

Disappointing discourse

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A review of
Genesis: A Commentary
By Bruce K. Waltke
Zondervan, 2001

Bruce Waltke, professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida, is among the first rank of Hebrew scholars and has co-authored a standard academic Hebrew grammar. This commentary, however, is written more for the layman and busy pastor rather than for just other academics.

The introductory chapter looks at Genesis' overall structure, the author and the possible sources he used, and then launches into an analysis of the book's overall literary genre and a helpful survey of literary techniques that are regularly employed throughout Genesis. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the major theological motifs found in the book.

Each logical unit of the Biblical text is treated in turn in a separate section, and each section begins with a summary of the unit's theme, an outline, and a literary analysis. This is followed by exegetical notes, in which the keywords and phrases in each verse are briefly discussed and explained. There is little discussion of any textual, grammatical or lexical issues relating the Hebrew text, although there are many footnotes containing references to other sources where one can find such information. This is understandable given the target audience, but one would expect a lot more discussion and interaction with differing viewpoints regarding each particular keyword or phrase. The reader is sure to only get one side of the story when reading this commentary—Waltke's side! Each

section is then concluded with some theological reflections on the unit.

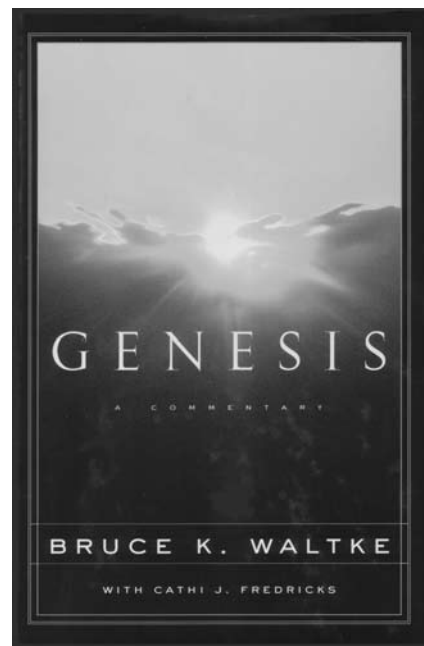
Since this commentary covers the entire book of Genesis and is quite lengthy, I will limit my specific comments to the sections on Creation and the Flood.

Waltke's overall approach to the creation account and the interpretation he adopts in this commentary is not much different from what he has previously written on this subject.¹ Indeed, he directly references this previous work in the footnotes.

Waltke takes Genesis 1:1 as a title to the account: heaven is viewed as a merism denoting the completed and organized universe, and the 'beginning' refers to all six creation days. Verse 2 is said to describe the 'pre-creation state' and thus, we are not told (at least in this passage) who or what created the Earth and the deep. The darkness and the deep are seen as 'surd evil'.

Regarding the possibility of verse 1 referring to the very first act of Creation (i.e. the creation of the raw materials which are subsequently transformed), Waltke asserts that such a view is grammatically improbable although he fails to elaborate. On the contrary, the presence of the waw-disjunctive at the beginning of verse 2 suggests a definite grammatical link between the two verses: verse 1 describes the initial act of Creation, while verse 2 consists of three circumstantial clauses. A similar grammatical arrangement can be found in Jonah 3:3. Indeed, this is also the view presented in Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.² However, the most disappointing thing is that Waltke's view was thoroughly rebutted by Mark F. Rooker several years ago in the same journal in which Waltke first published his work,³ yet Waltke does not even cite Rooker's papers (nor are they listed in the bibliography), let alone interact with them.

Waltke adopts a type of literary framework view, that is, a 'dischronologized' literary account rather than



a strictly historical account. The narrator's concern is theological rather than historical. Waltke claims Genesis 1 is not a record of human history since no humans were present. It is unlike any other account, and bears little resemblance to modern conceptions of history, thus it cannot be seen as 'straightforward or positivistic history' (pp. 75–76). But why should we limit sources of historical and factual information to the records of human eye-witnesses? Is not God's own divine and inerrant revelation of history completely factual? Was God not an eye-witness to His own Creation? To suggest that Genesis 1 is not a strictly historical account because no humans were around is ludicrous. Furthermore, Genesis 1 is grammatically and formally no different from the other historical accounts recorded in Genesis, so Waltke's judgement on the genre of Genesis 1 is completely arbitrary.

It should also be noted that history and theology are not mutually exclusive. In fact, God's actions in history are central to Christianity, and all of Christian theology is rooted in history! This is the one thing that sets Christianity apart from all other world religions and validates its truthfulness. In adopting such a view, Waltke has taken a subtle but significant step away

from historic Christian doctrine and evangelical hermeneutical principles.

Regarding the process and progress of creation, Waltke writes: 'all of the acts of Creation follow a chronological framework. God does not create in time, but with time' (p. 57). However, not only does such a statement border on the absurd and meaningless, it is so obviously not true! Time is a creation of God: it has a beginning and He is not subject to it. On the other hand, God's creatures, humans and animals, and the rest of the physical universe, experience the passage of time, so God does indeed create in time.

In support of 'dischronologization', Waltke offers the occurrence of evenings and mornings before the Creation of the luminaries to divide them, as evidence. However, if he had only read Genesis 1:4 more carefully, this supposed chronological problem disappears: God Himself separated the light from the darkness.

In light of other clearly anthropomorphic language found in Genesis 1, Waltke asserts that the days of Creation are also anthropomorphic—they are merely human expressions describing things which are beyond human comprehension. But E.J. Young pointed out years ago that anthropomorphisms are only used to describe God's actions or senses, and always take the form of a body part or body movement. They never take the

form of anything like a weekday.⁴

In his excursions on the literary genre of Genesis 1, Waltke reiterates: 'the narrator ... has a theological agenda: to tell us that God created the earth and that it is all very orderly' (p. 77). But if this minimalist view is really the case, why then did the narrator choose such a verbose, jumbled up, and disorderly format, which appears to almost everyone, past and present, to be a chronological historical narrative? As Waltke himself demonstrates, the narrator could have expressed everything he wanted to say in a couple of simple and brief sentences! Realizing this problem and the lack of a historical basis for Creation, Waltke goes on to say that the account is 'not theology as we usually understand it' (p. 78), but a mix between theology and history.

Despite his insistence that Creation is historical even though the account is not strictly historical, Waltke's view of the literary genre of Genesis 1–2 approaches 'myth' and this is reflected in his tendency to spiritualize many of the details.

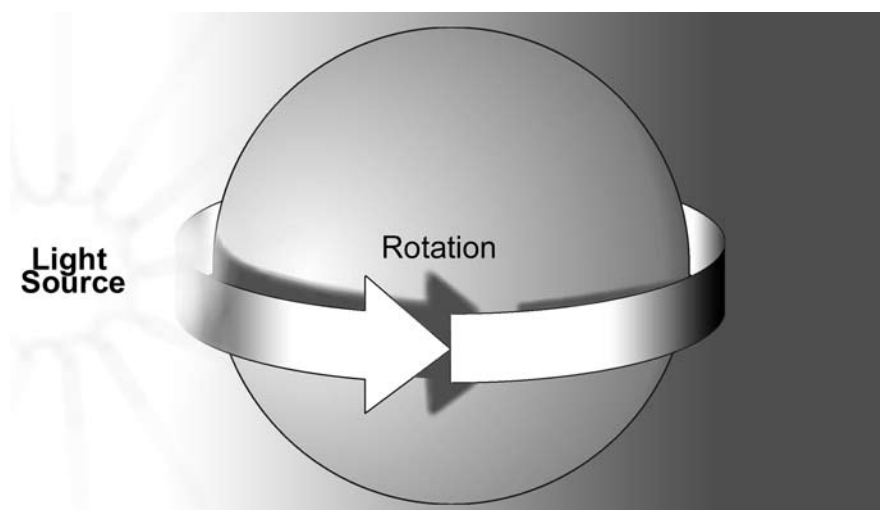
In regard to the Flood, Waltke acknowledges that the narrator, even allowing for hyperbole, has in mind a global deluge. He himself leans toward a global Flood and is skeptical, if non-committal, about the claims of uniformitarian geology.

In summary, I found this volume a major disappointment—a shallow

and poor treatment of the text. Unfortunately, Waltke's mastery of Hebrew grammar apparently does not extend to hermeneutics and theology. Add to this the exorbitant price tag (\$US27.99, \$A85.00), and you are better off saving your money. A better purchase for the layman or busy pastor would be John J. Davis's *Paradise to Prison*—a far superior work all round.⁵

References

1. Waltke, B.K., The Creation account in Genesis 1:1–3, Part I, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **132**:25–36, 1975; The Creation account in Genesis 1:1–3, Part II, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **132**:136–144, 1975; The Creation account in Genesis 1:1–3, Part III, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **132**:216–228, 1975; The Creation account in Genesis 1:1–3 Part IV, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **132**:327–342, 1975; The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3 Part V, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **132**:28–41, October 1975; The first seven days, *Christianity Today* **32**:42–46, 1988.
2. Kautzsch E. (Ed.), *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English Edition, translated by A.E. Cowley, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 454, 455, 1910.
3. Rooker, M.F., Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or re-creation? Part I, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **149**:316–323, 1992; Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or re-creation? Part II, *Bibliotheca Sacra* **149**:411–427, 1992.
4. Young, E.J., *Studies in Genesis One*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 58, 1964.
5. Davis, J.J., *Paradise to Prison*, Sheffield Publishing Company, Salem, 1998.



All that is needed for evening and morning in the first few days is a light source (not necessarily the sun) and rotational motion of the Earth.