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Introduction

Directions concerning campaigns, Deuteronomy 20:1. The priest shall encourage the people with the assurance that God will accompany and fight for them, Deuteronomy 20:2-4. The officers shalt dismiss from the army all who had just built a new house, but had not dedicated it, Deuteronomy 20:5. All who had planted a vineyard, but had not yet eaten of its fruits, Deuteronomy 20:6. All who had betrothed a wife, but had not brought her home, Deuteronomy 20:7. And all who were timid and faint-hearted, Deuteronomy 20:8. The commanders to be chosen after the timid, etc., had retired, Deuteronomy 20:9. No city to be attacked till they had proclaimed conditions of peace to it, provided it be a city beyond the bounds of the seven Canaanitish nations; if it submitted, it was to become tributary; if not, it was to be besieged, sacked, and all the males put to the sword; the women, children, and cattle to be taken as booty, Deuteronomy 20:10-15. No such offers to be made to the cities of the Canaanites; of them nothing shall be preserved, and the reason, Deuteronomy 20:16-18. In besieging a city no trees to be cut down but those which do not bear fruit, Deuteronomy 20:19, Deuteronomy 20:20.

Verse 1

When thou goest out to battle - This refers chiefly to the battles they were to have with the Canaanites, in order to get possession of the promised land; for it cannot be considered to apply to any wars which they might have with the surrounding nations for political reasons, as the Divine assistance could not be expected in wars which were not undertaken by the Divine command.

Verse 2

The priest shall approach, and speak unto the people - The priest on these occasions was the representative of that God whose servant he was, and whose worship he conducted. It is remarkable that almost all ancient nations took their priests with them to battle, as they did not expect success without having the object of their adoration with them, and they supposed they secured his presence by having that of his representative.

Verse 5

That hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? - From the title of Psalm 30:1-12, - A Psalm or Song at the Dedication of the House of David - it is evident that it was a custom in Israel to dedicate a new house to God with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving; and this was done in order to secure the Divine presence and blessing, for no pious or sensible man could imagine he could dwell safely in a house that was not under the immediate protection of God. Hence it has been a custom in the most barbarous nations to consecrate a part of a new house to the deity they worshipped. The houses of the inhabitants of Bonny, in Africa, are generally divided into three apartments: one is a kind of state room or parlour; another serves for a common room, or kitchen; and the third is dedicated to the Juju, the serpent god, which they worship; for even those savages believe that in every house their god should have his temple! At the times of dedication among the Jews, besides prayer and praise, a feast was made, to which the relatives and neighbors were invited. Something of this custom is observed in some parts of our own country in what is called warming the house; but in these cases the feasting only is kept up - the prayer and praise forgotten! so that the dedication appears to be rather more to Bacchus than to Jehovah, the author of every good and perfect gift.

Verse 7

Betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? - It was customary among the Jews to contract matrimony, espouse or betroth, and for some considerable time to leave the parties in the houses of their respective parents: when the bridegroom had made proper preparations, then the bride was brought home to his house, and thus the marriage was consummated. The provisions in this verse refer to a case of this kind; for it was deemed an excessive hardship for a person to be obliged to go to battle, where there was a probability of his being slain, who had left a new house unfinished; a newly purchased heritage half tilled; or a wife with whom he had just contracted marriage. Homer represents the case of Protesilaus as very afflicting, who was obliged to go to the Trojan war, leaving his wife in the deepest distress, and his house unfinished.

Ἰλιάδ. 1. ii. ver. 100.  
 ἄλλ' ὅτε μὲν ἔτι παρὲν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ τῇ μητρὶ  
 ἔμελλε γάμον τεύχουσα, καὶ οἶκον ἀνέμειλεν  
 ἀνέμειλεν ἔτι, καὶ οἶκον ἀνέμειλεν ἔτι.

Iliad, 1. ii., ver. 100.

ἀλλ' ὅτε μὲν ἔτι παρὲν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ τῇ μητρὶ

To rend in Phylace her bleeding cheeks,

And an unfinished mansion: first he died

Of all the Greeks; for as he leaped to land,

Long ere the rest, a Dardan struck him dead.

Cowper.

#### Verse 8

What man is there that is fearful and faint - hearted? - The original רַחֵם (rach), signifies tender or soft-hearted. And a soft heart the man must have who, in such a contest, after such a permission, could turn his back upon his enemies and his brethren. However, such were the troops commanded by Gideon in his war against the Midianites; for after he gave this permission, out of 32,000 men only 10,000 remained to fight! Judges 7:3. There could be no deception in a business of this kind; for the departure of the 22,000 was the fullest proof of their dastardliness which they could possibly give.

#### Verse 10

Proclaim peace unto it - Interpreters are greatly divided concerning the objects of this law. The text, taken in connection with the context, (see Deuteronomy 20:15-18), appears to state that this proclamation or offer of peace to a city is only to be understood of those cities which were situated beyond the limits of the seven anathematized nations, because these latter are commanded to be totally destroyed. Nothing can be clearer than this from the bare letter of the text, unless some of the words, taken separately, can be shown to have a different meaning. For the common interpretation, the following reasons are given.

God, who knows all things, saw that they were incurable in their idolatry; that the cup of their iniquity was full; and as their Creator, Sovereign, and Judge, he determined to destroy them from off the face of the earth, & lest they should teach the Israelites to do after all their abominations, Deuteronomy 20:18. After all, many plausible arguments have been brought to prove that even these seven Canaanitish nations might be received into mercy, provided they,

1. Renounced their idolatry;

2. Became subject to the Jews; and,

3. Paid annual tribute: and that it was only in case these terms were rejected, that they were not to leave alive in such a city any thing that breathed, Deuteronomy 20:16.

#### Verse 17

But thou shalt utterly destroy them - The above reasoning will gain considerable strength, provided we could translate חָרַם־לָהֶם חַיָּוִת (ki hacharem tacharimem), thou shalt utterly subdue them - slaying them if they resist, and thus leaving nothing alive that breathed; or totally expel them from the land, or reduce them to a state of slavery in it, that they might no longer exist as a people. This certainly made them an anathema as a nation, wholly destroying their political existence. Probably this was so understood by the Gibeonites, viz., that they either must be slain or utterly leave the land, which last was certainly in their power, and therefore, by a stratagem, they got the princes of Israel to make a league with them. When the deceit was discovered, the Israelites, though not bound by their oath, because they were deceived by the Gibeonites, and therefore were under no obligation to fulfill their part of the covenant; yet, though they had this command before their eyes, did not believe that they were bound to put even those deceivers to death; but they destroyed their political existence, by making them hewers of wood and drawers of water to the congregation; i. e., slaves to the Israelites. (See Joshua 9). Rahab and her household also were spared. So that it does not appear that the Israelites believed that they were bound to put every Canaanite to death. Their political existence was under the anathema, and this the Hebrews annihilated.

That many of the Canaanites continued in the land even to the days of Solomon, we have the fullest proof; for we read, 2 Chronicles 8:7: & All the people of the land that were left of the Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, who were left in the land, whom the children of Israel consumed not, them did Solomon make to pay tribute to this day. & Thus Solomon destroyed their political existence, but did not consider himself bound by the law of God to put them to death.

#### Verse 19

(For the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege - The original is exceedingly obscure, and has been variously translated, חָרַם־לָהֶם חַיָּוִת (ki haadam ets hassadeh labo mippaneycha bammatsor). The following are the chief versions: For, O man, the trees of the field are for thee to employ Them in the siege - or, For it is man, and the tree of the field, that must go before thee for a bulwark - or, For it is a tree, and not men, to increase the number of those who come against thee to the siege - or, lastly, The tree of the field (is as) a man, to go before thy face for a bulwark. The sense is sufficiently clear, though the strict grammatical meaning of the words cannot be easily ascertained: it was a merciful provision to spare all fruit-bearing trees, because they yielded the fruit which supported man's life; and it was sound policy also, for even the conquerors must perish if the means of life were cut off.

It is diabolic cruelty to add to the miseries of war the horrors of famine; and this is done where the trees of the

field are cut down, the dykes broken to drown the land, the villages burnt, and the crops wilfully spoiled. O execrable war! subversive of all the charities of life!

There are several curious particulars in these verses:

1.The people had the most positive assurances from God that their enemies should not be able to prevail against them by strength, numbers, nor stratagem, because God should go with them to lead and direct them, and should fight for them; and against his might none could prevail.

2.All such interferences were standing proofs of the being of God, of his especial providence, and of the truth of their religion.

3.Though God promised them such protection, yet they were to expect it in the diligent use of their own prudence and industry. The priests, the officers, and the people, had their respective parts to act in this business; if they did their duty respectively, God would take care that they should be successful. Those who will not help themselves with the strength which God has already given them, shall not have any farther assistance from him. In all such cases, the parable of the talents affords an accurate rule.

4.Their going to war against their enemies must not deprive them of mercy and tenderness towards their brethren. He who had built a house and had not yet dwelt in it, who had planted a vineyard and had not eaten of its fruits, who had betrothed a wife and had not yet taken her to his house, was not obliged to go to battle, lest he should fall in the war, and the fruits of his industry and affection be enjoyed by others. He who was faint-hearted was also permitted to return, lest he should give way in the heat of battle, and his example have a fatal influence on others.