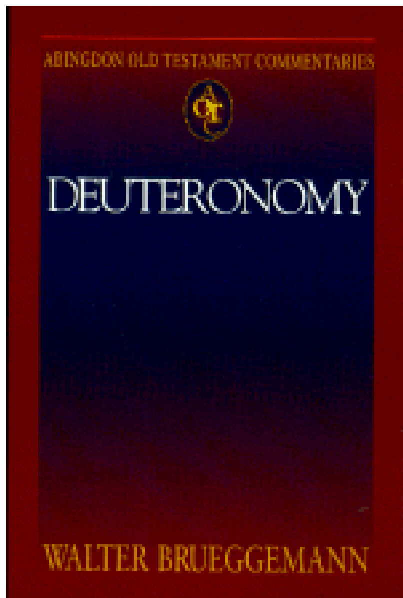
RBL 06/2003



Brueggemann, Walter

Deuteronomy

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

Nashville: Abingdon, 2001. Pp. 306. Paper. $34.00.
ISBN 0687084717.

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Remembering the words of Qoheleth, "of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl 12:12), one may wonder, Why another commentary on the book of Deuteronomy? In the present volume, Brueggemann answers this skepticism by appealing to the very nature of Deuteronomy: what the book says about Israel's faith and how it says it. For him the main themes of the book—such as law and obedience, promise and faithfulness, covenant and exclusive loyalty, a jealous and merciful God, right worship and radical social ethic—provide an essential foundation for the formation of Jewish and Christian faith. Accordingly, he opens his commentary with an assertion (17), similar to E. Achtemeier's claim about Deuteronomy, that "there is no other book of more importance in the Old Testament and no Old Testament book more basic for understanding the New Testament than Deuteronomy" (*Deuteronomy, Jeremiah* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 9). In addition, Brueggemann argues that the book shows a dynamic process of interpreting the present reality, in view of the past, for the sake of the future. This interpretive process is expressed in its literary peculiarities, which include Moses' speech, temporal notations ("today" or "this day"), commands to remember the past, and anticipations of the next generations' questions. It means

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that “there is no final, settled interpretation, … but always another reading of the tradition that must be done afresh” (23). This means that “Deuteronomy is a model commentary that becomes the warrant for the endless flow of commentaries ” (23; cf. 79). Thus, despite the claim of Qoheleth, the substance of Deuteronomy and its process of interpretation warrant another commentary on the book, one that demands fresh reiterations for today.

In accordance with the general purview of the Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries series (AOTC), Brueggemann’s commentary shows little interest to the “technical academic debate” in current scholarship on Deuteronomy and focuses more on “analysis and discussion of the literary, socio-historical, theological, and ethical dimensions” of the book itself (10). His discussion on sociohistorical contexts of Deuteronomy is brief and appears mainly in the introduction (18–21), whereas his analyses of other dimensions occupy the rest of the commentary. For the sociohistorical contexts of the book, he succinctly summarizes scholarly hypotheses concerning the literary history of the formation of the book. Deuteronomy may have been compiled of three sources: a Levitical source that originates from the period prior to the eighth century and stresses the authority of the Levitical priests as keepers and teachers of the Torah; a prophetic source that stems from the eighth or seventh century and demonstrates Israel’s exclusive alliance to YHWH, thus attempting to create an alternative community in reaction to Assyrian domination; and a scribal source that comes from the fifth century and highlights the influence of Ezra for canonization of the book. Rather than choosing one source (or period) as the most definitive, he suggests that those sources together represent Israel’s “hard-fought consensus” about a “YHWH alone perspective on faith and life” in various stages of its history. Accordingly, the book can be read in each of the following contexts: the time when the wilderness generation of the Israelites was about to enter the promised land under the new leadership of Mosaic law and Joshua, when king Josiah attempted to reform Judah as “an independent Yahwistic, Torah-informed state” opposing Assyrian imperialistic control, or when Israel was about to reenter the land after experiencing the devastation of exile in Babylon. Of these three contexts, Brueggemann focuses primarily on the first in his commentary, although he does not neglect the implications of the other two. He reinterprets Deuteronomistic traditions in the light of these latter contexts wherever they are pertinent and specific to the textual units (4:1–43 [27–31]; 9:1–10:11; 30:1–20).

For the literary genre and structure of Deuteronomy, Brueggemann does not discuss the issues systematically. In terms of its genre, he mentions several technical terms in his commentary that may indicate a possible genre definition:

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speech or address (17), covenantal formulations (17), liturgical reenactment (18, 246), travel report (25), recital of past memory (88), song or poem (284), and the like. Since he uses these terms for a particular unit rather than for the whole book, it is hard to determine his position on the entire book's genre. However, based on his frequent use of the concept of liturgy, one can speculate that Deuteronomy for him appears to be a public liturgy that Israel performs periodically to reconstitute itself as the people of YHWH.

In terms of the structure of the book, Brueggemann seems to present three outlines. In his introduction he divides the book into the three speeches of Moses (1:1–4:40; 4:44–29:1; 29:2–32:47) followed by a conclusion (32:48–34:12). He elaborates its second speech further as one organized with covenant formulations (historical prologue [5–11], statutes and ordinances [12–25], mutual oaths of fidelity [26:16–19], and blessings and curses [27–28]). In the commentary he discusses nineteen literary units and lists them sequentially indicating their equal standing compositionally. Yet the tenth unit ("The Statutes and the Ordinances" [12–25]) is subdivided into eighteen smaller units. Moreover, the eighth unit (16:18–18:22) of these eighteen is further subdivided into four more. This outline, reflected also in the table of contents, suggests three different levels of hierarchy in the organization of the book. Third, he occasionally discusses interrelationships among the various units, such as 4:44–5:33, which he says "serves as introduction and reference point for the appeals of chapters 6–11" (63), and 26:1–19, which is regarded as part of chapters 26–28 (26:1–19; 27:1–26; 28:1–29:1), the conclusion of the second speech of Moses, begun in 4:44 (245). The four units, comprised of chapters 31–34 (31:1–29; 31:30–32:52; 33:1–29; 34:1–12), are joined together to narrate what is anticipated "beyond Moses to the ongoing history of Israel across the Jordan into the land of promise" (271). This practice is based on the thematic relationships among units rather than literary criteria; hence, it deviates from the first suggested macrostructure of the book, the three speeches of Moses.

Each of the three outlines for Deuteronomy is plausible, for each sheds a distinct light on the organization of the entire book in its own way. However, correlating the three may help the readers to see the coherence of the entire book. The following is an attempt to diagram what Brueggemann might have done if he were to systematize the three outlines.

A public liturgy of covenant theology for Israel

I. Three speeches of Moses 1:1–32:47

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A. First: historical review 1:1–4:43

1. Memory as context for interpretation 1:1–3:29

2. Calling for an urgent, land-securing decision 4:1–43

B. Second: laws proper 4:44–29:1

1. Principle laws 4:44–11:32

a. Remembering the decisive confrontation 4:44–5:33

b. Substance of the decision for obedience 6:1–11:32

2. Application: statues and ordinances 12:1–25:19

3. Sanctions and appeals 26:1–29:1

C. Third: movement from rejection to renewal 29:2–32:52

II. Concluding remarks 33:1–34:12

A. The blessing of Moses 33:1–29

B. The death of Moses 34:1–12

For the theological and ethical dimensions of Deuteronomy, Brueggemann presents exegetical analyses in which he discusses specific issues of individual units. By paying special attention to the rhetorical devices used in a given text, such as syntax, wordplay, word order, contrasting scenes, judicial languages, and psychological imageries, he explicates its textual meanings. For example, the rhetoric of "either/or" explains how Israel should respond to YHWH's generous commitment to it. Israel must choose to remember the failed history of its ancestors or stay in the satiation that creates amnesia. Israel must choose to remain in the wilderness or move forward to the land of promise. Israel must choose to obey YHWH's commandments or follow the practices of surrounding nations. Israel must choose to be the holy people of YHWH or be "like other nations." Israel must choose to be YHWH's radical example in the world or remain indifferent. All these choices hinge on the supreme choice: Israel must choose to serve YHWH or not. Depending on this choice, Israel may occupy, retain, and live prosperously in the land of promise or lose it all. Of course, the land and their entire future in that land is a gift from YHWH, but it is a gift given

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on the condition of Israel's obedient attitude. This choice is urgent because it was uttered at the Jordan; it is costly because it is matter of life (in the land) and death (out of the land); it is nonnegotiable because YHWH, who governs the affairs of the whole world, declares it so. Accordingly, the book uses the imperative "hear" (5:1; 6:4; 9:1) to encourage Israel to submit its entire life to YHWH in singular, exclusive, glad, and willing obedience. Furthermore, Israel is required to demonstrate its single, covenantal loyalty to YHWH in every aspect of its public life, including "right worship, just economics, viable public power, faithful conduct of war, and the sustainable ordering of family life" (21). In so doing, Israel becomes YHWH's "theological-social experiment in the world" that exercises an intentional social ethic rooted in YHWH's own holiness, mercy, and grace toward others. Taking the theological and ethical dimensions together, Brueggemann articulates the substance of Israel's faith in Deuteronomy as "public theology." Israel, as the exclusive covenantal community with the all-powerful YHWH, must respond to this God with singular loyalty, and this loyalty should be demonstrated in complete and glad obedience to his commandments, which in turn demands that Israel practice "a radical social ethic that envisions a different mode of social relationships in a distinct, self conscious community" (20). From this theological exegesis, Brueggemann deduces creative and imaginative ethical messages—such as implications of keeping Sabbath (72–77), consumerism (91), environmentalism (74, 241), immigrant communities (111), and privatization (169, 222)—that are relevant to contemporary, faithful communities.

It is immediately clear that Brueggemann meets the mandate of AOTC with distinction, setting a paradigmatic model for upcoming volumes. His commentary situates carefully AOTC's perspective in relation to other commentary series. His exegetical analysis of the text in terms of small rhetorical units differentiates his commentary from M. Weinfeld's (*Deuteronomy 1–11* [AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), which analyzes the text verse by verse, and from P. Miller's (*Deuteronomy* [IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), which offers theological reflections on much larger units. The attention given to diverse rhetorical features of the book is also different from D. Olson's commentary (*Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses* [OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), which interprets the book with a single dominant theme, and J. H. Tigay's analysis (*Deuteronomy* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), which views the book solely in light of the historical context of Josiah's reform. The ethical implications that Brueggemann suggests are provocative, radical, and philosophical, thus differing from those of R. E. Clements ("The

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Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* 2:271–538), which are more practical, though both stem from serious exegesis.

His faithful adherence to AOTC's purpose, however, may have caused him to inadequately explain some of the difficult messages in Deuteronomy. How should one understand YHWH's special love for Israel in view of God's love for all creation, his exclusive election of Israel out of all nations, and his determination to provide a land for Israel at the expense of others' lives? Should God use his universal sovereignty and power only for the sake of his chosen people of Israel? How does one interpret the seemingly contradictory reasons for Moses' exclusion from entering the land of promise (1:37; 3:26 versus 32:50–51; Num 20:10–13, 27:12–14)? Is the Israel in the Old Testament to be equated so readily with the church in the New Testament, as his canonical approach seems to suggest? These difficulties require more adequate explanation.

Nevertheless, Brueggemann's commentary has much to offer. It could be thought of as a collection of intelligent sermons that are carefully crafted and powerfully proclaimed. Even the titles of each units could be appropriate for sermon titles! Upper-level college and seminary students as well as pastors responsible for teaching and preaching will glean much from this work. To read it thoroughly does not make one weary in the flesh but refreshes one's heart and mind.

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