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## At Third Glance

Deuteronomy 20:1-9

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, July 22, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Stephen B. Chapman

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*At first glance*, the twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy confirms all of our worst suspicions about the Old Testament. Lodged in the middle of the legal material forming the core of the book, this passage provides Israel with rules for war – and straight off we encounter difficulties with it. We stumble up against its objectionable conflation of religion and military conduct. War against Israel's enemies is said to be sanctioned by God, and God's priests are not only to accompany Israel's armed forces but help the officers embolden the troops before battle.

One hundred years ago this weekend, the Battle of Soissons took place in France – a largely forgotten battle, in a relatively unremembered war: the Great War, World War I. Over several days, some 275,000 men lost their lives, including 12,000 Americans. The German Spring Offensive had begun in May and saw the German army advance deep into French territory. The Battle of Soissons capped the Allies' effort to retake those gains, and it positioned them for their final Hundred Days Offensive, in which they pushed beyond the Hindenberg Line and pressured Germany to accept an armistice in November.

Historians have often spoken of the “long nineteenth century,” the period of social transformation and cultural optimism running more or less from the French Revolution in 1789 to World War I, when something fundamental changed in the West. It was not only the scale of the slaughter – ten million soldiers dead, six million civilians, and millions more injured – but the indiscriminate and futile combination of trench warfare, artillery bombardment, and poison gas. Infamously known at its outset as “The War to End All Wars,” World War I exposed the falsehood of jingoistic patriotism and revealed the complicity of religion in fueling nationalistic ambitions. German soldiers wore the phrase “God with us” inscribed on their helmets. As Philip Jenkins documents in his book *The Great and Holy War* (HarperOne, 2014), World War I was treated as a religious crusade by all sides in the conflict, leading the great poet and soldier Wilfrid Owen to write: “If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, – / My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / to children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.*” What Owen calls the “old Lie” is a line in Latin from Horace, that “It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.”

So after the blood-soaked twentieth century, and the blood-stained beginning of the twenty-first, we are understandably repulsed by the hollow appeal of religious crusades and any prospect of wanton violence. And that is the other problem with Deuteronomy 20 – not only that it conflates religious faith and military aggression, but that it goes on, in the remainder of the chapter, to authorize the killing of captives. For distant towns, outside the land that God has promised, all of the men are to be put to the sword after the town is taken, and the women and children seized as spoils of war. For nearby towns in the promised land itself, nothing that breathes is to remain alive. “You shall annihilate them” the text reads, “the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach

you to do all the abhorrent things they do for their gods” (20:17-18). How can such a horrific command exist in the Bible? And how can Christians, who follow the Prince of Peace, possibly make peace with such a text? It is hard not to sympathize with A. A. Milne, the author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, who had himself lived through trench warfare in World War I: “The Old Testament,” he wrote, “is responsible for more atheism, agnosticism, disbelief – call it what you will – than any book ever written; it has emptied more churches than all the counter-attractions of cinema, motor bicycle and golf course.”

But if we look more closely at our Deuteronomy text, *at second glance*, several curious features emerge. The priest who calls the troops to battle does not offer a sacrifice or pray. Rather than a religious blessing, what the troops receive is an inspirational speech, followed by a lengthy series of participatory questions posed by the officers on hand: “Has anyone built a new house and not dedicated it? Then he should go back or else he might die in battle and someone else dedicate it. Has anybody just planted a vineyard and not yet enjoyed its fruit? He should go back and enjoy it. Has anyone recently become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? He should go back, too. Is anybody afraid? He should return home as well” (20:5-8).

Now this has got to be the most counter-productive way to prepare for battle ever envisioned. Since when do military officers provide soldiers with loopholes just before the fighting begins? We could try to take this remarkable speech straightforwardly and view it as a rhetorical way of insisting on soldiers’ full-fledged devotion. But when the officers conclude by venturing to dismiss anyone who might be afraid, the whole discourse threatens to collapse into parody. Everyone would have been afraid! How could a battle actually be started like this? Would Corporal Joe Israelite really stay to fight after hearing that he could go ahead and leave if he was feeling a case of the jitters?

We might also ask a further question about the distinction made between nearby and distant towns. The treatment of captives seems reprehensible in both cases, but in the distant towns captured women and children are *not* to be killed, as is the case for nearby towns. Why the difference? In the perspective of the text itself, the killing of all captives in nearby towns is not enjoined out of excessive bloodlust or even a disregard for human life but because of the danger that captives from those towns would encourage the Israelites to worship other gods. To be sure, it seems like there should have been better ways to preserve the Israelite faith than by slaughtering those whose faith was different. But it remains interesting that the text does not stipulate the same whole-scale killing for distant towns, which is perhaps a recognition that other peoples in other places *may* pursue their own gods – or at least that their religious practices were not viewed as the same kind of radical threat to Israel.

Finally, at the end of Deuteronomy 20, there is an odd legal coda that prohibits the destruction of fruit-bearing trees. Only trees that do not bear fruit may be cut down and used in building siege-works. “Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?” the text pointedly inquires. Here again it seems as if we are encountering a surprising qualification to the wholesale slaughter that the biblical passage, at first glance, appeared to endorse full-throttle. An evident environmental concern warrants this last restriction in military conduct. The Israelites are not to impose human violence, to the extent practicable, on the natural world. This brief coda, not so well known to Christians, is very well known in Judaism as the basis for the principle of *Bal Tashchit*, the prohibition of any wasteful or destructive act on something that can be of benefit to humankind.

So Deuteronomy 20 limits war in addition to authorizing it, and by doing both things at once it reminds us that it is part of a story. We run into insurmountable difficulties when we attempt to read the Bible as a timeless deposit of moral instruction. If we try to understand the Bible merely as a how-to manual, we can frequently only throw up our hands and reject what it says as failing to live up to modern standards. What we forget is that the Bible tells a story, and it is the lasting contribution of historical-criticism of the Bible to remind us how all of its episodes are part of a great chain of events, like pearls on a string. We anachronistically expect the ancient Israelites to know what we know and do what we do. We naively think that just because they were called to follow God, their society should have been free from all faults and completely unlike the other nations surrounding them. Yet the story of the Bible reveals that ancient Israel was in reality only another ancient Near Eastern country, fairly typical in its traditions and worldview. What is remarkable about ancient Israel is not where it started, but where – with God’s insistent prodding – it tries to go.

We should not be surprised that ancient Israel engaged in the very same warfare practices as other ancient Near Eastern nations, practices that were familiar and accepted in that time and place. It should instead catch our attention that, even so, Israel was led to limit such warfare over time. Deuteronomy 7 also authorizes total war against the nations of the land, but it indicates that this kind of fighting is confined to the period of Israel’s entrance into Canaan. Deuteronomy 20 continues this authorization of war, but then offers further restrictions. Prophets like Isaiah will criticize those who “trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 31:1). What is astonishing is not that ancient Israel fought wars like other ancient societies, but that a critique of war developed in Israel over time, and that Israel’s vision of the future was one in which all the nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; *and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*” (Isa 2:4). That’s in the Old Testament, too.

What Israel comes to understand is that war is a basic expression of human self-sufficiency, the human desire to determine one’s own destiny, to take charge of the world and make things right on our own. The Old Testament isn’t as concerned with inappropriately involving God in armed conflict – that is our concern – the Old Testament is more concerned with how war can be used to keep God out of the picture.

So, *at third glance*, what we discover in Deuteronomy 20 is not only rules for war but a meditation on divine sovereignty and human trust. All of Deuteronomy’s laws are no longer simply “laws,” but theologically inflected laws – that is, “scripture.” They exist in the Bible not only to tell us what Israel did or was meant to do, but who God is and what God is like. Notice how chapter 20 focuses on fear. “You shall not be *afraid*,” the passage begins, “for the LORD your God is with you.” “Do not lose heart or be *afraid*,” the priest says. “Is anyone *afraid or disheartened?*” ask the officers. *Fear* is treated throughout Deuteronomy as a basic form of disbelief in God. This kind of fear does not arise from doubt in the power of superior troop strength or advanced weaponry, but from too much confidence in those things, from the lack of conviction that God is truly in charge and able to deliver. The theological danger of warfare is that it easily goes hand-in-hand with pragmatic atheism, the assumption that “in the real world” people have to make do for themselves, that “when push comes to shove” God cannot be depended on to make a difference. There are in fact many such atheists in foxholes, bunkers, and war cabinets.

So not being afraid, not having a heart that melts away, recognizing the lie of self-sufficiency, relying whole-heartedly on God – is Deuteronomy’s root understanding of faith. And in expressing this understanding, Deuteronomy – with all its sharp edges and unmodern notions – nevertheless points as unwaveringly as my grandmother’s finger directly to Jesus Christ, who also challenged our idea that we can manufacture our futures on our own, and who called us to open our hearts to God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminded his hearers of the contrast between the flimsy house, built on the shifting sand of self-sufficiency, and rock-built house constructed by those who live out Jesus’ teaching (Matt 7:24-27). In the Parable of the Great Banquet read today from the Gospel of Luke (14:15-24), Jesus gently mocks those who refuse his invitation of new life because of their prior commitments. Their excuses sound so contemporary! – and they are the mirror image of the loopholes offered to the soldiers in Deuteronomy 20. “I just bought a piece of land; please accept my regrets. I recently acquired five yoke of oxen; I am busy. I am newly married; I cannot attend.” Rather than a list of reasons why soldiers may *go* home, this is a list of reasons why invited guests will not *leave* home. But the focal point in both passages is actually the same: our inclination to resist God by relying on ourselves.

Many people think the saying “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible. It isn’t.