

RBL 08/2004

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Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment

Studies in Biblical Literature 60

New York: Lang, 2003.
Pp. 130. Hardcover. \$53.95. ISBN 0820468231.

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Deuteronomy 4 is one of the chapters of the Hebrew Bible to which several studies have already been devoted. The analysis of Georg Braulik (*Die Mittel deuteronomischer Rhetorik: Erhoben aus Deuteronomium 4,1–40* [1978]) was mainly characterized by an approach oriented toward synchronic and stylistic issues, whereas the study of Dietrich Knapp (*Deuteronomium 4: Literarische Analyse und theologische Interpretation* [1987]) sought to identify a complex redactional process, implying several successive layers. The present volume advocates a reading of Deut 4 as an innerbiblical interpretation of the second commandment, the prohibition of divine images, a position already argued by Walther Zimmerli in 1950.

In his introduction Holter presents his main thesis: the structural logic of Deut 4 must be explained by its constant allusions to the second commandment, especially in the form conserved in Deut 5:8–9. Holter's approach is based on the concept of intertextuality as well as on Michael Fishbane's method of innerbiblical exegesis. As to the definition of intertextuality, Holter distinguishes between two uses of the term, one very general and another more specific and narrow, in which an attempt is made to understand the connection between two or more texts in a historical perspective (14–15). Although he opts himself for the second option, Holter nevertheless seems to consider Deut 4 as a literary unity (10), in particular because of its systematic concern with the theme of the second commandment. Holter divides the chapter in a core text, Deut 4:9–31, which consists of the following units: 4:9–14, 15–16a, 16b–18, 19–20, 21–24, 25–31. This core text is framed by a prologue and an epilogue; the latter are related to each other by the technique of *inclusio*, since both contain a series of rhetorical questions and mention the decrees and the laws in 4:1–2 and 4:40. Here, however, Holter does not realize that 4:40

also offers an *inclusio* with 4:32; this verse seems to be forgotten in his diagram on page 13 (but see however 101). The following chapters of the books are dedicated to an analysis of the core text followed by some comments on the frame.

Verses 9–14 introduce the noun *temunah* and prepare the reader to the theme of the second commandment. The author of these verses insists on the fact that the Horeb theophany did not contain any visual aspect. At the same time, the second commandment is considered as *pars pro toto* of the whole covenant (33, read “covenant” instead of “covanant”).

Verses 15–16a introduce a change of number in regard to Deut 5:8–9, which according to Holter “hardly has any interpretive significance” (38). This is a rather puzzling statement in regard to the close reading that he otherwise advocates. Holter himself acknowledges that 4:15–16a contain a shift in the interpretation of the prohibition of images. Verse 15 seems to understand this prohibition in its original intention, as polemics against images of Yhwh, whereas 4:16a switches to the issue of images of other deities (46). In the following chapter Holter admits that 4:16b–18 depend on Priestly language and pick up, in reverse order, the list of the elements created in Gen 1 (61). But this observation does not allow considering these verses a later addition, as did Knapp and others (56–57). If Holter is right, that would mean that Deut 4 as a whole is a post-Priestly text, even if Holter never clearly draws this conclusion.

Verses 19–20 expand the prohibition of images to celestial bodies and should be understood as polemic against astral deities (77). Doing so, they introduce a warning against the veneration of other gods and thus closely link the second commandment to the first (82). The insistence on Yhwh as a jealous god in 4:21–24 contains intertextual connections to the golden calf episode in Exod 32–34; the expression “a consuming fire” points to Deut 9:3, which stands at the opening of the account of this episode in Deut 9–10 (90–91).

The final passage of the core text, 4:25–31, clearly uses the references to the second commandment as a hermeneutic key to the exile, but contrarily to other Deuteronomistic texts this section holds a quite optimistic attitude with regard to the future (100).

In his conclusion Holter locates the addressees of Deut 4 in an exilic or early postexilic context (110). This location remains quite vague, as do his considerations about the insistence on the prohibition of divine images. The reviewer regrets that Holter seems unaware of the works of Christoph Uehlinger, who argues that it was only during the Persian period that aniconism became a constitutive element of Judaism (see, e.g., “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh’s Cult

Images,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of the Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* [ed. K. Van der Toorn; Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 97–156; and “ ‘Powerful Persianisms’ in Glyptic Iconography of Persian Period Palestine,” in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Postexilic Times* [ed. Bob Becking and Marjo C. A. Korpel; Leiden: Brill, 1999], 134–79). Most of Holter’s intertextual observations are quite convincing, even though one gets at times the impression that Holter practices “l’art pour l’art.” The book ends with a bibliography and indexes (authors, subjects, biblical references).