



Genocide?

“...then you must destroy them totally...”

Deuteronomy 7:2

The text quoted above is for many Bible readers almost indigestible. This is certainly true of Bible readers in our time who know something of the horrors of Auschwitz and of genocide in Armenia, Iraq and Srebrenica.

Various texts in the Old Testament say that the tribes of Canaan had to be driven out (see Exodus 23:27-31; Numbers 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 7:22 for example). By this you could think of a charge to force the peoples across the borders, out of the land. But ‘totally destroy them’ goes further. It implies complete destruction indeed. Deuteronomy 20:16-17 shows this clearly: ‘you must totally destroy them’ means that nothing which has breath be left alive. The same can be read in the continuation in Deuteronomy 7 in words like ‘eliminate’ and ‘destroy’ (see Deut.7:22-24).

The book Joshua tells how Israel actually dealt with the peoples. They did not destroy or annihilate all the original inhabitants of Canaan. They did literally end the lives of the inhabitants of a large number of places: Jericho, Ai and many other cities, as much as in the South (Josh.10:28-43) as in the North (Josh.11:11-14).

But the greatest stumbling block for us is not even that the people of Israel ever did something like this. No matter how appalling such acts are, it does not place Israel beneath rulers and peoples who have ever done such things. At the most, people realize with amazement or with irony that the Israelites made themselves guilty of what happened to the Jewish people in the Second World War. The greatest stumbling block is, according to Deuteronomy, that the Lord Himself charged them to do this. If the extermination of thousands of people in Canaan was genocide, then this genocide took place at God’s command. It was His will.

This point was well understood by J.A. Montsma. He graduated on 3 May 1985 at the Free University in Amsterdam with a thesis called *De exterritoriale openbaring* (‘The Ex-territorial Revelation’). He posed a problem which, according to him, cannot be ignored in the interpretation of Deuteronomy. That is, that the writers of Deuteronomy use the name of God in a way which makes one think of ‘fascistic’ ideologies. In other words, Deuteronomy is not about what Israel once did. The biggest problem is that the name of God is joined here to issues which make us think of fascism.

‘Because of their wickedness’

The charge to annihilate the peoples of Canaan was far reaching and radical. But the charge also had clear boundaries. Israel was not to destroy every people, which stood in its way, at random. The command to exterminate had specific relevance to the peoples who lived in Canaan. Deuteronomy 7:1 summarizes them by name: the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

The annihilation charge was not relevant for people who lived outside of Canaan. If there was war with these, a peace declaration first had to be proposed. If the enemy did not agree with this, the men were to be killed. Women and children were spared (Deut.20:10-18).

Why then the special treatment for the seven nations in Canaan? Deuteronomy 9:4-5 points to the sinful character of these nations: ‘on account of their wickedness’. This was, by the way, no reason for Israel to feel better than them. They did not receive the Promised Land because of their own righteousness and pureness of heart: ‘*you are a stiff-necked people*’ (Deut.9:6).

The annihilation was thus a punishment from the Lord for the godlessness of the peoples of Canaan. It was not a random attack by someone who happened to be at a certain place at a certain time. The

godlessness referred to was an attitude of rejection towards God which had grown across the centuries. Only when the limit was reached, did the judgement come. The Lord took time to do this. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not receive direct permission to take over the land with violence. First they had to stay in Egypt for generations. Only when the unrighteousness of the Amorites had reached its limits could they declare war and take their place in the Promised Land (see Gen.15:16).

Unique love

In Deuteronomy 7 the emphasis does not fall upon the godless character of the seven nations from Canaan. This only receives implicit attention in the verses 4-5, 16 and 25. In Deuteronomy 7 one motive dominates, which we would not associate with the annihilation of nations: the motive of love.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 uses very strong terms to express God's love for Israel. Familiar terms are used in part, such as 'choose' (*bachar*), 'love' (*ahav*) and 'his own precious people' (*'am segulla*). There is also a word that is only used on two occasions in the Bible to describe the relationship between God and his people, that is: 'set his affection on' (*chashaq*, vs. 7; see further Deut.10:15, where it refers to the love of God for the forefathers). You could probably translate it better with 'falling in love with'. This is what it means when used in the context of relationships between people. To give a concrete example, a relationship between a young man and a young woman, as was the case with Shechem, who fell passionately in love with Dinah (Gen.34:8) or of an Israelite soldier who became enchanted by a beautiful woman whom he had taken as prisoner of war (Deut.21:11).

Deuteronomy 7 characterises God's love for Israel with this word. Together with the other terms mentioned, it indicates a unique relationship that He wanted to enter into with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were a people that He meant only for Himself: a people holy before the Lord, their God (vs. 6). It belonged to Him, in just as intimate a relationship as that between husband and wife.

No third person was allowed to come between them. As long as Israel lived in the wilderness, the chance of that was very small (see Jer.2:1-3), but later in Canaan that would become different. There Baal, god of agriculture, would constantly try to win Israel's heart for himself. He would play the role of the lover, the third party. He intended to have a place in the house that the Lord would inhabit with His bride: the Promised Land. But if you are just married and head over heels in love, you will not tolerate a third party in your house!

That was the motivation which Moses gives in Deuteronomy 7 for the annihilation of the nations. The seven nations of Canaan had to be completely destroyed, because, if they remained alive, they would be a constant threat to the marriage between God and his people. For this reason fraternizing and intermarriage between them and the Israelites was strictly forbidden (vss. 2-4). For this reason too, the command to annihilate is accompanied by the charge to destroy all the apparatus they used to serve their gods (vs. 5).

Israel itself threatened

The charge to annihilate had thus to do with God's unique love for Israel. Now it is possible, with a bit of bad will, still to connect this with ideas like 'my own people first' or with other sounds within which you can hear the false music of fascist ideology. But that becomes impossible if you realise that the charge to annihilate could turn against Israel itself, because it had everything to do with the unique loving relationship between the Lord and his people.

Deuteronomy 7:4 leaves no possible room for a misunderstanding. If Israel later plays the harlot with other gods, exactly the same fate will await them as awaited the seven nations. The wrath of the Lord will burn against them and overwhelm them. And that, not after a long time, but quickly (vs. 10: God recognises no pardon for an Israelite who hates God; He personally deals with such a person). If the Israelites, contrary to God's command, take the gold and silver belonging to the Canaanite idols into their own houses, then they will be utterly destroyed, just as the seven nations (v26).

Further on in Deuteronomy, Moses returns to this point repeatedly. In chapter 9:8 and 14 he reminds them how the Lord had recently almost destroyed his people at Mount Horeb, when they had disobeyed God by worshiping the golden calf. In Deuteronomy 13 detailed instructions are given should the

Israelites let themselves be distracted by serving idols. Should individual members of the people be involved, then they must be put to death (vss. 5 [6] and 8-10 [9-11]). If a whole city were concerned, it would be destroyed in a way which would be no less dramatic than the destruction of Jericho (vss. 15-17 [16-18]).

To the New Testament

Once in the Promised Land, Israel made a considerable start to driving out the Canaanites, but the work was never completed. A third remained living in the home for God and His people in which a unique love was to take form. Again and again they succeeded in bringing the marriage to the brink of destruction. Israel constantly succumbed to the temptation of giving her love to another.

And the Israelites knew it. Hundreds of them were killed by invading enemies or other disasters. Ultimately Israel had to leave home. She was literally driven out as though she was one of those seven nations, when many were carried away with the Assyrian or Babylonian captivity.

At that time, the Lord showed his unique character again. He let many Israelites return to their own land. In this He demonstrated that His holy love was so much stronger than the love of man. It was the love of the unforgettable God (see Hos.11:8-11). But this too was insufficient. Outright idol worship was much less after the return from exile. Nonetheless Israel's undivided love and faithfulness towards God was lacking.

Malachi spoke clear language about this. In the last verse of his book the words 'total destruction' (*cherem*) appear again. In our translations that is how the Old Testament is finished! The words still ring in your ears when you turn to the New Testament. The threat of total destruction hangs above God's land, as the great day of the Lord approaches. But the threat is no longer directed at the peoples in Canaan. It is directed at God's own people.

This threat of destruction would have immediately been carried out had the Lord not set a higher initiative of love in action. Before He began the announced destruction, He sent a new Elijah (Mal.4:5-6 [3:23-24]). Then He let His own Son appear. He, Jesus Christ, took the destruction, God's judgement, upon Himself. He dedicated Himself completely to God, his heavenly Father. He let His earthly life be destroyed, in order to give those who follow Him a lasting place in God's Promised Land.

One way

Heartrending scenarios would have taken place when Israel killed all the inhabitants of Jericho and all the other cities. It remains difficult to digest that this happens at God's command. If you think about it, you feel the urge to try and defend God's deeds. But this is a risky undertaking which can have haughty characteristics about it.

This does not detract from our duty to make up the balance of what we read in Deuteronomy and elsewhere as having happened to the people in Canaan. Then you see that this was not simply a question of genocide at God's command. It is not even about ethnic preference for any one nation. Deuteronomy is about the wonderful way in which God's plan for the salvation of fallen man is realised. He wanted it to be just as good as in the beginning, an unspoilt loving relationship between Himself and man. The command to destroy the peoples in Canaan took its own place along that path at a given moment in the history of Israel. But it also reminds us continually of where we will end up if we do not let ourselves be taken along God's unique path.

There is only one way to life. It is He who said so: 'I am the way and the truth and the life' (John 14:6). This statement gives rise to very different feelings than the command to utterly destroy the peoples of Canaan. Yet there is a link between the one and the other. Both, each in its own way, direct us to God's unique redemption Route. All thanks to God alone when a human being accepts this and chooses for that Route!

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