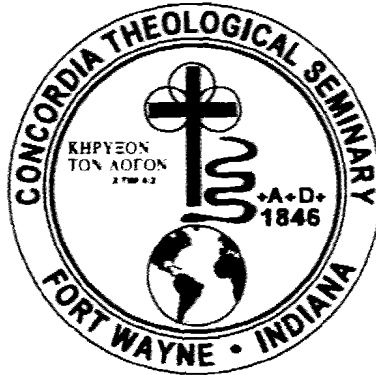


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## Book Review

*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15.* By Bruce K. Waltke. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. xxxv+692 pages. \$50.00.

More than any other book of Scripture, Proverbs is popularly understood to be a book of practical advice. Yet, many of its sayings are often misunderstood or misapplied by laypersons reading the much-smooth English of the widely-available translations. The Hebrew of Proverbs is not easy, making good commentaries on it valuable to the parish pastor who is not a specialist in either the Hebrew language or Wisdom literature. Moreover, the growing number of articles and studies on Proverbs or on Wisdom literature in general presents a number of useful secondary sources for the study of the book, but most of these remain unknown and largely inaccessible for those who do not have privileges at an academic library. This commentary by Waltke, a respected evangelical scholar probably best known for his contributions to *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns, 1990) and *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Moody, 1981), is the latest in the NICOT series that published its first volumes in 1976. This volume, originally planned to be a single volume on the entire book, represents only the introduction and commentary on the first fourteen chapters of Proverbs. A second volume on the balance of the book (Proverbs 16–31) is due to be published in 2005.

Waltke's commentary demonstrates throughout that he is conversant with most contemporary scholarship on Proverbs. The introduction takes pains to explore late twentieth-century commentaries, articles, and essays pertaining to Proverbs and its place among Wisdom literature in the Ancient Near East. At the same time, Waltke demonstrates that he stands within the stream of conservative evangelical thought as he defends a traditional view of the authorship of Proverbs. He defends Proverbs 10–24 as essentially composed by Solomon (with the 22:17–24:34 being other wisdom sayings adapted by Solomon), 25–29 as Solomon's proverbs edited by Hezekiah's scribes, Proverbs 30 in its entirety as coming from Agur's pen and all of Proverbs 31 as coming from King Lemuel, essentially in agreement with the various notices given in Proverbs itself. Moreover, he makes a good argument (based on his previous publications) that Proverbs 1–9 is also Solomon's work, contrary to the widespread opinion of critical scholars (and some evangelicals) who tend to date these chapters late. The only place where Waltke is open to challenge is his insistence that the acrostic poem about a Good Wife (31:10–31) is from Lemuel and not from the book's final (anonymous) editor. His argument here is not well-developed and his reasoning is suspect. But this is a minor point, since Lemuel *could* be the author of this poem. Waltke's introduction also competently explains other issues in Proverbs, including the ancient text and versions, the book's structure, poetry, poetics, and wisdom genres in Proverbs.

The commentary itself is competent, and while some of Waltke's philological assertions are open to challenge and will no doubt prove to be controversial,

the work clearly is well-researched and demonstrates Waltke's years of work on Wisdom literature. There are many exegetical insights to be found in the pages of this commentary. Moreover, Waltke skillfully demonstrates the organization of Proverbs. This is relatively easy to do for chapters 1-9, but much more difficult for 10-15, which is often seen as simply a random collection of sayings. Yet Waltke builds on the research of others ably demonstrating that these sayings are organized by various schemes, including a times theme, wordplay and catchword. While some of his assertions are less than convincing (e.g., the supposed chiasmic outline of Proverb 1-9, p. 12), most of his work on this score is welcome, since it will aid readers in understanding contextual clues that can be used to help interpret otherwise baffling sayings.

As helpful as all of this is, the Lutheran pastor will probably ask something more of a commentary on Proverbs: Where is Christ? Where is the gospel? Indeed, the editor's preface could be read as suggesting that this will be a prime focus, since this series arises out of American evangelicalism with "the conviction that the Bible is God's inspired Word, written by gifted human writers, through which God called humanity to enjoy a loving personal relationship with its Creator and Savior" (p. xx). Certainly, Waltke has much to comment on as it relates to God as Creator, a theme that is prominent in Proverbs (3:1-20; 8:1-31, and scattered sayings from Prov 10 onward). This is relatively easy. The harder part is finding and explicating Christ and his gospel in Proverbs. Unfortunately, Waltke almost denies that there is any reference to Christ at all in the book. He claims that Lady Wisdom who is featured prominently in Proverbs 3 and 8 is a reference to Solomon's wisdom and only a type of Christ (though he never explains his understanding of the word *type*). How Solomon's wisdom, not Christ, was present at creation and was that through which God created the world (3:19-20) and who rejoiced in God's creation (8:30-31) is not explained, although one might presume that Waltke believes that Solomon's wisdom derived from God himself. Instead, Waltke seems to be attempting to argue to the generally accepted view of critical scholars but to rescue it for evangelicals by giving it a patina of Christian application to Christ. Thus, he has a concluding section in the introduction that discusses Christ. Here he claims that Lady Wisdom cannot be Christ, yet somehow this all relates to Christ because Jesus is superior to Solomon's wisdom (a position that reads as if it is forced upon him by the New Testament). Strangely, he presents several propositions that are supposed to prove that Lady Wisdom cannot be Christ (p. 131). The most puzzling is the last one: "Wisdom was begotten by God, but Christ is God." Surely, Christ as God's Son strongly implies not only that he is God, but that he was begotten of the Father, a topic explored in the New Testament itself (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; all relating to Psalm 2:7).

Moreover, Waltke is somewhat defensive about his denial that Lady Wisdom is not a hypostasis of Christ, since Proverbs 8 was the origin of the Arian controversy, and both sides admitted that this chapter depicts Christ. Instead, Waltke argues that the premise of the controversy (Lady Wisdom is Christ) was wrong from the start. Thus, neither the Arians nor the Orthodox were correct in seeing Wisdom as Christ. They were, in essence, arguing the right question on the basis of the wrong text. While this denial of any real intent of the author of Proverbs 8 to depict Christ as Wisdom is common among critical scholars and has been followed by some evangelicals, it is simply wrong. A comparison of Paul's discussion of Wisdom in Ephesians 3:8–10 with Proverbs 8 is enough to demonstrate that Paul knew Christ as "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), especially in Proverbs 8 (cf. Prov 8:10–11; 17–18; Eph 3:8; Prov 8:22–31; Eph 3:9–10; Prov 8:15–16; Eph 3:10). Our Lord himself claimed to be God's wisdom, as a quick comparison of Luke 11:49 and Matthew 23:34 demonstrates. Waltke seems embarrassed by the traditional Christian identification of Lady Wisdom as Christ, which leads him to claim that the Church Fathers were wrong about Proverbs 8 without truly exploring New Testament texts that may have given them good reasons for this identification. Instead, the Fathers are simply characterized as being ideologically motivated without having any sound exegetical basis for their assertion. While the Fathers often do not discuss in detail how they reached their exegetical conclusions, it is gratuitous and naive to believe that they were simply ideologues who asserted claims about a text without any sound exegetical principles. I believe that a sensitive reading of discussions of wisdom in the New Testament demonstrate that from the very beginning of our Lord's own teaching, he claimed to be Wisdom—a claim that was at least in part based on his understanding of Proverbs 3 and 8.

Thus, Waltke argues that the "high Christology" of Paul in the New Testament sprang from the apostle's fertile mind without any influence of Old Testament Wisdom texts (pp. 127–130). Since one cannot trace a "straight trajectory in Hellenistic Jewish wisdom literature moving from Wisdom in Proverbs 8 to Wisdom as the agent of creation to Jesus as Creator" (p. 128), there is no such trajectory in the Gospels or Paul, despite the fact that both can speak about Wisdom in terms that are at times quite parallel to Proverbs (e.g., Matt 23:34; Luke 11:49 1 Cor 1:19–30; Eph 1:17–18; 3:8–10).

Waltke at times seems to accept other claims of critical scholars and then attempt to make them palatable to evangelicals. For instance, like most critical scholars he argues that the verb וַיֵּצֵא at Proverbs 8:22 must mean "created" instead of the more common "acquired" (e.g., Prov 1:5; 4:5, 7; 16:16; 17:16; 18:15; 23:23). The arguments for this are not convincing, especially that this meaning is more natural in other passages (e.g., Gen 4:1; Exod 15:16). Moreover, in his translation he fails to distinguish between וַיֵּצֵא and וַיִּבְרָא (8:24,

25), compounding the problem and obscuring the beautiful Christology of this passage. Wisdom says "God acquired me (חָכְמָה) at the beginning of his ways . . . I was brought forth (8:24, 25)," referring to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. This, of course, was the crucial passage in the Arian controversy. No wonder Waltke denies that Proverbs 8 is about Christ, because if it is, his philology and exegesis would lead to the conclusion that the Arians were correct!

Waltke's failure to find significant passages about Christ in Proverbs leads him also to minimize the gospel in Proverbs. While he can speak of Proverbs as promising life and blessing, he often fails to unfold the riches of the gospel in Proverbs. Thus, he can speak about "life" in Proverbs being more than temporal existence and ultimately connecting it to the resurrection (p. 107), but he fails to use this as the gospel motivation to wise living that it actually is throughout the book. Passages that are filled with the blessings of the gospel (notably Prov 1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-18; 11:28; 12:28) are either lightly treated when it comes to the promises of the gospel or turned into law. For instance the clear gospel promises of 11:28 (" . . . but righteous people will sprout like foliage") and 12:28 ("In the path of righteousness there is life, and the way of that pathway is not death.") are seen more as admonitions to readers to be faithful to God (i.e., as law; cf. Waltke pp. 511-512, 543-545) rather than as the promised work of God in the life of a believer (gospel).

Thus, Waltke's Proverbs has many fine points, but in the end falls short of being a truly gospel-motivated, Christ-centered commentary. While there is much to be learned here about the technical aspects of understanding the organization of the book and much philological insight in its discussion, it is disappointing to see this wonderful book of Scripture read as only about Christ in a peripheral sense, thereby emptying it of the power of the gospel. Proverbs' guidance is thereby reduced to a moralizing admonition from Solomon grounded in what is seen as humanly-generated confidence in God. This is a far cry from the book's real power: the gospel of Christ, which saves humans from their sinful foolishness and empowers them to live as wise children of God, relying on his transforming power to create faith in them and guide them in the path of faithful living.

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[The review of volume two of this commentary on Proverbs was published in CTQ 69 (2005): 336-339. The Editors]