

Deuteronomy 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 2 Not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession.

You shall purchase food from them with money, that you may eat, and you may also buy water from them with money, that you may drink. For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows you are going through this great wilderness.

These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing. So we went on, away from our brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Araba road, from Elath, and Ezeon-Geber. And we turned and went in the direction of the wilderness of Moab.

And the Lord said to me, Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ah to the people of Lot for a possession.

The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. Like the Anakim they are also counted as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim. The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them, and destroyed them from before them, and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the Lord gave to them. Now rise up and go over the brook Zered.

[1 : 3 9] So we went over the brook Zered, and the time from our leaving Kadesh Barnea until we crossed the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation, that is the men of war, had perished from the camp, as the Lord had sworn to them. For indeed the hand of the Lord was against them, to destroy them from the camp until they had perished. So as soon as all the men of war had perished, and were dead from among the people, the Lord said to me, Today you are to cross the border of Moabitar, and when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession. It is also counted as a land of Rephaim.

Rephaim formerly lived there, but the Ammonites call them Zamzami, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. But the Lord destroyed them before the Ammonites, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place, as he did for the people of Esau who live in Seir, when he destroyed the Horites before them, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place even to this day.

As for the Avim who lived in villages as far as Gaza, the Kaftorim who came from Kaftor destroyed them and settled in their place. Rise up, set out on your journey, and go over the valley of the Anon. Behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to take possession and contend with him in battle. This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you. So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemath to Sihon the king of Heshbon, with words of peace, saying, Let me pass through your land. I will go only by the road. I will turn aside neither to the right nor to the left.

You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat, and give me water for money, that I may drink. Only let me pass through on foot, as the sons of Esau who live in Seir and the Moabites who live in Ar did for me, until I go over the Jordan into the land that the Lord our God is giving to us.

But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day.

[3 : 55] And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have begun to give Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to take possession, that you may occupy his land. Then Sihon came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Jehaz. And the Lord our God gave him over to us, and we defeated him and his sons and all his people. And we captured all his cities at that time, and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors, only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves, with the plunder of the cities that we captured. From Oroah, which is on the edge of the valley of the Anon, and from the city that is in the valley, as far as Gilead, there was not a city too high for us. The Lord our God gave all into our hands. Only to the land of the sons of Ammon you did not draw near, that is, to all the banks of the river Jabbok, and the cities of the hill country, whatever the Lord our God had forbidden us. Deuteronomy chapter 2 begins as the 38 years of wandering after the failure to enter into the land are about to come to an end. The warriors of the first generation of the Exodus have been wiped out. Not all the women and children of that generation, presumably, but the adult males. And great numbers of these have been wiped out by special judgments of God, not just by old age. We recall the path of Israel from Numbers chapter 20 onwards in this chapter. The first time, they were going to go straight into the land from Kadesh Barnea, but now they have to go the longer way around. They pass round a series of nations, Edom,

Moab, Ammon, and then they fight the Transjordan Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og. They will now enter the land from the east. These are related peoples, in many cases, the children of Lot, Moab, and Ammon, and the children of Esau, in Edom. Israel has to recognize its brotherhood with Edom. Indeed, Edom was the twin of Israel, Jacob and Esau, and the relationship between Israel and Edom, is here presented in a far more positive light than it is in Numbers chapter 20. That pairing of the two nations is seen most clearly in the book of Genesis, but it develops further. You can see it also in places like 1 Samuel. Israel's brother and distant cousins, Ammon and Moab, have already taken possession of the land, and they provide examples for Israel. What the Lord has provided for Israel is good, however, and they must not be jealous of the other peoples around them. We're further told that the Lord has given these other peoples their lands. While Israel is set apart from the peoples, there are parallels with these other peoples. The Lord has also given territories to other peoples, and Israel must honour that gift. The Lord is the Lord of all peoples, the God of the whole earth, and Israel needs to be careful not to think of themselves as unique in all respects. Observing this, we shall probably beware of placing too much weight upon the concept of holy war for understanding their entering into the land.

It is an important concept, but it won't bear all the weight that some people want it to bear. First of all, Israel is not spreading the worship of the Lord through military conquest and subjugation of other nations. That is not the purpose of the conquest of Canaan. Second, the conquest is bounded.

Israel is not allowed to take possession of lands beyond the territory that the Lord has allotted to them, and we see that very clearly within this chapter. Third, Israel is set apart from the nations as the people of the Lord's own possession, but Israel is not the only people who have had territory allotted to them. In Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 8 to 9, When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

But the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. In Amos chapter 9 verse 7, The granting of these lands to these peoples also recalls details of the story of Genesis before Israel went down into Egypt. There we saw that the narrator's attention is never merely narrowly restricted to Israel itself, but peoples arising from Ishmael, from Lot, from the sons of Keturah, and from Esau all come into view at various points.

[8 : 16] Fourth, Israel is not the only people who have dispossessed aboriginal peoples according to the Lord's will. Such dispossession is not necessarily illegitimate. Elsewhere in places like Judges chapter 11, with the conversation between the Ammonites and Jephthah, the impression is given that on occasions people can lose their rights to territory when dispossessed by other nations. The holy war card that some people resort to in order to justify the dispossession of the Canaanites as a unique case does not necessarily work in such instances. This chapter contains a number of examples of people who are dispossessed giants, descendants of the Rephaim, and driven out other peoples and settled in the lands that had formerly been theirs. The Horites were driven out by Esau and his descendants.

We see a lot of this in chapter 36 of Genesis, in the background of the story, the displacing of the Horites. The Moabites displaced the Emim, the Zamzanim were displaced by the Ammonites, and the Avim by the Kaphtarim, or the Philistines. If these peoples successfully occupied their lands, and displaced giants in many cases, then Israel should be able to follow in their footsteps. While they do not attack Moab, Ammon, or Edom, they attack King Sihon of Heshbon, an Amorite king. His heart is hardened like Pharaoh.

Initially the Israelites request passage through his land, but Sihon responded with force, because the Lord will to give his land into the hands of the Israelites. As in the case of Egypt, this seems to be one of the ways that the Lord judges or dispossesses nations.

Sometimes nations are dispossessed by cruel and evil powers, powers overseen by, but not approved by God. On other occasions, however, the Lord moves the hearts of kings to folly, so that they are destroyed.

Those nations given into the hands of Israel are to be totally defeated, their entire territory occupied, every town and city captured, every person killed or driven out, all spoil taken. In addition to the conquests of the other surrounding nations, the victories that they have already achieved on the eastern side of the Jordan, provide Israel with lessons and models to follow for when they cross the Jordan and enter into the principal part of the land. If chapter 1 of Deuteronomy told the story of Israel's wanderings in a way that foregrounded the bad choices that were made in their failure to enter into the land, and the consequence of death that followed from that, and the positive example of Joshua and Caleb against that background, here in chapter 2 we have positive examples of entering into the land, of faithfully seizing hold of what the Lord has laid out for them.

[10 : 58] A question to consider. In the book of Genesis, there are several examples of people related to Israel, achieving landmarks before Israel did. In this respect, they provided patterns for Israel to follow, examples for them to learn from both positive and negative lessons, and also encouragements that what was possible for these other people might also be possible for them, and certainly with the Lord's help.

Looking back to the book of Genesis, can you identify some of these examples?