

# DIFFICULT PASSAGES

“Devote them to complete destruction”<sup>1</sup>, *Deuteronomy 7:2*

Paul told the Corinthian Christians that God expects His people to “be united in the same mind and the same judgement” (*1 Corinthians 1:10*). That expectation, however, encounters difficulties when we consider the challenging nature of some of the material God put into His Bible, the book that He intends to play a key role in our unity (*cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6*). We will, therefore, take time in this lesson to explore one difficult passage – God’s command to the Israelites to “devote [the Canaanites] to complete destruction” in *Deuteronomy 7:1-5* – and its place within the biblical narrative.

## Beginning considerations

- We need to begin by reminding ourselves that God did not write the command in *Deuteronomy 7* to us; He addressed it to ancient near eastern, Semitic people who lived in a particular culture in a particular time.
- Additionally, God did not write the Bible to transform the thinking of ancient people into thinking that mirrors our modern, western thinking; we must consequently learn to filter our understandings of the Bible through those that would have been common to the people to whom God originally addressed it.
- God did not intend Israel’s conquest of Canaan to be an outrageous act; it sits within the rhetoric of other wars in the ancient near east. Consider, for example, the following inscription describing a military victory of Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC); “I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar;...and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled...”.
- Additionally, God did not have the same expectations for Israel that He has for Christians today (*Acts 17:30-31; Galatians 3:19-26*).

## Genocide?

Consider how the following items develop a structure that helps us better understand Moses’ instructions for the conquest in *Deuteronomy 7*:

- In prescribing the conquest, Moses did not indict the Canaanites with unforgiveable sins; they were no more sinful than other nations nor were they bound by the moral expectations God applied to Israel through His covenant with them (*cf. Genesis 15:16*). He instead gave two reasons motivating the conquest:

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- God was fulfilling His promises to Abraham (*Deuteronomy 7:1-11; cf. Joshua 21:44-45*).
- God was protecting the Israelites from the Canaanites' idolatrous influence (*Deuteronomy 7:4; cf. Numbers 33:55-56; Judges 2:3, 11-15*).
- Those reasons, however, do not tell the full purpose of the conquest – God used the conquest to prepare a holy space in Canaan within which His presence would dwell and make itself known to Israel and to the world (that purpose helps explain the different standards for dealing with people inside of, and outside of, Canaan's borders, *Deuteronomy 7:1-7; 20:10-18*).
- While the conquest was certainly a military event that involved violence and death, a couple factors help us understand that it was not a genocidal command.
  - God worked in advance of Israel's arrival in Canaan to prepare the land for them:
    - He repeatedly promised to "drive out" the inhabitants of the land prior to Israel's arrival (*Exodus 23:28; 33:2; 34:11; 34:24; Leviticus 20:23; Deuteronomy 4:38; 6:19; 11:23; cf. Judges 2:21*).
    - By clearing out the non-covenant, idolatrous people in Canaan, God was purifying the land to receive His presence (*cf. Deuteronomy 12:1-32; Ezekiel 10-11*).
  - The Hebrew word translated "complete destruction" (*hrm*) in *Deuteronomy 7:2* does not merely mean 'kill them all'; it more broadly refers to something removed from normal human use.
    - While *hrm* could involve 'complete destruction' (*cf. Joshua 6:21*), not everything placed under *hrm* was destroyed (*cf. Joshua 6:19; 11:12-15*); certain items "vowed" to God were not destroyed and could be redeemed for normal human use again (*Leviticus 27:1-25, 28*).
    - In the case of populations, *hrm* focuses on a community's identity rather than every individual person composing it.
      - God, for example, announced that He had placed Babylon under *hrm*, removing them from their position of national power as judgment for its arrogance and violence (*Jeremiah 50:21-51:58*). He fulfilled His promise of *hrm*, however, through Persia's peaceful conquest of Babylon in 539 BC rather than through the nation's physical destruction.
      - God also announced that He was placing Judah under *hrm* while, at the same time, promising to preserve a remnant (*Jeremiah 25:8-11; 50:17-20*). In the case of Judah, God used *hrm* to excise the covenant violators from the community of Israel in order to purify the nation and give them a new identity (*Ezekiel 11:17-21; Isaiah 1:21-28*).
- Even though it might still seem distasteful to us, God commanded the Israelites to engage in military action in conquering Canaan to drive out, kill, or 'convert' (as in the case of Rahab, *Joshua 2; 6*) the Canaanites in order to purify the land to receive His presence so that He could begin to work through Israel and accomplish His promise to bless humanity through Abraham's descendants (*Genesis 22:18; Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Ezekiel 5:5*). The command was not, however, a command to commit genocide.

## Applications

- We must not offer simplistic or unbiblical answers to the Bible's difficult passages.
- We must not read Deuteronomy 7:1-6 in isolation; putting it into its larger context of God's self-revelation helps us see that the emphasis resides, not on God's judgment, but on His mercy (*Exodus 34:5-7*).
- The conquest represents a key stage in the larger context of the revelation of God's mercy rather than merely a plan to drive people out of their land. The conquest created a sacred space within which God could reveal Himself to the world through His covenant people for the purpose of drawing people to Him in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham (*cf. Genesis 22:18; Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Ezekiel 5:5*), which is the same purpose God gives the church today (*1 Peter 2:9*).
- Some passages will always create discomfort in readers because they reveal the corruption sin causes in our world, which reminds us that sin is ugly and creates ugly realities.
- God did not intend the Bible to speak to, and within, our comfort zones; He intended it to disrupt human thinking and behavior so that we could begin to learn new and better ways of thinking and living.
- Finally, God does not require Himself to answer every question we might have (*cf. Job 38-41*); what He has revealed about Himself is sufficient even if it leaves us with unanswered questions.

Deuteronomy 7:1-6 certainly offers a challenging passage, a challenge that we must not ignore nor misrepresent. May God guide us as we wrestle with that passage (and others like it) so that we can cultivate our relationship with Him by developing a deeper and more interconnected understanding of His Bible.