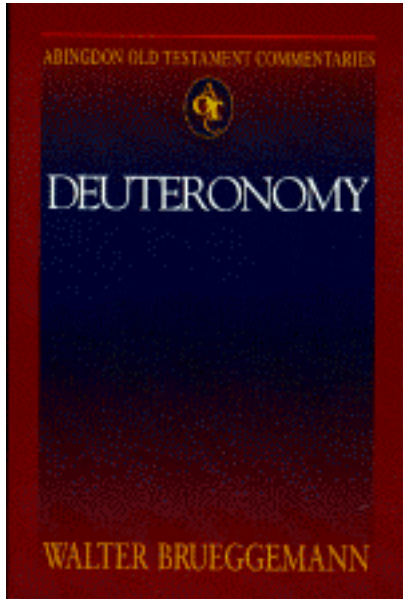


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Brueggemann, Walter

Deuteronomy

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

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In the words of the general editor of the Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (AOTC), Walter Brueggemann's serial commentary on Deuteronomy is intended for "the use of theological students and pastors. It is hoped that they may be of service also to upper-level college or university students and to those responsible for teaching in congregational settings" (9). What the book is not is a line-by-line immersion into the grammar, syntax, and philology that characterize other commentaries. Rather, the intent of the AOTC series is to present the reader with an assessment of the document and text that reflects in some way on the present day and age. This can be a very difficult task, one that Brueggemann handles in his own imaginative and thought-provoking way. By focusing on the theological and ethical dimensions of the text, Brueggemann routinely uses the Deuteronomic narrative as a commentary on our present day and age, set within a Judeo/Christian context (e.g., 47, 89–91). This hermeneutic, that is, allowing the Old Testament text to speak to Christians in their contemporary setting, is remarkable and is accomplished by Brueggemann with his typical force and lucidity (e.g., 46–50, 154–56).

The book is structured unlike other commentaries in that it follows theological breaks in the narrative rather than a chapter-by-chapter demarcation. Brueggemann helpfully entitles these breaks with what are essentially thesis statements, informing the reader of

the general theological thrust of the particular selection. There are no formal chapters. I found this feature very enlightening in that the commentary reads something like the book of Deuteronomy itself. By producing a book that has no formal chapter breaks, Brueggemann seems to be mimicking his primary observation of Deuteronomy, namely, that it is a model commentary, one that continuously invites new commentaries on the book of the law (23). In short, Brueggemann's commentary is to Deuteronomy what Deuteronomy was to the first four books of the Pentateuch: a contemporary theological response to ancient, traditional theological texts.

Each new section begins with a brief introduction (normally a paragraph or two) and is then followed by a section entitled "Exegetical Analysis." Brueggemann generally stays away from including technical points of grammar. This decision greatly enhances readability, particularly so for those not trained in Hebrew. Instead, he selects key English phrases that are indicative of the intent of the passage. Again, just as the format does not proceed chapter-by-chapter, Brueggemann does not proceed verse-by-verse, as many commentaries do, but often handles a section of verses that are related. Following the "Exegetical Analysis" is a section entitled "Theological and Ethical Analysis." It is in this section that Brueggemann punctuates the importance of Deuteronomy in a contemporary society. His sociological and political observations are terse, fresh, and elicit greater interest in Deuteronomy as a religious textbook for the modern Judeo-Christian tradition.

Brueggemann points out that the book is organized primarily around the three great speeches of Moses with a concluding section about the death of Moses and the transference of leadership to Joshua (17). This structure leads Brueggemann to note three fundamental features. First, Deuteronomy represents the reception of Mosaic law by a postexilic community (18–20). Second, the attribution of authorship to Moses makes a strong canonical claim (25–26), and, third, Moses is the central figure in the whole of the book (117–22, 288–89). Thus, as Brueggemann points out, Deuteronomy is "not the 'original version' of Torah from Sinai, but is and intends to be a derivative interpretive tradition that comments on the Sinai materials in ways that keep the remembered tradition pertinent" (22). In short, Mosaic law is reinterpreted for a postexilic community set to reenter the promised land (122).

First and foremost, according to Brueggemann, the introductory chapters to Deuteronomy represent the "narrative memory" of the people of Israel (25). As such, remembering the past is essential to the religious ethos of Deuteronomy (62–93: cf. esp. the section entitled "The Threat of Amnesia"). As Brueggemann states,

It is *by utterance* that later generations of Israel are always again brought to Sinai and the drama of covenant making. By utterance, this generation is invited to the awesome assembly, whereby Israel is entrusted its peculiar identity in the world. By utterance this generation hears a voice but sees no form that voice of Sinai keeps sounding into all subsequent generations of Israel (54; author's emphasis).

Second, yet of equal importance, is that Israel remains obedient to YHWH (97, 103–5). Brueggemann begins his lengthy section (141–245) entitled “The Statutes and the Ordinances” by noting, “With the conclusion of the powerful, persuasive rhetoric of chapters 5–11 summoning Israel to obedience, the speech of Moses shifts to articulate the ‘statutes and ordinances’ to which Israel must adhere in the land” (141). With this statement, Brueggemann suggests that obedience is twofold. First, obedience is a requirement in order to receive the promises, that is, land (e.g., 111–17). Second, obedience is a requirement to keep the promises, that is, land. More than that, obedience to the rules and regulations defines the community of Israel (e.g., 156–57, 202–3). Further still, Israel's obedience to YHWH holds importance for the whole world. As Brueggemann notes in commenting on Deut 4:1–8:

It is not enough that Israel should be obedient, as already enjoined in verses 1–2 (v. 5). Moses is here doing “public theology,” aware that Israel's radical and intentional choice of obedience takes place in broad daylight before the eyes of all the watching nations ... who will be dazzled by what they see lived out in Israel's existence. (52)

In short, his commentary throughout, and in particular in the section entitled “The Statutes and the Ordinances,” continually highlights this concept: the community of Israel is defined by its obedience to YHWH's laws and ordinances.

Brueggemann also points out the thread running through the Deuteronomic narrative of the nature of YHWH. Above all else, YHWH is sovereign, not only over Israel, but also over other nations as well (52, 250). Yet it is in Israel, his special people (93–96, 156–57, 279), that YHWH has chosen to maintain a relationship. Brueggemann points out that it is YHWH's selective prerogative that defines Israel and that the actions of YHWH and Israel are intertwined (41). Thus, to reject YHWH is to reject his promises (34) and to forfeit the divine witness to the nations of the earth (157, 249). In short, YHWH is pedantically and mercifully faithful to the covenant with Israel, which Brueggemann posits as YHWH's defining characteristic. Commenting on Deut 32, perhaps the most devastating and, at the same time, uplifting statement regarding Israel in the whole of the Pentateuch, Brueggemann writes,

The second part of the poem (vv. 30–43), still filled with brutalizing harshness toward the enemy, is an astonishing accent on YHWH’s enduring commitment to Israel after Israel has given every reason for forfeiture of that relationship. The unexpected “news” of these verses is YHWH’s inalienable devotion to Israel, a devotion that will cause the remaking of the world map on behalf of Israel and against autonomous superpowers. (283)

A serious student of the text may find Brueggemann’s commentary less than helpful for several reasons. First, he does not enter into grammatical, syntactical, and philological discussions. Instead, Brueggemann brings the text to bear on particular anthropological frameworks, such as sociology, politics, and the like. His commentary, then, generally forces the issue onto the broader canvas of human behavior and religious (Christian) responsibility. Second, and as a corollary, Brueggemann does not bring in “outside” interpretation from any ancient commentary, such as LXX, *Sifre*, Targumim, and so forth.

However, the work is not intended to serve in the capacity of a grammatical, syntactical, and philological commentary, and therefore the foregoing comments are not intended as negative criticism. As the AOTC series intends, this commentary will be a first-rate addition to any pastor or lay reader involved in teaching in a congregational setting. For the upper-level college or university student, this work will undoubtedly provide new avenues of discussion and application of the text. Any point on which Brueggemann engages the text is sure to bring fresh insights to the reader. Yet perhaps the greatest contribution of Brueggemann’s work is that it demonstrates to the reader that the Old Testament text is still a valid and valuable social, political, and religious textbook, both for Jews and Christians. It is not an easy task to produce “Old Testamental” awareness in Christian circles, but if any commentary is capable of so doing, it is this one.

Brueggemann’s style is, as always, innately readable and engaging; he is simply good fun to read. The commentary itself is well arranged and includes sections listing other commentaries on Deuteronomy as well as other further areas of study. It is an easy work through which to navigate, and its compact size, a benefit of foregoing grammatical, syntactical, and philological discussion, will make it a convenient tool of the office and study.