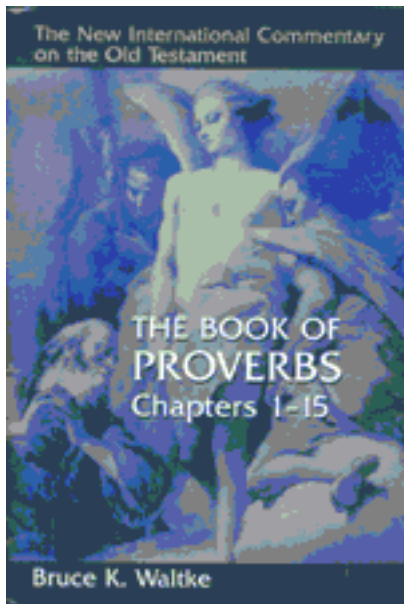


RBL 07/2005



**Waltke, Bruce K.**

***The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15***

New International Commentary on the Old Testament

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Pp. 729. Hardcover.  
\$50.00. ISBN 0802825451.

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In the first volume of Waltke's commentary on the book of Proverbs, the reader is presented with a study both erudite and insightful, fascinating and challenging. Waltke comments in his introduction that he has been engaging with this biblical book for over a quarter of a century; as one works through his commentary, it quickly becomes clear that this has been time well spent, for Waltke has produced a study that is not only of great help simply with regard to understanding Proverbs but that also contributes to the continuing scholarly discussion on wisdom as a genre and the analysis of Hebrew poetry.

The work is divided into an introduction and the commentary itself, the former spanning 130 pages and ending with a forty-page bibliography; indices of subjects, authors, scripture references, and selected Hebrew words and phrases close the volume. The usual issues of text, genre, authorship, ancient Near Eastern influences, and the like are dealt with in this introduction in an entirely helpful way. Three issues in particular are worthy of note.

First, contrary to prevailing views, Waltke argues that the attribution of much of the book's content to Solomon is not pseudepigraphic; his reasons include the similarities of the book of Proverbs to the contemporaneous Egyptian text *The Instruction of Amenemope* (which is not regarded as a pseudegraph), the probable presence of Israelite

scribal diplomatic correspondents who could have acted as a conduit for foreign influence, and the evidence for a royal setting in the book (with Solomon as the best candidate to fill this setting). In addition to the other authors named in the book, Waltke then posits a final postexilic redactor; he draws an interesting comparison here to successive copies of Mesopotamian wisdom texts that show a conservative but not rigid tendency in transmission, allowing for occasional additions.

Second, with regard to the internal coherence and thought processes of wisdom as a genre, Waltke centralizes the theological dimension of wisdom in Proverbs, claiming that the “fear of the Lord” is the epistemological foundation and key focus of the book. Creation theology and what Waltke terms “character-conduct-consequence” connections are thus made relative to this central credo; the sage creates wisdom literature not merely on the basis of observation of creation and human society but by observation made through the lens of covenant faith (while noting that Proverbs does not abound in historical references, Waltke does rely on the fact that Solomon, Israel’s king, is credited as a main author and that the covenant name for God is used throughout the book). Wisdom is thus the skill to cope with life and achieve what is otherwise impossible for the good of the community. It is gained not through observation of an impersonal order in creation but through observation in the service of covenant faith in a God who will bring each individual under judgment. As a result, while noting the difficulties that some Old Testament theologians have had in integrating Proverbs with other sections of the Hebrew Bible, Waltke minimizes the differences between the perspective of Proverbs and other Old Testament books. Waltke spells out many of the implications of this theological emphasis in the “Theology” section of the introduction, which traces the characterizations of YHWH in the book and the different wisdom categories applied to human beings.

Third, Waltke argues that the proverbs making up the book are not only meant to be interpreted aphoristically but that collections of proverbs form entire poems on a subject; as a result, each individual proverb speaks not only for itself but as part of a larger whole. Although the fact that there are no syntactical structures organizing these “proverb-poems” renders discernment of structure more difficult, the criteria that Waltke calls on in analysis are merely the building blocks of Hebrew poetry and thus are no different from those used to determine structure in any other Old Testament poem (e.g., intentional repetition of sound or any other grammatical feature, *inclusio*, key repeated words, varieties of chiasm, etc.; the influence of scholars such as Adele Berlin is noticeable here). Without denying the importance of verse-specific application, then, Waltke joins a larger trends in the study of this book by looking for intentional structural devices in chapters 10 and following. On Waltke’s interpretation, this larger context is of significance to no small degree because it softens the putatively overly neat categories

that different proverbs impose on experience, placing the claims of these individual proverbs within a larger theological framework.

The commentary itself, as with the rest of the NICOT series, begins each section with a translation of the relevant passage, followed by a discussion of the passage's structure and verse-by-verse comment. (Although the NICOT format does not give a final section for theological comment, Waltke's verse-by-verse observations do not neglect this aspect of the text.) The notes to Waltke's translation focus on text-critical observations (usually in relation to the LXX) and philological and grammatical matters. Even though these notes frequently take up more than two-thirds of the page, Waltke packs so much useful information into these comments that one can hardly complain about their length. But it is in the discussion of structure and verse-by-verse comment that Waltke's method of interpretation, outlined in the introduction, is brought to bear on the text. An example will help to show the denseness and cogency of Waltke's argumentation (but it should be noted that Waltke's exegetical work is so detailed that not all of his arguments on this particular text can be reproduced here).

Waltke blocks off 10:1–16 as the first poem following the introduction of chs. 1–9, analyzing it in the following manner: 1b functions as an introduction but also forms a frame with 10:5 (in that they both refer to the wise and foolish son); each of the proverbs of 10:1–5 deal with wealth and poverty, just as do 10:15–16. Verses 1–5 and 15–16 are also linked by the chiasmic repetition of a variety of roots (“poor” and “make rich” in 10:4 and 15, as well as “righteous” and “wicked” in 10:2–3, 16). This link thus forms a frame around 10:6–14, all of which has to do with communication. (Waltke draws in at least seven distinct exegetical considerations to analyze 10:6–14, including the presence of four antithetical proverbs in 10:6–9 and 11–14 surrounding the “hinge” of 10:10, as well as the mention of the mouth in the introduction to both halves [10:6 and 11] and in the concluding verse [10:14]). The first section itself is tightly structured, with 10:2–3 taking on a more theological perspective and 10:4–5 a more practical one, both of which flesh out the difference between a foolish and wise son with regard to wealth and poverty. Furthermore, alternating descriptions of virtue and vice in each half of the poetic lines link each proverb with the immediately surrounding verses, encouraging the reader to interpret them together. Just with regard to the grammatically similar 10:2–3, then, which pertain to the security of the righteous and the wicked and the gratification of their desires, we ought to understand the double reference to the treasures of the wicked (10:2) and the frustration of their desire (10:3) as implying that this frustration will occur in an indefinite future. (This dovetails with Waltke's goal of showing that the theology of Proverbs allows for more subtlety than it is sometimes granted.) A variety of such interpretative inferences are made throughout the course of this poem, which is basically

taken to show a link between wealth and words in wisdom. Even this clipped example shows the depth of Waltke's analysis.

My admiration for Waltke's achievement is already obvious, but one or two questions (I hesitate to say "criticisms") about this commentary may be raised. First, the two poles of reference in Waltke's interpretative strategy are the ancient text, in its ancient Near Eastern and Israelite setting, and modern biblical scholarship. One wonders, however, how Waltke's approach to the book squares with premodern Jewish and Christian interpretation; although the fact that the first volume of the commentary alone weighs in at almost seven hundred pages cautions one against asking for more, it would have been interesting if the broad outlines of Waltke's approach could have been situated in relation to earlier traditions of interpretation. (The sole exception to the exclusive focus on the ancient Near Eastern context and modern scholarship is found in a brief discussion of early Jewish and Christian interpretation of Prov 8 and the fulfillment of wisdom in the New Testament on pages 126–33.) Second, although I found myself, more often than not, convinced by Waltke's delineation of different poems in chapters 10–15, his method of interpretation is surely more precarious than the attempt to trace the structure of a psalm or part of a prophetic book. Doubtless not everyone will be convinced in individual cases, and some may not be convinced as to the validity of this approach at all, but if this is the case, it will certainly not be for lack of careful argument on Waltke's part.

Despite these two hesitations, however, it is easy to recommend Waltke's new commentary both to those seeking to make inroads into the book of Proverbs and for specialists in wisdom literature. Waltke's theological emphasis in interpretation and holistic reading method will surely stimulate new discussion in the study of wisdom as a genre and Hebrew poetics. Although the sheer intensity of Waltke's work on this biblical book demands much from the reader, the effort is always repaid many times over.