

Deuteronomy 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 7 When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction.

You shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons, or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.

Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them. You shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and chop down their asherim, and burn their carved images with fire.

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all the peoples.

But it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

[1 : 2 4] Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him by destroying them.

He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment, and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.

And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you.

He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you.

You shall be blessed above other peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock, and the Lord will take away from you all sickness, and none of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you.

[2 : 3 0] And you shall consume all the peoples that the Lord your God will give over to you. Your eyes shall not pity them, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you. If you say in your heart, these nations are greater than I, how can I dispossess them?

You shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God brought you out.

So will the Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. Moreover, the Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed.

You shall not be in dread of them, for the Lord your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. The Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you.

But the Lord your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed. And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven.

[3 : 37] No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them. The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God.

And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house, and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.

Deuteronomy chapter 7 is a chapter that concerns in large measure Israel's relationship to the other nations of the land of Canaan. The Lord will clear out the nations before them, these seven nations that are greater and more powerful than they are.

And there's a serious warning against intermarriage. Now when we think about intermarriage, we're often thinking about two individuals coming together and their individual ancestry. But that isn't the emphasis here.

Rather, it's about joining families and intermingling peoples. For our understanding of marriage, it's very much two detached persons. But within that culture, it's a greater bringing together of peoples.

[4 : 47] And so the intermarriage would be forging a bond between peoples, not just between isolated individuals who have a romantic attachment. Israel seems to face a real temptation to intermarriage.

Why is that the case? We could maybe suppose that it's about the romantic attraction between two individuals that fall in love. One happens to be a Midianite, one happens to be an Israelite or something.

And the star-crossed lovers are chafing at the restrictions that prevent them from coming together. Now, that may be part of it, but I think there's more going on here. There is a temptation to intermarry because Israel is a small nation.

And if you're a small nation, one of the ways that you develop strength is by strategic alliances, by joining families and intermingling peoples. And along with this would be the natural accompaniment of making covenants with them and having religious syncretism as a part of that.

They would serve their gods, they would make treaties with them, and then they would intermarry with them and they would become one mingled people. There is an example of just this taking place, of course, in Numbers chapter 25 in the relationship with the Moabite women and the Midianite women.

[6 : 00] There is also a warning against it in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16. Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst.

You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their asherim. For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.

The warning here shows that alliances with people in the land, worshipping their gods, and marrying their daughters and their sons all go together. If you engage in the covenant making, these other things will tend to follow quite naturally.

Daniel Lowenstein observes that there is a parallel with this, of course, in Genesis chapter 34. Make marriages with us, give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves.

You shall dwell with us, and the land shall be open to you. Dwell and trade in it, and get property in it. Genesis chapter 34, verses 9 to 10. This is the invitation of Hamel.

[7 : 15] This is an attractive offer. If you're someone who's wandering around from place to place, who doesn't have great power or great numbers, then you could get security by marrying into one of these established groups, and it would enable both of them to be stronger for the alliance.

The marriages then were the means of knitting peoples together, of intermingling peoples, and along with the alliance making and the intermarriage came the worshipping of the other's gods.

That syncretism that brought together two cultures, two peoples, in the worship of the idols of each other. After the actions of Simeon and Levi in destroying Shechem, Jacob says to them, You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household. The temptation for someone in that position is to intermarry, and appreciating the weakness of his position and how easily he could be preyed upon by others, Jacob was prepared to make some sort of treaty with the people of Shechem, and that treaty was one that involved them getting circumcised, but that circumcision did not seem to be arising out of a deep commitment to the worship and serving of the Lord.

It was a sort of religious syncretism, and the danger, of course, was that the syncretism went in two directions. In the next chapter, we read a very instructive passage.

[8 : 41] So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.

So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem, and as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Jacob is aware of how small he is in numbers and the need to make these sorts of strategic alliances with the people in the land. However, the result of this is a sort of syncretism.

They have all these foreign gods. Whether these idols were taken just in the day-to-day interacting with the people of the land or in the plundering of the city that we see at the end of chapter 34, in both of these acts, Jacob's household was snared in idolatry.

However, as they cut off those idols and completely removed themselves from the worship of the people of the land and distinguished themselves as a people, not forming these sorts of entangling alliances, God puts a terror upon the cities round about them so that they are not attacked.

[10:02] And a similar thing seems to be going on here. They must completely dissociate themselves, completely reject the Canaanites and their ways. They must beware of appropriating their gods and their property.

If they defeat a city, they must not take the spoil because the spoil, as it was for Jacob's sons, seems to have been a snare and they take the idols and they start to worship the idols.

Rather, they are to be a people holy to the Lord, a people dwelling alone, not a people who are mixed in with the nations because they fear them defeating them. The story of Genesis chapter 34 is a despoiling of the Hivites and at the end he talks about his fear of the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

These are nations that are mentioned at the beginning of this chapter and so the parallels between these stories would have been apparent to people who are reading this. Where else do we find a story of the Israelites completely destroying a city of the people of the land?

It's in Genesis 34. On the third day when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males.

[11:10] They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city because they had defiled their sister.

They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys and whatever was in the city and in the field, all their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in their houses, they captured and plundered.

And this plunder seems to have become a snare to them. This was a pattern that the Israelites as they went into the promised land should not follow. They should learn from the failures of Jacob but also from the failures of Simeon and Levi.

Jacob failed by not keeping the people holy to the Lord by making a covenant with the people of the land that would lead to intermingling and Simeon and Levi failed by again not keeping themselves holy by taking things from the city that ended up trapping them in and their people in the sin of idolatry.

The snare of plunder must be avoided and so they must bury the spoil if they're to escape. They are to be a people holy to the Lord. The Lord did not choose them because they were great in number.

[12:17] The Lord knows that they are few and the Lord will protect them as such. They must fear the Lord and be faithful to him rather than fearing the nations of the land. The Lord will put his terror in them and protect them just as he did Jacob their forefather.

The Lord set his love upon them. They didn't do anything to deserve it. He promised to their forefathers and he delivered them from Egypt. Rather than engaging in strategic alliance making they need to be faithful to the Lord.

That is the covenant that will pull them through. Not the covenants that they will make in a shrewd way to gain favour with the people of the land. It will be by cleaving to the Lord and not departing from him in any way.

Why is God giving them the land? Verse 12 gives us an answer. And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers.

Now this should remind us of something that we've heard elsewhere earlier on in the story. It's the statement that God makes to Abraham after his sacrifice of Isaac or his preparedness to sacrifice Isaac.

[13 : 24] And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said By myself I have sworn declares the Lord because you have done this and have not withheld your son your only son I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you have obeyed my voice.

It's a similar sort of statement because you listen to these rules and keep and do them because you have done this because you have obeyed my voice. These two statements seem to make the blessing of God contingent upon the faithfulness of the person who's being blessed but there seems to be an apparent tension.

The Lord here seems to suggest that they enter the land because they observe his rules but just two chapters later we read do not say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land whereas it is because of the wickedness of those nations that the Lord is driving them out before you not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess the land but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers to Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob that's Deuteronomy chapter 9 verses 4 to 5 and here it seems in contrast to chapter 7 verse 12 they enter in because of the wickedness of the nations and purely because of the Lord's promise and love to their ancestors how do we reconcile these statements how is it that they are given the land because they listen to and observe the commandments but they don't in any way earn it the answer is although the Lord didn't choose Israel because of anything in them he chose them for a purpose their obedience is the means by which the purpose and the promise is fulfilled not a means by which they earn the Lord's favour or love and we see something of the logic of this in Genesis chapter 18 verses 17 to 19 the Lord said shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him for I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him the logic there is that God chose Abraham to bless all of the nations in the earth he chose him for that purpose he didn't choose him because of anything in Abraham that merited being chosen however the blessing that God promised to Abraham that he would experience himself and the blessing that he would be to others will be achieved through Abraham's faithfulness and God is going to form that faithfulness in Abraham so that God will bring to pass through Abraham what he always intended now what does this mean for Israel it means that the land is not a reward that God is giving them no it's part of their mission

God has chosen Israel so that they will be a light to the nations a blessing to the people that have been cursed at Babel he's going to drive out nations before them but not because Israel is great but because his purpose in Israel requires that they have the land the land is a tool for them to achieve the purpose for which he has called them and so that blessing of the land is part of the way in which the promise is going to be fulfilled part of the way in which God is going to bring his light to the nations round about and finally to the whole world they are instructed to consume the peoples of the land they must remember the lessons of the Exodus and not be afraid of any of them the Lord fights for them the Lord fought for them in the events of the plagues and the Lord will fight for them again in a similar manner he'll clear out the nations bit by bit so that they can take possession as they have the ability to do so he won't do it in a sudden swoop rather as they rise in faithfulness and their capacity for taking rule in the land God will drive out the people as they grow and the work of defeating destroying these nations will not primarily be done by them it will be done by the Lord who fights for them what this actually looked like in practice is not entirely clear we should not presume that it would just be a matter of them falling by the sword when they do take over the land they must beware at every step not to give in to the temptation of syncretism not to take the plunder of the cities and fall into the snare of idolatry they must be holy to the Lord and it's that bond with the Lord that drives all of this mission the holiness that they must express the wickedness that they must completely detest and reject and the way in which God will bless them as they take that route over others this will be the means by which God's purpose for his people will be accomplished a question to consider what are some of the ways in which we can compromise our holiness as the people of God through dangerous entanglements that we enter into through fear