

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on Deuteronomy 30.15-20; 31.3-6 and Sirach 4.1-10*

Deuteronomy made it into the Bible, and Sirach did not. The former is a book of the Torah, and the latter a book of the Apocrypha. Most people, for this reason alone, would give more credence to Deuteronomy. Yet if we put aside our notions of what we are "supposed" to believe, and consider them for the truths they may yield to a rational and ethical mind, we will discover that these verses in Sirach are far more noble in its words than those in this text from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy starts out fine; telling us that God is putting before us a choice about how to live. On the surface, it seems that obeying God's commandments and loving God and walking in God's ways is sound advice. It is when we look more closely that things start to reveal otherwise. Acting in accordance with God's ways is proper action, but when we hear the reasoning for why we should do this, it all comes apart. We are told we are to do it in order that *"God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."*

This is ethically suspect for two reasons. First, we should do the good and right things because to do them is good in itself, not to get a reward. If we only act "good" in order to get something in return, then we aren't doing it for moral, but rather practical, reasons. Jesus noted that even bad people will show caring concern for those who will benefit them, but only genuinely good people will do what is right independently of whether it benefits them.

Second, the benefit we are to receive is at another people's expense. Supposedly, if we do the right things, then we have earned God's approval, and apparently that approval means that God will prefer us over other people. Why else would God justify forcibly removing people from their homeland and even killing them in order that we can come in and take over their land for ourselves?

While God is said to be impartial and just in many other passages in the Bible, here we see God being extraordinarily prejudicial and discriminatory against the people who have lived on the land for untold generations just so the land can be possessed by the Hebrews.

This tribalistic view of God as our God, but not theirs, is obviously self-centered. While the Hebrews have a creation story that says that God is the God of all peoples, the Creator of all the world, here we see a rather different God who is parochial, provincial, and antagonistic towards those who are different. The God in Genesis is nothing like the God of Deuteronomy. They are as different as night and day.

We see the differences continue between these texts. In Genesis, God wants all creation to flourish, and encourages people to be fruitful and multiply. Here we see a vindictive and retributive God who threatens God's own followers with the same annihilation to them that God promises to the people who are living in the land they want to possess. Is this what we would call ethical behavior: to threaten people with destruction if they don't do what God says? Sounds like pure evil to me. Sounds like a bully who is out of control and has to have his/her own way, or else. Coercion, manipulation, threats, and such are in no way ethical. They are the opposite of ethical. They are immoral.

Of course, we must assume that this is not actually the will of God being stated, but rather the will of the people who want their domination of another people to be justified as if God sanctioned it. It is a people who are willing to create a theology of a God who will pillage and kill for them if they only obediently do whatever God tells them – which interestingly corresponds to their own avarice and greed.

Sound authoritarianly and fascistly disgusting to you? It does to me. And I think it is complete unfaithfulness to a God we revere as being just, compassionate, and peace-loving to presuppose that God actually sanctioned the pillaging and murdering of a people who have been living in their own homeland simply because we saw the desirability of their land and wanted it for ourselves. It is an obvious projection

of the people's wants onto God's will. It is creating God in the image we want God to be in order to grant us all of our desires; even the most unethical and despicable ones.

The justification for this egregious portrayal of God is simple enough. The author(s) simply put it in God's mouth that their own desires are what God wanted for them. Indeed, not only did God want it for them, but God commanded it to be. How convenient it is that God wants us to dominate and oppress another people so we can have everything we ever wanted! How repulsive is that?

It is put in pious sounding language that tells us we have a choice. We can either do God's "will" and conquer this people and take away their land, or we can disobey God and suffer immensely. Put that way, who would want to do the latter? Except that the latter thing, not making war with a peaceful nation, not taking over their lands, and not murdering them is actually the ethically right thing to do. But the rhetoric as described in Deuteronomy would have us to believe that the actually evil and unethical thing to do is the right thing. It is double-speak as George Orwell called it. Or it is the way many politicians and people in our own country are now acting by calling what is evil good, and what is good evil.

Blatant self-interest is still rearing its ugly head many millennia after these words were written; across cultures and across time. Humans will use providence to justify their deplorable schemes, and then pat themselves on the back as being righteous, the true people of God. It is all so disgusting. Indeed, it is revolting how the self-justification continues. It is claimed that even God God's self will fight for this people who choose to do despicable things to people in their own homeland. God will "cross over before you" and "will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them."

To claim that one's own God not only justifies, but sanctions, such genocidal mania is beyond unconscionable. Honestly, what would we think of a people who used such excuses to come and kill people in our country and take over our country? Would we say, "Oh, well, it is alright because their God said it was okay?" We know for a fact that is not what we'd think. We'd think these people were evil incarnate. And we'd be right. To justify the worse kind of behavior towards other people and claim that it is sanctioned by divinity is the most unethical thing imaginable. It is to pretend to be good by actually being evil, and it is to pretend that a good God legitimizes such horrendous evil. Can it possibly get worse than this?

Well, actually it does. The text goes on to say to *"be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you."* In other words, it tells the people not to feel guilty or bad about the atrocities that they are about to commit against this other people. And, of course, that can only happen if we dehumanize people and pretend that they are not really people; you know, those with God's own image within them, which our own texts told us many times that they were. No, don't feel guilty for murdering them, and don't feel guilty for going against what our own sacred scriptures tell us never to do. The author is instructing the people to not have any conscience at all about the murder of innocent people, and the taking over of their land, animals, crops, and survivors. It can't get more vile than that; but there it is right in the text. An author claiming that God told them to act in all of these grossly unethical ways.

And yet, millions of people throughout the millennia have justified these horrific texts as being "God's will." It is disgraceful. It is long past time that we as religious people need to shout it out that we reject such atrocious texts, and that this is not the God we believe in. We have to make it clear to all those who judge religious people as being this evil and without conscience that we are the exceptions to the rule. We don't support these texts, nor their repugnant commands. We call them out, and make clear that these are the words of a self-centered, greedy, and malignantly malicious author who sought to justify cruelty to other people in order to have one's own way. And in that people believed these words, they are just as bad; for even the slightest ethical introspection would reveal how wrong these verses are.

Contrast this now with the text from Sirach, which does just the opposite. In Deuteronomy, we are urged to have no empathy or compassion; but in Sirach we are told to not cheat the poor, not grieve the hungry,

not add to the troubles of others, not reject those in distress, not avert our eyes from the needy, and not give anyone a reason to curse us. And along with all of these things we are "not" to do to others, we are to actually do things like endear ourselves to others, give a hearing to the poor, respect them, rescue the oppressed from their oppressors, be like a parent to orphans, and be like a spouse to the orphan's parents.

How different this is than what we saw in the Deuteronomy passage. How impossible it would be to act in this way if we were taking people's land and killing them; right?

Sirach is not in many Bibles (it is in Catholic Bibles, and with Bibles with Apocryphas), but it is far more ethical in its "recommendations" than are the "commandments" listed in Deuteronomy. And this itself should give us pause to reflect. Whenever something is "commanded," it implies an authoritarian approach. Whenever something is "recommended," it implies that we have autonomy to make our own choices based on our own assessment of the morality of the recommendation.

Notice that the authoritarian language in Deuteronomy is consistent in calling God, "Lord" (Lord being a hierarchical term denoting one in whom we are to be subservient to and obey despite our own conscience and free will), and also claims that God commanded these things of us (a tactic used by totalitarians); whereas in Sirach there is no authoritarian language, no reference to God as telling us these things, no threats if we don't do as suggested, and, of course, no injuring of others for our own gain.

The words of Sirach correspond to the best Biblical values, and the words of Deuteronomy to the worst. And yet Sirach is not technically a part of the Bible and Deuteronomy is. This should tell us that we should not accept things as true simply because they are in the Bible. We are to consider whether they are ethically right and morally true, whether they epitomize the sacred virtues of God, or whether they do the opposite. We are not to put our consciences aside.

Yet, that is what authoritarian and hierarchical language would have us to do. And it is why God is referred to as "Lord" rather than in more noble and egalitarian terms. By having us call God, "Lord," it was helpful to the powers that be to keep us docile and unquestioning; so that they could go about their own desires without our calling them out for their being unethical. If someone is our "Lord," then we are not to take our own thoughts and reasonings into consideration; we are simply to obey. If you want a manipulatable public, isn't this the kind of language you would employ in scripture and in laws? If you didn't want people to feel they could think for themselves, that it would be impious to argue with, much less resist, the authorities, then wouldn't hierarchical language help to accomplish this, and reinforce this attitude for the foreseeable future?

This is why it is incumbent upon us as Christians to reject hierarchical language, and to see how it has led our ancestors to be complicit with the injustices of those in power. We need to see how this kind of authoritarian thinking has led Christians of many cultures and times to commit terrible acts of injustice and cruelty, unquestioningly, because the authorities framed it in religious language to make it seem like it was the right thing to do. This kind of credulity of the people needs to cease. We need to take ownership of our own consciences, and reject the multifarious ways in which we have been taught to go along to get along.

Jesus, of course, taught us to think for ourselves. But the church has countered Jesus' own teachings and ethic so as to maintain control over the masses. And it has led to things like the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Witch Trials, the genocide of over 250 million indigenous peoples in the Americas, the slavery of millions of African peoples throughout the world, the Holocaust, and so many more moral blights on our collective Christian history.

Shall we choose to listen to scriptures like Deuteronomy that justify our oppression of others, or will we listen to non-canonical writings like Sirach that tell us to care for all others? Are we not to judge all words by the same standard, as to whether they conform to the virtues of love, peace, and justice that best

represent the divine? The choice in each generation is ours. I'm hoping our generation will choose goodness over evil. It is long past time that humanity made this more ethical choice.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/19/2023*