

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY- CHARLOTTE

DEUTERONOMIC ECOLOGY: WARFARE AND THE  
PRESERVATION OF TREES

SUBMITTED TO DR. RICHARD BELCHER JR.

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
OT5200 – GENESIS - DEUTERONOMY

BY

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DECEMBER 4, 2019

## DEUTERONOMIC ECOLOGY: WARFARE AND THE PRESERVATION OF TREES

Christian ethics has something to say about ecology. In the current social and political climate, this statement might sound a bit awkward or even troublesome. But in Deuteronomy 20, we find a short command that forbids the falling of certain trees. Interestingly enough, this law about cutting down trees applies today. This paper is concerned to that end - what does this law mean, and how ought it be applied today? In the following, it will be shown that this law is purposed for at least three reasons: (1) separating Israel from ANE cultures, (2) blessing Israel upon their entrance into the land, and (3) distinguishing between human beings and the natural environment. Following these things, the general equity of this law will be applied to the modern context by showing application corporately in warfare, and also individually in man's relation to the environment

### Context of the Passage

Before understanding this pericope, it is important to note the context of this law. If one removes this law from its immediate context, errors will surely follow. Therefore, to understand this law is to understand that it is the last of the laws concerning the warfare of Israel (20:1-20).<sup>1</sup> A simple division of the chapter is: corporate commands for battle (vv. 1-

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Currid, *Deuteronomy* (EPSC; Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 326. There has been much debate about the literary structure of book of Deuteronomy. Among this ranges differing theories, some more critical (Von Rad, Welch) and others less so (Kaufman, Walton). While discussing this in more detail is out of the limits of this paper, I will mention that this paper follows off of the presupposition that at minimum the document is high in its literary quality and construction. Moreover, for the sake of clarity, this paper is written from an understanding that the book is written as an exposition of the Decalogue. Yet the arguments that follow are not entirely dependent upon that specific construction. For more on this, see Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 19-24; A.C. Welch, *The Religion of Israel under the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912); S.A. Kaufman, 'The Structure of Deuteronomical Law', *Maarav* ½ (1978-1979): 105-158; J.H. Walton, 'Deuteronomy: An Exposition of the Spirit of the Law', *GTJ* 8.2 (1987): 213-225; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21:9* (WBC; 2 vols.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), xcii-xcv; S.R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 27-32; Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 11-15, 22-23; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 20-24.

4), laws concerning exemption from battle (vv. 5-9), laws concerning the warfare against cities (vv. 10-18), and laws concerning the use of trees in the warfare (vv. 19-20).<sup>2</sup> What is clear throughout this chapter specifically (and more broadly in the entire book) is that Israel is being given this land by the Lord and they are to take it according to his commands. The common refrain throughout the chapter is “When you go out to war...” or “When you draw near to a city to fight against it...” The emphasis being made is that these commands are specific to how Israel is to take the land that the Lord is giving them. The statements are not conditional in the sense that if they get into a battle, then do x. Instead the law is “part of a larger unit that forms a whole in addressing the variety of circumstances that Israel would face and the specific actions to take place in the situations.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore this law concerning the cutting of trees is only correctly understood in light of the context of warfare and entrance into the Canaanite land.

### **Restriction and Provisions**

The pericope of vv. 19-20 has one basic restriction and two initial provisions. The restriction is that Israel is not to cut down the trees that bear fruit. The first provision is that the Israelites are allowed to eat from these fruit-bearing trees (vv. 19). The second is that non-fruit bearing trees can be cut down and used in warfare (vv. 20). It can be discerned fairly easily that the provisions both will help Israel take the land of Canaan. While they are fighting the Canaanites, not only will they have non-fruit trees to help them make

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<sup>2</sup>This chapter division is generally taken from Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 270-271. I have chosen other language to title each section for clarity of its contents.

<sup>3</sup>Michael G. Hasel, ‘The Destruction of Trees in the Moabite Campaign of 2 Kings 3:4-27: A Study in the Laws of Warfare’, *AUSS* 40.2 (2002): 205.

“seigeworks” but also they will have trees to sustain them during the time of intrusion. While these simple facets of the law are clear, there is more theological deduction that ought to be traced out.

### **Understanding the Original Law**

Upon understanding what is prohibited in the text, the commands may seem odd in a vacuum. But on the contrary, several things can be discerned about the law, which have significance for its purpose and understanding. In the following, the law will first be observed in light of Ancient Near Eastern practices. Secondly, the law will be viewed in the redemptive history of Israel and shown to be theologically and exegetically contextualized. The final section will deal with an exegetical concern in vv. 19, which has implications for the applicability of the law to both Israel and to today.

#### ***A. Ancient Near Eastern Context***

It is well noted by several commentaries that the destruction of forests in warfare was common in ANE history.<sup>4</sup> Dr. John Currid describes one of these instances, “At the site of Lachish (located in the Shephelah) during the early sixth century B.C., the Babylonian monarch Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to the city and destroyed it with fire, the fuel used for the conflagration being provided by means of cutting down forests and laying wood at strategic points of the city's fortifications.”<sup>5</sup> This practice is not unique to the Babylonians.

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<sup>4</sup>Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 588-589; Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 276-277; Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21:9*, 448; Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 240; Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 445.

<sup>5</sup>John D. Currid, ‘The Deforestation of the Foothills of Palestine’, *PEQ* 116:1 (1984): 1-11. This article provides a helpful look on Palestinian deforestation, while showing that warfare is a contributing factor, yet not a sole reason for ecological problems in the land.

The ancient Egyptian accounts of the campaigns of Thut-mose III (c. 1490-1436 B.C.) contain several notes about the destruction of trees in foreign conquests.<sup>6</sup> These are quite interesting to read in light of the prohibition of Israel to fell the trees of Canaan. In the fifth campaign of Thut-mose it is read, “Now his majesty destroyed the town of Ardata with its grain. All its pleasant trees were cut down.”<sup>7</sup> Or in the sixth campaign, “Arrival at the town of Kadesh. Destroying it. Felling its trees.”<sup>8</sup> Or “I took away the very sources of life, (for) I cut down their grain and felled all their groves and all their pleasant trees... I destroyed it; it became a ... upon which there are no trees.”<sup>9</sup> There is another example of this practice mentioned in 2 Esdras where the readers are warned of another nation making war against them. 2 Esdras 15:62 reads, “They shall devour you and your cities, your land and your mountains; they shall burn with fire all your forests and your fruitful trees.”<sup>10</sup> Documents like these make clear this point: cutting down the trees of enemy cities/nations was a practice of ANE warfare.

It is important to note following these examples that the command of God to Israel is to set them apart from their foreign neighbors. In the conquest of Canaan, the Lord commanded Israel not to make war like its neighbors, who decimate the land by falling all

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<sup>6</sup>Pritchard, James, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd Edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 239-244.

<sup>7</sup>ANET, 239.

<sup>8</sup>ANET, 239.

<sup>9</sup>ANET, 240. The direct object of this sentence is missing in the ANET translation. But contextual evidence provides that the implication of the account is that the land had no trees after the attack.

<sup>10</sup>NRSV.

the trees, even the most pleasant ones. Therefore, a major emphasis in this command is that Israel would not act like other nations.<sup>11</sup>

### ***B. Future Provision in the Land***

As mentioned previously, the law has two initial provisions for the people as they take the land of Canaan (i.e. food, trees for seigeworks). But that is not all. Imbedded in this law is a provision for the future of Israel. The fruit trees that are not to be cut down by Israel will not only sustain them while they take the land, but will also provide in the blessing of the covenant fulfillment by inheriting the land.<sup>12</sup> Simply put – one rationale of this law is for the natural processes of food development and the sustainment of human life. These two must be held as a means to an end. Miller correctly recognizes the protection of trees as not merely for the sake of the trees themselves:

[These laws] are examples of early environmental protection regulations. These cases are not simply for the sake of the natural environment but because of its existence as a habitat for the human community. The regulations remind the reader of the interface of the natural and the human; the welfare of both are inseparable.<sup>13</sup>

Miller understands the underlying principle of the natural processes, which are under protection, yet he does not take it far enough. The law is not intended to preserve the vague grouping of the “human community.” No. On the contrary, the law is intended to preserve a

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<sup>11</sup>Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 346.

<sup>12</sup>Such a redemptive historical argument is not simply deduced theologically but attested to within the document itself. For example, Deut. 6:10-12 reads, “And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, *and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant*—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The implication of the statement here is that the Lord will bless Israel with an inheritance in the land that they did not take up and make themselves, but was given to them as a fulfillment of the covenant promises to the Patriarchs.

<sup>13</sup>Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 170-171.

specific people, the people of God, while they are in the land. As one commentator reminds, “Israel, let it be said again, is to inhabit the land.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***C. Are the trees of the field human?***

There is a curious detail in Masoretic text concerning the end of v. 19. All major translations render the phrase as a rhetorical question. But in fact, the vocalization of the word  $\text{אֲשֶׁר־הָאֲדָמָה}$  does not contain the interrogative particle  $\text{וְ$  but instead is pointed with a qamets ( $\text{ָ}$ ).<sup>15</sup> Following the Masoretes, the translation has several options, but the basic rendering would be, “for the tree of the field *is* man’s *life* (KJV).”<sup>16</sup> The other option, which is a majority consensus among scholars, renders the phrase as a rhetorical question by repointing the qamets to a seghol.<sup>17</sup> For several reasons the latter option ( $\text{אֲשֶׁר־הָאֲדָמָה־וְ$ ) is more favorable in terms of text criticism, yet also the interpretation from a rhetorical question follows the logic of the chapter, and leads to a better understanding of the command.<sup>18</sup>

First, the rhetorical question refers back to vv. 16-18 and the command of the *herem*. There is a logic being followed by the author, which is literarily coherent. Contrary to

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<sup>14</sup>Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 590.

<sup>15</sup>Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 240. Also see Eccl. 12:10 for the same rendering of “man”.

<sup>16</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses: Arranged in the form of a Harmony*, trans. Rev. Charles William Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 172n1. The footnote here speaks of a rendering by Dathe that implies the literary rhetoric of Gen. 1:29.

<sup>17</sup>Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 240; Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 589; Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, 172; Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 277n20; Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21:9*, 448; Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 346.

<sup>18</sup>This option is to be favored for several reasons. First, LXX translates this phrase rhetorically with the use of  $\mu\eta$ . Second, the majority of other ancient documents render as a rhetorical question. See Codex Ambrosianus and versio Syriaca secundum polyglottam Londinensem; or the Vulgate’s “*et non homo*”.

some commentators, when the text is read closely this section is not first understood as a “blush, irrelevant paragraph about the treatment of trees in a time of siege.”<sup>19</sup> Instead this text echoes of the *herem* ban on the peoples of Canaan. It is directly following that command (vv. 16-18) that in this command, the author asks the rhetorical question, “Are the trees of the field human that they should be besieged by you?” The resounding anticipated answer is no.<sup>20</sup> The trees are not to be under the same category of the current inhabitants of the land.<sup>21</sup> The trees do not take up arms and fight against Israel, for they are not human.<sup>22</sup> Therefore it must first be distinguished that the trees are not under the *herem*.

Secondly, the rhetorical question echoes language of the dominion mandate of Gen. 1:28-30. This is where the principle underlying the law is brought forth in more clarity. Until this point it has been said that: (1) Not destroying the trees separates Israel from other ANE nations, (2) the fruit trees (not being cut down) will provide sustenance and be covenant blessing from God, (3) the trees are not under the *herem*. The question posed also implies a

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<sup>19</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC; Nashville: B&H Publishers, 1994), 287. I understand that Merrill does not likely view this text as a blush, irrelevant paragraph. But by conceding that at first read it does, essentially hands over the reins to critics who argue against a coherent book, with one author, who is not simply synthesizing other information or texts. Instead a better argument can be made that it does not even appear to be irrelevant but is literarily precise and pointed.

<sup>20</sup>Contra to: David Vogel, ‘How Green is Judaism? Exploring Jewish Environmental Ethics’, *Business Ethics Quarterly* 11.2 (2001): 351-352. In this essay, Vogel speaking of this phrase says, “The trees have a life of their own: they don’t just exist to serve human needs.” This statement is in fact the opposite of what the author is trying to get at. To use Vogel’s own buzz words (yet contra his argument), the interpretation is not supposed to be “eco-centric”. Instead it is decidedly “anthropocentric”. The Lord does not protect the trees for the sake of their own “lives” but instead for the lives of the Israelites who will inhabit the land. To be blunt, how could the rhetoric be against the idea of trees being human, while trying to argue for the internal life of trees? It seems to be the exact opposite, especially considering that some trees can be cut down for certain reasons.

<sup>21</sup>Note thus far in the command, fruit and non-fruit trees have not been distinguished. Therefore, in some sense, this command applies to all trees (provided some guidelines for cutting down others for other purposes).

<sup>22</sup>Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 346; Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 589; Driver, *A Critical And Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 240.



fundamental difference between humans and the rest of creation, which is to the biblical worldview. In some sense, the preservation or destruction of the trees belongs to the responsibility of man. It is not the tree that decides to besiege man, or come against him in battle. This distinction is rooted in the dominion mandate of Gen. 1:28-30, where man is given authority and power.<sup>23</sup>

### **Application of the Law**

Tracing the theme of dominion in the Hebrew scriptures, Stephen Dempster notes that, “The rest of the canon assumes the royal overtones of Genesis 1, indicating the unique authority assigned to the primal couple, and thus to all humanity.”<sup>24</sup> This theme of dominion is foundational for understanding of the application of the law to the New Covenant. If man is given authority and power to rule over creation, then there is an implied understanding of responsibility to act faithfully to this mandate.<sup>25</sup> The details of responsible action, specifically decreed in this law will be discussed below – first in a broad sense, then secondly in a narrow sense.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 59.

<sup>24</sup>Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 60. Dempster’s work is a biblical theology of the themes of dominion and dynasty in the Hebrew Bible, which surveys these themes literarily and canonically.

<sup>25</sup>Again, for brevity and clarity’s sake, it is assumed that the responsibility borne by man in the dominion mandate is in some sense a moral responsibility to live unto the command of God. There have been several attempts and approaches at applying a consistent argument for ecological-moral issues for Christians. Each may add interesting insights and applications, but none seems to be the most consistent argument exegetically and theologically. See Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); Cornwell Declaration in *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Wisdom on the Environment*, ed. Michael B. Barkey (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2000).

<sup>26</sup>The filter used to apply the of principles of Deuteronomic law are not that of Reconstructionism, but more drawn from the WCF 19 and Calvin’s application of these types of law. In a Westminster way of speaking, Deut. 20:19-20 is not merely moral, nor merely civil, and therefore the general equity is applied unto all peoples. Likewise, in the application of these laws in Calvin, one can notice that he will not allow the law to

## ***Warfare Conduct***

The first application that can be drawn from the principle of this law is the responsibility of nations, tribes, and forces to make war with a sense of environmental responsibility. Of the many possible applications of the law, this seems to be the most direct from the text. Two principles can be discerned concerning the making of war: (a) warfare indeed might destroy some of the environment, but it is to be useful and not haphazardly, (b) warfare must take into account the value of human life, and the sustainability of the environment for people of the area of warfare.<sup>27</sup> Each of these principles can be applied to warfare conduct today.<sup>28</sup> For an example of recent breaches of these principles, Saddam Hussein was charged with the destruction of 250,000 acres of fruit trees.<sup>29</sup>

## ***Individual Conduct***

There is a temptation in the application of the law to draw quick parallels to modern context and make specific applications. For example, one might reason from the text

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be plainly applied directly to people in this dispensation, nor will he allow only the moral law of the Ten Commandments to be applied. Instead, the Westminster divines follow Calvin in his own distinctions between the differing categories, whereby he had previously applied what is the general equity of civil and ceremonial laws. For more on Calvin's application of the Deuteronomic law, and specifically this passage, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 394-395; Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, 171-173; William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990).

<sup>27</sup>Drawing from vv. 19-20, principle A follows from the provision of using not fruit trees for war, while principle B follows from the implication of sustaining the Israelites in the future days.

<sup>28</sup>At this point, it is helpful to note that these ethical issues are better dealt with in a longer discourse but this paper will not suffice for such. Yet it should be noted that the writer does admit that some issues arise in which certain destruction of greater portions of land might be necessary and beneficial for the protection of other land. This point is not an exception to the principles above; instead the point is solidified, specifically by principle A.

<sup>29</sup>Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 588. The Iraqi Criminal Tribunal charged Hussein for the burning of 250,000 acres of orchards in the city of Dujail, along with the hundreds of executions, murders, and destruction that was poured out during the massacre. For more information see John F. Burns, 'A Town That Bled Under Hussein Hails His Trial,' Dec. 2, 2019. Another interesting example would be the desolation caused by Sherman's March to the Sea in 1864. It could be argued that this is another example of the devastating consequence of disobedience to the law of God.

that it is a binding moral necessity to be financially supporting climate change initiatives. The problem with such a conclusion is that it does not reach the true general equity of the law. The principle(s) to be followed are in fact principles and not specific deductions. Therefore to make a specific rule concerning these things is a dangerous position. Instead following the general equity, the first principle is that man ought not destroy creation without intent or design. Therefore, by theological deduction and reasoning, it seems to be a necessary conclusion that an unbridled destruction of nature is morally wrong.<sup>30</sup> The best logic exegetically and theologically reasons that the destruction of certain natural organisms (trees) is sometimes necessary. The provided restrictions of the law give the interpreter guidelines (i.e. haphazard destruction, human dignity, dominion mandate) for application of this law.<sup>31</sup> Not only that but there is a responsibility principle imbedded here. When individuals make decisions about destroying trees, or other ecology, there must be a responsibility borne not for the mere sake of ecology but for the sake of human life.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the individual is responsible for promoting human life, and is morally accountable for haphazard destruction of nature.

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<sup>30</sup>Calvin notes that the destruction of all trees for the Israelites would have taken place under “the impulse of anger and hatred.” While it is presumptive, it seems to be fairly consistent with the rest of what has been argued here, specifically the actions of other ANE forces. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, 179.

<sup>31</sup>The creation of this paper damaged trees. Using the consistent methodology of application and reasoning, the writer can reason that the destruction of the tree for the use of this paper was purposeful and intentional for the betterment of human dignity and to the glory of God in study.

<sup>32</sup>Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 307. Gane argues that the prohibitions of against cutting down the fruit trees has a principle of responsibility imbedded in it because of the consequences for human beings where the environment is destroyed.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the previous pages, it has been argued that the law of Deuteronomy 20:19-20, which forbade the falling of fruit trees, has at least three primary purposes. The first purpose of the command was to set Israel apart from its ANE neighbors who demolished the ecology of the land during warfare. Secondly, the command was a wise, gracious command of God that resulted in covenant blessings, as Israel inhabited the land following their intrusion. Thirdly, this law made a clear distinguishment between humans and trees, which highlights the value of humanity, and still the goodness of the created world. Following these insights from the command, the general equity of the law was then applied to the New Covenant dispensation. The general equity was applied broadly as principles of warfare conduct, and then was applied narrowly as principles of individual conduct toward the environment. In conclusion, this law concerning trees was both a wise, gracious command of God for the people of Israel specifically as they entered the land. As well, this law concerning the trees has moral application for human beings today as they conduct themselves individually and nationally. The value of human life is to be esteemed, and to that end, it is right to be wise, and purposeful with one's use of the environment.

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