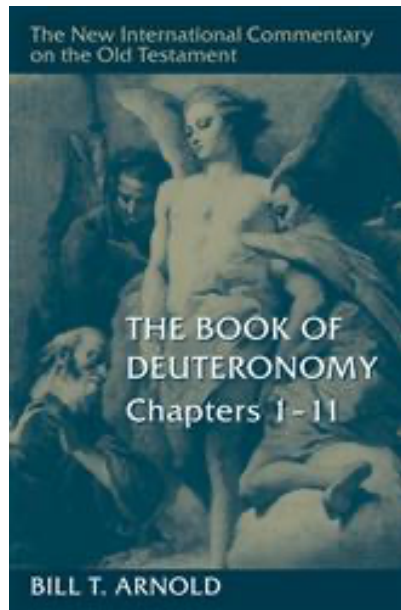


RBL 06/2024



**Bill T. Arnold**

***The Book of Deuteronomy: Chapters 1-11***

New International Commentary on the Old Testament 29

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. Pp. xxxix + 660.

Hardcover. \$60.00. ISBN 9780802821706.

Carmen Palmer  
Stetson University

*The Book of Deuteronomy: Chapters 1-11* is the first installment in Bill T. Arnold's commentary on this same biblical book, for the New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT) series. The volume offers an up-to-date commentary following the previous Deuteronomy edition, published by Peter C. Craigie in 1976. Arguing that "Deuteronomy ... provides that solid point of reference from which one can discern with greater clarity the message of all of Scripture" (1), Arnold offers nothing short of a masterfully comprehensive 600-pages-and-plus volume, integrating a thorough overview of scholarship with his own scholarly perspective always fully in view. The commentary offers a thorough introduction regarding the book's origin(s), social setting in ancient Israel, and important themes, prior to an extensive verse-by-verse commentary with original translation, all with a thoughtful eye toward the NICOT series general audience of those adhering to forms of evangelical Christianity.

The introductory section is organized into nine subsections that offer a breadth of information functioning as overview and situating the text and commentary that follow. First, in "Background: The Narrative Horizons," Arnold lays out Deuteronomy's "narrative horizon" structured around the plains of Moab, a look back to the base of Horeb as a point of departure, the top of Horeb, and a "suggested" fourth horizon of future readers of the book (4). "Unity of Composition" looks to unity achieved through the book's speeches, distinctive phraseology, and pointing to the Torah scroll, distinct from itself. "Authorship and Date" carefully articulates for readers the focus on

“Mosaic authorization rather than authorship per se” (10) and offers some overview of various scholarly approaches from the nineteenth century onward, settling on Arnold’s described approach that considers Deut 1–3 as a “deliberate preparation for the Torah presentation introduced in 4:44–49” (16). A section on “Occasion” traces Arnold’s position regarding the lengthy transmission of the book, charting an early version in the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century BCE to the “book of the law” discovered during the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs 22:8), replete with a flipped-script on ancient Near Eastern treaty texts (31), retooled with a message that YHWH replaces any human power. The section “Canonicity” addresses the canonicity of Deuteronomy within the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) as well as Deuteronomy’s own internal sense of canon and authoritativeness (e.g., Deut 4:2’s command to neither add nor omit). The next section, “The Text,” introduces a discussion of Deuteronomy’s multiple texts (as opposed to “recensions,” 41) and variants such as the MT, LXX, SP, and manuscripts from Qumran. Here Arnold lays out his own tendencies and method, striving to regard each variant on a “case-by-case basis” (43), starting with, though not privileging, the MT as the “point of departure” (44). Of note, it is pleasing to see the commentary make use of Qumran phylactery and mezuzot witnesses. A section on “Theology” introduces the question “whether, or the degree to which, revelation itself—the notion of intentional self-disclosure of the divine Will—is present in Deuteronomy” (48). Here Arnold focuses on Deuteronomy’s polemic against other gods, YHWH’s passion for Israel, and the ideal of a “unified and single Israel” (60). In “Main Themes and Their Implications,” various key themes are identified, including torah, covenant, prophecy, retributive justice, cult centralization, education, individualism, warfare, (“we must allow Deuteronomy to be at home in its ancient Near Eastern context” (80), exile, poverty (based on not only economic insecurity but including absence of land, power, and social status [83])). Finally, a section titled “Analysis of Contents” provides an outline of Arnold’s organization for the book of Deuteronomy into a series of discourses.

Because Arnold organizes the text and commentary for the contents of Deut 1–11 according to “discourses,” as opposed to by chapter, length is variable among the subsections. The discourses are preceded by a brief section on the superscription of Deut 1:1–5. Observing that “geography and chronology are paramount” (91) in the superscription, the section describes Moses as first law teacher (91). Arnold rearticulates the section’s focus on unity of the twelve tribes of Israel, for present and subsequent generations, and preparation for the historic overview of Deut 1–3.

Deuteronomy 1–3 is placed together under the rubric “Historical Discourse: From Horeb to Beth-peor.” Arnold argues that this discourse illustrates the two models to come from which Israel must choose: rebellion and death, represented in Deut 1:6–46, or obedience and blessing (Deut 2:1–3:29 [105]). Arnold notes the narrative reworking from Exodus and Numbers (106), in addition to ancestral narratives from Genesis (seed, land), to function as a literary reminder of God’s covenant faithfulness (112). The narrative looks back to the initial departure from Horeb followed by rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, to explain the reason for subsequent lengthy desert

wandering and to motivate avoidance of such behavior again in the future (124): in this instance, Israel is sent back to the desert. Following descriptions of the territories of their subsequent sojourning, including Edom, Moab, and Ammon, Arnold argues that Og, king of Bashan, is defeated to “erase the pattern of sin” (198). The discourse closes by noting the significance of Deut 3:24 and its “incomparability statement” (219) for the purpose of highlighting YHWH’s incomparability.

Next follows a section on “Sermonic Discourse: The Nature and Tragedy of Idolatry (Deut 4:1–43).” Arnold structures this discourse around the ban against idols (226). The case is made that Deut 4 has as focal point Mount Horeb, and Israel’s experience of YHWH is not in what they saw but in what they heard (4:12 [241]). Deuteronomy 4:11 does not offer a divine appearance but only “the results of YHWH’s near presence” (248). A description of presence is therefore not idolatry. Deuteronomy 4:19, apportioning astral bodies to be worshiped by other “people groups” (259), Arnold deftly renders to mean that YHWH is “so different by nature and degree from other beings that he transcends them in a way similar to the transcendence of the divine realm in relation to humans” (260). Idolatry will lead to exile from the land, though with repentance Israel may be assured of forgiveness.

The section “Torah Discourse: Covenant Instructions for Israel (4:44–26:19)” is by far the longest. The commentary completes “The Paraenesis: 4:44–11:32” before leaving Deut 12–26 and onward for the second installment of the commentary. Several thematic points are (re)emphasized. Some explanation is offered on the nature of “torah”: it represents religious law, identified as “the revelation of the divine Will for ancient Israel” (294); the Decalogue (the “Ten Words”) (Deut 5:6–21) fixes maximal obligation with minimal standards, with the remainder of Deuteronomy building upon this code (311); the power of God is the only enforcement to these Ten Words (352); and the Ten Words are communicable (359). A certain amount of space is dedicated to discussing the Sabbath (Deut 5:12–15), which “democratizes holiness” (337) and functions to “relinquish one’s mastery of time” (344), reemphasizing God’s sovereignty. The Shema (Deut 6:1–9) is also given substantial explication: a key concept here is the Shema’s “revolutionary breakthrough” in understanding God’s revelation of self to humans, not humans understanding God in human terms (378), as well as opting for “YHWH is one” in Deut 6:4, indicating YHWH’s singularity (385). Commentary for Deut 7 maintains as a focal point the challenging tension between a God of covenant love and the concept of utter destruction of the seven nations, *herem* (431). The real danger of these nations is religious, not military (433–34, 441). A focal point of Deut 8 is a refrain of the dual theme of remembering and forgetting, which is more complex than solely a sense that remembrance gives way to blessing and forgetting gives way to curse. For example, blessing may itself give way to forgetfulness (on Deut 8:12–13 [491–92]). Adjoining the theme of remembrance is a focus of Deut 9 on what Israel should not be thinking, namely, thoughts of personal righteousness and that they can fulfill God’s plan “in their own strength” (502, 509). Commentary for Deut 10 and 11 discusses content such as historical

“flashbacks” introduced with “at that time” (539–40), core covenant requirements with overlaps from Mic 6:8 (557–58), and Deut 11:8–25 functioning to draw together most of the themes from Deut 5–11 (584).

The volume is careful to make Deuteronomy relevant for evangelical readers in a way that is respectful of the text at hand. For example, Arnold argues against any understanding that God in the Hebrew Bible is an inherently “angry God” in contrast to a depiction of God within the New Testament as a “loving” God (54, 524). There are also numerous other points identified where New Testament rewriting and theology are explicated in terms of an expansion from Deuteronomy as their base, for example the Shema’s location in the “Greatest Commandment” (Mark 12:28–34; Matt 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28, see commentary 401–4), and Jesus’s forty days and forty nights in the desert, which “echo Israel’s forty years of wanderings” (485).

There is recurring mention of the “divine Will” in relation to Deuteronomy throughout the commentary. Theological terms are always subject to interpretation and require careful attention. One might be inclined to understand this term as the frequently utilized mainstream cultural concept of “God’s plan.” It is evident that such a meaning is not at all Arnold’s intent, however, once one assesses the commentary’s full spectrum of references to “divine Will.” There is a connection of divine will to divine revelation: Scripture as canon linked with inspired will of God (36); self-disclosure of the divine will (48); religious law as revelation of divine will for ancient Israel (294); internalizing and living torah as divine will through learning and teaching (372, also 352); and observance of divine will as that which “comes out of the mouth of YHWH” (480, also 459). All of this culminates in a denoting of torah as divine will of God (584). Thus, one may relate revelation of divine will with torah itself.

The only potential drawback to this volume is its sheer length, with commentary running over 600 pages, which may render a careful reading of its contents difficult. That said, the length also permits the gradual growth of certain points as they are revisited, most aptly comments on Deuteronomy’s own concept of time that moves backward and forward (see above in the introductory section). It is also possible to read certain sections on their own.

For those readers of Deuteronomy who may be inclined to leap to a focus on the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12–26), this first installment by Arnold that focuses on Deut 1–11 offers compelling reminders of the importance of these first eleven chapters in terms of their thematic introduction to what follows. The volume will be of great interest to all graduate-level students (including seminary but also anyone wanting an up-to-date, expansive work on recent Deuteronomy scholarship), teachers, scholars, as well as the general reader. That is a key highlight of the volume: it is both meticulous in its scholarship, yet also accessible.