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The Limits of Utopia: A Levinasian Reading of Deuteronomy 7

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Introduction: Reading for Community

Reading Deuteronomy 7 offers an opportunity to ponder the question of community. In fact, this text makes for a most helpful conversation partner because it invites us to consider community with *all* its complex dynamics: the need for belonging and safety, the aspect of power, and our tendency to exclude others. The issue of community is central to the book of Deuteronomy, as it is set on the brink of Israel's entering the land of promise. Through the words of Moses, a detailed vision is offered for what life *together* should look like once Israel enters the land – a life where people ought to be well taken care of in safety and prosperity. As the vision takes shape, however, it becomes clear that the good life in the good land is thought to be dependent on an existence separate from other inhabitants of that land (defined in ch. 7 as seven nations) and that this separation needs to be not just moral and religious but also relational and physical. According to the book of Deuteronomy the boundaries around the people of Israel are to be strongly enforced; life depends on it. There are limits to the Deuteronomic utopia – it is not open for everybody.

In Deuteronomy 7 an idea of not only separation from but destruction of the seven nations[1] takes a central position. This text can therefore be quite disturbing for a modern reader. But what makes the text interesting is that it contains not only a violent demand for genocide, but also an expression of hope for a troubled community. Therefore the text can also offer inspiration for how to overcome internal diversities for the sake of peace and prosperity. It is this connection between a community's expressed need for a good home (a need we should take seriously, both for the Israelites, and for people in our own times) and the call for genocide (a call we should always reject) that makes the text especially intriguing.

[1] For simplification I will refer to the list of seven nations in Deuteronomy 7 as the "nations," as we remain aware that separation was not to be upheld against every non-Israelite.

Among scholars there are two main options for handling the disturbing tone of Deuteronomy 7. The first option explains that the presence of other religions posed a threat to Yahwism, and that Israel needed to protect its unique worship tradition at all costs. If Israel hadn't stayed clear of that threat, so the argument goes, they would have lost also their unique ethical tradition and risked becoming guilty of atrocities and an oppressive kingship.[2] The second type of explanation relies more on historical studies than ideas of Israelite exceptionalism and argues that the text's call for genocide was never carried out. It was merely a rhetorical strategy to enforce distance from the "nations" – a strategy that can be explained with sociological, anthropological, and psychological theories – and therefore modern readers need not take the violent tone seriously.[3] I find both of these options unsatisfactory. They disregard the ethical problem of a text demanding the annihilation of people – a problem that needs to be addressed whether or not Israel was under pressure, and whether or not the violence was ever acted out. They also fail to explore the relationship between a community's real needs, utopian dreams, and the limits around those dreams. Therefore, I offer in this article a reading of Deuteronomy 7 that does not focus primarily on explaining *why* the text says what it says. My interest instead lies in how one can do an ethical and responsible reading of a text that reaches for an ideal place *and* demands annihilation of some of the inhabitants in that place.

When the issue is *how to read,* hermeneutical – and not just exegetical – questions are being asked. Hermeneutical theories acknowledge that a reader always makes (conscious or unconscious) choices in terms of approach, method, and conclusions, and that those choices are based on the reader's cultural context and social position. One way to think of a reader's locality is in terms of center and margin. Feminist and deconstructionist theorists in particular tend to bring up this perspective.[4] That

[2] For this type of interpretation see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996); Dennis Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994); Richard Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2002).

[3] See for instance Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9* (WBC; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001); Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991); Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in L. E. Keck (ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 268–538.

[4] For an introduction to ideas about center and margin, and truth and identity, see Mary Klages, *Literary Theory for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum Books, 2006); A. K. M.

Western culture is built on a structure of center and margin has both philosophical and social aspects to it. At the core is the notion that reality is structured around an *idea* that cannot be questioned (e.g. that white, heterosexual, and male are the most desirable identities) and that everything in our reality gets its place and value in relation to that idea. People or perspectives that don't fit neatly into that idea, which is the center of reality, are placed on the margins in terms of power and resources. The view of many feminist and deconstructionist theorists is that our world's social injustice has its roots in this structure, and that a change toward justice involves deconstruction of the center. Such a deconstruction is likelier to be done by someone positioned at the margin, than someone at the center.[5] For the center is a place of privilege, and if I am among those who benefit from the ideas we take as unquestionable, I may have a hard time recognizing those ideas that give me value, power and resources. It is harder still to break away from them.

If it is true that work for justice is more effective when done at the margins, how does a person situated at the traditional center partake? More specifically for the current project, can a *reader* positioned at the center (like myself, being a native-born, well educated, and comfortable Swede) read in a way that exposes and challenges an unjust structure in which she is among the privileged? By reading Deuteronomy 7 with a hermeneutics crafted from Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of the Other,[6]

Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcoming in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009).

[5] In Biblical Studies, readings that are done from marginalized positions and that question the center include: Uriah Y. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008); Carleen R. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (eds.), *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[6] Throughout this article I will use capital O when referring to Levinas' "Other." In his own French writing, Levinas switches between "l'Autre" and "l'autre" to speak of the personal Other. Translators choose differently. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 24–25, footnote. Cf. Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas' Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 336–337, n. 1. I will use capital O in order to stress the weight and importance of the concept of the Other as a source for ethics, in Levinas' work, and in this article.

this article is an attempt to show that a centered position can be deconstructed also from the inside, and that this happens by welcoming the Other. I will show that while the main voice of Deuteronomy 7 envisions a utopian community dependent on clearly defined limits around itself and against the "nations," there are traces of a resistance in the text against this image of utopia. A Levinasian hermeneutic of the Other enables us to see that the text's imagining of an Israel in isolated unity is deconstructed and resisted from the centered inside.

When the purpose of the reading is to partake in the furthering of social justice, it can be tempting to simply dismiss Deuteronomy 7 as a destructive and dangerous text. But this article does not go in the direction of dismissal. As we will see, Levinas' philosophy of the Other provides a resistance against any judgment or evaluation of any text or context, even if they seem exclusionary and violent. With Levinas, any attempt to settle comfortably for who is victim and who is oppressor, or for what a moral interpretation should be, is disrupted by the presence of the Other, i.e. by human beings of radical alterity that resist my categorizations. The Other is present as the various producers and readers of this text, and the text itself is an Other to me. The Other therefore takes a centered position in my reading – guiding it, and resisting it.[7]

Toward a Levinasian Hermeneutic

The philosophy of Levinas is startling in its insistence that hope for a torn world lies not in a sense of unity or sameness, but in maintaining our irreducible differences. This view introduces an unusual perspective into conversations about community and justice.[8] But it is helpful in a close read-

[7] As we can already sense, Levinas' concept of the Other is different than what is commonly assumed both in everyday conversations and in literary and social theory. An "other" often refers to an individual or group systematically judged as different and therefore *inferior* to a normative majority. To "other" someone is usually seen as a negative and exclusionary act and an injustice we should do away with to strive for greater "sameness." See, e.g., Klages, *Literary Theory*, 96. Contrary to this understanding, Levinas understands the concept of Other as saving the world from de-humanization. For him, retaining otherness is retaining dignity.

[8] Cf. for instance with Markus M. L. Crepaz, *Trust Beyond Borders: Immigration, the Welfare State, and Identity in Modern Societies* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Of Michigan Press, 2008), 260–261: "'Identity' is built on shifting sands, is malleable, constructed, and not an unchanging essence. This should … remind [people] that *it is more fruitful to seek common ground than emphasizing what separates us*" (italics mine).

ing of Deuteronomy 7. Through Levinas' persistent emphasis on the irreducible dignity of the Other, he offers a way for complexity and nuance with which to analyze relationships within and between communities – ancient and modern – and between reader and text.

A Lithuanian Jew, Emmanuel Levinas' life and work were deeply shaped by the horrors of World War II.[9] He strove to understand the violence that had devastated Europe, and to search for *ethics* – Levinas' word for goodness. This made him focus on the fundamental aspects of the interpersonal relationship; what does an ethical relationship look like? Levinas locates the root of violence at the heart of Western thought-tradition. Ever since the Greeks, he argues, the Western world has been preoccupied with notions of totality and sameness. "Totality" refers to the effort in both the natural sciences and humanities to identify an ontological, overarching idea of reality – something that precedes and surpasses each human being. Every aspect of reality will then be seen as nothing but a part of the whole, something that has a place and value only in relation to that totality. In this mindset, nothing must be allowed to shake the totality; each part must serve to uphold the structure of the totality.[10] "Sameness" refers to what those steeped in the tradition of totality tend to strive for in relation to other people, and to reality in general. According to Levinas, we tend to approach whatever object we encounter in a way that eliminates its alterity and assimilates it into sameness with what we already know. To *understand* is our goal, which leads to categorization into whatever totalizing idea is currently dominant. This goal gives the subject priority over the object: it's more important that the object fits into the subject's understanding, than that the object is allowed to be what it truly is. Moreover, when this "object" is a human being his or her dignity as a unique existent will vanish under the weight of the grand idea.[11] The Western preoccupation with totality and sameness, Levinas argues, is related to the notion of an independent subject as the center of reality. In any encounter, the subject will inevitably view the object through a veil of ideas and categories. Since the object is not allowed to alter those ideas or categories, the subject is not only the center of reality, but the master of it.

[9] Robert John Sheffler Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1993), 11.

[10] An example of this is the Third Reich's treatment of its Jews and other groups that didn't seem to "fit" their idea of a true person. What cannot be assimilated into the whole apparently must be annihilated.

[11] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

The Other remains at the margins, reduced to something that fits the subject's categorizations.

To offer a way towards ethical relationships, Levinas suggests a radically different approach to understanding the self and the world, the center and the margin. His philosophy starts not with the subject as center and master of reality, but with the infinite transcendence of the Other. It aims not for maintaining totality or sameness but for retaining the Other's alterity. His ethics doesn't rely on a person's autonomous conscience, but on welcoming the Other as having priority over me.[12] In every encounter, in all my thinking about myself and the world, in all my speaking and reading, there is the Other – approaching me, different than me, and with absolute priority over me. For Levinas, the utter otherness of the other person will always be experienced as shocking and disruptive. But this otherness – and not recognition – is what can spark a response of goodness, and it does so precisely because of its disruptive nature. Ethics means letting the Other be precisely Other, not reducing him/her to something similar and understandable to me, and letting that otherness put my own being into question.[13] For Levinas, the Other has priority over the subject, and thus, the subject is de-centered; the margin becomes the center.[14]

In this de-centered identity lies the path for a reader that finds herself in a privileged position but is concerned with reading for the sake of justice. Levinas' perspective allows me to explore how Deuteronomy 7 categorizes its world – including human beings, experiences, hopes, and relationships with a deity – and how that categorization tends to overlook the

[12] Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 190.

[13] When the Other has approached the subject and thus decentered the subject's identity through substitution, the encounter calls the subject to respond, "Here I am." So Levinas: "[I]n the responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, the negativity of this anarchy … commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor. … It provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage. All my inwardness is invested in the form of a despite-me, for-another. Despite-me, for-another, is signification par excellence. And it is the sense of the 'oneself', that accusative that derives from no nominative: it is the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 11.

[14] Levinas calls this de-centering movement *substitution*: the subject no longer exists for-one-self but its existence is substituted into being for-an-Other. This is the process in which the subject receives its true and ethical identity. Through *substitution* the Other, approaching from the outside, will now constitute the true identity of my self.

way the presence of the Other effects a breach in the understanding of reality. It pushes me to search for ethical and responsible encounters hidden beneath the text's ideas and rhetoric.

The scope of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of the full implications of Levinas' philosophy of the Other, nor of its limitations. The limitations may include the partly problematic radicalism of Levinas' priority of the Other over the self,[15] and the sometimes frustrating absence of an ethics that includes more than two people – indeed, the lack of any constructive plan of how community should be built after the ethical encounter and the de-centering of the subject has taken place.[16] Both the radicalism and the avoidance of concrete blueprints for societal structure, however, are at the heart of Levinas' contribution to the current project. His is a work of resistance and obstinacy, not prescriptive engineering of how a "we" might be organized. Instead of offering a blueprint of how to build an alternative world together, Levinas leaves it to the encounter, the ultimate moment, to create that world. A Levinasian hermeneutic therefore renders the road forward quite uncertain, except for the consistent struggle against a totalizing reduction of the Other under methodological, moral, or theological ideas.

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[15] Responding to the Other's approach, according to Levinas, entails great risks. But the risks are worth taking. Levinas argues: the Other's approach "is a dis-inter-ested sentiment certainly capable of degenerating into hatred, but a chance for what we must – perhaps with prudence – call love and resemblance in love." Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (trans. Bettina Bergo; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 147.

[16] There will always be another Other to de-center whoever approaches someone, and this someone will be an Other for yet another. Each subject exists in a web of approaches, encounters, and substitutions, which raises the question: if two separate Others approach me with contradictory demands, to whom should I respond? John Drabinski asks: "To whom am I obligated? And in what sense am I obligated – to what end, with what severity, and with how much scope? Levinas's ethics induces plenty of vertigo in the face-to-face." John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 165. Levinas acknowledges that there will be situations where the subject needs to ask which Other has priority. At this point Levinas starts using the term justice where he before focused only on ethics. *Ethics* refers to goodness and responsibility in the encounter with the Other, but the question of *justice* is for Levinas one of judgment and comparison between conflicting calls from several Others, and every civilization needs to ask that question. Beyond this, however, he does not prescribe a method for how to compare and prioritize. Such a method would become a totality. Each responsible person needs to solve it in each concrete encounter. However, the Other's priority over the subject remains. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans. Michael B. Smith; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 102.

In my reading of Deuteronomy 7 I use a Levinasian sensibility and vocabulary to sift through and deconstruct the text's rhetorical layers in search for those excluded by that rhetoric. Specifically, Levinas' philosophy of the Other pushes me to ask the following questions:[17] *First*, what are the totalizing ideas that center this text? To answer that question I will look for the implicit assumptions behind the rhetoric. *Secondly*, what is the common ground that is assumed between people in the text? Here I will explore the rhetorical choices that the redactors have made at the expense of diversity. *Thirdly*, what otherness disrupts the center? I will show how the text contradicts itself and manifests ambiguity by which the text's centering ideas become less absolute. *Fourthly*, what is the ethical encounter between people to be retrieved out of the text? This is a question of history and context. *Fifthly*, how is my reading continually disturbed by the text and by the human beings that are touched by it? I will let the text remain my Other and pay attention to my interpretations and conclusions lest they too become absolute and totalizing.

In the literary analysis of the biblical text[18] I mainly use rhetorical criticism, since I assume that the text is well composed, rather than just a patchwork of sources and traditions.[19] I also assume that the text is produced to have a persuasive effect on an audience and that the effect is linked to the text's form, and will therefore pay attention to that form to demonstrate how the text develops and communicates its ideas. As part of the literary study, however, we also need to ask historical questions, to ponder who is attempting to persuade whom with this text, and to expose the rhetorical choices that have been made when other options were available.

Methods of biblical studies typically aim not only for a precise reading of a text, but also for a stable foundation for interpretation. In the current project this aim will be held in tension with a Levinasian sensibility that

[17] For other examples of putting Levinas' philosophy to hermeneutical use, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Gary A. Philips, and David Jobling (eds.), *Levinas and Biblical Studies* (SemeiaSt, 43; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

[18] Quotes in English are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise specified. Analysis of Hebrew vocabulary is based on the BHS.

[19] I am focusing on the text as it now stands, rather than on its historical production and usage. I am not striving to ultimately determine an authorial intent behind the text, and I do not overload my text with technical terminology. But since I am exploring how narratives of identity, community, and boundaries are rhetorically constructed, it is helpful to trace the rhetorical styles and features of the text.

inevitably leads to openness and to a resistance against ready conclusions. In order to keep this tension alive, I structure the current project as an *intercontextual* reading, i.e., a dialogue of sorts.[20] I assume that texts exist in an intricate web of mutual influence with other texts, and contexts. An intercontextual reading brings into the dialogue not only "literature" but also popular culture and other parts of discourse, and intermingles history of official documents with history of social memory. By maintaining a constant dialogue between Deuteronomy 7 and a Levinasian sensibility I show how each text/context illuminates the other.[21]

Deuteronomy 7: A Voice of Unity

To show the focus that the idea of annihilation of the "nations" gets in this text, and hence the importance of paying close attention to this idea in a reading, let me first point to three aspects of the text's literary context. First, it is helpful to read Deuteronomy 7 in light of the appeals in Deut 5:1; 6:4; and 9:1. At these instances, Moses[22] summons his audience to "Hear, O Israel," and the appeals are followed by discussions on Israel's covenant with Yahweh as expressed in the ten commandments, particularly the first one. The exclusive covenant with Yahweh alone is the center of these chapters, not least chapter 7 (see 7:4, 10, 16, 25).[23] The focus

[20] For an introduction to this approach, see Tat-siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Jean K. Kim, *Woman and Nation: An Intercontextual Reading of the Gospel of John From a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2004).

[21] Liew presents his intercontextual approach as sparking a dialogue between contexts, intending to show "how each [context] may become vulnerable alongside the other." Liew, *Politics of Parousia,* 150.

[22] When I mention Moses, Israel, Moses' audience, and the "nations," I refer to them as literary characters within the Deuteronomic text, not historical persons or communities. When a discussion is needed of the historical background of these characters, I will alert my reader of the shift.

[23] According to Dean McBride, the exclusivity of a Yahwistic covenant is the center of Deuteronomy's ideology as a whole: "Thus the first part (5:1–6:3) not only reviews the fundamental demands of the decalogue, which articulate Yahweh's sovereignty, but legitimates Moses in his role as spokesman for Yahweh. This means that Israel must accept the Mosaic legislation as covenant policy, comparable in authority to the decalogue stipulations themselves. *The second part (6:4–8:20) offers the fullest and most forceful presentation of Israel's covenant ideology to be found in the whole of Hebrew Scripture*." S. Dean McBride Jr., "Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy," in John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (eds.), *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of*

on the first commandment, and the rhetorical weight of Moses' appeals to the people (Moses' words are given explicit legitimacy in 7:11), bring out the import of the chapter in regards to Deuteronomy's imagination of communal identity. But when we read the text in this perspective, not only exclusive Yahwism but also the call for annihilation of the "nations" obtains a centered and authoritative weight.

Second, there seems to be a dependent relationship between Deuteronomy 7 and an older, anti-Canaanite tradition reflected in Exod 23:20–33.[24] The content is strikingly similar, but the language of Deuteronomy 7 is stronger, both in the verbs instructing the Israelites in how to handle the "nations," and in the description of the fate of the "nations."[25] The sharpening of the language in the Deuteronomic text appears to be intentional rather than accidental. Because the authors of Deuteronomy 7 seemingly changed an older tradition to serve a new situation, this article will take the particular and violent rhetoric seriously.

Third, one of the particular features of Deuteronomy 7 is that it is enveloped by the term חרם (exterminate, ban) which forms a delimitating *inclusio* for the unit. In vv. 2 and 26, חרם is how Israel should handle the "nations." But חרם becomes an intriguing warning for Israel as well (if they disobey, also they will be set apart for destruction, v. 26), which complicates matters. As I will argue, חרם in this text is a source both for the unity of Israel – distinct from the "nations" – and resistance against that unity.

When was there a need for a text of such unifying (for Israel) and delimiting (against the "nations") character? There has been no agreement on Deuteronomy's history of production. Cases are still being made for pre-exilic and exilic settings, with more or less post-exilic editing.[26] The

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Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 17–33, here 27 (italics mine).

[24] See for instance Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11,* 382–383; Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* 84.

[25] Exod 23:28 has שׁלח (send away) and גרשׁ (drive away), both verbs often found in contexts of divorce (cf. שׁלח in Deut 24:1 and גרשׁ in Lev 21:7). Deuteronomy 7, however, uses חרם (ban, exterminate, vv. 2, 26), אכל (devour, v. 16), כלה (put an end to, v. 22), שׁמד (wipe out, v. 24), and אבד (perish, v. 20). In Exod 23:27, God promises Israel to "throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies *turn their backs to you.*" In contrast, according to Deut 7:23 "the Lord your God will give them over to you, and throw them into great panic, until *they are destroyed*" (italics mine).

[26] For an overview of the scholarly development regarding the redaction history of Deuteronomy, see Thomas Römer, "The Book of Deuteronomy," in Steven L. McKenzie and M.

issue will not be settled here. But what seems clear is that Deuteronomy does not provide guidance for the first conquest of the land at the time of a historical Moses.[27] Rather, the situation to which the text responds is much later – a situation in which past events needed to be retold purposefully, using the voice of a past hero. Fully aware of the complexity regarding the issue of socio-historic setting, I am going to stipulate, for the purposes of this project, that we read the text as a response to the Babylonian exile. An exilic setting makes sense of the text's urgent tone (see e.g. 7:17–18) – especially regarding the "nations" – and the referrals to an impending catastrophe that appear in Deuteronomy 7 (see 7:4, 26). A production in exile also fits with the text's literary setting of Moses and the people still being outside the land, still in the wilderness. Furthermore, while the text has been used in multiple situations and communities, it was certainly used during and immediately after the exile. Therefore I will read it with an exilic community, struggling to maintain its distinct identity while being threatened by their own loss of memory of the old traditions, threatened by assimilation into a foreign people, and searching for fulfillment of a distinct identity as a people different from all others.[28]

The following analysis of Deuteronomy 7 is structured around four subsections: Deut 7:1–6, 7–11, 12–16, and 17–26. I explore the text in parts to trace how it constructs an idea of sameness within Israel and establishes boundaries against the "nations." I suggest it does so through certain rhetorical themes, characterized here as *identity* (7:1–6), *story* (7:7–11), *life* (7:12–16), and *fear* (7:17–26). These themes have two effects: First, they construct a sense of sameness for the audience by offer-

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Patrick Graham (eds.), *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 184–194; Robert R. Wilson, "Deuteronomy, Ethnicity, and Reform: Reflections on the Social Setting of the Book, of Deuteronomy," in John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (eds.), *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr.* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 127–123.

[27] See Römer regarding the implicit references in the Deutoronomic text to the ancient Near Eastern treaty tradition, which points to a Deuteronomic use of ideologies that were in practice much later than the first conquest. Römer, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 196–197.

[28] For this perspective, see E. Theodore Mullen, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1993); David Noel Freedman, "The Earliest Bible," in Michael Patrick O'Connor and David Noel Freedman (eds.), *Backgrounds for the Bible* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1987), 29–37.

ing a shared identity as Yahweh's holy people, a shared experience and story in the exodus, a shared hope for life in safety and prosperity, and a shared fear of the "nations." Secondly, the themes gain a persuasive weight through their existential nature. Since the text does not simply offer a discussion in which the details can be agreed or disagreed upon by the audience, but uses existential themes that go to the heart of a person's and a community's identity, it is easy to be pulled into the text and difficult to argue against it – both, I imagine, for an ancient audience, and a modern reader. The existential nature of the rhetorical themes thus gives the ideas that the text communicates an *ontological* character in a Levinasian sense. The ideas are that "true" Israel is a community chosen by Yahweh for a distinct and holy life, a community which exists in an exclusive covenant with Yahweh, is promised to possess the land, and needs to be separated from the "nations."

7:1–6: Identity

A temporal marker introduces the chapter: "*when* the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy" (v. 1). From the outset, then, the text is slightly displaced out of the present because what it looks to is not what is here and now – neither for Moses nor for the author.[29] The text reaches elsewhere, both temporally and spatially. Temporally, Moses and his audience are preparing for what is going to happen in the future, once they have entered the land. The exilic audience is turning to a narrative from the past, while also looking to the future and their imagined re-possessing of the land. Spatially, Moses' audience is situated on the threshold of the land that they have been wandering towards since their exodus out of Egypt. They haven't crossed the Jordan yet; they are still in the wilderness (cf. Deut 1:1). They are being held up here, on the border, looking with Moses into the land and into the future.[30]

[29] The temporal marker כי in verse 1 is followed by a verb in the imperfect: יביאך (he will bring you). NRSV translates the subsequent participle (בא–שמה) and infinitive construct (לרשתה) of the verse as "about to enter and occupy." This translation maintains the forward-looking sense, which is iterated again in the waw-consecutive perfect of ונשל (and he will clear away).

[30] Robert Polzin comments on the spatial perspective that Moses shares with the author: "The author of Deuteronomy, and *his* audience is apparently in exile, that is, also outside the land, hoping to get in once more with God's mercy and power. The one audience is told under what conditions they will *retain* the land; the other audience under what conditions they will *regain* the land." Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary*

The text attempts to construct an identity in the here and now by looking to a different time and a distant land. It reaches for past and future without grasping neither, hanging somewhere in between, displaced from the present. This existence "in-between" makes the tone of certainty of the whole chapter (stating that the land will be conquered and the "nations" cleared away) destabilized from the outset. At the same time, however, the reality of being currently displaced provides a foundation for the ideas that the authors wish to communicate: Only if Israel embraces its identity as Yahweh's holy people and obeys the commandments given through Moses – including the separation from the "nations" – only under this condition will Israel possess the land.

How does Levinasian hermeneutics shape the reader's interpretation of this initial displacement from the here and now? The text's description of a future of worshipping Yahweh alone (7:9–12), and of safety and prosperity (7:13–16), implies discontentment with present circumstances. Should we, with a Levinasian approach, interpret the rhetorical displacement as a welcoming of otherness in the sense of a time, place, and communal identity different than what is here and now? Not necessarily. Levinas argues that a vision for *possessing* something transcendent (i.e. what is different than me and beyond my reach) is still rooted in an idea of the immanent (i.e. that I can understand and grasp everything).[31] In Deuteronomy 7 the vision is about possessing a particular land and a particular life (cf. ירשׁ, "take possession of," in vv. 1, 17). The vision hopes for change, but not any kind of change, and it offers a path to possessing that change. Therefore, what may appear as welcoming otherness in the text actually has the effect of cementing the text's ontological ideas. Even if the text looks elsewhere for a different time, place, and life, as if open to alterity, it grasps desperately for *rest* for its own people.

What is disrupting Israel's sense of rest in this text is the presence of the "nations." Vv. 1–4 present who the "nations" are, what mixing with them will lead to, and how they should be dealt with. The list of seven

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Study of the Deuteronomic History (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 72 (italics in the original).

[31] Levinas explains with an analogy: "The doctor who missed an engineering career, the poor man who longs for wealth, the patient who suffers, the melancholic who is bored for nothing oppose their condition while remaining attached to its horizons. The 'otherwise' and 'elsewhere' they wish still belong to the here below they refuse. … The alterity of a world refused is not the alterity of the Stranger." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 41.

nations in v. 1 is a traditional list and appears elsewhere in the Old Testament, although in varying versions.[32] By the time of the exile, most of the peoples in this list no longer existed, and an exilic audience would probably have no reference to these named entities.[33] Therefore it should not be read as referring to concrete relationships with the peoples named in the list. Rather, the list is a general and totalizing representation of "all of them," of all who are not included in the "you" addressed by Moses. "All of them" probably includes the foreigners surrounding the exiled Israelites in Babylon, the foreigners present in Judah before and after Jerusalem's destruction, and, as we will see, perhaps also the Israelites that did not fit in Deuteronomy's view of "true" Israel. The text expresses no interest in the details of these peoples' lives, of why they are in the land or what their specific cultures and traditions are.[34] What is important in this text is that the "nations" are more numerous and stronger than Israel. So what Israel must do is not just defeat them, but *utterly destroy* (החרם תחרים) them (v. 2).[35] In the next sentence we get a sense of emphasis by way of repetition: "Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy." How are these two demands related? The first – to not write a covenant – envisions a bilateral agreement for two parties who are both responsible and loyal. The second – to show no mercy – conveys something more unilateral (mercy or favor is granted by the stronger party to the weaker). Thus Israel should not only refrain from a mutual covenant (which is risky since the other party might not be trustworthy), but even in the instances where favor could be bestowed on the undeserving, Israel is to say no.

After a reiteration of the prohibition to intermarry (v. 3), a warning that intermarriage leads to idolatry (v. 4), and a description of what acts of destruction are demanded of Israel (v. 5), v. 6 presents the rationale not only for Israel's separation from the "nations" but for the destruction of their cultic places: "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God." But

[32] For instance in Exod 23:23 (six nations) and Ezra 9:1 (eight). According to 1 Kings 9:21 Israel was *not* able to completely destroy the (here five) nations.

[33] See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 84–85, for an introduction to the research on the peoples listed in v. 1.

[34] The "nations" are mentioned repeatedly in Deuteronomy, e.g. in 9:1–5, 12:29–32, and 29:18. They are varyingly described as wicked, threatening to poison Israel, and are accused of "abhorrent" practices.

[35] The first half of v. 2 is intensified not just by a sort of repetition of concepts but also by a switch in verbal tense: Up until now the events have been expressed in the imperfect (or perfect consecutive), but here appears the first imperative (additionally emphasized by the infinitive absolute).

this statement is more than a legitimization. Separation and destruction are here rendered intimately linked to the deepest identity of Israel and their connection with their God. By obeying what Moses demands of the people, they will show that they are set apart as holy. By closing this section with a reminder of Israel's holiness the text not only generates a uniting identity within its audience, but also contrasts Israel with the "nations" who are also to be set apart – not as holy, however, but as חרם (v. 2).[36] There is thus an intimate association in this text between being God's people and separating from the "nations."

Deut 7:1–6 expresses an idea about who "true" Israel is, based on Israel's distinct identity as Yahweh's holy people. This identity is understood as one of sameness and unity. Under the idea of "true" Israel, the "nations" are given an anonymous part by representing – through a traditional and reducing list – who Israel is not. The text communicates a sense of being disrupted, and attempts a totalizing grasp of the otherness that the "nations" represent.

7:7–11: Story

While the previous section constructs a sense of unity and sameness for its audience by emphasizing Israel's differentiation from the "nations," vv. 7–11 establish this unity by expanding on what constitutes this "we." The text seems here to attempt not only a reduction of the "nations" but also an assimilation of the people of Israel. To achieve this assimilation the text overlooks the vast diversity of its exilic audience and constructs a shared story and a shared agenda.

Verse 7 stays with the language of identity, but here the origin of identity is placed in the past: Yahweh desired, and Yahweh chose. The idea of exceptionalism also continues: "for you were the fewest of all peoples." With Levinasian hermeneutics this claim for particularity in a people's character and Yahweh's choice may sound like a welcoming of Israel's irreducible transcendence. But we should remember that in the ethical encounter so central to Levinas' thought, alterity is to be recognized first

[36] Weinfeld has noted that the notion of attaching Israel's holiness to God's election "occurs twice in the book of Deuteronomy, *each time in connection with the practices of foreign peoples unbecoming to the noble people of Israel (14:2 and 21; 7:6*)." Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 226 (italics mine).

of all in *the Other*. To claim it for the self is the subject's usual way of appropriating and devouring the world for itself.

Israel is said to share in the following characteristics: they are elected by God (vv. 6, 7); they stem from the same ancestors (v. 8); they share the experience of being captives in Egypt and redeemed by Yahweh (v. 8); they are together in a covenantal and eternal relationship with God (vv. 9, 10); they have been provided – by the one authoritative leader – with a set of laws to follow, and have a communal vocation to observe that law today (v. 11). According to Römer, it is typical for the exilic redactions of Deuteronomy to locate Israel's unique origin in the people's experience and vocation, rather than in genealogy. For an exilic audience, a continuity with a Yahwistic worship of old needed to be established. The text's referrals to the "ancestors" (7:8) demonstrate how the authors built that continuity. Even though in exilic times the "ancestors" could be alluded to in different ways – either in terms of genealogy or of the exodus – in Deuteronomy the focus is on the latter.[37]

It is not difficult to imagine that the story of the exodus was a useful lens for the redactors concerned with instilling hope and direction in an exilic audience. The story of leaving captivity behind and retaining their own land must have been compelling, both for sustaining a sense of distinct identity, and to persuade the audience to go back to Judah. For the thought of leaving Babylonian captivity might not have seemed desirable for all. Lester Grabbe points out how little we know about how many actually returned to Judah after the end of the Babylonian empire. Archeological data however do not seem to support the image painted in Ezra 1–2 that there was a sudden influx of returned exiles in Judah in the early Persian period. Grabbe concludes: "The return was probably more gradual than pictured in Ezra and probably involved smaller numbers. … Although *the bulk of the Jews living in Mesopotamia stayed there*, it seems unlikely that some would not have taken advantage of the opportunity to return."[38] Grabbe's conclusion suggests to me that Deuteronomy's exilic audience did not all agree on the necessity of returning to regain the land. Perhaps not every Israelite in exile perceived living in a foreign land as

[37] Römer, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 204–208.

[38] Lester L. Grabbe, "They Shall Come Rejoicing to Zion – or Did They? The Settlement of Yehud in The Early Persian Period," in Gary N. Knoppers and Lester L. Grabbe with Deirdre Fulton (eds.), *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter R. Ackroyd* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 116–127, here 124 (italics mine).

such a threat to their identity as the deuteronomists did. The story that Deuteronomy tells, however, is that Israel is a people that leave foreign lands to possess its own.

The text gives direction for how life in the land is to be organized, for Israel's identity is distinct not only in being chosen by its deity but in its response to that vocation. The correct response lies in knowing "that the Lord your God is God" (Deut 7:9), in expecting consequences for rejecting the Lord (7:10), and therefore to "observe diligently the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that I am commanding you today" (7:11). The authors' idea of how "true" Israel must live is given rhetorical weight not only by the threat of divine retribution (v. 10), but also by the chapter's second instance of a first person pronoun: "the commandments . . . that *I* am commanding you" (v. 11). Emphasizing that God's commandments come through Moses – specifically and exclusively – gives authority to the speaker and to his words. In Deut 1:6–4:40, where mostly historical reviews are given, first person *plurals* are predominant. But when it comes to the law that will direct life in the land, Moses takes on the role of the exclusive teacher.[39] The vision for how life in the land is to be shaped takes on a more authoritative and persuasive import by the speaker suddenly separating himself from the group. Deuteronomy 7 thus characterizes Israel as a people worshipping Yahweh alone, in a way demonstrated by Moses alone, that is, by the deuteronomic agenda alone.

Also in the demand for exclusive allegiance to Yahwistic worship the text attempts to assimilate a diversity that exists within Israel itself. What precisely is meant by the proclamation יהוה אחד (Yahweh – One) in Deut 6:4, alluded to in ch. 7? Is it a call for monotheism, polemical against Canaanite cults? Or is the enemy of Deuteronomy, represented by the "nations," rather a sort of poly-Yahwism among Israelites themselves? According to Römer, the latter is more probable. The popular religion in Judah, at least during Josiah's reign, was one where "YHWH was worshipped alongside other deities (Ashera) and under different forms of manifestations (YHWH of Teman, YHWH of Samaria)."[40] It is not diffi-

[39] Polzin clarifies: "Although the phrases 'God of *our* fathers' or '*our* God' appears at least twenty-three times in the book, we find them only once in the lawcode, which overwhelmingly prefers the "I vs. you" form, and therefore the lawcode predominantly employs phrases such as 'your God.' … Moses at chapter 5 leaves off speaking to his audience sometimes as a fellow Israelite, and henceforth (apart from 5:2 and 6:4) speaks only from the viewpoint of his role as teacher." Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 47.

[40] Römer, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 200–201.

cult to imagine that this "poly-Yahwism" remained an option for Israelites also in exile. Mullen raises the possibility that Israelite worship was never entirely separate and different from the religious practices of other peoples. The distinctions that Deuteronomy tries to make between Israelite and foreign worship are therefore not built on existing distinctions, but on the insistence that distinctions should exist.[41] If that is the case, it suggests that some of the otherness that Deuteronomy 7 attempts to resist and assimilate is not just a quality of the disruptive "nations," but of Israel itself. This disruptive alterity is not just due to differing experiences and agendas, but also differing religious practices.

Through the establishment of a common story in vv. 7–11 the audience is imagined into a uniform entity of sameness. Although there was diversity among the exiled Israelites, "Israel," according to the text, has the same background, wants the same change, and will bring about that change in the same way. The text thus attempts to construct an unambiguous center into which all alterity is assimilated, and in which the Other does not belong.

7:12–16: Life

In this section the rhetoric of unity and totality is crafted in a way that renders unlikely any objection among the exilic audience to the authors' call for distanciation from the "nations." Here, the text obtains persuasive weight by appealing to the audience's hope for a future life in safety and prosperity.[42]

Three verbs, of which Yahweh is the agent, appear in a chain of fast accumulation and intensification: "and he will love you and he will bless you and he will multiply you" (v. 13, my translation). The verse repeats

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[41] Mullen, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries*, 70. Cf. Mark Brett, who argues that Israel was in fact indigenous to Canaan, and thus close kin to those that Deuteronomy attempts to push out of "real" Israel. What is presented as a conflict between nations could be about differing political and religious views within one nation. Mark G. Brett, "Genocide in Deuteronomy: Postcolonial Variations on Mimetic Desire," in Mark A. O'Brien and Howard N. Wallace (eds.), *Seeing Signals, Reading Signs: The Art of Exegesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 83.

[42] Vv. 12–16 establish a bridge between past and present through an emphasis on the ordinances that Israel has been given by Moses and must now heed (v. 12; cf. v. 11), and on the covenant sworn by Yahweh to Israel's ancestors (v. 12; cf. vv. 8–9). The identity expressed in nominal clauses in v. 6 (כי עם קדוש אתה) and v. 7 (כי־אתם המעט, in a context of verbs in perfect tense) is here redirected to the promise for the future: "you *shall be*" (תהיה, imperfect, v. 14).

the second person singular suffix, making a total of twelve instances of "you" and "your." It seems like the text attempts to capture its audience by this emphasis on "you." The goal of the authors is the shape of the community, and the repetition of "you" is an emphasis of the divine promises being limited to this particular community of listeners. But the use of second person *singular* also emphasizes that the divine promises involves each listener. Hence the responsibility for maintaining the commandments and the covenant involves the individual. Every single member of this Israel must follow along in Deuteronomy's vision, lest the whole goes into ruins (v. 26).

The text then expands on the future blessing of Yahweh. The blessing will cover everything that is central to an agrarian community, thus ensuring the fertility of people and land, food for sustenance, multiplied livestock, and health (vv. 13–15). Ellen Davis discusses how an agrarian perspective has influenced the Old Testament; there is an imagined kinship in the Old Testament between the earth and the human being.[43] Davis argues that from this kinship, which starts with the earth and connects the human with it, grows a particular approach toward the land. Agrarianism is most basically about giving priority to the *land*, over all else, so that it be preserved, so that the land will last long and communities live long on it. Precisely the long-term perspective is crucial – there needs to be continual stability for the agrarian economy to keep going, and for the agrarian community to survive.[44] However, being occupied and displaced by a foreign empire meant a disruption of the Israelite community, not only in terms of ethnic identity but also of modes of sustenance. Thus, for an exilic audience, the way that Deut 7:13–15 imagines the divine blessings for humans, land, and livestock is not simply a metaphorical depiction of something abstract – not just inspiring imagery. Rather, what is at stake here is life itself. The text pictures the good life as overflowing, an image that stands out in sharp contrast to the harsh wilderness where Moses' audience is still on hold, and to the Babylonian world of the exilic audience. This rhetorical theme is persuasive indeed, as it appeals to a physical need for safety and provision. Who is there to object to a promise of life itself? Who can resist a future of such abundant blessing?

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[43] Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29. See, e.g., Gen 2:7.
[44] Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 66.

The problem, however, for someone attempting a reading for the sake of social justice, is that the image of the future in Deut 7:12–16 does not only convey life for Israel, but something less than life for others. The rhetoric of life is linked to a specific agenda – the distancing from and even annihilation of the "nations" – and so the beautiful vision for life seems to have become a totalizing idea resulting in the dehumanization of the Other: "The Lord will turn away from you every illness; … he will lay them on all who hate you" (7:15). Furthermore, not only will Israel have an abundance of grain, wine, and oil to meet their needs of sustenance, but also, "You shall devour all the peoples that the Lord is giving over to you" (7:16). It is as if for the authors of this text, life for its own community must be at the expense of another. Protecting the needs of the self is more important here, than responding to the needs of an Other, of those defined as "hating you," as "peoples," and as "nations."

How should a modern reader understand the conflict that the text expresses between Israel's survival and the survival of others? Some scholars justify Deuteronomy's position by interpreting the Israelite lifestyle as more moral than that of other peoples. For instance, Davis contends that agrarianism (like that of the Hebrew Bible) always is a marginal culture, constantly threatened by the interests of those in power who think they will gain more from industrial exploitation (such as Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian economy). Davis seems to believe that the image of life in Deuteronomy is therefore one that modern readers should learn from, since it is a protest against a more destructive type of economy.[45] Dennis Olson likewise reads Deuteronomy 7 as resistance. For Olson, however, the resistance is against the "false god" of militarism and numerical strength, an idol worshipped by empires and compelling also for Israel who is here told to trust in Yahweh alone.[46] Looking to Yahweh for provision should be preferred by Israel and – I presume – by modern readers.

I believe that both these interpretations are inadequate, not because they acknowledge the potential conflict between Israel's needs and that of others, but because of their assumptions about non-Israelite peoples. I am not suggesting that empires are ever benign toward their subjects. But there was more to non-Israelite peoples' worship than militarism and industrial exploitation. In Deut 7:13, where the text presents the divine promises for Israel's future, the language contains traces of non-Yahwistic

[45] Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 68.
[46] Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 53–54.

deities. Many have noted the connection between the nouns recounted in v. 13 as Yahweh's gifts (grain, wine, oil, increase of cattle, issue of flock), and the names of deities that were well known and worshipped in the area around Judah and Israel, at least in Josiah's time.[47] It was common that deities were named after the specific provision they were "responsible" for.[48] The remnants of these deities in our text ought to remind the reader that also non-Yahwists were concerned with sustenance available in an agrarian economy, expressed in the worship of divine providers of this sustenance. Other deities were just as associated with life and provision for non-Israelites (similarly in the language of an agrarian society) as Yahweh was for the Israelites. Thus, when the text posits the life of its own community as having priority over others' lives, modern readers should not simply accept that priority as justified on the basis of an assumed immorality of those other communities. The conflict between "our" survival and "their" survival that Deut 7:13–16 presents cannot be settled by interpreters simply by judging "their" community as less worthy. Instead, when read in light of Levinas' philosophy of the Other, the position of the text becomes one of a centered self devouring the rest of the world, reducing it to accommodate its reigning totality, namely the specific vision of a life in abundance for a clearly defined and limited community. A Levinasian sensibility does not make the conflict simpler for a modern reader, but at least the Other is not reduced to an entity that must be annihilated because of an assumed intrinsic immorality. With Levinasian hermeneutics, readers can instead ponder the notion of self-preservation. Self-preservation is the idea that the life of our community needs to be protected at the cost even of an Other's life (as in Deut 7:1–5, 14–16), and that this is the only, natural and inevitable way to be in the world. According to Levinas, however, even though self-preservation seems natural and

[47] Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 102: "Under the surface of common nouns loom the names of rival gods." See also Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 373.

[48] The word used for "grain" is דגן and corresponds to the god Dagon (see Judges 16:23, where the Philistines are said to offer sacrifice to this god). תירש ("new wine") can be related to the Ugaritic deity Tirath. Following these nouns/names is the idiom "the increase (שגר) of your cattle and the issue (עשתרת) of your flock." Sheger and Astarte were deities well known from Ugarit and Egypt, both associated with fertility. Judith M. Hadley, "The De-deification of Deities in Deuteronomy," in Robert P. Gordon (ed.), *The God of Israel,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157–174, here 168–170.

good, it is not; it is simply based on the idea that reality is centered in a mastering subject.[49]

7:17–26: Fear

So far, I have pointed to the way Deuteronomy 7 constructs a sense of sameness for its audience through differentiating Israel from the "nations," through telling a particular story and calling it shared, and through imagining their future life in a both beautiful and violent rhetoric. In the last section of the text, much of the previous language comes back. But here the theme of fear is used as a foundation for unity within Israel and for the demand for annihilation of the "nations."

Deut 7:17–26 looks back to the past and forward to the future, but its main concern seems to be an immediate fear which, according to the text, dominates the audience. Three times the text comes back to fear (vv. 18, 19, 21) and the object of Israel's fear is said to be the numerous nations and not being able to possess (ירשׁ) them. The fear is to be averted by recalling again the dramatic events of the exodus-story (v. 19) and that Yahweh is present among them (v. 21). Here a reference to Egypt appears for the third time in chapter 7. In the first instance, the focus is on the more benign side of that experience, i.e., on Yahweh's choosing Israel and redeeming them from slavery (v. 8). The second time, in v. 15, the terror of that past is recounted. Here, in vv. 18–19, it seems like those two sides of the story – redemption and pain – are brought together. We have seen that the story of the exodus establishes a unique identity in terms of origin and vocation for Deuteronomy's Israel. But here it seems as if the authors also use that story to provide a paradigm for Israel's dealing with the "nations": to save some, others must be sacrificed.

The destruction of the "nations" is to be complete and total (v. 20). If after the exodus there were at least survivors on the Egyptian side, this will not be the case for the current enemy. They will meet the same trials that the Egyptians did, but "moreover," God will make sure that even the fugitives are destroyed (v. 20). It is as if the current situation is seen as graver even than captivity in Egypt, calling for even more desperate measures than an exodus. But the totality of v. 20 is peculiarly contra-

[49] Zimmermann explains: "The mistaken identification of the self with consciousness is unethical because it is self-centered: it knows no mode of existence other than self-preservation." Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 192.

dicted in v. 22: "The Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to make a quick end of them, otherwise the wild animals would become too numerous for you." The "nations" may seem to be too numerous for Israel, but according to the text only the animals could overpower Israel. For that reason their devouring of the "nations" will be slowed down. What is the significance of this sudden disclaimer in the text? Nelson reads it as an explanation for the fact that in the time of late editions to the text, the "nations" were still present. The wording would thus suggest a historical failure to obliterate the "nations," and a rhetorical legitimation of that failure: "As a consequence of such [alien] survivals, the present reader is faced by a challenge comparable to that of the conquest."[50] For the audience, something similar to the first conquest is apparently needed again.

As part of the future destruction of the "nations," Israel should "blot out their [kings'] name from under heaven" (v. 24). According to Tigay, this refers to total annihilation; even the memory of the person is to be extinguished on earth, and in the afterlife their spirits will be worse off without their names.[51] Nelson suggests that the reason kings receive extra attention in v. 24 is that "a free and egalitarian society cannot coexist with oppressive kings."[52] I assume that Nelson sees the political vision presented in Deuteronomy as the foundation of this "free and egalitarian" community. That genocide plays a central part in this community's road to freedom and social justice – at least rhetorically – is apparently trumped (for text and interpreter) by the goal: a good life for the few, defined as "us" and not "them." Any trace of the Other must be annihilated, even on the other side of the grave. And, as the last verse reminds the audience, there is no room for ambiguity. Israel must utterly detest and utterly abhor the "nations'" practices lest they themselves become חרם (v. 26).[53]

An air of fear pervades this section, if not the entire chapter. It is not difficult to imagine that an exilic readership would feel threatened by its surrounding foreign culture, both physically and in terms of their communal identity.[54] Even though this fear has problematic consequences, part of

[50] Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 104.
[51] Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 91.
[52] Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 104.
[53] The two instances of infinitive absolute + imperfect generate a sense of certainty and totality.
[54] However, reading this part of Deuteronomy 7 makes me think of modern rhetoric of airport security. At airports these days I read signs expressing the authorities' concern for

a Levinasian sensibility is to not disregard the fear of those who perceive themselves as being threatened. Levinas acknowledges that the Other who approaches me may not have good intentions – the approach may even have degenerated into hatred and a threat to my life or our community. Are there limits to how welcoming I can be for the Other's demand? Even though Deuteronomy at large presents its Israel as being in charge of their circumstances (having the generosity to include some into their community, and the power to exclude others) they were most likely seriously threatened by stronger and destructive forces. When can one respond "no"? Levinas does not answer that. Instead, the question needs to be addressed in each encounter. But when that question is not addressed and the "no" comes without hesitance, as seems to be this text's strategy, that is when the Other becomes dehumanized under a totalizing idea.

Deuteronomy 7: Voices of Resistance

With my Levinasian hermeneutics it has been possible to uncover the rhetoric of sameness and totality that is so prevalent in Deuteronomy 7. I have spotted in the text an authorial effort to construct a delimited centered identity among the audience for which the future will be safe and prosperous – given that those on the margin are kept at a distance. Since the otherness at the margin cannot be assimilated, the safety of those at the center depends on the marginalized's annihilation. The question now is: does this imagination of a good life for Israel stand unchallenged? A Levinasian hermeneutic should also help us see the alterity that remains, stubbornly, in spite of the center's attempt to reduce it to something manageable. I call that continuous disruptive presence *resistance*.

But where will we look for this resistance? It will not be found in a particular social organization, since according to Levinas all organizations build on ideas that tend to be totalizing and reductionist. Nor will it be in well-intentioned diplomacy or dialogue, in spite of their air of goodness

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my state of mind. I am told to keep my eyes on people around me, watch my luggage and not bring any fluids onto the plane, stand in line, be X-rayed and body-checked, and take off my shoes, because "We think of your safety." It is assumed that I am afraid. And if I am not, the authorities are telling me that I ought to be, as if those in power gain something from keeping citizens afraid of an external enemy. I wonder whether a similar phenomenon is present in Deuteronomy 7; that the authors are attempting to instill fear in the non-afraid parts of their audience, in order to assimilate Israel's diverse views of the "nations" into a uniting fear.

and rectitude.[55] Instead we must go to that ultimate location of ethics, to the decisive encounter between the subject and the Other, to the moment of responsibility. For Deuteronomy 7, I suggest that we look for the moment of face-to-face encounter in the "problem" of mixed marriages between Israelites and the "nations." For the text does not tell us much about who the "nations" are, what they are like, or what they do. The only certain thing is that they are set apart as חרם, and that parts of the audience consider them *perfectly marriable*. Why else would there be a need to prohibit intermarriage with such effort?[56]

In the text's prohibition against intermarriage (7:3–4) there is a rationale ("for that would"), and a threat ("Then the anger"). The rationale given against mixed marriages is the risk of apostasy for Israel. Benedikt Conczorowski argues that intermarriage is not a secondary problem for Deuteronomy, but intimately connected to Israel's foundations: to intermarry with the "nations" would mean losing their exclusive relationship with Yahweh (through idolatry), which would mean losing their identity. For it is Yahweh who is "the source of holiness for Israel and thus its center of identity as a 'holy people'."[57] If the rationale behind the prohibition is linked to maintaining a specific identity as a community, then reading

[55] According to Levinas, in dialogue people may "fade away into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures." Levinas claims that the problems of violence and injustice the world faces are really insoluble and should be recognized as such, even though diplomacy and dialogue may present matters as resolvable with just the right idea and organization. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87–88.

[56] Claudia Camp notes that in other texts about mixed marriages (e.g. Ezra 9–10) only foreign *women* pose a threat to Israel, which suggests that the problem there is mostly one of male identity construction, rather than intermarriage per se. That Deut 7:3–4 involves both foreign wives and husbands gives the text some historic authenticity, according to Camp, in that intermarriage was a reality rather than simply an ideological problem. Claudia V. Camp, "Feminist- and Gender-Critical Perspectives on the Biblical Ideology of Intermarriage," in Christian Frevel (ed.), *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 303–315, here 305.

[57] Benedikt J. Conczorowski, "All the Same as Ezra? Conceptual Differences Between the Texts on Intermarriage in Genesis, Deuteronomy 7 and Ezra," in Frevel, *Mixed Marriages*, 89–108, here 99. It should furthermore be noted that the rationale in Deuteronomy 7 is one of morality and religion. What makes the "nations" ill suited for covenant is not a ritual impurity that could be remedied with a sacrifice, nor an intrinsic quality like genealogy, but their religion and (im)morality. Hayes points out that Moses had a Midianite wife, so intermarriage in Deuteronomy was not a problem when the foreigner adopted Israelite religion and culture. See Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

intermarriage as resistance to that idea of a uniting identity is rather natural. Mixed marriages go to the heart of things and challenges the center of identity on which all else in this text rests. What appears to lie in the domestic realm actually has significance also for the communal; the authors of Deuteronomy 7 express this as a problem, I suggest we also see it as a source for hope.

Katherine Southwood's study of the marriage-crisis in Ezra 9–10 presents the anthropological theory that in traditions of border-construction, couples in mixed marriages represent an anomaly. They are neither "we" nor "they," and they cannot be considered both-and. As an anomaly they challenge the categories of in-group and out-group, and therefore become the source of conflict and attention for the boundary-constructing group.[58] Thus, marriage policy is the location for enforcing a sense of commonality with some, over and against the Other. It seems to me, then, that a praxis of mixed marriages would be the location for a welcoming of that Other, and for a resistance against the idea of a clearly delimited "we." Through this implicit refusal of the "nations" to be assimilated into Israelite customs – by surrendering their identities in religious conversion – and Israel's habit of intermarrying with them, the Other's infinite transcendence remains present. It disrupts the center, and some among the centered are welcoming the disruption, moved to live in messy entangled-ness, posturing themselves to welcome their Other. Borders are crossed, and the center becomes de-centered.

However, the threat that intermarriage poses is not only about what the "nations" will do to Israel. The real threat is what Yahweh will do. If Israel marries the "nations" Israel will serve other gods, and "[t]hen the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly" (v. 4). If the Other is welcomed into the centered self *the Lord* will destroy Israel. In Deuteronomy at large, Yahweh's violence against Israel is a central theme. This violence is apparent in the constant threats from Yahweh (via Moses the speaker), and also in Israel's later (canonically speaking) expulsion from the land into exile. The violence is connected to Israel's relationship with the gods of the "nations." Those gods are part of the threat Israel faces, but mainly for the reason that behind them waits the wrath of Yahweh. Throughout Deuteronomy, the other

[58] Katherine Southwood, "An Ethnic Affair? Ezra's Intermarriage Crisis Against a Context of 'Self-Ascription' and 'Ascription of Others'," in Frevel, *Mixed Marriages*, 46–59, here 49, 55.

gods' "outstanding feature is that they are *other* than YHWH," and since it is Yahweh who is the distinctive commonality of Israel, his anger would lead to them being destroyed as a community.[59] I would argue that the presence of a potentially angry deity undermines the text's imagining of the "nations" as Israel's greatest threat. In Levinasian words: at this moment in the text (v. 4) it becomes clear that the encounter that appeared to be simply between Israel and the "nations" is complicated by the presence of a third party. The text turns out to be not just about Israel's relationship with the "nations" but about a three-way relationship between Israel, the "nations," and Yahweh. It is clear on the destructive effect that siding with the "nations" would have for Israel. But the text also gives us the notion that Yahweh's presence is equally life-threatening, and this complicates the simple us-them dichotomy in Israel's idea of reality and thus makes that idea less totalizing. Israel is pushed out of its mastering of reality, not only by the "nations," but also by Yahweh.[60] While siding with one of them – as Deut 7:3–4 pushes for – may result in an even stronger boundary against the other Other, the third party also has the potential to loosen the tightly composed union between the first two.

For Israel to negotiate the irreducible calls from several Others, and the responsibility towards them, is not an easy task. How is Israel going to judge between the demands of these two Others? The ethical encounter in Deuteronomy 7 takes place on a family level and in a theology expressed

[59] Rob Barrett, *Disloyalty and Destruction: Religion and Politics in Deuteronomy and the Modern World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 10, 54–57. See, e.g., Deut 28:15–68 for a poignant example of the dystopia awaiting Israel if they disobey their Lord.

[60] The relationship between Israel and Yahweh becomes less reassuring also when we consider Yahweh's perspective in the text. From the outset Yahweh is on Israel's side, responding to their need for a good place by giving many "nations" over to them, and clearing the "nations" away for them (vv. 1–2). Later on, Yahweh's position toward Israel is described as desire (חשׁק v. 7). Israel's covenant with this desiring deity is emphasized as a unifying identity of the people (vv. 9–11). Israel's future will even depend on their keeping with this covenant that started with Yahweh's חשׁק. But when they were delivered out of Egypt, there was no covenant to keep – the חשׁק of the Lord was enough. Why is the initial affection and connection not enough to keep Israel safe now? It is as if Yahweh's love is different now, as if the deity's approach towards Israel has changed, that he now demands a different kind – an exclusive kind – of responsibility from them. Perhaps Yahweh should be able to expect more from them now. But with a Levinasian sensibility Yahweh's change is also troubling. Levinas uses the word "desire" when describing the ethical self's openness to the Other; "desire" because the welcoming can never be satisfied, and the Other cannot be possessed. For Yahweh, the initial, welcoming "desire" (חשׁק) for his Other – Israel – seems in this text to have transformed into something less welcoming, and more possessive.

with love-language. The call to be substituted from a for-one-self to for-another (see footnote above), a call from both of Israel's Others, seems to involve tension and fear. As the three parties – Israel, the "nations," and Yahweh – oppose one-another, it becomes unclear who is on whose side, and this ambiguity deconstructs the simple sense of a centered and unified "we" that the text attempts to create for its audience.

However, there is also a bond between the three, and this bond offers further resistance against a totalizing and reductionist vision of reaching the good life through separation. The text is enveloped by the association of the "nations" with חרם (vv. 2, 26). It signals how the audience should relate to the "nations." חרם is in the Hebrew Bible a quality of an object, corresponding to that of holiness. As with holiness, חרם carries the connotation of something to be *set apart* from the everyday. It is commonly used in texts about war and booty, but may also appear in texts regarding law, and religious dedication. An object of חרם does not necessarily have to be destroyed, however, but might be kept by priests within the safety of the temple.[61] In any case, its status as *set apart* must not be violated (cf. Joshua 7:1). Distance should be kept from the חרם, the reason being that it belongs exclusively to Yahweh.[62] The seven nations listed in Deuteronomy 7 are חרם; they belong to a prohibited realm for Israel, who might otherwise be tempted to appropriate it for themselves. The חרם belongs to Yahweh. Perhaps one may say that the חרם represents an otherness that cannot be possessed by the audience. The "nations" are absolutely Other and must be protected from assimilation, and thus may be handled by Yahweh alone. I believe that this bond, as it were, that the text constructs between the "nations" and Yahweh, leads to the center being disrupted – even displaced. For the otherness of the "nations" is due not to Israel's own categorization and distanciation, but something beyond their grasp and knowledge. As חרם the Other needs to be protected from Israel, not the other way around. The Other is sacred.

Lastly, the text exposes yet another connection between Israel and the "nations," besides the bond of intermarriage. The fate that awaits the "nations," i.e. destruction, is peculiarly close to becoming Israel's fate as

[61] Richard D. Nelson, "*ḥerem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience," in M. Vervenne and J. Lust (eds.), *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 39–54, here 41.

[62] So Nelson: "In divine war the best of the spoils (primarily human captives) belong to the divine victor and thus naturally take on the quality of being חרם." Nelson, "*ḥerem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience," 44.

well. Deut 7:26 reads: "Do not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction [חרם] like it." Cf. Deut 8:20: "Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish." According to Polzin, passages such as these show that in Deuteronomy, "the unique status of Israel, so unlike the other nations, is … effectively undermined. No matter how often the … address refers to Israel's special status, as in 7:6, the basic attitude of this address is epitomized in passages such as [7:26]."[63] I suggest that if חרם – the way for the centered subject of Deuteronomy 7 to categorize the Other – is what may also constitute the center (7:26), then the unique status of Israel is undermined, and the totalizing idea of safety for the well defined and united community starts to slide. Their identity is not essentially different from those they have put on the margin. The world of outsiders – those placed outside of the good life, outside of promising plans and theologies – may become also theirs. If חרם is what awaits those who encounter and respond to the Other, and if some actually have chosen to encounter and respond (e.g., through intermarriage), then a substitution is under way; the *for-the-one* has become the *for-another*. The Other has become the center.

Implications

The current project grew out of concerns about a privileged reader's responsibility, about biblical texts and communal boundaries, and Levinas' philosophy of the Other. What has my intercontextual reading yielded? *First*, I have found that Deuteronomy 7 imagines a utopia for the few, defined as "us" and not "them." This vision depends on strict separation from – even annihilation of – "them." *Secondly*, the text strives to establish a sense of sameness for its audience, a commonality that is possible only at the expense of alterity – outside of Israel, and within. *Thirdly*, Deuteronomy 7 advances through rhetorical themes (identity as a holy people, living a shared story, hoping for life for "us," fearing "them") to present the ideas on which the commonality is founded. *Fourthly*, there are, in spite of this commonality, layers of entangled-ness in the text, represented by the praxis of intermarriage, Israel's relationship with Yahweh, and Yahweh's relationship with the "nations." The interconnectedness among the three parties offers a resistance and challenge against the center

[63] Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 55.

of Israel and the boundaries that uphold the center. *Fifthly*, the experience of life in community will complicate any quick conclusions or ideas, even of who the Other is and what responding to that Other entails. This ambiguity has the potential of creating a deep tension within a community, but also to break open closed boundaries.

The benefit of a Levinasian hermeneutic lies in its persistent emphasis on the Other. The deconstruction of narratives and rhetoric undertaken in this article is not done merely to expose the fragility of the center, and the reading does not lead out into a void of relativism or nihilism. Rather, it is the welcoming of the Other that is the purpose of this exploration of how a sense of unity and "us" and "them" is constructed. The Other, in all her/his manifestations, is the unyielding presence that demands this work to be done. When nothing remains of ideas, certainty, and commonality, the human being is still standing there, asking not to be reduced. My reading of Deuteronomy 7 does not aim to prove the barbarity of the Israelite people or the Bible – in favor of any idea of a "higher" morality – but to respond to the human being in, behind, and in front of the text; those striving for unity and those resisting it, Israelites and "nations," ancient and modern.

The emphasis on the Other also provides a way for complexity and nuance with which to analyze the interpersonal relationship. We have seen that the text presents Israel as a strong center that has the power to draw limits around its community and can afford to be generous to some outsiders but not to others. But it is unlikely that Israel at any point of its (and the text's) history was not under pressure to assimilate – or worse – under surrounding political, economical, and military powers. Therefore my deconstruction of Deuteronomy 7's grasping for unity and dismissal of its Other has been done with an awareness that Israel was the Other of other powerful centers. Indeed, the ambiguous presence of Yahweh is an example within the text itself of this complexity.

For a reader to respond to all these Others – Israelites and "nations," a text and its ancient and modern readers, peoples relating to their deities, the deity I relate to, and the world of centered and marginalized humans in which I live – this is a dizzying task. They are all asking me not to reduce their alterity or dignity. But the encounter with our several Others fuels hope for a goodness that extends even beyond our most promising utopias, and charges us to search for that goodness.