

Turbulence and Trust (Deuteronomy 2:14–37)

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Clean-ups and refurbishments often result in rediscoveries. Something old and long-forgotten can come to light and make a significant impact on the present and, indeed, the future. The story of one such rediscovery is told in 2 Kings 22–23. There we read of the discovery of a ‘book of the law’ during renovations to the temple carried out during the reign of King Josiah toward the end of the seventh century before the time of Jesus. For a good century and a half or so, Bible scholars have equated this ‘book of the law’ with Deuteronomy, or at least a significant part of it. One of the things over which they disagree, however, is whether this ‘book of the law’ was found then or was actually written at that time to give authority to King Josiah’s religious reforms. We don’t have to enter into that debate to appreciate the significance of the book of Deuteronomy – one of the most important books of the Bible in terms of its theological and historical influence.

In the Bible, Deuteronomy is the hinge between the Pentateuch, the traditional books of Moses, and the lengthy history that extends from Deuteronomy itself through Joshua and Judges to the end of the books of Kings. Its role as the seam between these major sections of the Bible is paralleled by its theological and moral significance. It is in Deuteronomy that we find hammered

out an understanding of divine election of a particular people, especially chosen by the Lord God to enter into a covenant calling for gratitude and undivided loyalty. It is in Deuteronomy that we discover a theology of history, according to which loyalty to the covenant would be rewarded with prosperity and disloyalty would result in disaster – if not immediately, then eventually. It is in Deuteronomy that we learn how – and how much – human conduct matters to God as a measure of covenant loyalty on our part. There are other parts of the Bible that differ in important ways from Deuteronomy, but throughout much of Jewish and Christian history, the perspective that permeates this book has often provided the lens through which we read other parts of the Bible. It is both indispensable and, in certain respects, perturbing. It demands trust on the part of the faithful, but the turbulence created by some of the texts within Deuteronomy is morally unsettling and even abhorrent. One such turbulent text is our reading from Deuteronomy 2, part of Moses' retrospective on the story of Israel since the revelation of God at Mount Sinai, consistently called Horeb in Deuteronomy, which opens the book.

Throughout our reading, the Lord God is pictured as the master and commander of war. It begins in verses 14–15 with the fulfilment of the Lord's wrathful oath against the timidity of Israel's warriors. Not until the deaths of all those warriors who had balked at taking on the Amorites was the Lord prepared to instruct the people of Israel onwards toward the Promised Land. Then we learn that the Lord God has acted as military leader for other peoples –

the Ammonites against the legendary tribe of giants, and the descendants of Esau against the Horim. But in our passage, the Lord is both military advisor to Moses and, in fact, the enforcer who ensures victory over King Sihon, the Amorite of Heshbon. As it says plainly in verse 33, ‘the Lord our God gave him over to us; and we struck him down, along with his offspring and all his people’. Then again in verse 36, after recounting that every man, woman and child had been put to the sword in all the towns under King Sihon’s protection, Moses reaffirms: ‘The Lord our God gave everything to us.’

This passage of scripture belongs to a series of OT texts that present a view of *holy* or *miracle* warfare. In ancient societies, it was a common conviction that a people’s god fought alongside that people in times of war. Israel’s *holy war* tradition went further than this by affirming that the Lord God not only fought *with* the people of Israel but indeed fought *for* the people of Israel against her enemies, sometimes to the exclusion of Israel’s own involvement. The great precedent for this was immediately prior to crossing the Sea of Reeds, when Moses reassured his fellow Israelites with these words in Exodus 14:13–14:

Fear not. Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the Lord will win for you today. These Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you have only to keep still.

Then, after safe passage across the Sea of Reeds at the expense of Pharaoh's chariots and chariot drivers, the Israelite victory song celebrates with these words: 'The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name' (15:3). The theme of the prophet Miriam's victory song is the same: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea' (15:20–21). Our psalm this morning, Psalm 9, likewise celebrates the Lord's conquest over the psalmist's enemies, even to the point of the erasure of their memory.

But as we see in Deuteronomy 2 and in other texts like it – such as the continuation of the story in chapter 3 and again in chapter 7, where the people of Israel are instructed to show no mercy to the existing inhabitants of the land promised to them – this holy war tradition often envisaged the Lord ensuring military success while Israel's warriors engaged in indiscriminate slaughter of perceived enemies. Sometimes, as in Deuteronomy 2, all people were destroyed, while livestock and property were spared as spoils of war. At other times, women and children were also spared.

This picture of God is all too prevalent in our Bible, especially in the broad sweep of the biblical narrative hinged together by Deuteronomy. It is not as though snatches of this particular perspective about God peep through the texture of scripture in occasional or fragmentary fashion in some out-of-way part of the canon. It appears and reappears with disturbing regularity. According to Raymond Schwager, in a study of violence and redemption in the Bible:

Approximately one thousand passages speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishment by death and destruction, and how like a consuming fire he passes judgement, takes revenge, and threatens annihilation. He manifests his might and glory through warfare and holds court like a wrathful avenger. No other topic is more often mentioned as God's bloody works.¹

Strangely enough, we are, in our time, rather familiar with the kind of mindset shaped by this scriptural conception of God. The Christian crusades might now be but a distant historical memory in the West, if remembered at all. But we are familiar enough with religiously inspired violence among a range of religious groups today. Each such group considers that the violence it inflicts is not only authorised by God but is done on God's behalf because *God is a warrior*. Unless we think that violence authorised by, and done on behalf of, our Bible's God is somehow holier than violence authorised by, and done on behalf of, some other holy book's God, texts like Deuteronomy 2 pose discomfiting interpretive, theological and moral questions.

There is an easy answer, of course: *Jesus*. And some of you would know that, when all is said and done, Jesus is my answer to the questions raised by texts such as Deuteronomy 2, 3 and 7, among others. But to move too quickly to saying, 'Jesus is the answer', is to treat this significant scriptural tradition with

¹ Raymond Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats: Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 55.

disdain, as if Deuteronomy itself did not shape, in a profound way, Jesus' own understanding of God. To keep ourselves honest, therefore, I am leaving Jesus out of this today in the hope that we might nudge up against other scriptural perspectives that perhaps convinced Jesus to adopt a different attitude to violence and its validity.

First of all, let's take another look at Deuteronomy 2. As Moses tells the story, the Lord God first assured him that King Sihon and his land had been handed over to Israel. Sihon's fate was sealed at that point, however he might respond. Then the Lord instructed Moses: 'Begin to take possession by engaging him in battle' (2:24). In short, God has given it, so take it – and without delay! But as Moses continues on with the story, this is not quite how he goes about things. Rather, he attempts peaceful negotiation. We Israelites need to pass through your territory, he advises King Sihon, and so long as you give us right of passage, all we will do is walk through your territory, turning neither to the right nor to the left. In fact, Moses offers to buy food and water from the local inhabitants. This is a far cry from either destroying or dispossessing them. Only after Sihon refuses this request and musters for war does Israel defeat, destroy and despoil.

Deuteronomy 2:30 says that, as with Pharaoh a generation earlier, the Lord God hardened Sihon's spirit and made his heart defiant so as to hand him over to the Israelites. For John Calvin and his foot-followers in the Reformed tradition, this is but a necessary consequence of divine sovereignty: Whatever is

must be the result of the divine will. Take your pick – and you would be well advised to stick with Calvin – but I am more inclined to see this as a narrative expression of the inevitability of intransigence. From the perspective of Israel's story, Sihon was never going to act differently, no matter how many assurances Moses may have made.

In any case, despite Moses' initial efforts at diplomacy, Israel ultimately engages in wholesale destruction and slaughter under divine authorisation and instruction. But the dissonance in the story between God's initial instructions and Moses' actual approach to the situation suggests, at a minimum, a complexity to the situation that is not so simple as the concept of holy war might suggest. Moses' action may not be the direct challenge to divine violence that occurred when God threatened to annihilate the Israelites for worshiping the golden calf and Moses successfully lobbied God to reconsider (see Exodus 32:7–14). But in this story, there is clearly more to the notion of Israelite conquest at God's behest than meets the eye. Moses' protest against divine retaliation on Mount Sinai and his attempt at peaceful negotiation with King Sihon, contrary to divine command, at least places a question mark against a view of God as violent and vindictive.

Broadening our horizon a little to encompass the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, we find that Deuteronomy 20 offers instruction for waging war that takes various contextual circumstances into account. The theology of holy war, 'God will fight for us', remains central, indeed, so central that troops are given

all manner of excuses to avoid engaging in battle. Let me list them for you. Perhaps this fellow has built a house but not dedicated it. Well, he should head on home and dedicate it, or he might die before having the chance to do so. Perhaps that wannabe soldier over there has planted a vineyard but hasn't had the chance to enjoy the fruits of his labours. Send him home, or others might get to enjoy the fruit of his vineyard before he does. Perhaps that fine specimen in the front line has recently become engaged but is not yet married. Send him back home, or he might die in battle and someone else will marry the woman promised to him. Perhaps this one, that one and the one over there are not really feeling up to fighting. Who needs them? Send them away, lest their faintheartedness spreads. (Imagine turning up to boot camp today and being given Deuteronomy 20 as your military manual!) When *holy* war is waged, neither troop numbers nor weapons matter, as the well-known story of Gideon in Judges 7 illustrates.²

Moreover, although total annihilation remains policy for populations in territory pledged to Israel by God as an inheritance, for populations elsewhere, the situation is much different and much less bloody. And the instructions in Deuteronomy 20 conclude with injunctions not to destroy fruit-bearing trees when involved in a siege against a city. In other words, various differences in the expression of how holy war was to be conducted shows it to have been open

² In relation to our theme of holy war, note the following two points about the story of Gideon. First, in Judges 6:19–24, the altar Gideon constructs after realising that he had seen the face of the Lord and survived he names 'The Lord is peace'. And second, Gideon's three hundred 'warriors' cannot use spears or swords because their hands are occupied with trumpets and torches.

to contextual interpretation back then – and so, I think, open to contextual interpretation now. As a result, even for those who think there is biblical justification for war or violence in certain circumstances, the biblical data are both plentiful and varied. If nothing else, to commit to read and to reflect upon it all responsibly at least buys time for more imaginative and creative courses of action to emerge. (I say this only half-facetiously.)

Even more important, I think, are the regulations in Deuteronomy 24:17–22, especially those that protect the well-being of resident aliens among the Israelites. Orphans, widows and resident aliens were the most vulnerable members of Israelite society, but this passage speaks on their behalf, advocating justice and a primitive form of social welfare in the form of intentional leftovers in the field, in the olive grove and in the vineyard. The passage begins and ends with the reminder, ‘Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt’. In other words, you were once at the bottom of the social scrapheap, so remember those at the bottom of the scrapheap now.

Is it too much of a stretch to interpret Israel’s understanding of holy war as an extension of its sense of being, so often, an oppressed or displaced people? In Deuteronomy 2, the Israelites are homeless and wilderness-weary. All they want is passage through to a promised homeland. But they are denied access through the territory of King Sihon, perhaps the result of concern that such landless people turning up unannounced might cause unforeseen problems. However much we might find the concept of holy war troublesome, in Israel’s

case it expresses the conviction that God takes the side of the vulnerable rather than the side of the powerful. The problem, of course, is that this perspective is more difficult to maintain when the vulnerable become mighty. Another point is that the holy war tradition, however difficult we may find it to swallow, is an expression of trust in the providence of God. Again, however, what does such trust look like when it is taken on board and displayed by the powerful rather than the vulnerable? Something altogether different, as far as I can tell. In other words, it makes a world of difference whether one views the holy war heritage from the vantage point of the vulnerable or from the perspective of the powerful.

It so happens that scholarship has cast doubt on the historical veracity of Israelite conquest of Canaan in the manner described in Deuteronomy and Joshua. For some, that might cause consternation about the reliability and authority of scripture, something I take seriously. But with respect to the notion of holy war, I find it helpful to see this traditional notion more as an expression of how Israel, insignificant as she was, relied upon God in times of distress than as a historical record of how much terror Israel inflicted at God's behest.

To conclude, let's not dodge the fact that our Bible has within it some of the same kinds of texts that we find disturbing about the holy books of other religions. If we ignore such texts and do not confront them head on, we are likely either to overlook the reality that such texts are inextricably interwoven with other strands of biblical faith or to operate with a Sunday School-level of

understanding of such texts. (I'm sure everyone who has been to Sunday School has learned about Joshua and Jericho as if that story did not warrant a PG- or even M-rating.) No Christian can condone genocide or approximations to it, but perhaps we may trust that wrestling with turbulent texts such as we have pondered this morning may nevertheless offer a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.