

# Deuteronomy – a book for Brexit times?

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author, and not those of Holy Trinity, Coventry.

## Dedication

*This short piece is dedicated to the memory of Mark Rodger, who led our home group in a stimulating short series of Bible studies on Deuteronomy shortly before he died suddenly in March 2017.*

## Introduction

Whether you rejoiced, grieved or were simply bewildered when the result of last year's EU referendum became clear, no Christian can afford to be indifferent to its consequences for the life of our nation, the lives of each and every one of us in these islands, and the church here in Coventry.

In modern times at least, no major nation has opted out of a common trade agreement with its major market partners. We are in uncharted territory. Some Christian voices maintain this is a time of opportunity, a time for re-asserting Christian values to which, they say, the EU is hostile. Others fear that equally important emphases within the Christian faith could be lost if the nations of the United Kingdom become more inward-looking as a consequence of the vote.

Does the Bible – a collection of books that took its final shape some 1,600 years before the founding of the EU - have anything to teach us about the events taking place in our midst? Christians have had an unfortunate tendency to read its ancient texts into unfolding events in the modern world. But while current affairs are not a 're-run' of the Bible, its ageless wisdom can be instructive. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy may just offer some intriguing lessons for Brexit times.

## The historical background

Readers of Deuteronomy (the name means 'second law') have long noticed that it repeats quite a lot of what Exodus and Leviticus have already said. There's been much speculation about why, but it's now widely thought Deuteronomy is a

revision of older material, updated for the changing circumstances of the kingdom of Judah in the latter part of the 7th century BC. With the power of the Assyrian empire in rapid decline, vassal states long under its thumb, such as Babylon and Judah, saw an opportunity to 'take back control'. Assyrian control, exercised from Nineveh (the Brussels of its day?) had benefited some in Judah, and trade had flourished. But so too had idolatrous worship; the gap between rich and poor had widened; and a decades-long influx of refugees (or perhaps asylum-seekers, or economic migrants?) from Israel, Judah's conquered neighbour to the north, had added to the sense of crisis. We can perhaps discern certain parallels to Brexit times in all this. But then events took a turn we might find surprising.

### **The Deuteronomic law: one people under God**

Even a quick read through the laws at the heart of Deuteronomy (chapters 12 – 26) reveals a concern for issues that, on the face of it, are scarcely topical today: payment of agricultural tithes, what to do if a man discovers his bride isn't a virgin, where freed slaves can live, and so on. So what, if anything, does this odd-looking patchwork have to say to us in the 21st century?

The connecting thread running through it is a sense of the people taking responsibility for shaping the rules, and for revising the law to ensure greater fairness for all. King Josiah is often thought to be the king responsible for the final shaping of the revised law, and 2 Ki. 22 & 23 in all likelihood tell the story of his part in this. But what's often missed is that he is appointed by 'the people of the land' (in Hebrew, the 'am hā' āreš). We don't know why the citizens of Judah suddenly tired of dynastic succession, though Josiah's predecessors Manasseh, and his son Amon, were hardly good advertisements for it. But whatever the reason, appointing a king (2 Ki. 21:24) was merely the first indication that the people, under God, were recovering a sense of their calling as one nation, chosen together to display what godliness looks like to watching world. A new covenant with their God replaced a covenant with the king of Assyria.

They did it without 'experts' too, dismissing the courtiers from their role as advisors to the king, part of an apparently general weakening of the monarch-centred state apparatus. And in all sorts of subtle ways, those curious laws they

revised displayed a lively, significantly extended concern for social solidarity under God, too:

The tithes, formerly payable to the king for his use as God's representative, are now to be distributed to the people as a whole. And they're given preferentially and directly, every third year, to the most socially marginalised: what Frank Crüsemann has called 'the first known tax for a social program' (see Deut. 14:22-29);

While some burdens on the 'people of the land' are lessened as the sacrificial requirements are reduced (worship centred in Jerusalem replaces the many local shrines), new laws demand that they make social sacrifices in favour of the poorest. These include provisions for full remission of debt, often incurred by the landless, after seven years; and an extension of the prohibition on charging interest to fellow Israelites;

There are provisions for the liberation of slaves, too – these would often have been agricultural workers. See Deut. 15, and Deut. 23:16 for their right to live where they choose amongst the Israelites once freed. Crüsemann has said about this provision that 'the whole state becomes a place of asylum for runaway slaves';

For the first time, the law mandates the inclusion of specific groups on society's margins in the major festival celebrations;

The 'justice system' gets an overhaul, too, with the power to decide cases either passing to the people publicly 'in the gate' or needing, for the first time, both parents' involvement. New to the public courts system were 'family issues' like the virginity status of brides and levirate marriage, which would previously have been for the male head of the family to decide;

Even going to war is now a matter for the whole people, rather than just the king (Deut. 20);

Given what the Bible persistently tells us about the Israelites' (understandable) attitude to rule by foreign powers, a social and religious backlash in a very conservative, nationalistic direction might have been expected once Assyria was no longer a force to be reckoned with. That a backlash didn't happen may have been in part due to the self-restraint of the 'people of the land', who put social

solidarity ahead of self-interest. It probably also owed something to increasing levels of literacy among all strata of society at this time.

The people seem to have grasped this was the time for 'a new beginning with Yahweh [God] through obedience to the laws designed for its life in the land' (A.D.H Mayes, Deuteronomy). This new beginning of 'genuine popular rule' (Crüsemann again) was generous, merciful - and designed to complete what may have been a century-long process of healing the wounds of historical division between Judah and its northern sister Israel. Following Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom, Israel's people had been variously deported or enslaved. Though Deuteronomy is scathing about its former near neighbour's religious failings, many of its people, having sought asylum in Judah, may have been among the landless debt-slaves newly protected there by Deuteronomy's laws.

It was, if not democracy as we know it, at least proto-democratic in remarkable ways. As we ponder the way forward for the UK, the possibilities for a democracy that's genuinely for everyone seem to hang in the balance. The people of Judah seem to have had a strong sense that they were building something for the long term. While those who made the laws and appointed the king were landowners, they were demonstrably not a 'metropolitan elite' looking to set (as it were) 'in tablets of stone' a system that would benefit them at the expense of the many. They strived to establish enduring arrangements for more equitable distribution of economic wealth, and to regenerate social, moral and spiritual capital for all.

Deuteronomy's account of the revision of the law ends with an imagined sense of the people gathered again with Moses, ready to 'enter the land' - that is, to be 'a people from somewhere' (as Grayson Perry recently characterised EU referendum 'leave' voters), a people with a sense of being called to live distinctive, holy lives as one people in a particular place, under God. And to reflect, in those lives, the mercy that God had shown them in their 'founding story' of rescue from oppression and slavery in Egypt.

In one of Deuteronomy's most famous passages, Moses sets before the whole assembled people the blessings that will follow on obedience to the law, and the curses that will follow on disobedience. Perhaps his final speech, like the book as a whole, has a message for us as God's people in a divided city, a divided country: 'Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him...'. (Deut. 30:19, 20).

## For further reading/viewing

Crüsemann, F. (1996). *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

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Finkelstein, I. and Silberman, N. (2001). *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Perry, G. (presenter) (2017). *Divided Britain*. London: Channel 4 (first broadcast 30<sup>th</sup> May 2017)

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31<sup>st</sup> May 2017