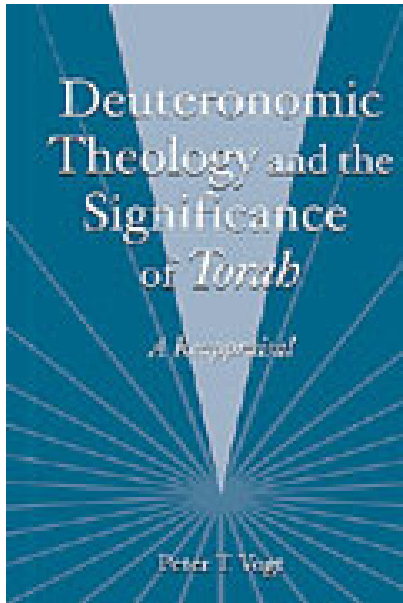


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Vogt, Peter T.

***Deuteronomistic Theology and the Significance of Torah:
A Reappraisal***

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Deuteronomy is revolutionary and radical. But in what way? Moshe Weinfeld argued long ago that Deuteronomy's uniqueness lay in its program of desecularization, centralization, and demythologization (*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972]). Vogt sees that a broad consensus has formed in general agreement with Weinfeld.

This consensus sees Deuteronomy demythologizing by turning from an anthropomorphic view of God whom people fear to look upon to a transcendent God who is heard but not seen and whose name alone dwells with the people. Deuteronomy's centralization move destroyed the local sanctuaries and insisted on worship at only one sanctuary. This in turn left many local priests jobless or forced them to move to the central sanctuary. This move robbed the towns of their judicial appeals court in the person of the priest. Worship changed greatly, being centralized in the one chosen sanctuary. This led to local slaughter laws with nonsacrificial killing of animals to eat and to long journeys to the central sanctuary to worship. Local sanctuaries could encompass all activities of life under the sacred. The central sanctuary, as interpreted by Weinfeld and his followers, led to Deuteronomy's withdrawal of many activities and institutions from the sacred realm to the secular. This revolutionary move secularized government, judiciary, legal, military, financial, and other institutions.

Vogt sees recent studies repudiating the exegetical foundations for this consensus and so turns in his work to a new focus on the ideology and theology behind Deuteronomy. In so doing, he steadfastly holds to the unity of the book, wanting to study the current form of the book without dealing with any diachronic strata that many scholars find behind the present form. Vogt sets up a thesis to counteract the demythologization, centralization, and secularization consensus, namely: “at the core of Deuteronomy is a theology of the supremacy of Yahweh, expressed in the life of Israel through adherence to *Torah*... It is in its deliberate rejection of ANE models of kingship and institutional permanence, its emphasis on the holiness of all life lived out before Yahweh, and its elevation of the supremacy of Yahweh and his *Torah* that Deuteronomy reveals itself to be a truly revolutionary text” (5–6).

To prove his thesis, Vogt sets up a somewhat standard scholarly format that leads, however, to consistent repetition of arguments and conclusions. Having set out the consensus with his opposing thesis, Vogt concludes the introduction with a lengthy review of the “Historical Background,” including reference to de Wette, Wellhausen, Lohfink, Mayes, Lenchak, Noth, Cross, Smend, Dietrich, and Polzin. Next comes the author’s “Ideology and Structure in Deuteronomy,” again providing a history of definitions and applications. His own definition (19) refuses to separate religious and secular: Ideology is “synonymous not with theology but with *world view*. ... Ideology represents the system of beliefs (including religious beliefs), attitudes, values, and assumptions of a community or part of a community.” Studying a text, then, requires the interpreter to be aware of the cultural context with its ideology and the rhetorical purpose in relation to the intended audience. Vogt leans on the book’s superscriptions to decide that “the structure of Deuteronomy ... suggests an emphasis on Moses as mediator and interpreter of *Torah*” (25). The book is influenced by ancient Near Eastern treaty forms but is not itself a treaty. Using treaty elements, Deuteronomy emphasizes the role of the sovereign (Yahweh) in establishing relationships with the vassal (Israel). This encouraged devotion and loyalty to Yahweh and set up the treaty stipulations (*torah*) as Israel’s authority, thus reducing the role and power of all human authorities.

In chapter 1, Vogt turns (32) to “Centralization, Secularization, and Demythologization in Deuteronomy. Here Deut 16:18–18:22 becomes the test case for each scholar’s interpretation. Views of Driver, von Rad, Weinfeld, Lohfink, and Levinson show the ways scholars explain centralization in Deuteronomy. As in each following section, Vogt provides his own evaluation of the views and his own conclusions. In regards to centralization, sacrifice in Deuteronomy has a religious character and purpose as well as humanitarian, Weinfeld offering only an argument from silence. The actions take place in the divine presence, not just in the presence of the Name, God being immanent as well as transcendent. Weinfeld’s centralization led to the loss of local priests, not local judges,

and did not limit the role of elders. Levinson looks for diachronic answers to the neglect of synchronic ones. Vogt concludes that he has shown that these understandings of centralization in Deuteronomy have problems and that centralization is not at the heart of the Deuteronomic revolution. He emphasizes the lack of unity on the setting and audience of the book as well as on the utopian or realistic nature of the book.

Turning to secularization and demythologization, Vogt defines the first as downplaying the sacred and removing institutions from the realm of the sacred. Demythologization reinterprets earlier anthropomorphic theology in a more spiritual, abstract way. Here Weinfeld argues that Deuteronomy's Name theology removes God's immediate presence from the worshipping community and places tablets in the ark rather than seeing God riding on the ark. Now the danger is hearing, not in seeing, God. The earlier and Deuteronomic presentations of cities of refuge and the annual festivals also point to secularization. Passover in particular features a central sanctuary rather than local family celebrations. The festivals now have humanitarian bases rather than religious ones. Tithes can be used for secular purposes. Deuteronomy takes a priestly, cultic idea of holiness and extends it to all the people.

Evaluating desacralization and demythologization, Vogt finds two false premises: earlier sources show a sacral perspective on Israel's life and its institutions, while portraying an anthropomorphic, immanent God. The second premise sees Deuteronomy turning the religious institutions to secular ones and removing God to the transcendence of heaven. Vogt replies that Name theology represents normal, ongoing worship, while glory theology (*kabod*) refers to dramatic divine manifestations. Here, as often, Vogt says the data of the text can be interpreted "in a variety of ways" (89). The correlation to this is frequent use of "may be," "can possibly be," "is a possibility," and other hedging words when describing his own opinion. Here Vogt decides that "the differences between the sources are not of the kind that Weinfeld supposes" (89).

Vogt challenges Weinfeld's second premise on the basis of the extensive writing of Lohfink, who shows that Deuteronomy has extended the concepts of *sacred* and *holiness* by bringing the people together in pilgrimage to the chosen place. The marginal members of society are here treated as equal brothers. Nothing remains in the realm of the profane. International borders mark the only dividing lines for holiness. Thus Vogt concludes that the legal section of Deuteronomy (12–26) "includes matters of great religious significance" (95), making any secular/sacral distinction questionable. Weinfeld has thus "ascribed to the authors of Deuteronomy a world view that they were unlikely to possess" (97), a modern view, not one from the ancient Near East.

Chapter 2 investigates the appointment of Judges and *torah* as seen in Deut 1:9–18. Since Deuteronomy says nothing about bringing cases to God, Weinfeld and followers immediately speak of secularization, and their description of judges as wise connects them to Israel’s intellectual tradition. Vogt replies that the judges must judge in accordance with God’s will and thus are sacred if not cultic. Deuteronomy implies the moral qualities explicitly stated in Exod 18:21. Deuteronomy highlights Moses’ role as mediator of God’s words and thus does not speak of him taking decisions directly to God. Appeals to the priests in Deut 17:8–13 does away with the secularization argument. Deuteronomy 1 thus gives the first suggestion that *torah* will succeed Moses as the way of access to God’s presence. This first chapter also “demonstrates that the book is able to address people in ever-new generations” (111). People of God are always at the “place of decision” (112).

Chapter 3 deals with the presence of Yahweh and *torah*, based on Deut 4:1–6:9. The ancient Near Eastern treaty pattern shapes 4:9–31. Because Yahweh speaks from heaven rather than descending to earth, Weinfeld speaks of demythologization, God moving to heaven. Vogt finds Deuteronomy removing all traits of the storm-gods of Israel’s neighbors. The argument about the prohibition of images seeks to emphasize Yahweh’s transcendence, but, Vogt responds, Deuteronomy calls Israel to gather before Yahweh who speaks from the midst of the fire. Thus Vogt concludes that Yahweh is present in the fire. Image prohibition shows that “invisibility and absence are not the same things” (122). People represent God’s image, so nothing else is needed or permitted. To limit God to an image would gag him, not letting Israel hear divine words. Exodus 20:19 shows the danger of hearing God’s voice just as clearly as does Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy’s emphasis is on what the people experienced, so a portrayal of Yahweh’s descent disappears. Deuteronomy 4:36 shows Yahweh present both on earth and in heaven. Both Yahweh and Israel are described as unique, unlike the gods or peoples of the nations. Deuteronomy thus emphasizes Israel’s unique experience of Yahweh’s nearness as well as Israel’s unique reception of God’s *torah* as the new means of experiencing God’s nearness. Deuteronomy 4 is thus not so different in purpose from Exodus and does not represent demythologization in the way Weinfeld contends.

Exodus 5:1–6:9 presents an anthropomorphic God who needs rest, while Deuteronomy moves the rationale for the Sabbath from mythical to social, in Weinfeld’s view. Vogt points to Deut 5:4 as pointing to an actual encounter with the invisible Yahweh. This means the difference between Exodus and Deuteronomy is not so wide at this point. Vogt finds the motivations of the Sabbath law not mutually exclusive, Exod 23:12 pointing also to humanitarian motivation, so that multiple motivations are possible. Deuteronomy presupposes and accepts the Exodus motivation and applies another more appropriate to the present audience. But Deuteronomy’s approach cannot be called secular. Again here Deuteronomy shows that obedience to *torah* “is a means of actualizing the presence of

Yahweh” (151). Deuteronomy issues a call to follow God’s chosen way of absolute loyalty to the treaty sovereign. “Through the blending of generations and the emphasis on teaching the words of Yahweh, this section seeks to demonstrate that *Torah* remains the foundation for every generation of the people of Yahweh” (159).

Chapter 4 turns to Deut 12 and the supremacy of the giver of *torah*. Here Weinfeld finds Deuteronomy negating the sanctity of blood by letting the blood of animals slaughtered away from the central sanctuary pour out like water (Deut 12:16). He also finds that the use of Name theology combats and demythologizes the ancient belief that the deity actually lived in the sanctuary. Vogt evaluates this as ignoring the similarities between the covenant code and Deut 12, Exod 20:24 even using Name theology. But Name theology does not demythologize. Rather, it points to the supremacy of Yahweh over the gods of Canaan and in choosing a place and manner to be worshiped. The Name theology “may stress his continuing relationship with his people” (196).

Scholars like Wenham have argued that Deuteronomy allows for a central sanctuary as well as other local sanctuaries such as the one on Mount Ebal. McConville and Niehaus see a central sanctuary that may change locations at different times. This comes close to the altar law in Exod 20:24–25. Vogt sees that the text may be read in different ways (174). Using his typical chiasmic description of Deut 12, Vogt sees the major issue as contrasting Israel’s practice with that of the Canaanites. Canaanite worship sites must be eliminated along with all vestiges of their worship practices. Worship of Yahweh must be completely different. This eliminates the number of sites as the key issue and lets Vogt leave the issue open.

Nonsacrificial slaughter also is key to the argument for secularization. Vogt interprets 1 Sam 14:32–35 as not dealing with an altar and thus not dealing with sacrifice, only with slaughter. But Deut 12 uses the Hebrew term *zābah*, a term always connected with sacrifice, pointing away from secularization. Sacrifice is restricted to the central sanctuary, but worship is not. Slaughter becomes a nonsacrificial ritual reminding Israel of God’s faithfulness.

In regard to holiness, Lohfink has shown that Deuteronomy expands the holy and the sacred to include all the people, not just cultic personnel, and all the land, not just the sanctuary. Vogt says Deut 14 and 16 make this case at least plausible. Deuteronomy seems to accent the religious nature of life in the land, not a secular existence. “All of the actions of the people of Israel in the land have covenantal and religious significance” (203).

Finally, in chapter 5 Vogt studies Deut 16:18–18:22 to look at political administration and *torah*. Here the issue is centralization's effect on local political and judicial proceedings. The limitation of the king's authority is widely debated, but the limited role of priests and elders along with local judges points to secularization and centralization. Vogt responds that judges did not move but continued to function locally. Kingship according to Deut 17:14–20 may be read as presenting kingship as one option the people may choose but do not have to. The king loses military power, financial and "harem" rights, and judicial power. The loss of power by the king does not fit centralization, as seen in Josiah's administration. The king becomes a model Israelite studying *torah*.

The people, not the king, appoint judges and becomes responsible to see that righteousness (a term setting up a standard for the community, not one limited to a justice system) is carried out. Rural priests do not pour into the central sanctuary as a part of a centralization program but, at best, serve temporary tours of duty. The text does not emphasize this, accenting rather the rights of Levites to enjoy wealth just like any other Israelite. Priests do have a role in administering justice as well as teaching *torah*.

Prophets ensure that God's voice will continue to be heard interpreting *torah* in changing times and situations. God promises a succession of prophets through the generations, but the prophet is subordinated to the *torah*. Deuteronomy is thus radical not in centralization or secularization but in its opposition to ancient Near Eastern models of kingship with great powers. *Torah* provides for the roles Moses filled and represents God's presence among the people.

Concluding, Vogt notes that Deuteronomy centralizes sacrifice but not worship, expands holiness rather than contracting it, rejects ancient Near Eastern models of royal power as Josiah exercised while empowering and giving responsibility to the people. Such a vision has certain utopian elements but is intended as a realistic program. Above all, "at the heart of the Deuteronomic world view is the supremacy of Yahweh. One of the primary goals of the book is to inculcate a sense of total loyalty to him.... He alone is God; therefore he must be obeyed and honored" (227). The vision is "remarkably egalitarian," making all people of God "brothers" (229).

Vogt has presented a strong argument against the "consensus." He has used the work of a large number of scholars to create his anticonsensus viewpoint. In refusing to deal with many of the critical issues concerning the development of Deuteronomy, he will not get a hearing from many scholars. In presenting his view as the one that should replace all others, he may be accused of simplifying a strongly complex issue where the answer to centralization and secularization issues may come closer to both-and rather than either/or. Certainly, Deuteronomy is a call to give total loyalty to Yahweh and to follow

his *torah*. But *torah* is not the only replacement for Moses and divine presence. Joshua fulfills part of Moses' role as servant of Yahweh. Centralized worship represents the presence of Yahweh with God's people. The *torah*-reading king remains a political leader who represents God's guidance of the people Israel.

Also, Deuteronomy's strong humanitarian emphasis and the extreme effects of centralizing sacrifice and national worship would have stronger consequences than Vogt is apparently willing to allow. These may be secondary emphases of the book, but they do force us to recognize the complexity of the book's purpose.

Still, anyone dealing with Deuteronomy is going to have to consider the strong position Vogt has taken against the consensus and turn away from a total emphasis on secularization, demythologization, and centralization to incorporate the call to *torah* obedience as the major way of worshiping the Sovereign God who continues to be present with the people of God.