

A THEOLOGY OF GENOCIDE? DEUTERONOMY 20:16-18 AS SCRIPTURE FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE.

רָק מֵעַרְיוֹ הָעִמִּים הָאֱלֹהֶה אֲשֶׁר
 יְהוָה
 אֱלֹהֵיכֶם נָתָן לְךָ נַחַלָּה לֹא תִּחְיֶה
 כָּל־גָּשְׁמָה:
 כִּי־הָחֶרֶם תִּחְרִימָם הַחֲתִי וְהָאָמָרִי
 הַכָּנְעָנִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי הַחֹוִי וְהַיְבוֹסִי כַּאֲשֶׁר
 צָוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
 לֹמְדֵן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָלַמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם
 לְעֹשֹׂת כָּל תֹּועַבָּתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ
 לְאֱלֹהִים וְחַטָּאתָם לִיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God. (NRSV)

Overview

The main aim of this thesis is to ask, against the background of *Dei Verbum*, especially chapters III and IV, in what sense(s) it is meaningful to speak of this text demanding the ‘Ban’ (חרם) as Scripture, that is to say how it is “inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (1 Tim 2:16).

Dei Verbum does assert that the books of the OT *imperfecta et temporaria contentant* (DV 15) but to describe the order to slaughter everything that has breath, including non-combatants and infants, as ‘imperfect’ seems at best rather an understatement, and to describe it as temporary, for example by insisting that it only belonged to the time of the conquest and only applies to the peoples mentioned, still leaves us with the question what sort of God would command such an action at any point in

history? Aquinas' and others response that whatever God demands is just does not seem entirely adequate.

Some work has been done in this area. Lake, in his 1997 dissertation¹ argues that Augustine did us a disservice by insisting that we retain the literal sense, whereas according to him previous patristic writers – notably Origen and the Alexandrines, argued that texts that were manifestly unworthy of God must be interpreted allegorically. Lake concludes that the texts must be read 'hyperbolically'. Lakes contention that contemporary theology has either ignored or rejected this text, or used it in a way which ignores or dismisses its problematical dimensions, is probably valid. Lyons, in his 2003 dissertation² looks at a number of specifically evangelical responses. His thesis is essentially a comparative literature review and the three authors considered all follow the principle which we find in Aquinas and later in Calvin and Luther that anything God commands is just, arguing further that God is the giver of life and therefore is within his rights to withdraw life also.

Modern socio-literary criticism, however, opens up new avenues which may allow us to follow something of Origen's principle that hard texts are a sign to interpret allegorically without actually abandoning entirely the validity of the 'literal' meaning. Noting, with Rowlett,³ that at least the core of Deuteronomy probably dates from the time of Josiah, we can see its purpose is partly to do, with 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the people of Judah at that point, and the need to remain faithful and trust in God, and it is not, and never was, intended as a set of laws about war that were actually to be implemented. Thus the literal sense – in the sense of *quid hagiographi reapsi significare intenderint* (DV 12) – is preserved. But furthermore, the unpalatable nature of the 'literalistic' sense (if I may call it that) has led us to look more deeply at the text and discover (arguably) its true 'literal' sense.

Although this 'literal' sense is still problematic, it is easier to see it as 'imperfect' in the sense that it contains insights which need balancing against other texts of Scripture.

Methodology

The project is necessarily methodologically diverse. The basic question is theological, and within theology it is probably best identified as fundamental theology, since it is about how Scripture is interpreted

¹ T.L. LAKE, *Did God Command Genocide?*, Boston 1997.

² W.L. LYONS, *Between History and Theology*, Florida 2003.

³ L.L. ROWLETT, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence*, Sheffield, 1996.

theologically. Nevertheless there is also a moral theological dimension in the sense that it is about an ethical assessment of a text.

However to reach this point we need various tools from the exegetes toolbox. Using the guidance and the terminology of the Pontifical Biblical Commission,⁴ To establish the ‘literal’ meaning of the text (as defined above) the historical critical tools are essential,⁵ including questions about the socio-literary situation of the text.⁶ Canonical – or at least intertextual – questions are also important here.⁷

In looking at the interpretation of the text, narrative analysis,⁸ Jewish interpretive traditions,⁹ and in particular the history of influence¹⁰ and the interpretation in the tradition of the Church will be important.¹¹

In coming to conclusions, the theological questions obviously revolve around the meaning of inspired Scripture,¹² and will impact on questions of the relationship of Biblical interpretation to other theological disciplines.¹³

Other methodologies may be touched on in as much as other interpreters of this text have used them, but will not be central to my argument.

The methodological diversity will entail a certain selectivity and judicious reliance on secondary literature if the project is to be kept to manageable proportions. However at key points in the argument I will, of course, always be working with primary sources.

Outline of the Thesis

Introduction

This will outline the project, my reasons for pursuing it, and the methodologies to be used. My original interest stems from two experiences. One is of recommending reading the Bible to people only to find some of them come back repulsed by certain parts of it, especially in the Old Testament. The second experience is that of hearing of the horrors of the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 and being appalled by them, and at the same time and being struck by the fact that our Scriptures contain passages which appear to demand similar behaviour of God’s people. More recently, my attention has been drawn to the possibility that this text and others like it may have influenced both modern ‘imperialist’ agendas and some

⁴ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 1993 henceforth *IBC*

⁵ cf. *IBC* I.A

⁶ cf. *IBC* I.B.1 and I.D.1

⁷ cf. *IBC* I.C.1

⁸ cf. *IBC* I.B.2

⁹ cf. *IBC* I.C.2

¹⁰ cf. *IBC* I.C.3.

¹¹ cf. *IBC* III.B

¹² cf. *IBC* II.B

¹³ cf. *IBC* III.D

expressions of liberation theology in ways which some may find disturbing. It seems, therefore, that there is a pastoral, theological and indeed ethical need to address this aspect of the Biblical witness in a responsible and rigorous manner.

Chapter 1. Textual observations

This will fall into two parts. The first will be an initial look at the text and translations of Dt 20:16-18 and briefly situate it within its wider literary context of Dt 20 and the book of Deuteronomy in general. The second part will be an initial overview of the usage of the term חרם and its cognates in Greek and Latin within the Hebrew Bible and the Greek and Latin versions. I will also briefly introduce usage of similar terminology in adjacent cultures. There may be some slight overlap with the historical studies of chapter 3 here but it should be minimal.

Chapter 2. History of Exegesis 1: Precritical Readings¹⁴

In this chapter I will look at how the Ban, and this text in particular, has been interpreted and explained in Judaism and Christianity. Of particular interest will be Origen and Augustine from the Patristic era. Lake's analysis of the pre-Augustinian period, although interesting, relies rather heavily on secondary sources and dated translations, and so needs considerably more work. Also of particular interest are the remarks of Thomas and the reformers Luther and Calvin. In Jewish terms it is notable how the term חרם came to mean something like excommunication as this may throw light on some interpretations of the Deuteronomy text. Also of concern in this section will be the extent to which interpretations of this text may have contributed to crusade theology, to Puritan theology both in the English civil war and in the conquest of America and other situations where Christians have either seen themselves as righteously occupying a territory or characterised their enemies as Canaanite or Amalekites, implicitly or explicitly. The chapter will also look at more contemporary readings which none the less are methodologically pre-critical.

Chapter 3. History of Exegesis 2: Modern Historical Critical Readings

These fall into four main groups. The first group I will call the 'literalist' group. This group takes the view that the text is more or less historical in character and seeks to interpret it from that perspective. The interpretation can take the form of a defence of the text – the evangelical commentators reviewed by Lyons take this position – or the rejection of it.

¹⁴ I am using pre-critical here in the sense defined by DULLES *The Craft of Theology*, New York 1995, 3-5

The second group – of whom von Rad is a pioneer¹⁵ – could be described as the ‘military historians’ in the sense that they see the text as either simply part of a set of war laws which then have to be interpreted in context, or more broadly as part of the wider rhetoric of warfare. Typically this group does not make value judgements, though some – such as Craigie¹⁶ – also belong the previous group, and those dealing with the rhetorical dimension may also belong to group three in some senses.

The third group – which I will call socio-literary – looks at the text not so much in terms of its relationship to the military history as to its whole socio-literary location. Rowlett is an important voice here. This takes the primary historical location of the text as the time of its writing rather than the historical period which it narrates, and therefore tries to see what function the text would have had in the community of the late pre-exilic and/or exilic period.

A fourth approach is to look at the range of meanings given to **חרם** in the OT, noting particularly the sacrificial dimension, observing that textually it is seen as a religious dedicatory action. Niditch, among others, brings this out.¹⁷ This insight, together with the insight from the previous approach that the text was never intended as an actual account of how war was to be conducted, may throw further light on the question.

I will conclude this section with some of my own observations and a synthesis. Of particular interest here may be the fact that the execution of the **חרם** in the militaristic sense found in Dt 20:16-18 is always located in the conquest and settlement phase and never in the time after the monarchy is established. The term is used about later periods, but in different senses. The term is also used by Israel’s neighbours in the monarchical period, but is never applied by the OT to the various wars waged by the Israelite kings after Saul. It will also be important to take into account various prophetic texts against the nations which talk, sometimes rather graphically, of God’s vengeance on Israel’s enemies. However these texts rarely, if ever, specifically invoke **חרם**.

Chapter 4. Exegesis and Ethics

One response to the question, as already mentioned, is to say that whatever God commands is just. This has formed part of the exegetical tradition since Augustine. However two questions arise from this. The first is that the ethical theory of divine voluntarism is at least questionable as a basis for morality. I don’t propose to explore this in any great detail except

¹⁵ G. VON RAD, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, Göttingen, 1958.

¹⁶ P.C. CRAIGIE, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* Grand Rapids, 1978.

¹⁷ S. NIDITCH, *War in the Hebrew Bible* Oxford – New York 1993. See in particular 28-55

to note that it stands in considerable tension to the natural law approach to moral theology which has formed a very significant part of contemporary exposition of moral questions by the Magesterium.

The second question raised by such a response, which I will explore in greater detail, is that of the moral effect on the reader. Recent studies on the ethics of reading in general – pioneered to some extent by Wayne Booth¹⁸ – and the ethics of biblical interpretation in particular – which have emerged in the past couple of decades seek to show that the attitude we take to texts has an ethical dimension. Booth would argue this is true of all texts, including those we read principally for pleasure. Although arguably unfashionable, this is not a new insight – the observation that immoral books can corrupt if not read critically is hardly revolutionary! If this is true of all texts, it must be truer of texts which actually demand our response and allegiance, and the Bible is such a text. Of course few scholars would argue that the Bible is an immoral text, but given it has some parts which, if taken on face value, could lead to morally reprehensible behaviour, the question of how we read the text is relevant. The ancient Christian principles of reading according to the *regula fidei* and also reading the parts in the context of the whole and within the community of the Church are relevant here.

Conclusions – Not a Theology of Genocide!

In my final, concluding chapter I will seek to draw on the conclusions of the previous chapters to demonstrate that by not suppressing our horror at the idea that God could demand genocide, we are driven to study the text more deeply and find its literal meaning – by which I mean the meaning the author intended (cf. DV 12) – is discernable within the text and is different from the literalistic meaning. This meaning – which is arguably about, among other things, purity, commitment, community cohesion and giving to God what belongs to God, is non the less still problematic if taken by itself, but read in the light of the *regula fidei* and the wider message of the Scriptures and the Tradition and teaching of the Church, and particularly the person of Jesus Christ, none the less is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (1 Tim 2:16).

I will finally go on to suggest that this demonstrates the wisdom of the Church’s approach to Scripture, in which both scientific exegesis and the tradition of the Church’s reading are valued, and that using a proper methodology which incorporates both of these the challenging nature of this and possibly other ‘hard texts’ can lead us to new and deeper insights into the Word of God.

¹⁸ W.C. BOOTH, *The Company we Keep* Berkley, 1988.