

Dissecting Deuteronomy

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The book of Deuteronomy consists of several farewell speeches of Moses to the people of Israel. In these addresses, he repeats many of „God's laws." In other words, Moses was giving these laws to Israel for a second time. Hence the book is called „Deuteronomy," from the Greek, "second law." For Jews, Deuteronomy is the heart of their Scriptures. The „Shema Israel" („Hear, O Israel! 6:4-9) is their morning and evening prayer. Christians revere Deuteronomy as one of the inspired books of the Bible. For our purposes, we shall assume, with the masses of believers, that Deuteronomy is an accurate account of Moses' words to the Israelites. We shall dissect the "second law" into seven sections, which should be sufficient to prove that Deuteronomy is indeed a despicable document.

Section 1. „Chosenpeopleism" God chose Israel to be a beloved people for his very own possession (4:20, 7:61 14:2), „a treasured possession" (26:18), his „own special people" (28:9) That is, Israel is God's special treasure whom God specially prizes. Israel is as precious to God as God's own eyes (32: 10), and he takes personal care of them (32:9). He loves and protects them (33:3).

But why did God choose Israel out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his special treasure? God did so because he loved the fathers of Israel, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and chose their descendants, the Israelites, to be his treasured possession above all peoples (4:37; 10:15, 29:13-15). God's choice of the patriarchs and of Israel was thus an act of unexplainable grace. God chose Israel, the smallest and weakest of all nations, simply because he loved Israel (7:6-8). Hence God's choice of Israel is grounded in the mystery of God's tender love and unbounded mercy, For reasons known only to himself, the God of Deuteronomy (indeed, of all the Bible) is the God who plays favorites, Why he plays favorites is none of our business. It's a given which believers must accept.

And what are the results of God's choice of Israel? Hear Moses: „The Lord has rescued you (Israel) and given you more blessings than any other nation. He protects you like a shield and is your majestic sword. Your enemies will bow in fear and you will trample on their backs" (33:29, Contemporary English Version, CEV). The protective shield and sword of the Lord give his favorites victory.

The Lord will make Israel more famous than any nation, and Israel will receive more praise and honor than any people (26: 19). Israel will become "a leader among the nations, wealthy and powerful" (28: 13). Moses here gets carried away with a burst of imperial arrogance and nationalistic fervor as he declares Israel's high destiny as God's favorites. Can anyone love and worship the God who plays favorites?

Section 2. The Promised Land. To his chosen people, God gives the land of seven nations (7: 1). References to „the land" recur repeatedly in Deuteronomy, like a broken record. Especially prominent are the expressions, in various forms, of „the land which the Lord your God gives you" (1: 25; 2:29; 3:18,20; 4:1,38; 5:16,31,33; 8:1 0; 11:31; 12:10; 15:4; 16:20; 25:15,19; 26:3,9,15; 28:8; 32:52), and of „the land which the Lord promised to your fathers and to their descendants" (1:8; 6:10,18-19; 7:13; 9:5; 11:9,21; 19:8; 28:11; 30:20; 31:7,20,21,23; 34:4), harking back to God's words to Abraham, „To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

These verses about „the land" are not merely of interest to ivory-tower biblical theologians. On the contrary, they are the source of the current bloody conflict in the Middle East. Today both Israelis and Palestinians claim the land because both regard themselves as descendants of Abraham, to whom God promised the land. And Christian supporters of Israel insist that Israeli control of the land is a prerequisite for Jesus' second coming.

Section 3. Holy War. For Moses, a holy war was a war declared, led and won by the God of Israel, „who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, and to help you win the battle" (Deuteronomy 20:1-4; similarly 11:22-25; 18:12; 19:1). Moses commanded the chosen people to put to death without mercy every last person in the seven nations, each nation being larger and more powerful than Israel (7:1-2; 20:16-18; 25:19; 31:3-5). If the total number of Israelites was about 3,000,000 (see Exodus 12:37), then Israel terminated the

lives of 21,000,000 men, women, and children. That is an incredible bloodbath, without remorse. The so-called „gift of the land" thus turns out to be a euphemism for Israel's bloody holy war against the seven nations of Palestine. If the words of Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 16 „had proceeded from the mouth of a demon, if they had been spoken by some enraged and infinitely malicious fiend, I should not have been surprised" (Ingersoll).

One of the most horrifying features of the holy war as depicted in Deuteronomy was the holy war hornets (7:20). Hornets are fierce and their stings are exceedingly painful. How can anyone love and worship „the great and awesome God" (7:21) who not only plays favorites but who also sends hornets to chase down terrified men, women, and children?

Section 4. Butcher-shop Religion. Moses' „great and awesome God" (7:21) not only was a brutal holy warrior who ordered the spilling of rivers of human blood, but he also was a heartless butcher who commanded his worshipers to slaughter zillions of sensitive animals to please him (12:6,27; 17:1; 18:3; 27:5-7; 33:10,19). Consider this case: When an innocent person is murdered, and no one knows who the murderer is, then, to make atonement for the crime, the elders of the town must break the neck of a young cow. This sacrifice thus serves as a substitute for the guilty party (21: 1-9). In the name of common sense, why should a heifer suffer a broken neck and give her life for the crime of a human being?

One of the distinctive features of Deuteronomy is its insistence on the centralization of slaughterhouse spirituality at the place the Lord chooses, eventually considered to be in Jerusalem at the Temple, the epitome of butcher-shop religion (12:5,11,14,18,21,26; 14:23; 15:20; 16:1-7). Instead of commanding that sacrificial worship be centralized at the Temple, why didn't God/Moses have a heart and order the chosen people to eliminate this utter barbarism once and for all? After all, Charvaka, an early Indian rationalist of about 600 BC/BCE, condemned sacrifices as suited only to the intelligence of fools who waste their time and money on sacrificing animals. Jainism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism (all of the sixth century BC/BCE) pronounced bloody sacrifices as anathema. The Ebionites, a Jewish-Christian vegetarian sect in Palestine (second century AD/CE), warned that the wrath of God will not cease from those who cease not from sacrificing. Such sensitive people as these put Moses and the deity of Deuteronomy to shame. As Charvaka would say, the sacrificial system of Deuteronomy gives God/Moses „the intelligence of fools."

Section 5. Pitiless Punishment. The deity of Deuteronomy not only is a brutal warrior and a heartless butcher, but he is also a ruthless enforcer of his laws. According to 17:8-13, anyone who does not accept the decision of Israel's supreme court shall be put to death as a deterrent to others who might defy the court's authority. The voice of the court is the voice of the Lord himself. Deliver us from a theocracy!

All punishments are to be administered without pity: „Life for life; eye for eye; tooth for tooth; hand for hand; foot for foot" (19:21). In other words, „Stone them to death! Gouge out their eyes! Knock out their teeth! Cut off their hands! Amputate their feet! Tit for tat, without mercy." Such maiming of the guilty is shocking to people of reasonable sensitivity, who regard it as morally intolerable. Even the ancient Hittites of Old Testament times emphasized restitution. As for us, let's give three cheers for our Bill of Rights, which forbids „cruel and unusual punishments."

It gets worse. Moses gave this command to the chosen ones: „If a stubborn and rebellious son refuses to obey his parents, even after they have punished him, then the men of the town shall stone him to death" (21: 18-21). Since this law is so heartless and senseless, we would hope that few if any parents in ancient Israel ever appealed to it. Modern Jews and Christians ignore this law and apply reasonable discipline, together with love and understanding. Nevertheless, this law is still there in the „inspired" book of Deuteronomy, dormant, perhaps, but not dead.

Things get no better. If a bride is not a virgin, the men of the town must take her to the door of her father's house and stone her to death to cleanse the town of the evil the woman brought to the community by sleeping with a man before she got married (22: 13-21). And if a man is caught having sex with someone else's wife, both of them shall be put to death (22:22).

Brace yourselves. Whipping is an appropriate punishment for some crimes, up to forty lashes (25:1-3). And if two men are fighting and the wife of one man tries to rescue her husband by grabbing the other man in the wrong place (his private parts), then the woman's hand must be cut off, no mercy allowed (25: 11-12).

Section 6. The Scourge of Slavery. God/Moses endorse slavery. Although slaves are

allowed to rest on the Sabbath, they remain slaves nonetheless (5:14-15). If a non-Palestinian town surrenders to the army of Israel, then all of its residents become slaves of Israel. But if a non-Palestinian town refuses to surrender and Israel, with the Lord's help, captures the town, then the Israelites are to kill all of the men and take the women and children as slaves (20:10-15). Can anyone love and worship such a heartless God?

Owners of Hebrew slaves must set them free after six years. But if a slave wishes to remain as a slave, here is what Moses orders the owner to do: „Take the slave to the door of your house and push a sharp metal rod through one earlobe and into the door. Such slaves will belong to you for life, whether they are men or women" (15:17, CEV). The text, which Moses failed to clarify, reads as if the slave remains pinned to the door from then on. But whatever Moses meant, the bored ear was a humiliating badge of permanent obedience and servitude.

Section 7. Pious Persecution. Let anyone who thinks biblical religion is overflowing with compassion, love, and tolerance listen up. The Lord killed everyone who worshiped the god Baal-Peor (4:3). Moses warns the people not to have anything to do with the gods of other nations: „If you worship other gods, the Lord will be furious and wipe you off the face of the earth" (6: 15, CEV; similarly 8:19-20; 11:16-17). The people must destroy completely the natives' „places of worship": „Tear down their altars; break down their sacred stones; burn their sacred poles, and smash their altars to pieces" (12:1-4).

Moses also commands the people to put to death any interpreter of dreams or prophet who tells the people to start worshiping new gods (13:1-5). So, too, the people must kill any prophet who claims to have a message from another god (18:20). Likewise, if the family and friends of the Israelites invite them to worship other gods, the Israelites must stone the enticers to death (13:6-11). And when a town turns from the Lord (Yahweh) to serve other gods, then the Lord's worshipers are to take their swords and kill every one of the apostates and their livestock too. Then the true worshipers are to top that off by burning the town and everything in it as a burnt offering to the Lord (13:12-18). But there's more: „If it is true that some in Israel have worshiped other gods or the sun or moon or stars, then stone them to death" (17:2-7).

John Calvin (1509-1564), the Protestant reformer, based his cruel philosophy of persecution on Deuteronomy 13: „In this passage," said Calvin, "we follow not the authority of man, but we hear God speaking. In no obscure terms, God commands his church forever. God extinguishes all our affections of love for our parents, brothers, neighbors and friends." It may be only a matter of time until a new Calvin arises and persuades fanatical Christians to rise up and carry out these divine decrees. Woe unto all non-Christians.

Conclusion: Deuteronomy's Deity (DD).

1. DD (Double D) is the God who plays favorites by choosing Israel to be his special treasure.
2. DD is the God who promised the land of the seven Palestinian nations to Israel, thus sowing the seeds of the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
3. DD is the holy warrior who empowered his chosen people to destroy ruthlessly the millions of men, women, and children of the seven nations who lived in the Promised Land.
4. DD is the brutal butcher who was inhumane to the very animals he had created in the first place, requiring his worshipers to slay legions of sensitive creatures upon the altar.
5. DD is the executioner who authorized cruel and unusual punishments, including agonizing death by stoning.
6. DD is the master who saw nothing wrong with one human being owning another.
7. DD is the persecutor who extinguished love of family and friends if they preferred gods other than he.

The „Shema Israel" („Listen, Israel!"), which we noted in our introduction, begins like this: „Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, and strength" (6:4-5, CEV; similarly 10:12; 11:1,13,22; 19:9; 30:6,16,20). Our sevenfold dissection of Deuteronomy, on the contrary, should make it impossible for sensible and sensitive people to love Double D. He is not worthy of our ethical respect, boundless love, and heartfelt worship.

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