

Deuteronomy 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 19 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 20 Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it?

Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And is there any man who has planted a vineyard, and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man enjoy its fruit.

And is there any man who has betrothed the wife, and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted?

Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own. And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.

When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably, and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labour for you, and shall serve you.

[1 : 3 6] But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. But the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves.

And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.

When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.

Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.

In Deuteronomy chapter 20 we have laws relating to warfare, falling under the rubric of the sixth commandment. When Israel goes out to war, the priests must address the people on behalf of the Lord.

[3 : 0 8] They must assure the people of the Lord's strength and assistance in their conflict. They are assured so that they need not be afraid. And then at that point, the officers speak to the people, and they go through the camp to find out four kinds of persons who are then told to go home.

First, the person who has built a house and not lived in it yet. Second, the person who has planted a vineyard and not tasted its fruits. Third, the person who has betrothed the wife and not taken her.

And fourth, the person who is fearful, who might make others fearful. The first three are told to go home for their own private sake. It seems strange to us.

Why send them home? Why care particularly about the death of persons under such circumstances? Surely death is the greatest tragedy whenever and wherever it hits. What does that little bit of extra tragedy really count relative to it?

However, what is highlighted here are some of the things that people live for and find value and a meaning in. Building a house and settling down somewhere. Planting a vineyard and reaping the fruits of the land.

[4 : 12] And then marrying and starting a family. These are the sorts of ends that people work towards in their lives. The sorts of goals that give life meaning and value. It's a tragedy if you come close to these things and don't actually achieve them.

In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30 it speaks about these specific instances. And the judgment that will befall Israel if it is not faithful. You shall betroth the wife, but another man shall ravish her.

You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit. Now implicit in that text is the fact that you'll be dead. If you're dead, why care about these things?

Because the meaning of our lives has a lot to do with our enjoyment of the fruits of our labours. A life that is characterised by futility is not a good life.

The Lord, having brought his people into the land, wants his people to enter into rest in their labours. Israel has been given inheritance of the land by the Lord, and it is important that they don't refrain from enjoying it.

[5 : 14] We should observe the democratic nature of this law. It's addressed to any man, however rich or poor, who might have just fallen short of entering into rest in his labours, the rest that belongs to the people of God.

He must be allowed to enjoy his Sabbath, while his companions labour and fight for him. The people must be careful to guard the work of their neighbours from the potential of futility.

The exemptions are presented in a way that highlights the risk of someone losing his enjoyment of the benefits of rest in the land to another man. The commitment here is not to let this happen to anyone, and it binds the Israelite men together in a sort of commitment of brotherhood.

This is not to be a society of every man for himself. What is this somewhat strange law doing under the principle of not murdering? The commandment itself is framed by the notion of fear in verses 1, 3 and 8.

It protects, we could say, the stuff of life, so that life and its fruitfulness is always prioritised, and we don't end up allowing the fear of death to eclipse everything else, the work of war to quench the enjoyment of the rest that belongs to the people of God, the urgency of combat to condemn people's labours to futility.

[6 : 29] Some people need to go to war, to put themselves in the line of fire, but it is important that we jealously value and guard the milestones that give meaning to our lives.

Hebrews chapter 2 verse 15 speaks of the fear of death as a means by which the devil holds people in slavery. Israel must not operate out of a fear that is simply preoccupied with the enemy of death, with the enemy at the border, but must operate out of a commitment to protect and value the good life that God has given them, the rest that God has granted them within the land.

Aversion to death is not the same thing as the valuing of life. This law, placed under the sixth commandment, teaches Israel that not murdering also involves protecting and valuing the conditions of shalom, of peace and life where they can, even in, and perhaps especially in, the precarious times of war.

The relationship between this and the principle of not fearing is important. Deliverance from bondage to the fear of death requires trust in God. This doesn't mean that there is nothing to fear in death, or that great sacrifices don't need to be made.

The people who do go out to fight would be putting their lives in jeopardy. They would come back and they would not be sleeping with their wives. They would not be eating the fruit of their vineyard. They would not be enjoying the security and rest of their house.

[7 : 52] However, in a society that was vigilant to ensure that every person did get to enjoy these things, their lives would not be characterised by futility. This sort of approach was only possible for Israel when they did not lose sight of the fact that they served a God who was greater and more powerful than the forces of death.

When Israel attacked a city outside of the land, they had to offer it terms of peace first, terms that were rather harsh by any modern standards, but not by those of the day. Israel was given strict limits upon the sort of warfare that they were permitted to engage in, so attacking cities in such a manner would not be typical, but would generally be a response to aggression on the part of the other nation.

Israel was not an expansive imperialistic power. Cities of the land were not offered, however, the same terms. What exactly is involved here should be considered.

We shouldn't necessarily assume that the entire population of the Canaanites were being eliminated. That clearly didn't happen. Still less that ethnic cleansing was the goal. The emphasis throughout is upon the behaviour of the Canaanites, and Israelite cities would be subject to the same fate if they sinned in a similar way.

We should also consider that most of the population of the lands did not live in the cities, or in many cases we might think of them as citadels, which Israel attacked. Israel clearly left many of the people of the land, while utterly annihilating their centres of power and their rulers.

[9 : 19] We can see something of this in 2 Chronicles 8, verses 7-8. All the people who were left of the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, who were not of Israel, from their descendants who were left after them in the land, whom the people of Israel had not destroyed, these Solomon drafted as forced labour, and so they are to this day.

Was the continued existence of these people in the land proof of Israel's unfaithfulness? Not necessarily. We also see Canaanites who became members of Israel, perhaps most notably someone like Rahab, but also people like Uriah the Hittite.

Israel's warfare in the land was a divinely mandated war against idolatry, and it had to be uncompromising, giving no quarter. And Israel are seen as the instruments of the Lord's judgement.

They are not conducting this war on their own terms. They are not conducting this war for their own sake. They must obey the Lord, even when it's difficult. Placing this material under the Sixth Commandment is really striking.

If the Sixth Commandment calls us not to murder, surely this directly contravenes it. Yet careful reflection reveals a more complicated view. While this does challenge the absolutism of many forms of pacifism, by situating the commands of warfare under the commandment not to murder, it demands that we reflect carefully upon the relationship between these two things.

[10 : 41] And the way in which warfare itself should be carried out in a way that honours life, that maintains a commitment not to murder, even in that situation where it may seem to be suspended.

This is not a suspension of the commandment not to murder. Rather, even in the context of war, where life may legitimately be taken, the force of the Sixth Commandment must still be felt.

Scripture recognises but places limits upon the necessity of war in a fallen, sinful world. The principles here cannot and should not be spiritualised away.

The struggle against spiritual evils in the world sometimes requires killing persons who have committed themselves to advancing those evils. Just as Genesis chapter 9 mandates the death penalty in the context of the prohibition of murder, so Deuteronomy chapter 20 mandates war in the same sort of context.

All of this requires careful discrimination and the recognition that war, like everything else in the life of Israel, falls under the rule of the law and its principles of righteous judgements.

[11 : 46] It must not be treated merely as an amoral exertion of power over others, nor as a straightforward permission that the Lord has extended to them, exempting them from the force of that commandment.

The Christian tradition, taking this very seriously, has tried to subject warfare in its practice to the principles of justice. It has talked about just war, reflecting upon the ends of warfare, the manner of warfare, and other considerations and discriminations that help us to speak appropriately about the character of warfare.

About its evils, about some things that may be permissible and even necessary in the waging of warfare, that are nonetheless not good in themselves, results of being in a fallen universe.

Taking life in warfare is not necessarily sinful. Indeed, under some situations it may be a righteous thing to do, and something praiseworthy. But in scripture, peace takes priority over war, and men of warfare bear the stains of the tragedy of the fall.

Much of the Bible's teaching concerning war appals modern sensibilities, even though within living memory, Britain firebombed Dresden, or America dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[12 : 54] While our distance from these events may, I believe, help us rightly to see some of the brutality, and the cruelty, and the injustice that was characteristic of them, That same distance can make it difficult for us to perceive the necessary evils of war.

Profoundly sanguinary actions that may be legitimately undertaken, but with tragic and horrible consequence. Overcoming the evils of the Nazi and Imperial Japanese regimes required the willful taking of a very great many lives.

It is very easy looking at our distance to blanch at the horror of the actions required to dislodge evil, and it is essential that we recognise that Deuteronomy chapter 20 is not looking at matters from such a privileged, distanced vantage point.

This chapter ends with another strange law. It's a law about fruit trees. This law, again relating to warfare, prohibits wreaking devastation upon the land, engaging in a scorched earth policy.

The tree is not your enemy. Humanity is called to serve and to protect the land, and the principle of not murdering requires an active concern for the protection of nature from devastation, and carefully bounds the destructive forces of war.

[14 : 05] War can be undertaken in a way that cares nothing for the environment, that reduces the landscape to a hellscape. An example of this could be the Red Zone in France, 460 square miles that was utterly devastated by the First World War, and is largely still uninhabitable on account of unexploded ordnance and poisonous chemicals.

War may be a tragic necessity under some conditions, and even sometimes a moral imperative, but we should do what we can to protect life, not to allow everything to get sucked into the vortex of conflict and destruction.

This chapter then presents bounds upon warfare, upon the people that are to be sent out to war, ensuring that war does not condemn people to futility, upon the forms of warfare to be adopted with different enemies, to ensure that not all peoples are treated as servants of great evils that must be absolutely uprooted, and finally upon the scope of warfare, to ensure that we do not engage in devastation of the good earth that God has given us.

A question to consider, how might we fill out the ecological concerns of this chapter elsewhere in scripture?