

CHAPTER 20

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY 20

In this chapter rules are given to be observed in times of war. When a battle was near, a priest was to address the soldiers, and encourage them to fight, (^{<6510>}Deuteronomy 20:1-4), then the officers were to declare who might return home, (^{<6515>}Deuteronomy 20:5-9) when an enemy's city was approached, peace was to be proclaimed on certain conditions, which, if accepted of, the inhabitants were to be tributaries and servants, but if not, when taken, all were to be put to the sword, excepting women, children, and cattle, (^{<6520>}Deuteronomy 20:10-15), but those of the seven nations were to be utterly destroyed, (^{<6526>}Deuteronomy 20:16-18), and, during a siege, no trees bearing fruit fit for food were to be cut down, (^{<6539>}Deuteronomy 20:19).

Ver. 1. *When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies*, etc.] There were two sorts of war the Israelites were engaged in, one commanded and another permitted, as Maimonides ^{f236} distinguishes; one was by the order and appointment of God, as against the seven nations of Canaan; the other was voluntary and arbitrary, which was left to their own discretion and will, as they saw fit, when they were provoked or distressed, or were invaded by their enemies, or they saw reason to go out against them, and either act the offensive or defensive part, or both; and of each of these some things are said in this chapter:

and seest horses and chariots, and a people more than thou; the Israelites had no horses, and so no chariots, their armies were all infantry; but their neighbouring nations that made war with them had a large cavalry, and multitudes of chariots, which made them very formidable; thus Shishak, king of Egypt, in the times of Rehoboam, came against Jerusalem with 1200 chariots and 60,000, horsemen, and people without number; and Zerah the Ethiopian, in the times of Asa, came against him with an host of 100,000 men, and three hundred chariots, (^{<412>}2 Chronicles 12:2,3 14:9)

be not afraid of them; because of the strength of their cavalry, the terrible approaches of their chariots, and the number of their men:

for the Lord thy God is with thee; hence, as Hezekiah says, more would be with them than with their enemies, with whom was an arm of flesh, but with them the Lord their God, (~~<480>~~2 Chronicles 32:7,8) and so the Targum of Jonathan,

“for all of them shall be reckoned as one horse and one chariot before the Lord your God;”

with whom numbers are nothing; and which adds,

“for his Word shall be your help;”

the eternal Logos, or Word of God; so Onkelos; and if God and his Word, his only begotten Son, are on the side of his people, they have nothing to fear from enemies, though ever so many and mighty:

which brought thee out of the land of Egypt; which is observed for the encouragement of their faith and confidence in him; for he that did that for them, what is it he cannot or will not do?

Ver. 2 *And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle*, etc.] When all things are preparing for it, and it seems unavoidable:

that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people; not any priest, but one appointed for this service; who is called

the anointed of war, as Jarchi and Aben Ezra observe, and concerning whom Maimonides^{f237} is more particular; he says,

“they appoint a priest to speak to the people at the time of war, and they anoint him with the anointing oil, and he is called the anointed of war; twice the anointed of war speaks unto the people, once in a book at the time they go forth, before they set in battle array, he says to the people, “what man is there”, etc. and when he has caused his words to be heard, he returns; at another time, when they are set in array, he says, “fear not”, etc.”

this man seems to be an emblem of Gospel ministers, who are anointed with the gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, and whose business it is to encourage the people of God to fight the Lord’s battles against sin, Satan, and the world, and not to be afraid of their spiritual enemies; directing them to take to them the whole armour of God, and to endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ, to follow him the captain of their salvation,

assuring them of victory through him who makes them more than conquerors, and that their warfare is or shortly will be accomplished.

Ver. 3. *And shall say unto them, hear, O Israel,* etc.] Exciting their attention to what he was about to say, and which, as Jarchi observes, was spoken in the holy tongue, or in the Hebrew language:

you approach this day unto battle against your enemies; were marching or ready to march, preparing to engage with them, and a battle seemed near at hand:

let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; many words are made use of to animate them against those fears which the strength, number, and appearance of their enemies, would be apt to cause in them. Jarchi observes, that here are four exhortations, answerable to four things which the kings of the nations do (in order to inject terror into their enemies); they shake their shields, to clash them one against another, that hearing their noise they may be afraid of them and flee; they prance their horses, and make them neigh, to cause the noise of the hoofs of their horses to be heard; they shout with their voices, and blow with their trumpets: and accordingly these several clauses are so interpreted in the Misnah ^{f238}

““and let not your hearts faint”; at the neighing of the horses, and the brightness of swords: “fear not”; at the clashing of shields: “and do not tremble”; at the sound of trumpets: “neither be ye terrified” at the voice of shouting;”

and no doubt but it takes in everything that has a tendency to cause fear, faintness, and dismay, which they are cautioned against.

Ver. 4. *For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you,* etc.] To battle, and therefore they had no reason to fear and be dismayed, to be fainthearted, terrified, and tremble:

fear not, I am with thee, etc.] (²³¹⁰Isaiah 41:10), this, according to the Misnah ^{f239}, respects the ark, and so Jarchi, which was a symbol of the divine Presence, and went with them to battle; (see ⁰⁰⁰⁴Joshua 6:4 ⁰⁰⁰⁵1 Samuel 4:3-5)

to fight for you against your enemies, to save you; to annoy and destroy the one, and to protect and save the other; thus far the anointed priest

addressed the people in an oration to this purpose: the account Maimonides gives of it is, that

“when they have set their ranks, and are near to a battle, the anointed of war stands on an high place, and all the ranks before him, and says to them in the holy tongue, “hear, O Israel”, etc. unto to save you; and then another priest under him causes it to be heard by all the people with an high voice ^{f240},”

he repeated what the anointed of war had said, and expressed it with a loud voice, that all might hear.

Ver. 5. *And the officers shall speak unto the people*, etc.] What these officers were is not easy to say; they seem not to be officers of the army, for they are distinguished from captains of the armies, (^{f5109}Deuteronomy 20:9), unless they can be thought to be general officers; but the word for them is the same that is used of such that attended the judges and were ministers to them, (^{f5168}Deuteronomy 16:18), and perhaps they were a sort of heralds that published and proclaimed what the anointed of war had said; and so the above writer ^{f241} affirms, that what here follows was first spoken by him, and after that (what is said, (^{f5108}Deuteronomy 20:3,4)) the anointed of war speaks, saying,

what man is there, etc.] (to the end of (^{f5107}Deuteronomy 20:7)) thus far the anointed of war speaks, and then an officer causes all the people to hear it with an high voice, saying,

what man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? or perfected it, as the Targum of Jonathan, not quite finished it, has not, as that paraphrast says, fixed in it the door posts, or rather perhaps he means the Mezuzah, or writing, which the Jews thought themselves obliged to fasten to the door posts of their houses; (see ^{f5120}Deuteronomy 11:20) until this was done, an house was not thought to be completed; though Jarchi interprets this of inhabitation; of a man’s having built a house, but has not yet dwelt in it; (see ^{f5380}Deuteronomy 28:30), so Josephus ^{f242} explains it, of its not having been used and enjoyed by a man a full year; but there seems to be something more than all this in dedication; for though it does not signify a consecration or dedication of it to holy uses, as the dedication of the tabernacle and temple, yet there was something done, some ceremony used at entrance into a new house; a good man entered into it, no doubt, with prayer and praise, as the thirtieth psalm was composed by David at

the dedication of his house; (see ^{<1627>}Nehemiah 12:27) and perhaps it was usual to have their friends together, and make a cheerful entertainment on the occasion. Ben Melech on the place, assures us it was a custom to make a feast and merriment at eating the first meal in a new house:

let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it; or perfect it, as the above Targum, or dwell in it, as well as have the pleasure of entertaining his friends in it at the first opening of it; this was either a command, enjoining a man, in such a circumstance, to return, and so the rest that follow, or a permission to him, allowing him to do it if he thought fit.

Ver. 6. *And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it?* etc.] Which he has a right to do, and it is hard for him to be deprived of it, (^{<1607>}1 Corinthians 9:7) or “hath not made it common” ^{f243}; according to the law in (^{<1823>}Leviticus 19:23-25). Three years the fruit of trees, and so of vines, might not be eaten; in the fourth, they were devoted to the Lord, and might be redeemed from the priest, and so made common; and on the fifth year were eaten in course; so the Targums of Jerusalem, Jonathan, and Jarchi, interpret it: “let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it”; or make it common, according to the above law: Aben Ezra seems to have another sense of this passage, deriving the word from another, which signifies piping and dancing, and observes, that it was a custom to sing, pipe, and dance in vineyards; and the Septuagint version is, “hath not been made merry of it”; though that may signify not having drank of the wine of it, to be made merry with it.

Ver. 7. *And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her?* etc.] Home to his house and bedded with her; has only betrothed her, but is not properly married to her, the nuptials are not completed; this the Jews understand of anyone betrothed to him, whether a virgin or a widow, or the wife of a deceased brother (yea, they say, if his brother is dead in war, he returns and comes home), but not of a former wife divorced and received again ^{f244}:

let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in battle, and another man take her; or marry her.

Ver. 8. *And the officers shall speak further unto the people*, etc.] According to Maimonides ^{f245}, the priest the anointed of war spoke to the

end of (^{f246}Deuteronomy 20:7) and which the officers repeated after him to the people aloud, as before observed; and then after that an officer speaks of himself, or in his own words, and not in those of the priest, as follows;

what man that is fearful, etc. and then another officer causes all the people to hear it:

and they shall say, what man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? that has not courage to face his enemies, to whom the terrors of war, and especially of death, are dreadful; the Targum of Jonathan adds,

“because of his sin;”

whose sins stare him in the face, and lie heavy on his conscience; so that he is afraid he shall die in battle, and in his sins, and suffer divine vengeance; both these senses are observed in the Misnah ^{f246}. According to R. Akiba, a fearful and fainthearted man is one

“that cannot stand in battle array, or behold a drawn sword; but R. Jose the Galilean says, he is one that is afraid of the transgressions he has committed; and therefore the law joins to this all those things for which a man may return;”

as having built a new house, planted a vineyard, and betrothed a wife; that so it might be thought it was on account of one or other of these that he returned, and not through faintheartedness, either because of the terrors of war, or of his own conscience for his sins:

let him go and return to his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart; lest, by his pale looks and trembling joints, his fainting fits and swoons, he discourage the rest in the same company with him, and by his example make them unfit for war also.

Ver. 9. *And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people*, etc.] By reciting what the anointed of war said unto them, and by speeches of their own framing, to encourage to the battle; and all were dismissed that had leave to depart, and chose to take it:

that they shall make captains of armies to lead on the people; on to battle; that is, either the officers should do this, which may seem to confirm what has been hinted, that they might be generals of the army, who constituted captains under them, to lead the people on to battle: unless this is to be understood of the princes of Israel, or of the king when they had one, and

his ministers; for it does not appear in any instance that the people chose their own officers over them, to go out before them, and lead them on to battle; or “to be at the head of them”^{f247}; which the Jewish writers understand in a very different sense; not to head them, or be at the head of them, to direct and command them, but to keep them from deserting: their sense is, that the officers having dismissed persons in the circumstances before described, and set stout men before them, and others behind them (i.e. the army of the people), with iron hatchets in their hands, and every one that sought to return, they had power to cut off his legs; since flight is the beginning of falling before their enemies^{f248}.

Ver. 10. *When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it*, etc.] This is to be understood of an arbitrary war, as Jarchi observes; which they engaged in of themselves, or were provoked to by their enemies; which was their own choice, and according to their own will and pleasure; and their conduct towards their enemies in it was different from that in a war with the seven nations, commanded by the Lord, and distinguished from it, (^{<1915>}Deuteronomy 20:15,16).

then proclaim peace unto it; that is, offer them terms of peace; which were, that the inhabitants of it should renounce idolatry, and become their tributaries and servants.

Ver. 11. *And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace*, etc.] Comply with the terms of peace offered:

and open unto thee; the gates of the city and its garrisons, and deliver all into their hands:

then it shall be that all the people that is found therein; some having made their escape before the surrender of the city:

shall be tributaries unto thee: pay a yearly tax imposed upon them, as the Moabites sometimes did, and which was paid in lambs and rams with the wool, (^{<1916>}2 Kings 3:4)

and they shall serve thee; not as slaves, or be in continual bondage and servitude; but upon occasion be called out to any public service, as joining them against their enemies, rebuilding palaces and cities, or repairing walls of cities, and the like; and in general acknowledge their dominion over them, and their own subjection to them, by paying an annual tribute, or

sending gifts unto them; thus the Moabites, Syrians, and Edomites, became the servants of David, (^{Q1082}2 Samuel 8:2,6,14).

Ver. 12. *And if it will make no peace with thee*, etc.] Will not accept of terms of peace offered:

but will make war against thee; come out and fight, or prepare to defend themselves: then thou shalt besiege it; surround and block it up on all sides with their forces; the Jews say only on three sides, leaving one for any to flee and make their escape if they thought fit; (see Gill on “^{Q1087}Numbers 31:7”).

Ver. 13. *And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands*, etc.] When, what with pressures without, and calamities within, the city is obliged to surrender: this is not to be imputed to the methods and arts of war used in besieging, or to the courage and skill of the besiegers; but to the power and providence of God succeeding means used, and sending famine or pestilence among the besieged, and inclining their hearts to deliver up their city:

thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword; the men in it, grown persons, as distinguished from little ones in the next verse; because it was owing to these it was not surrendered at once, when terms of peace were offered.

Ver. 14. *But the women, the little ones, and the cattle*, etc.] These were to be spared; women, because of the weakness of their sex, and subjection to their husbands; and little ones, which take in males as well as females, as Jarchi observes, because of their tender age; and cattle because of their insensibility; all these having had no concern in holding out the siege:

and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shall thou take unto thyself; gold, silver, merchandise, household goods, utensils in trade, and whatever was of any worth and value to be found in their houses:

and thou shall eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord thy God hath given thee; that is, enjoy all their wealth and riches, estates and possessions; for this is not to be restrained to things eatable only.

Ver. 15. *Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee*, etc.] As all such were reckoned that were without the land of Israel, even all in their neighbouring nations, the Moabites, Edomites, Ammonites,

Syrians, etc. for the children of Israel never went to war with any very distant nations, unless they came unto them and invaded them; nor did they seek to carry their conquests to any great distance, when the most powerful and victorious, as in the days of David and Solomon:

which are not of the cities of these nations; of these seven nations, as the Targum of Jonathan, the seven nations of the land of Canaan; all that were not of them were accounted foreign cities, and at a distance.

Ver. 16. *But of the cities of those people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance*, etc.] The cities of the seven nations, six of which are mentioned by name in the next verse:

thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth; the reason of this severity was because of their wickedness, the capital crimes and gross abominations they were guilty of, and for which they deserved to die; and on account whereof they were reserved to this destruction, when the measure of their iniquities was full, such as idolatry, incest, witchcraft, soothsaying, necromancy, etc. (see ^{
}Leviticus 18:3,24,25,27 20:2-23 ^{
}Deuteronomy 18:9-12).

Ver. 17. *But thou shalt utterly destroy them*, etc.] Men, women, and children: some think this is to be understood only of such cities which did not accept of terms of peace; for they are of opinion that Joshua made proclamation of peace to all the cities of Canaan; which being not complied with, he destroyed them as they fell into his hands; and they suppose that the Gibeonites had not heard of such a proclamation, and therefore were spared; and it is certain that there were many who were suffered to live among them, who it may be thought were allowed on their becoming proselytes, which was one of the terms of peace, as Rahab and her household did, and which is the sense of some of the Jewish writers. Jarchi on the following verse observes, that if they repented, and became proselytes, they might be received: namely,

the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; one of the seven nations is here omitted, the Girgashites, as they are also in (^{
}Exodus 23:23). It is said ^{f249}, that

“Joshua sent three letters into the land of Israel before they went into it; in the first, whoever would turn (and flee) might; in the second, whoever would make peace might; in the third, whoever would make war might: the Girgashites, believing God, went to

Africa, according to (^{<23617>}Isaiah 36:17), the land there is Africa; the Gibeonites made peace and dwelt in the land; thirty one kings made war, and fell:”

as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee; (^{<48108>}Deuteronomy 7:1,2).

Ver. 18. *That they teach you not to do after all their abominations,* etc.]

This is another reason why they were to be utterly destroyed, not only because of the abominations which they committed, but to prevent the Israelites being taught by them to do the same; wherefore, as before observed from Jarchi, such as became proselytes were suffered to live among them, because there was no danger of idolatry from them, which even proselytes of the gate renounced; and though all other abominations are included, yet this is particularly respected, as appears from the following clause:

which they have done unto their gods; to the honour of whom not only many superstitious rites and ceremonies were performed, and idolatrous actions committed, but acts of lewdness, and even unnatural uncleanness:

so should ye sin against the Lord your God; a sin the most provoking to him, as the sin of idolatry was; and cause his anger to rise to such a degree, as to suffer them to be carried captive from the land he gave them to inherit; and which afterwards, was the case, and that through learning the manners and customs of these people; (see ^{<39464>}Psalm 106:34-42).

Ver. 19. *When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it,* etc.] Before it will surrender; it holding out the siege a considerable time: the Hebrew text says, “many days” ^{f250}; which the Targum of Jonathan interprets of all the seven days, to make war against it, in order to subdue it on the sabbath day. Jarchi observes, that “days” signify two, and “many” three; hence it is said, they do not besiege cities of the Gentiles less than three days before the sabbath; and he also says it teaches that peace is opened or proclaimed two or three days first:

thou shall not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them; that is, not cut them down with an axe, such trees as were without the city, and in the power of the besiegers: what sort of trees are meant appears by what follows:

for thou mayest eat of them; the fruit of them, which shows them to be fruit trees, and gives a reason for not cutting them down, since they would be useful in supplying them with what was agreeable to eat:

and thou shalt not cut them down to employ them in the siege; in building bulwarks and batteries, and making of machines to cast out stones, and the like, to the annoyance of the besieged; which might as well or better be made of other trees, as in the next verse:

for the tree of the field is man's life; by the fruit of which, among other things, his life is supported and maintained: but some give a different version and sense of this clause, for the tree of the field is man^{f251}, or is man's; it is his property; but this is not a sufficient reason why it should not be cut down, whether the property of the besieger, in whose hand it is, or of the besieged, to whom it belonged: or, "for, is the tree of the field a man",^{f252}? that has given any reason of being thus used? no; it is no cause of the war, nor of the holding out of the siege; and had it a voice, as Josephus^{f253} observes, it would complain of injury done it, and apologize for itself. Some supply the negative, "for the tree of the field is not a man"; so the Targum of Onkelos, as well as makes it a comparative form of speech;

"for not as a man is the tree of the field, to come out against thee in a siege;"

the Targum of Jonathan is,

"for not as a man is the tree of the field, to be hid from you in a siege;"

or, as some in Aben Ezra express it,

"it is not as a man, that it should flee from before thee;"

it can neither annoy thee, nor get out of thy way; and therefore to lift up an axe against it, to cut it down, as if it was a man, and an enemy that stood in the way, is ridiculous and weak; though the sense of the said writer himself is the same with that of our version; but what seems best is to read the words, "*for, O man, of the trees of the field*" (there is enough of them) to bring "*before thee for a bulwark*"^{f254}; to make use of, without cutting down fruit trees: though some understand it metaphorically, that as the tree of the field is, so is man, or should be, bring forth fruit, that he may not be

cut down; (see <080>Matthew 3:10). Plutarch ^{f255} relates, that it was forbidden the worshippers of Osiris to destroy garden trees.

Ver. 20. *Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, etc.] Which might be known not only by their not having fruit upon them, but by other tokens, and even at a time of year when there was no fruit on any, which might be sometimes the season of a siege:*

thou shalt destroy and cut them down; if so to do was of any disservice to the enemy, or of any service to them, as follows; they had a liberty to destroy them if they would:

and thou shall build bulwarks against the city that maketh war, until it be subdued; build bulwarks of the trees cut down, and raise batteries with them, or make machines and engines of the wood of them, to cast stones into the city to annoy the inhabitants of it, in order to make them surrender, and until they do it. All this may be an emblem of the axe being to be laid to fruitless trees in a moral and spiritual sense; and of trees of righteousness, laden with the fruits of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, being preserved and never to be cut down or rooted up; (see <080>Matthew 3:10 <2808>Isaiah 60:3 <0153>Matthew 15:13).