

# The Politics of Deuteronomy

Edited by  
BILL T. ARNOLD

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## Preface

This volume would not have been possible without the contributions of a number of persons working together to bring it to completion. In particular, I am most grateful to my erstwhile co-chair of SBL's Deuteronomy Program Unit, Dr. Harald Samuel, who was instrumental in visualizing and giving structure to the book at its beginning stages, and who edited early drafts of a few of its chapters. I am also grateful to Tobias Stähler and Markus Kirchner of Mohr Siebeck for their work in the production stages. Finally, the Press and I express our appreciation to my research assistants, Evan Lee for his careful copyediting of the manuscript and David Clayton for building the indexes.

Bill T. Arnold



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## Introduction: Political Theory and Interpretive Possibilities in Deut 16:18–18:22

*Bill T. Arnold*

Many years ago, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin opined that the traditions now found in the book of Deuteronomy constitute “the crystallizing nucleus of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> That may be true with regard to the broad conceptualizing of the character of Israel’s God  $\text{YHWH}$ , his covenant with Israel, and the theological significance of those traditions generally. But the same cannot be said of the important portion at the center of Deuteronomy – the so-called Law of Offices in Deut 16:18–18:22. Many questions remain about this portion of the book. Far from crystallizing a “nucleus” for the rest of the Bible, we are left with uncertainty about the role it played in the history of pre-exilic Judah. Even its reception in the Persian period and in early Judaism is unclear. Did this text have any paradigmatic significance at all, or was it a reflection of the idealistic vision of tradents who hoped for such a reality in the future? While we cannot answer these questions with confidence, scholars since Wellhausen have explored this portion of Deuteronomy as an early type of constitutional law, especially for the way it defines the responsibilities for four main human authorities in Israel: judges, kings, priests, and prophets. Indeed, this portrait of Israel’s human leaders continues to fascinate us with possibilities, perhaps especially because of its suggestive significance for political theorists and legists even today.

The contributions in this volume stem in part from sessions of the Deuteronomy Program Unit of the Society of Biblical Literature. They have no genetic relationship other than the goal of investigating this important portion of the book from either a theoretical or exegetical perspective. Part One contains theoretical studies, while Part Two presents more exegetically-based investigations. It is hoped that together, they open new avenues for further research or add information to the body of research previously overlooked or inadequately explored.

The volume opens with a contribution by Francis Borchardt, who begins with the observation that the “constitutional system” envisioned in Deut 16:18–18:22 is *sui generis* in the ancient world. Borchardt addresses the problems of the way power itself is generated and distributed in such an ideal form of government.

<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: Volume One, Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 368.

Drawing on actor-network theory, an approach in the sociology of science that explores the study of authority, Borchardt argues that the constitutional passage of Deuteronomy establishes a truth regime in which all actors are legitimated through their success in enacting divine presence. Each official is endowed with authority only to the extent to which their performance embodies YHWH's continued activity among Israel. Each official is transformed into a carrier of YHWH's presence in Israel and the deity is transformed into a figure perennially active in Israel.

After a helpful overview of the way Deuteronomy has been read as a political document in biblical studies generally, Madhavi Nevader takes up the book's political purposes and the way scholarship has tended to ignore the single most important figure, who is the most consistent and fearsome political actor of the book – YHWH himself. She navigates several unsatisfying approaches to reading the politics of Deuteronomy, and then turns to the possibility of reading the book as apologetic, specifically as royal apologetic, compared to the ancient Near Eastern corpus. Finally, she shows how many contemporary readings of Deuteronomy as politics are skewed by the self-conscious reading of our own politics into the text, finding an unsubstantiated divide between East and West, between Biblical and Oriental, or between political and religious.

Brent A. Strawn revisits the question of Deuteronomy's genre, which is a question at the core of many of the other contributions in the volume. His essay argues that, given the legitimacy of the idea of Deuteronomy as a kind of constitution, it should be seen as a supplemental composition rather than as a replacement; that is, as the book now stands in the Pentateuch, its hermeneutic of legal revision(ism) is best understood as akin to constitutional amendment. From there, Strawn asks specifically what kind of politics is envisioned in Deuteronomy, concluding that the notion of "political theology" is a helpful category for its details, a perspective which he suggests understands the book as a "constituting" or "constitutive" type of text.

Starting with the principle of the separation of powers in Deut 16:18–18:22 as representing a link in political theory to early modern conceptions, Anselm Hagedorn raises the question of whether we can know how this relates to an *Urdeuteronomium*. By focusing on the earliest formulation of administration of justice in the book's legal core (Deut 12–26\*), he works from a comparative legal perspective, drawing especially on Greek oratory and inscriptions, in order to investigate how politics and public order are shaped in the text. The contribution is also sensitive to the text's balance between legal innovation and traditional morals.

Carmen Palmer draws upon and combines recent developments in political theory and ethnic identity formation, exploring what these researches imply about Deuteronomy's "law of the king" in Deut 17:14–20. While others have understood the surprising (even unconventional) picture of the king as a model

for the Israelites, Palmer shows that the image also serves to construct and define the identity of the Israelites more broadly. By comparing the paragraph with the Temple Scroll, she demonstrates that the person of the king reflects the interests and ideological convictions of each author. The priestly interests of the Temple Scroll are most apparent there, whereas in Deut 17, the interest is the identity of the Israelite people themselves.

The second half of the volume opens with a comparative study by Bruce Wells. In his review of “political and administrative ideals” as presented in Deuteronomy, Wells investigates key aspects of this governmental system with similar features of the administrative system of southern Mesopotamia in the sixth century BCE. He shows that, in particular ways, Deuteronomy presented an ideal that mirrored corresponding concepts in the Neo-Babylonian system. The fact that the Babylonians (and Persians after them) were unable to bring such ideals to reality suggests that the tradents of Deut 16:18–18:22 did not expect to see their idealistic program come to fruition fully but sought instead to influence the political realities of their day, perhaps moving them closer to the aspirational goals outlined in the text.

My study of Deuteronomy’s “Justice Manifesto” begins by focusing on the way the syntax of Deut 16:18–18:22 marks each new portion of its four-part structure, introducing in turn judges, kings, priests, and prophets. Yet this conventional way of dividing the material is also deceptively simple because it obscures an overarching interpretive principle that may shed light on all the laws in the passage, which are otherwise quite complex. The investigation reexamines the details of the unit and explores the possibility that a singular and foundational interpretive tenet gets lost in most treatments of the passage, or at least has been neglected in the secondary literature. My proposal is that the directive for the judges to perform their duties with “a judgement of righteousness” in 16:18b introduces the entire unit rather than only the local magistrates in 16:18–17:13. In subsequent verses, the phrase comes to serve as a social ideal, functioning as a literary touchstone for all of 16:18–18:22. In this way, Deuteronomy’s constitutional ideal presents a vision for justice that begins with a mandate for justice in the narrower sense of wise court proceedings, but immediately expands the ideal to embody justice in all four officials on the way to establishing the prophetic ideal of social justice more broadly.

After a meticulous study of the layers of tradition in Deut 16:18–20 and 17:8–13, Reinhard Müller concludes that a core of those pericopes was part of *Urdeuteronomium* (16:18\* and 17:8–9\*), and that this original core of the book originated in the late-monarchic period. Furthermore, this original layer of text is paralleled in other ancient Near Eastern royal instruction, suggesting that the implied speaker of these instructions concerning the local and central judiciary was “none other than the king of Judah.” During the exilic and post-exilic periods, these pericopes

were reworked in several subsequent layers, particularly reflecting the later covenant theology and other theological concerns of those respective eras.

Drawing upon mainstream scholarship of the “law of the king” (17:14–20), Kevin Mattison observes that the preceding laws in the extended unit (16:18–17:13) assign judicial responsibility to judges and priests, creating a self-contained court system with no need for a king. Mattison then reexamines the widely held assumption that the image of the king here deprives the king of power, but instead protects those powers against corruption, allowing him to retain all that is not explicitly prohibited. He argues that Deut 17:14–20 assumes, as its original audience must have assumed, that the king would continue to hold vast powers. Rather than a shadow king, as is often assumed in the literature, the text envisions a powerful monarch who was a champion and enforcer of Deuteronomy’s Torah.

The volume closes with a contribution by Sandra Jacobs on the notion of child sacrifice as it may have been known in the ancient Mediterranean and Levantine worlds. One’s most precious physical issue, namely a child, and often a first-born child, was perceived as the ultimate gift to a god. Her examination of the prohibition of burning children in Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10–11 examines the language of these laws together with the phenomenon of trans-generational punishments. Such directives assert that the consequence of parental sin falls directly on their children—as was maintained also in the surety (or guarantee) clauses of Neo-Assyrian private loan and purchase contracts from the seventh century BCE. While Deuteronomy’s bans qualify as another “hermeneutic of legal innovation,” in keeping with Bernard Levinson’s reconstruction, they nonetheless take a step further, by forbidding practices that were previously permitted. All acts of passing children through flames (including those with non-fatal consequences) are categorically outlawed in these laws, which constitute, alternatively, a hermeneutic of dissent.

Returning to Voegelin’s thoughts about Deuteronomy as “the crystallizing nucleus of the Bible,” he went on to assert

One might even say there would have been no Bible, that is, no Book, unless the book had metamorphosed the history of Israel into the Torah and existence under God into existence under the written Law. That is a strange success for a book; and it suggests forces stronger than a mere literary whim, or the skill of a codifier, or the propitious moment of discovery.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the “strange success” of Deuteronomy is something the authors in this volume attempt to trace in our imaginations, and perhaps even in our own political realities. In this way, they contribute to the ongoing fascination with this text in the hopes of marking that strange success and perhaps moving it forward in our search for “*justice*, and only justice – justice without intermittence.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, 368.

<sup>3</sup> S. R. Driver commenting on Deut 16:20; *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 3rd ed., ICC 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, [1895] 1965), 201 (emphasis his).

Part I

# The Book of Deuteronomy in Political Theory



# Judge, King, Priest, Prophet: The Invention of Authority in Deut 16:18–18:22

Francis Borchardt

## 1. Introduction: Power and the Deuteronomy Constitution

The constitutional passage of Deuteronomy has long been an object of scholarly fascination.<sup>1</sup> This should come as no surprise, as Deut 16:18–18:22 is often seen as a boundary marker, both providing a capstone for the instructional material that precedes it in the Pentateuch, and setting the stage for the historical drama that follows in Joshua through Kings.<sup>2</sup> It is thus studied both for its vision of Israelite society once it enters into Canaan, and for how that vision relates to the historical fiction that is played out in the narrative books following it in the traditional canon.<sup>3</sup> The problem of how power is distributed in the constitutional passage is

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Norbert Lohfink, “Die Sicherung der Wirksamkeit des Gotteswortes durch das Prinzip der Schriftlichkeit der Tora und durch das Prinzip der Gewaltenteilung nach Ämtergesetzen des Buches Deuteronomiums (Dt 16,18–18,22),” in *Testimonium Veritati: Philosophische und theologische Studien zu kirchlichen Fragen der Gegenwart*, ed. Hans Wolter, Frankfurter Theologische Studien 7 (Frankfurt am Main, Knecht, 1971), 143–55; Udo Rüterswörden, *Von der politischen Gemeinschaft zur Gemeinde. Studien zu Dt 16,18–18,22*, BBB 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987); Eckhart Otto, “Von der Gerichtsordnung zum Verfassungsentwurf: Deuteronomische Gestaltung und deuteronomistische Interpretation im ‘Ämtergesetz’ Dtn 16,18–18,22,” in *‘Wer ist wie du, Herr, unter den Göttern?’ Studien zu Theologie und Religionsgeschichte Israels: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Ingo Kottsieper et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 142–55; Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, “Der deuteronomische Verfassungsentwurf. Theologische Vorgaben als Gestaltungsprinzipien sozialer Realität,” in *Bundesdokument und Gesetz: Studien zum Deuteronomium*, ed. Georg Braulik (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1995), 105–18; Jean-Marie Carrière, *La théorie politique dans le Deuteronomie: Analyse des unités, des structures des concepts de Dt 16,18–18,22* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2001); Bernard Levinson, “The First Constitution: Rethinking the Origins of Rule of Law and Separation of Powers in Light of Deuteronomy,” *Cardozo Law Review* 27 (2006): 1853–88; David Flatto, “The King and I: The Separation of Powers in Early Hebraic Political Theory,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 61 (2008): 61–110; Mark O’Brien, “Deuteronomy 16.18–18.22: Meeting the Challenge of Towns and Nations,” *JSOT* 33 (2008): 155–72.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Wilson, *Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 46–47; Dominik Markl, “Deuteronomy’s ‘Anti-King’: Historicized Etiology or Political Program?” in *Changing Faces of Kingship in Syria-Palestine 1500–500 BCE*, ed. Agustinus Gianto and Peter Dubovsky (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2018), 165–86, esp. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Nihan, “Rewriting Kingship in Samuel: 1 Samuel 8 and 12 and the Law of the



a frequently recurring theme. The issue for many scholars amounts to this: Deuteronomy presents a notion of Israel wherein governing power is apportioned relatively equitably between judicial officers, Levites, a king, and a prophet. However, this idea of shared power is wildly at odds with ancient Near Eastern models of rule, *and* crucially distinct from depictions of the governing styles of several idealized monarchs in the books of Samuel and Kings.<sup>4</sup> Several questions arise out of this apparent incongruence. Does the constitutional passage invent the concept of separation of powers? If so, for what purposes, and serving whose interests? Further, under what historical circumstances might this section have been composed (whether there are one or many stages of composition)? Finally, how does this anomalous picture of governance in the ancient Near Eastern context relate to the more common picture known from Mesopotamian and Judahite sources?<sup>5</sup> A problem to which less scholarly attention has been devoted is how power is generated in the “constitutional system” envisioned in Deut 16:18–18:22. That is, in this radically new ideal of government, which figures bear authority, and from where do they derive it? Other than an occasional assertion that YHWH, or more commonly Torah, is the ultimate means of legitimation, much of scholarship has been content to slink past this problem to consider the issues already noted above.<sup>6</sup>

I think there is more to this problem, and my solution might impact how we answer some of the scholarly questions more commonly asked of this passage. I am arguing that the constitutional passage of Deuteronomy establishes a truth regime in which all actors, human and non-human, are legitimated through their success in enacting divine presence. That is, each official, whether judge, Levite, king, or prophet is endowed with authority only to the extent which their performance embodies YHWH’s continued activity among Israel. This omnipresence of YHWH is realized in Deuteronomy’s imagined interactions between diverse actors, through speech acts, rituals, performance, and the encounter with physical locations and objects. Through this network of interactions, each entity is transformed into a carrier of YHWH’s presence in Israel, and thereby authorized to

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King (Deuteronomy 17),” *HeBAI 2* (2013): 315–50, is primarily interested in connection between part of this passage and the historical fiction that follows it. Levinson, “First,” 1871–84, spends more time on the idealized vision in Deuteronomy itself.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Dutcher-Walls, “The Circumscription of the King: Deuteronomy 17:16–17 in its Ancient Social Context,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 601–16, esp. 605–6; Flatto, “King,” 73–74; Nihan, “Rewriting,” 319–21.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of the constitutional passage being a birthplace for the separation of powers along with several divergent theories on the circumstances for its rise see Levinson, “First Constitution,” 1887; Moshe Greenberg, “Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law,” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. Duane Christensen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 283–300; Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Two notable exceptions attending to how power is generated in this passage are, O’Brien, “Deuteronomy,” 171; and Dutcher-Walls, “Circumscription,” 605–7.

perform certain functions. In the same way, this network of interactions transforms YHWH from a conceivably distant deity of the imagined past, into a figure perennially active among the Israelites.

Because the study of authority fundamentally belongs to the realm of sociology, I shall approach this problem within the framework of actor-network theory. After introducing this framework and its applicability to the question at hand, I shall offer examples of how the constitutional passage constructs a truth regime in which YHWH's presence is the measure of reality. I shall then show how these examples interweave to make it so that what is determined to be legitimate, authentic, and true must enlist YHWH as a participant.

## 2. Actor-Network Theory and Multiple Ontologies

Actor-network theory is an approach developed within the sociology of science.<sup>7</sup> Its most notable proponent is Bruno Latour, so much so that the man and the framework have become nearly inseparable in the usage of later authors.<sup>8</sup> Latour constructed this approach as a way to answer one question: How do we know?<sup>9</sup> Latour neither conceives of this question as purely biological nor entirely philosophical. Instead, he frames it as a sociological problem. Initially, he turned his attention to laboratories in the natural and physical sciences, and later to other fields of activity.<sup>10</sup> In much of this work, he follows a generally pragmatist and constructivist program that is skeptical of the modernist idea of objective truth.<sup>11</sup> He contends that the impression of an objective reality which simply reflects nature is an artifact of scientific practice. Latour argues that this practice works to create the impression that it is only observing reality by erasing much of its

<sup>7</sup> Fabian Muniesa, "Actor-Network Theory," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James Wright, 2nd ed. (London: Elsevier, 2015), 80–84, esp. 80.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Yves Cittion, "Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 309–29, esp. 309–10, where Cittion, in telling the story of the development of the approach, shifts between using the terminology of "Actor-Network Theory" and "Latourian".

<sup>9</sup> Bruno Latour, "'Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame,' or, How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate," in *Science, Religion, and the Human Experience*, ed. James Proctor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–48, esp. 28. In this chapter he frames his scholarly program as the study of truth production in science, technology, politics, economics, law, and religion.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), vii–viii.

<sup>11</sup> Rita Felski, "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53 (2016): 747–65, esp. 749 notes the ties to pragmatism and radical empiricism; Dave Elder-Vass, "Disassembling Actor-Network Theory," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 45 (2015): 100–21, esp. 101, ties Latour's method to social constructionism. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5–8, lays out his program in relation to other domains of knowledge.

own work in the production of knowledge. That is, it claims to be a photocopy of reality, but is actually mediated and constructed by scientific tools, post-doctoral researchers, recording devices, drafting of laboratory reports, journal publications, etc.<sup>12</sup> The resulting realization, then, is that both scientific knowledge, and the nature or reality it observes are constructs created by the interaction between various human and non-human actors.

But in making this claim, Latour does not deny the reality of the modernist paradigm of knowledge production. Rather, he notices the transformative properties of the mediation that he describes. Latour asserts that this is a sort of creation. It makes things real, or transforms them from something undetectable or unintelligible into knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Actor-network theory argues that the reality constructed by the modernist paradigm of observation, hypothesization, experimentation, and result is only one type of reality.<sup>14</sup> It suggests, however, that there are many ways in which people, institutions, or things are real. There are multiple ontologies in which one can produce authentic knowledge.<sup>15</sup> What this means is that there is no reality behind constructs, but the constructs themselves produce realities. So, something can be entirely true and legitimate in one ontology, but completely false within another.<sup>16</sup> These constructs work by assembling similar networks to that which Latour observes in laboratory sciences. People, practices, objects, and statements all interact to create a network within which a certain type of knowledge or truth is the only possible legitimate outcome.<sup>17</sup>

Since Latour developed this framework, it has been employed by many others in the sociology of science. But, it has also expanded to fields as wide-ranging as fine art and religion.<sup>18</sup> All of these approaches work in similar ways. They require detailed ethnographic descriptions of interactions between various actors, both human and non-human. Then, they demand reflection and discussion about how these interactions transform or create actors as something else. In so doing, these descriptions reveal a network within which a certain type of knowledge is produced through the translation of one entity into another. Latour calls such

<sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 89–90.

<sup>13</sup> Latour, “Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame,” 36.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Annemarie Mol, “Ontological Politics: A Word and Some Questions,” in *Actor-Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 74–89, esp. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Mol, “Ontological,” 77–79.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Muecke, “An Ecology of Institutions: Recomposing the Humanities,” *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 231–48, esp. 231–32.

<sup>18</sup> For an example of an actor-network theory approach to art, see Patrice Maniglier, “Art as Fiction: Can Latour’s Ontology of Art be Ratified by Art Lovers (An Exercise in Anthropological Diplomacy),” *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 419–38. For a religious application see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously,” *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 331–51.

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