

Further Interaction with Bruce Waltke

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In this and several subsequent posts, I intend to continue the exchange between Bruce Waltke and me, posted earlier on this site, and that first appeared in *WTJ*. Posted here is Waltke's follow-up to that exchange, which has already appeared in the latest issue of *WTJ* (and is also posted here with permission.) My subsequent posts are a reply to Waltke's comments.

It is no throwaway line when I relay, again, my appreciation to Waltke for being so candid in his views and for participating in this discussion. As readers of the previous posts have no doubt seen, Waltke and I have clear areas of disagreement on a number of important issues, and the sort of back-and-forth exhibited here is of the nature of academic discourse and vital for any progress.

As one can see in Waltke's piece, he divides his comments into three sections: Introduction, The Old Testament and Theological Diversity, and The Old Testament Interpretation in the New Testament. I will reflect on each of these sections in turn. Waltke's comments deserve a detailed responses, so I think it is best to spread out my thoughts over numerous posts to appear over a couple of weeks or so. The first several posts will interact with Waltke's comments in his Introduction.

Introduction

Waltke does well in laying out some of the overarching concerns he has both with *I&I* (*Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005]) and with my previous interaction with him. I will list some of those concerns that strike me as most pertinent and offer some reflections of my own.

I&I and the Westminster Standards

I have already commented at some length on this website on how *I&I* relates to the Westminster Standards, but let me reinforce a point or two here.

I appreciate that Waltke does "not doubt" that I intend "to stay true to the Westminster Standards," but this is not my goal. Neither the Westminster Standards nor any other ecclesiastical document is the lens through which we read Scripture, a point I learned as an M.Div. student at Westminster. My intention, rather, is to understand Scripture as the inspired yet historically conditioned document that it is, and to bring into that investigation not only previous theological formulations but true developments in biblical studies over the past several generations. In a word, my aim is synthesis.

I remain unpersuaded that either a 17th century confession of faith or its defenders are in the position of chief adjudicator of the matters before us. This is not to relegate the Westminster Standards, or other ecclesiastical documents, to the trash heap, quaint relics of by-gone eras that can be dismissed without a second thought. Rather, it is to recognize that, despite the value, they are necessarily limited in scope and in need of ongoing critical discussion. The issues Waltke and I are debating are largely, if not exclusively, modern ones, and so cannot be left simply in the care of earlier thinkers, however much they are still worthy of serious attention and respect.

Truth is not determined by the degree to which one is faithful to a tradition. Rather, a tradition is evaluated by the degree to which it reflects the truth. And this, I continue to affirm, is an ongoing theological exercise. Hence, as I have argued elsewhere, the only model of confessional commitment that can maintain this conversation between the vital past and present challenges is one that maintains a self-conscious degree of flexibility, or better, an expectation of self-criticism, lest the confession become the church's ultimate authority.

The same holds, I feel, for the history of Reformed thought. However important earlier figures may be, surely we must allow as a very real option the possibility of their being fallible in their knowledge, without being accused of "abandoning" the Reformed faith in the process.

To be sure, others are free to disagree. I have no personal qualm about that. But if intention to remain "true" to a "tradition" (which already assumes its non-growth) drives an academic assessment of real evidence (most of which was wholly unavailable when the tradition's trajectories were set), one runs the risk of adjusting evidence to what one already "knows" to be true. We do not tolerate such sloppy thinking in any other area of human discourse, but when it comes to theological discourse in some circles, it seems to be the preferred method of interaction. When one's position is by definition unfalsifiable, any meaningful exchange of ideas functionally ceases. Any tradition that aims to promote truth rather than obscure it must be eager to be open to critical evaluation.

Waltke, however, despite his opening comment, knows better and his subsequent comments reflect in my estimation an authentic attempt to listen to Scripture (even if certain assumptions continue to rear their head, as we will see below).

(2)

Nonsense and Logic

Waltke is concerned to maintain basic parameters of logic and to keep God from speaking “nonsense.” I think, though, that the entire point of our exchange has been to determine what in fact we have the right to label as “nonsense” and what a biblically oriented “logic” looks like. I may be missing something, but Waltke does not seem to consider this option.

Waltke repeatedly asserts that such things as human error in Scripture (which Hodge and Warfield themselves admitted to exist, by the way—see their booklet *Inspiration*, 27-28), or things commonly understood as mistakes, are unworthy of a book of ultimately divine origin. I do not wish to play word games, but I must continue to insist that just what these words mean, i.e., how they are to be defined, are the very things that need clearer definition precisely by bringing “biblical behavior” to the forefront of our debates rather than quick appeal to theological prolegomena.

To pick one extreme example, for some (not Waltke) it is “nonsense” to consider the differences of historical representation among the four Gospels or the synoptic accounts of Israel’s history in the Deuteronomistic History (Dtr) and the Chronicler. Diverse historical presentations in Scripture are “nonsense” because, since God is the author of Scripture, and Scripture is therefore “truth itself,” there really can be no synoptic “problem.”

I think Waltke and I are on the same footing when we respond, “No, the Bible itself will not allow for such an assessment of the nature of Scripture. The data do not support the theory.”

In principle, this is where we both are, but I would suggest that a real difference between Waltke and me is the extent to which we are willing to go in applying this same principle to other biblical phenomena. So, for example, I seem to be more willing to allow “Bible in its historical context” to determine what type of “logic” the Bible demonstrates and what constitutes “nonsense.” I am not only willing (begrudgingly) but fully prepared to engage the Second Temple hermeneutical context of the Chronicler in order to explain the differences between his account of Israel’s history and that of Dtr, as well as how the NT authors employ the OT.

All of this can be phrased as a question: *What limits do we put on the contextual, historical, situatedness of the Bible for explaining biblical phenomenon, and therefore the nature of Scripture, and WHY, ON WHAT BASIS, do we place those limits? Or put another way, At what point do we, should we, say, “No, since this is the word of God, we can only go so far”? Or yet another way, At what point in applying an incarnational model are we ascribing error to God rather than merely observing the Bible’s “human nature”? These are ways of phrasing*

the disagreement between us, and further clarity would be achieved if we all dug a bit deeper to expose and critically evaluate the foundations of our thinking. At this stage, I do not think Waltke's response moves us to greater clarity.

(3)

Tensions and Paradox

It is the clear presence of "tensions and paradoxes" in the Bible (as Waltke puts it) that brought me to a recognition that Biblical Theology is a preferred reading strategy, embracing as it does the dramatic, narrative content of Scripture, and so is quite suited to address the theological diversity and contextual rootedness of Scripture.

I am glad Waltke acknowledges the presence of real tensions and paradoxes in the Bible, as I always knew he did. He clarifies, however, that this acknowledgement extends only to the point where no sorts of "foibles" (i.e., errors or other infelicities) result.

Apart from the problem we have already mentioned, that of determining the nature of "foible," another issue is raised here. It is important to ask whether Waltke's caveat does justice to his own principle that the Bible is "truth itself" (quoting WCF 1.4). If Scripture is God's revealed truth, consistent in all its parts, profitable for all sorts of correction, reproof, etc., is there really room for tensions and paradoxes of any sort at all? What *purpose* do these tensions and paradoxes have in a Bible that is, according to Waltke's own standard, "consistent in all its parts?"

My answer is that they reflect the variegated human settings that the portions of the Bible were written in, and I have no further need to reconcile this fact with what is happening "in the mind of God" other than saying, "If we believe that the Bible is God's word, then, quite obviously, God is OK with all of this." The question now becomes "what do we *learn* about God from how he himself, in his wisdom, speaks?"

But Waltke's principle, as outlined in WCF, does not allow that option. At best, it admits to the "tensions and paradoxes" somewhat begrudgingly, relegating them to the realm of mystery, and that are somehow reconcilable in "God's mind." In other words, their presence has no positive theological value. They are more unfortunate marks of Scripture that run afoul of confessional commitments but, as we all know, are "ultimately" reconcilable.

The assumption is that the reconciling of these tensions is what is required of a text that is of divine origin. And if they cannot be reconciled here and now, we "know" they can be reconciled eventually, and, presumably, God will one day show us all how the pieces all fit together. In the meantime, our task to make sure these marks of Scripture do not

distract us from assessing Scripture's nature. Waltke does not lay out this line of thinking explicitly, but it is there nonetheless.

For me, the tensions, etc., of the Bible are not there for us to see how clever we can be at reconciling them, nor how patient and faithful we can be to expect some future reconciliation. Rather, they are marks of God's accommodation and so should be addressed deliberately with a view toward gaining positive theological information from them.

On a related point, Waltke points out that I do not address his statements that *I&I* imputes "foibles" to God. Perhaps, but I think the point of my previous response was to question the basis upon which Waltke determines what is or is not a "foible." Again, this is no clever word game I am playing, nor is it a disingenuous stall tactic. Rather, this matter is central to the under discussion. And there is sufficient diversity in the church, both now and throughout history, to justify such a query.

For some, it is a "foible" to say that Genesis 1 reflects anything other than a literal, historical, even scientific account of things, since, otherwise, Scripture could not be "truth itself." Others define "truth itself" in such a way that the mythic content and tempo of Genesis 1 are not a foible but part of what it means for God to speak in any meaningful sense in antiquity. Waltke is certainly more in the latter camp (although not as far as I am), but the more important issue is to determine on what basis such decisions should be made. This is very much on the table among conservatives and evangelicals, in my opinion—at least it should be.

Similarly, Waltke takes issue with the use of Peshier in the NT, which he dubs "unaccredited exegesis." I am not sure exactly what that means, but it begs the question "accredited by whom and on what basis?" In a nutshell, this type of question lies at the heart of my previously published response, but I do not seem to have persuaded Waltke of its importance.

(4)

Waltke is No Fundamentalist

I can understand why, in view of my previous response, Waltke would want to point out that he holds views that are considered progressive and therefore problematic by fundamentalists. He is open to multi-authorship of Isaiah, an exilic date for the final form of the Deuteronomy, and theistic evolution. I am already aware of this, although those who look to Waltke to champion their fundamentalist causes should take careful note how much Waltke is conceding on these points. Waltke is to be commended for expressing himself so clearly.

Still, given the groundwork that Waltke has laid thus far, I wonder if he would not be more consistent if he did maintain a fundamentalist posture on these issues. For, as Greg Beale has recently reminded us (*The Erosion of Inerrancy*), any talk of multi-authorship of Isaiah is to discredit the very words of Jesus himself, who quoted from various portions of the book but referred consistently to "Isaiah." If, after all, Scripture is the very truth of God revealed, and if there can be no foible or misrepresentation of historical fact, *must* we not take Jesus' "testimony" with utter seriousness, lest we attribute to Scripture "nonsense" and "human error"? How can we arrive at conclusions Jesus himself did not and would not accept? The same goes for pentateuchal authorship, and most certainly for evolution. To accept these progressive views, even as a possible options, seems to me to be more problematic for Waltke than he admits.

I would suggest that for Waltke to maintain his progressive (and correct) views, he must employ a hermeneutic and derivative doctrine of Scripture that are more subtle than the principles he employs with respect to my arguments. In other words, I don't think he can have it both ways. The manner in which he argues against some of my views discredits some of his own more progressive views.

(5)

Failure to Define Precisely What Divine Inspiration Entails with Respect to Scripture

That is correct, and is also correct of anything I have ever read on the topic, including Waltke's recent articulations. Failure to "define precisely" describes us all. The point of books and articles is to move toward further precision and clarity, sometimes by offering grand, programmatic pieces, other times more focused studies.

An incarnational model is an attempt to define what inspiration entails by giving an account of the breadth of biblical phenomena, a small fraction of which was covered in *I&I*. The model may not be to Waltke's liking, but pointing out imprecision, which is ubiquitous and unavoidable in these discussions, is not a counterargument. The accusation of failed precision can find universal applicability, and so is not a compelling criticism.

Rigorous Exegesis is Needed to Defend an Incarnational Model

This criticism follows somewhat upon the previous one.

I want to stress that an incarnational model is not "my" model, which Waltke seems to imply. To be sure, I am applying it to issues that others have not and to an extent that some may not be comfortable with. I am very much aware of that. But the model itself is not one of my own devising.

I would say, though, that no model, including an inerrantist one, can be demonstrated on the basis of “rigorous exegesis.” In fact, it is precisely rigorous exegesis that led me to question the model of inspiration Waltke seems to profess, and I am advocating something that I find more compelling as a point of departure, one that I argue accounts better for why the Bible looks the way it does.

(6)

“The Community of Faith Must Judge”

I have heard this before and I remain puzzled by it. Who, exactly, is this community of faith, and in what sense do they judge? What does this even mean?

Does Waltke mean an ecclesiastical court or a judgment in the eyes of popular opinion? If the latter, is it a matter of trading anecdotal evidence? Or do we leave it to the self-proclaimed gatekeepers, of which there seems to be no lack nowadays. If the former, which court? Which denomination? And more importantly, on what basis should that court be judged competent to pass judgment on others on some of the technical matters under consideration?

This does not mean that Waltke is entirely wrong. In fact, I would say that submitting ideas to a community of faith for judgment is *precisely what Waltke and I are engaged in here*. We are a *part* of that process by which God’s people gain clarity. Rather than there being a court, outside of this discussion, popular or “official,” to which Waltke or I need to submit our work, we are an important step *in that process*. We are, in fact, among those whose advice any “court” should seek in an effort to reach informed conclusions.

I know what that sounds like: “Enns is arrogant. He thinks that you need a Ph.D. in Biblical Scholars in order to determine doctrine because they are the only ones who have enough expertise in the Bible.” No, I don’t mean that. But, neither do I find at all constructive the unguarded statements of those not trained in these matters who dismiss with little forethought the work of modern biblical scholarship, and make sweeping and binding pronouncements. And yes, these issues do require training in biblical and related studies to handle well on the level of sophistication needed. Neither ordination nor expertise in related disciplines qualifies one to *determine* the direction of these discussions.

I am not in any way, shape, or form advocating a separation of disciplines. Actually, I am calling for the exact opposite. As I have said on numerous occasions, what is needed is true discussion among scholars of various disciplines to seek greater clarity about the

nature of the Bible at a time when there is, to say the least, growing dissatisfaction with formulations that have been worked out in isolation from the very challenges we face.

Times have changed. We cannot rest on the comfort of a familiar past. There is much work to be done. There is no place for fence building or posturing.

(7)

I Am too Sure of Myself, I Fail to Give Options Other than My Own, and I Give the "Appearance of Certainty"

This is all probably true, but so is it of Waltke and pretty much anyone I read who is worth the time. We are all "sure of ourselves," to a certain extent, convinced that what we have to say is worth listening to, which is why we write. Accusations such as this have little weight, since, as we have seen above, they are universally applicable.

Also, this type of accusation is really an indirect attempt to discredit the content of an argument and really has little to do with the manner of presentation. Had I argued for a model more to Waltke's liking, and done so with as much vigor as he displays, would the same charge still be offered? Unlikely. To the contrary, I would be commended for taking a strong stand.

Of course, other options than what I offer are indeed possible. Other options are always available. If the history of biblical interpretation has shown us anything it is that *anything* is possible provided you have certain assumptions in place and you try hard enough to argue your point. The ultimate value of the different options, however, is to be determined by how persuasive they are in accounting for the data, not whether one fails to offer other options.

Later Revelation May not Contradict what "Earlier Texts Present as Truth"

The issue Waltke is addressing here concerns monolatry vs. monotheism in ancient Israel, i.e., whether at some point in time ancient Israelites believed that Yahweh was one god among others, but was the only one worthy of worship, or whether they only ever thought that Yahweh was the one and only divine being in existence.

Waltke seems to be saying that Israelites could not have moved from monolatry to monotheism, for, if this were the case, they would have moved from a "false" notion to a true one. Since God's word can contain nothing false, this type of progressive revelation is *a priori* out of bounds.

Waltke does not seem to consider as theologically viable the notion that God can accommodate himself to ubiquitous ANE notions. Moreover, there are clear

monolatrous statements in the Old Testament, statements, in other words, that can be shown to be monolatrous by rigorous exegesis (or not even all that rigorous).

The issue of the advent of Israel's understanding of monotheism is a perennial theological and historical problem (or better, it is a theological problem *because* it is a historical problem). It is not an issue that can be moved aside by appealing to God as the "inerrant Source" of Scripture, as Waltke does, unless it can be convincingly argued, contrary to exegesis, that the inerrant Source would not do such an unacceptable job at accommodation.

(8)

My Model Destabilizes Students' Faith

I reject the blanket criticism that an incarnational model, however assertively it is offered, destabilizes faith. It certainly *can* do so, but in those cases we would do well to consider how those very students might have been set up for a fall by being ill-prepared to deal with the data. (For example, someone's faith will indeed be shaken if they encounter the synoptic problem after being told that God's word must be historically accurate in every detail lest it no longer be the word of God.)

What of those whose faith is not shaken but affirmed and strengthened because of an incarnational model? Do they count for nothing? Or is their newly strengthened faith on the basis of this faulty theological model simply more evidence of how far lost they are and in need of correction?

I also do not believe that there is a great unwashed mass of ignorant people out there who are so easily swayed by me, Waltke, or anyone else. I have found that students and readers are pretty clever, if also a bit resilient. They do not live in isolation from the world, are not immune to its challenges, and they are certainly not looking to the scholarly world to do their thinking for them.

I have had this same conversation many times before, once with Waltke himself about five years ago (and I do not presume that he should remember). It is true that exposure to developments in modern scholarship can shake people's faith, but that does not mean they should be shielded from them. Rather what needs to happen is that scholars like Waltke should be offering students alternate theological paradigms that are equipped to address the data. People lose their faith for all sorts of reasons. One of those reasons, easily documented but not often discussed, is the inflexible and outmoded answers given to real and difficult problems.

As I have said in other contexts and to Waltke several years ago, I understand people's faith can be shaken by what I am advocating (as they can by things Waltke advocates about Isaiah, evolution, etc.). But I am as concerned about people whose faith has *already* been shaken because of bad answers they have gotten to good and necessary questions.

I have a folder (electronic and paper) of people who used to be Christians but are now atheists, or were evangelical and now don't know what they are, not because of people like me, but because the only options open to them when they encountered the world of modern biblical scholarship was "you either believe the Bible or you believe the critics." This is an absurd dichotomy. To those knowledgeable about the very real and difficult challenges presented by biblical scholarship, and who are presented with these two options, there is no contest: the critics win. The question is whether these are the only two options available.

Both Waltke and I would agree that there are other options open to us that move beyond this dichotomy. We disagree on the best path to take. My main point in all of this is that the challenges we face in the present moment—and have been facing for generations—will not be settled without rethinking how persuasive past approaches have been.

It is regularly observed that the kinds of issues being raised by me and others are issues that have "already been settled" in evangelical scholarship, and so need no reexamination. Rather, what is required is to get in line. Yet, the same issues keep coming up regularly among evangelicals on both the popular and academic levels. The question is why. I realize that will be answered differently by different people, but the question is valid, even urgent. Neither "side" is going away, and unless the matter is addressed constructively, divisions will be exacerbated. For those of us who recognize the value of true dialogue, this would be a sad development.