

Deuteronomy 20

Introduction

In this module, we explore a passage from the Hebrew Bible in which seemingly genocidal commands from God appear.

Orientation to the Text

The book of Deuteronomy – the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible – consists of a series of speeches. The prophet Moses conveys messages from God to the Israelites, who have been freed from slavery in Egypt and have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

One of these messages is a command to take possession of the Land of Canaan, which the text presents as designated for the Israelites. The passage from Deuteronomy 20 printed below mentions seven different peoples who were living in the Land of Canaan at the time, and who are marked by God for annihilation. (The book of Deuteronomy also mentions other groups, such as Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites, who were living in other geographic areas and are *not* marked for annihilation.)

In the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites are informed of God’s command to conquer the Land of Canaan, but the conquest itself is not carried out. In the next book of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Joshua, an account of the conquest is narrated, including attacks on the seven peoples mentioned in Deuteronomy 20. Later parts of the Hebrew Bible, however, talk about people from these seven groups as still living in the area, in a manner that suggests they were not actually eliminated (see, e.g., 2 Samuel 24:18-25).

In the passage printed below, the “you” is addressed to the Israelites.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the short excerpt from Deuteronomy printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.

1. What are the Israelites instructed to do in the passage?
2. What reason or reasons are given in the passage for the acts of violence that are described?

Deuteronomy 20:16-18 (translation: JPS 1985, with slight modifications)

¹⁶ In the towns of the peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not let a soul remain alive. ¹⁷ No, you must annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – as the LORD your God has commanded you, ¹⁸ lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the LORD your God.

Digging Deeper

After thinking about questions 1-2 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

3. In the world today, nations often assert that acts of war or violence against other nations – or groups within nations – are necessary or justified in pursuit of a greater goal, such as protecting some people against others who might harm them. Sometimes non-combatants are also killed in the process, a result that is often described as “unintended” and “collateral damage.” How are these modern ways of talking and justifying acts of war similar to Deuteronomy 20:16-18, and how are they different?
4. In many descriptions of ancient warfare, including other passages in the Bible, conquering armies take women, children, and other people captive as a form of “war booty.” In contrast, Deuteronomy 20:16 says, “You shall not let a soul remain alive.” In your view, could the command in Deuteronomy 20 be seen as more merciful, or less unjust, than a command that said, “Kill the men and take the women and children as slaves”?

Exploring Later Interpretations

Jewish and Christian interpreters over the centuries have taken a number of different approaches to Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

(i) For example, many interpreters have understood the command to annihilate the seven peoples as only being meant for the specific people to whom it was first given – the people to whom Moses was speaking in the wilderness – not for later generations. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (b. 1865 – d. 1935), for example, points out that the Bible presents later Israelites, such as King David, as living in peace with some of these same people, rather than trying to eliminate them all (see 2 Sam. 24:18-25). Kook writes, “If it were an absolute duty for every Jewish king to conquer all the seven nations, how would David have refrained from doing so? Therefore, in my humble opinion, the original duty rested only on Joshua and his generation.”^a

^a Abraham Isaac Kook (5760/1999), *Tov Ro'i*, Jerusalem, p. 22.

(ii) Moses Maimonides (b. 1138 – d. 1204), a prominent Jewish legal scholar and philosopher in the Middle Ages, illustrates a different approach to Deuteronomy 20:16-18. He concluded that later generations of Jews still had a duty *in theory* to annihilate Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites – but asserted that in the present day one would never actually come across someone who could be identified as belonging to any of these specific groups – and one would therefore never have an occasion to kill anyone based on the passage. Maimonides suggests that most people from the groups mentioned in Deuteronomy 20:16 had already been killed by the end of King David’s reign, and those who were left had all been mixed in with other groups.^b This idea of the “mixing up of all the nations” also appears in the Mishnah, the foundational text of rabbinic Judaism, which was put together around 200 CE. The Mishnah says that an Assyrian king named Sennacherib “mixed up all the peoples” in the 7th-8th century BCE, when he conquered much of what is now known as the Middle East. As a result, various commandments from Deuteronomy that mention specific nations could no longer be carried out in practice, because it was no longer possible to identify any individuals as belonging to those groups (see, e.g., Mishnah Yadayim 4:4; Tosefta Kiddushin 5:4).

(iii) In the late eighteenth century, Ezra Stiles (b. 1727 – d. 1795), an American Christian who was then president of Yale College, took yet another approach to the text from Deuteronomy, drawing an approving parallel between the conquering of the Land of Canaan by Joshua and the ancient Israelites and the conquering of America by British and American colonists. Stiles described the United States as “God’s American Israel” and suggested that Native Americans were in fact descended from “Canaanites of the expulsion of Joshua.” He anticipated that the indigenous Native American population would “gradually vanish” entirely, and described both the annihilation of the Canaanites in the Bible and American wars in his own day as military action that had been “authorized by heaven.”^c

Reflect on these approaches to the passage by answering the following questions:

5. How do the first two approaches – “This command applied only to Joshua and his generation” and “You’ll never meet an identifiable Canaanite” – differ from one another, and how are they similar?
6. How does Ezra Stiles’ use of the passage differ from the first two approaches?
7. Is your reaction to Deuteronomy 20:16-18 different if you think of it as describing a command for specific people to kill other specific people in a specific geographical area at a specific time in the past, rather than as an ongoing command to be carried out by all generations of Israelites or all worshippers of Israel’s god throughout history? Which of these approaches is most similar to how you tend to understand scripture yourself?

^b See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 5:4, Hilchot Issurei Biah 12:25; *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Commandment 187.

^c Ezra Stiles (1783), “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor,” in R. Smolinski (ed.), *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, pp. 7, 10, 14, 16; available at: digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/41 [accessed 8 Feb 2021].

Further Reading

- Reuven Kimelman (2015). “The Seven Nations of Canaan.” *The Seforim Blog*, 31 July. Available at: <https://seforimblog.com/2015/07/the-seven-nations-of-canaan> [accessed 8 Feb 2021].
- Reuven Kimelman (2020). “Israel’s Election and the Moral Dilemma of Amalek and the Seven Nations of Canaan.” In Alon Goshen-Gottstein (ed.), *Judaism’s Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, pp. 143-173.
- Katell Berthelot, Joseph E. David, and Marc Hirshman (eds.) (2014). *The Gift of the Land and the Fate of the Canaanites in Jewish Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Daniel H. Weiss (2021). “‘And God said’: Do biblical commands to conquer land make people more violent, or less?” In Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge, pp. 32-46.

Summary of Key Takeaways from this Module

- Divine commands in scriptural texts are sometimes accompanied by justifications.
- Members of religious communities often do not view violent commands in scriptural texts as something to be carried out in their own day.
- Surprising parallels are sometimes drawn between scriptural texts and current historical events.
- One cannot discover whether religious communities think a violent-sounding scriptural text calls *them* to be violent in the present day just by reading the text on its own.