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Review of Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15*

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Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids\Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004). Pp. xxxv + 693. Cloth, US\$50.00. ISBN 0-8028-2545-1; *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31* (NICOT; Grand Rapids\Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005). Pp. xxxii + 589. Cloth, US\$50.00. ISBN 0-8028-2776-4.

A note to the reader: I am reviewing these volumes without having read them from cover to cover; instead, I have approached them in the way in which people regularly use commentaries. In other words, I read the Introduction completely and then sampled the commentary at various verses and passages for which I would likely have consulted it in the ordinary course of my work had it previously been available.

Bruce Waltke has given us a 1200-page commentary that is the fruit of more than a quarter-century of work. (Like *The Lord of the Rings*, Waltke's commentary appears in multiple volumes for practical reasons and not because of the author's intent.) He notes in his "Author's Preface" that "the new literary criticism ... has had a profound impact on traditional exegesis and ... required my rethinking the entire book. This new approach validates that the proverbs are arranged in a sensible way to protect the vulnerable sayings against misinterpretation and/or to enrich their meanings" (1.xxv). In fact, Waltke was so bold as to split his commentary in between vv. 15:29 and 15:30, judging that 15:30-16:15 is a prologue to the second half of the Solomonic collection of 10:1-22:16. The table of Contents in each volume presents the outline of coherence for which the commentary will argue. It is this aspect of the book that is likely to be of most benefit to scholars—not necessarily because all of Waltke's arguments to this effect will be accepted, but because considering them should prove productive.

The Introduction to the commentary takes up almost 15% of the entire work, 170 pages, of which the last 40 are bibliography. The remainder splits almost evenly into two halves, one treating the standard "historico-grammatical" (1.xxii) issues of text, authorship, dating, structure, and genre, and the other covering "Theology," which deals not only with images of God but also revelation, "anthropology" (in the German sense of the word often used in American Protestant Bible scholarship), and Christology. Though Robert L. Hubbard, the general editor of the NICOT series, notes that "it speaks from within that interpretive tradition known as evangelicalism" (1.xx), this Jewish reader did not find the explicitly Christian aspects of the book intrusive. Waltke cites Jewish commentators as diverse as Ibn Janah (1.419) and Malbim (2.131), and disagrees with the identification in Christian exegesis of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with Jesus Christ. Waltke maintains that such identification is not necessary for Christians to find worth in Proverbs; after all, "even though Christ's wisdom is so much greater than Solomon's, we do not discard the latter any more than we would throw away a five-dollar bill because we also owned a twenty-dollar bill" (1.132).

The most obvious result of the book's evangelical orientation is the identification of Solomon as the composer of the contents of Chapters 1-29. Chapter 30 was written by Agur son of Jakeh and all of Chapter 31, including the acrostic poem on "The Valiant Wife," by Lemuel, who "[s]ince such a king is unattested in Israel's history ... is probably a proselyte to Israel's faith" (2.503). Those who, like this reviewer, have fallen victim to the "endemic scholarly skepticism about the Bible's own claims of its

authorship" (1.27, 2.501) will need to bracket this aspect of the commentary in order to profit by its other aspects. But in fact Waltke's approach is more nuanced than this statement makes it sound. He concludes, "The final editor, the real author of the book, not of its sayings, probably lived during the Persian period ... or in the Hellenistic era" (1.37). For those who are fond of "Lemuel, king of Massa" (31:1 in the NJPSV translation), it is worth noting Waltke's observation (2.454 n. 5) that the understanding of *משא* as "oracle" here fits nicely with the prophetic connotations of the phrase *נאם הגבר* used (alongside *משא*) of Agur's words in 30:1. If Waltke wants to suggest (1.79) that this points to a likeness to the rest of the Bible and contradicts a view of wisdom literature as essentially non-religious, I find this an observation worth considering.

I feel the same about Waltke's attempt to see a coherent hand at work in ordering the "short sayings (or sentences) in the indicative mood" (1.57) that make up most of the book. His introduction (1.48-50) offers such a reading of 26:1-12, variously called "A Mirror of Fools" (1.48, 2.345), "The Mirror of Fools" (1.50, 2.354), and simply "The Fool" (2.xiii, 345). It is easy to take issue with some of Waltke's remarks here. For example, he finds vv. 1-2 linked by the "paronomasia" (1.48) or "pun" (2.347) of the opposites *כבד* (in *כבוד* at the end of v. 1) and *קל* (in *קללת חנם* at the beginning of v. 2a). The latter phrase means a "gratuitous curse" (NJPSV), but because of the birds mentioned in 2a, one is intended to remember that "in the Semitic languages it can mean 'to be flighty,' a notion that gives rise to the image of birds flying about without a landing" (1.48; cf. 2.347). In the Hebrew Bible, at least, this root is used with birds only of the majestic soaring of eagles (2 Sam 1:23, Jer 4:13, Lam 4:19), not to indicate "flightiness." The non-scholars for whom the main body of the text (as opposed to the footnotes) is intended (1.xxiii) will certainly be misled by this statement. I am dubious, as well, that "*epiphora* (same final sound or word)" links 3:13-15 (1.47, 257); these are a feminine singular noun and two 3 f. s. suffixes. I find an even more serious problem with the exegesis of 19:26-27. One might possibly accept that 19:27, with its famously difficult exhortation to the son to cease listening, is actually meant sarcastically—though it is harder to accept the same of Lemuel's mother's advice in 31:6 to "Give free beer to the poor" (1.40; cf. 2.508f.)—but Waltke's explanation that the two verses are a couplet does not jibe with his explanation. "The son's progressive hardening in sin develops from his holding himself back from his parents' instruction (v. 27a), to straying from wisdom (v. 27b), to crime against his parents (v. 26)" (2.124). The verses actually occur in the opposite order of their supposed progression.

At the same time, Waltke's larger point demands serious consideration. Proverbs 26 begins with 12 verses of which all but one, v. 2, have the word *כסיל*, "fool," followed by a different cluster with the word *עצל*, "a lazy man." It is possible that vv. 1 and 3-12 are clustered merely by the use of *כסיל* and nothing more, and that the index card for v. 2 slipped into the pile at this point by mistake. But to admit this feels like a failure of exegesis. As an exegete, I am quite aware that we are professionally able to make sense of things that are sometimes later discovered to have been mistakes. But I think scholars of wisdom will find it worth being pushed by Waltke on this point. His observation about the nature of wisdom writings in the "sentence" genre is quite important. "Finally ...one must grasp the concentrated way in which the authors in this book represent truth. This panegyric [31:10-31] portrays lopsidedly only the valiant wife as the family's breadwinner, just as the rest of the book lopsidedly spoke only of sons, never of daughters. The full truth is obtained in this sort of literature by collating all the proverbs and

poems into a coherent montage” (2.519). We have always known this; the consecutive advice in Prov 26:4-5 not to answer a fool according to his folly and also to do so makes clear that a single line cannot encapsulate all the wisdom necessary even on its own topic. Waltke clearly insists on “the restricted ability of epigrams to express the whole truth and the rectification of this problem by grouping them” (1.74), and that is a valuable corrective to the method of throwing up one's hands and dropping the problem.

The ultimate judgment on a commentary must be whether or not one can expect to gain by consulting it. I have often looked in Waltke and O'Connor's *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* for illumination on a grammatical point, and have rarely found it there. But in this Proverbs commentary, despite much that I cannot accept and more that I find debatable, I have at least always found some discussion of the points I am interested in. It will not be the first Proverbs commentary to which I turn, but I do expect to consult it frequently.

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