AI should they avoid? These questions have become more pressing since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, and this book is one of a number that have been published in response to the need for accessible, scholarly answers.

The authors bring theology backgrounds to the task. Sean O'Callaghan has a PhD in systematic theology and six years as director of the PhD program in Humanities and Technology at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island. Paul Hoffman has a PhD from the University of Manchester and is an associate professor in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies at Samford University in Homewood, Alabama.

They start by characterizing AI and acknowledging that there is no single accepted definition for it. The characterization includes concepts such as algorithm, autonomy, generative AI, narrow AI, artificial general intelligence, and artificial super intelligence. There is also a brief history of AI, highlighting Alan Turing, John McCarthy, and Geoffrey Hinton, as well as a survey of AI definitions from several perspectives, including computer scientists and government agencies. Their definition of AI is "A tool to be used for human flourishing, subject to human agency and authority" (p. 174).

On top of this foundation, a survey of thirteen current and potential implications of AI is conducted in the span of one chapter. Thus, the descriptions are brief, sometimes only a paragraph, but there are ninety-six footnotes for those wanting to go deeper. The implications lean toward the social sciences and omit or barely mention areas such as agriculture, manufacturing, and programming. The chapter could be valuable for readers new to AI but less so for those with experience in the area.

O'Callaghan and Hoffman then move on to biblical anthropology structured as a creational narrative starting with the triune God and progressing through creation, dis-integration, liberation, reclamation, and glorification. They touch on the *imago Dei*, the cultural mandate, and original sin of Genesis; the redeeming work of Christ; the current age in which Christians work to bring about *shalom* and flourishing; and the future full glorification when Christ returns. After the model is described, there is a deeper dive into the *imago Dei*, particularly relational and vocational perspectives.

From this theological base, humans and humanity are contrasted with transhumanism (including the singularity), Gnosticism, and technology in the context of current and future AI. There is also an excursion into neural science and genetic engineering applied to humans.

The theology chapters may be the most valuable in the book for a broad audience that spans pastors, church leaders, and lay people who may or may not regularly work with AI. The content will help those teaching and preaching to connect doctrine to current and emerging AI content and methodology. Without intentional spiritual formation related to AI, the beliefs and practices of Christians are more likely to be mis-formed by non-Christian sources such as naturalism, transhumanism, and Gnosticism.

The final section of the book is dedicated to specific applications. The chapter on AI in education is focused on adult education, recognizing that elements can also apply to youth and children. More specifically, O'Callaghan and Hoffman concentrate on AI in relation to truth, the flourishing of the human spirit, the accelerated life, and the family. Rather than focusing on detailed questions of the moment, the authors take a higher-level view that should remain useful as particular tools and instructional methods come and go.

Christian commitment to truth is viewed in light of the misinformation (e.g., hallucinations from large language models) and disinformation that can be rapidly generated by AI and broadly disseminated through social media to audiences targeted by AI. Such posts have led to the increase in people holding to conspiracy theories rather than beliefs that are based on public, traceable evidence. The authors connect conspiracy theories to Gnosticism, which emphasizes secret knowledge available only to a small group of enlightened people.

The authors view AI as contributing to flourishing of the human spirit when used as a tool for cocreation with God rather than as a substitute for human endeavors. There is a need for discernment to identify when AI moves from assisting people to replacing them in key roles. Examples of appropriate cocreation, in the opinion of the authors, include enhancing visual projects, producing advertising content, making templates for communication, and creating music.

The *Lectio Divina* is offered as an approach that counters the accelerated life promoted by AI. Writing without AI is prescribed as a discipline to improve unrushed, deliberative thinking. In moving from private to family activities, intentional abstinence from digital devices is seen as formative. Parents can model this and help children develop boundaries and disciplines.

Narrowing the focus to spiritual formation and discipleship, the authors consider AI to be part of the context and not a central element. They discuss the "Eliza effect,"

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which is based on experiences over five decades with a computer chatbot designed to be a therapist. They conclude that human relationships are an essential and non-AI replaceable element for spiritual growth. Following Albert Borgmann and Andy Crouch, they promote “hearth habits.”

In their final chapter, O’Callaghan and Hoffman address the question of how ministry leaders should approach AI from a principled rather than tactical approach. They provide three categories: things not to be done, things to be freely done, and things that require caution. Prohibited AI uses include writing or delivering entire sermons of Bible lessons, substitution for interpersonal counseling, and writing entire worship songs or planning entire worship services. They are fine with using AI for media material production, website management, human resource management, and language translation. Activities for cautious use of AI include research assistance and generation of teaching materials. My personal positions and practices are in general agreement with the authors’ positions and backing rationale.

I found the book worth the reading investment. Most valuable to me was the connection made between Gnosticism and how some view AI. “These concepts are taking greater import as AI threatens to perpetuate a fresh form of Gnosticism in Western culture, unbiblically dividing and decoupling the physical from the mental-spiritual” (p. 65). I would especially recommend the book to the intended audience of church leaders to introduce them to AI, key theological issues raised by AI, and church applications. The book is not comprehensive but provides an introduction with copious footnotes for further reading. Perhaps more importantly, it can provide basis for conversation between church leaders and congregants who are living on the front lines of AI. From this conversation, specific congregational spiritual challenges and opportunities can be identified and addressed.

*Reviewed by Noel Anderson, intelligent agricultural systems consultant, Fargo, ND 58102.*

## THEOLOGY

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**NEW EXPLORATIONS IN THE LOST WORLD OF GENESIS:** Advances in the Origins Debate by John H. Walton with contributions by J. Harvey Walton. IVP Academic, 2025. 244 pages. Paperback; \$25.99. ISBN: 978-1514004913. Kindle; \$25.99. ISBN: 9781514004920.

John Walton, well-known scholar of the Bible and professor emeritus of Wheaton College and Graduate School, returns to his primary study of Genesis and its place within the world of the ancient Near East. This book serves as the eighth publication in his Lost World series, begun in 2009, and as the fourth writing relating that

world to “the modern scientific origins debate” (publisher’s description). This edition updates previous readings and serves as a digest of the series as well as a summary of the status of the origins debate, all of which provide value to readers interested in these topics.

The target audience is primarily communities within the evangelical and fundamentalist conversation, rather than larger scientific, or academic, communities. Walton begins by describing the intellectual process through which he moved from early default young earth creationism (an uncomfortable position as a teacher) to the realization that there are other ways to think about creation (Genesis 2–4). His discovery of ancient world texts during his early academic studies opened his eyes to the significance of the historical and cultural contexts of the Hebrew Bible, which in turn raised questions about preserving the demands of biblical authority in the face of scientific (archaeological) evidence. We cannot, he concludes, get good answers if we are not asking the right questions. The Lost World series represents a systematic effort to ask the right questions, and this volume represents one more attempt to bring Walton’s constituency along with him.

Each chapter follows the same pattern. First, a summary of what Walton previously published on the topic; second, new insights and clarifications; and third, FAQs on the topic, developed out of Q&A sessions during his decades of interaction with evangelical colleges, churches, and conferences. It is abundantly clear that the same questions continue to be asked as those that were raised when he began his project in the 1970s.

The topics arise from the opening chapters of the Bible. Genesis 1 raises questions concerning the creation and “functional ontology,” in chapter 3 of this book; the seventh day and its significance as “temple and rest” in chapter 4. Genesis 2 questions cover the garden and the trees as “sacred space and priestly roles,” in chapter 5; Adam and Eve as “archetypes of dust and rib,” in chapter 6. Genesis 3 topics include “the serpent and fall” in chapter 7, and “pronouncement and aftermath” in chapter 8). Chapter 9, “Genesis and science,” speaks directly to the relation of approaches to origins in religion and science as the contrast between mechanism and agency.

In terms of contemporary scientific discovery, Walton argues that evolution is not incompatible with the Bible. He also offers a long footnote of works by devoted Christian scientists who adopt an evolutionary view of creation. Walton’s biblical methodology, to which he devotes chapter 2, remains balanced and largely consonant with broader scholarship on the subject. He frequently couches this method in his own terminology. For instance, he contrasts the existing evangelical reading of Genesis as a conversation about the material origins of the cosmos with his functional ontology. The claims of science address the mechanisms of “how” and “when.”