

Deuteronomy
(The strange story of the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and Amorites)

Song: Father who formed the family of man
 Thou who givest of Thy gladness

Reading: Deuteronomy 2:1-23, 24-37, 3:1-11.

I have titled this study as 'The Strange story of Edom, Moab and Ammon'. I call it strange because it does not fit into our modern way of thinking. Today we think in terms of contract or agreement and that is all wrapped up into some bundle of correctness, whatever that may be or whatever our culture determines that to be. In other words there is out there a kind of correctness which is rather confused. However, if we appreciate God's way of doing things, then the story of the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites is not strange. It makes perfect sense. We may wonder why this narrative is included in Deuteronomy. Is it merely a historical account of the route to the Promised Land? Not really. Furthermore, it does not have much to do with the laws. I will argue that this narrative is a testimony to the grace of God.

This morning, we will be looking at the historical families of Abraham and how they relate in the plan of God. I have said before that our faith is a historical faith. It is faith that has a promise and a history showing the way how the promise was worked out, i.e. God's promise and God's way of working it out in the lives of His people. We cannot project onto our God our objectives and ways of working things out. God's way works from the relational to the objective. Ours, i.e. man's, way of working things out is to set the objective and treat the relational as tools we use to achieve it.

Consider when someone wants to commence an insurance business and was advised to start with a list of ten friends and call them to buy insurance. Then another ten and so on. What is the nature of this advice? It appeared that we were making use of friendship for some financial gain. The friendship then becomes a utility for some other objective. Now, many people may not see any objection to that.

God's does not treat His creation as tools to achieve His objective. His people are the recipients of His blessing and what He has done. He achieves His purpose by His own hand. His objective is the restoration of humanity. Humanity participates with God in this restoration. Humanity is not a tool of God in the restoration. There is a difference between a participant in the process and a tool in the process. A tool is discarded when the purpose is fulfilled. A participant shares in the fruit or joy of the process. Let us see how this is played out in the history of Israel.

For a start we need to examine the relationship of all these tribes of people. We need to see them in the context of the covenant God made with Abraham.

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:1-3)

This is the way God showed to us in human terms the nature of His covenant. It works from the relational, i.e. God's relationship with Abraham and the relationship of Abraham and his posterity. Our God is not a material god. By this I mean firstly that He is Spirit and not of created matter. Secondly, the reality that God has created is not the material world, but the relationships that matter represents. In other words the created world has a relationship to each other and to the Creator. Therefore, we cannot use the matter in the created world

solely to represent the blessing of God. So, it is not the size or programs of the church that matter, but the relationships of the people to each other and to the Creator. The size and programs of the church may be important in a sociological sense or as an expression of the covenantal relationship.

The kingdoms of Edom, Moab and Ammon

There were three kingdoms or territories that Israel would encounter as they moved towards the Promised Land. They were told not to go by the coastal route. They were to move north-east and to enter the Promised Land from the eastern side. They would have to pass three kingdoms but they were not to make war on them. They were not territories for them to take over. These territories belonged to their 'cousins' or relatives and God had given those lands to them. God has a purpose for them and that is part of God's covenant to Abraham. These three kingdoms were Edom, Moab and Ammon. We will take a look at Abraham's family tree to see how they were related. (Show Abraham's family tree).

Edom

Edom was the land that Esau occupied. The people were called Edomites. Esau and Jacob were twins from the womb of Rebecca, Isaac's wife. They were the grandsons of Abraham. God's covenant is with Abraham and his posterity. We know that after Jacob cheated his brother, Esau, of his birthright, Jacob fled to his uncle, Laban, and worked there for fourteen years, seven to marry Leah, and another seven to marry Rachel whom he loved. That was because Laban cheated Jacob – the cheater was cheated. When Jacob returned, he contacted his brother Esau in the land of Seir, i.e. Edom (Gen. 32:3-4).

God's choice for His purpose was through Jacob. Even then, Esau was not totally excluded. God's grace has something in store for Esau. He was given the land of Seir which was the kingdom of Edom. This territory was not for Israel and Israel must not take it over.

However, the book of Numbers recorded for us that Edom was not too friendly to Israel when they wanted to pass through (Num. 20:20-21). However, Edom was treated favourably by the Lord (Deut. 23:7-8). In later years, Edom came out to avenge Israel as they harbour hatred against Israel and this was against the purpose of God. There was perpetual conflict between Israel and Edom. What is happening in the Middle East is nothing new. It has been there ever since the days of Esau and Jacob. King Saul and David fought the Edomites, and so were the subsequent kings of Israel (1 Sam. 14:47; 2 Sam. 8:13-14; 2 Chr. 20:1-4, 28:16-19).

For this Edom was punished by the Lord (Amos 1:11-12). 'Edom proper fell into Arab hands during the 5th century BC, and in the 3rd century BC was overrun by the Nabataeans. Through these centuries yet other Edomites fled to Judah. ... The Herods were of general Edomite stock.'¹

The Moabites and Ammonites

Lot was the nephew of Abraham. He left with Abraham from the Ur of the Chaldees. However, Lot had a dispute with Abraham regarding the land. Moab and Ben-ammi were the two sons of Lot. They were conceived by his two daughters – an incestuous relationship when Lot was drunk. It was a shameful episode (Gen. 19:30-38).

There was an interesting struggle between the Moabites and Israelites. The Moabites and Ammonites were punished by the Lord because they did not support the Israelites in their

¹J. A. Thompson, 'Edom', *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Pt 1*, (Sydney, IVP:1980), 411-412.

journey to the Promised Land, which was the will of the Lord (Deut. 23:3-6). Yet later on while Israel was in the Promised Land, God used the Moabites to defeat Israel when Israel did evil before God (Judges 3:12-14). The conflict between the Moabites and Israel recorded in 2 Kings 3 was also recorded on the Moabite Stone, discovered in 1868, 20 miles east of the Dead Sea.

We see from the story of Ruth, a Moabite, that she was the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 1:1-5). Solomon married Naamah, an Ammonite amongst many others. Their son, Rehoboam, ascended to the throne of Israel (1 Kings 14:21-22).

Continuing conflict between Ammon / Moab and Israel after the return from captivity (Neh. 2:9-10)

Judgment on Moab and Ammon

The kingdom of Moab though having been blessed by God, did not acknowledge the Lord and this brought judgment on themselves (Jer. 48:1-4). Yet the grace of God 'will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days' (Jer. 48:47).

Similar judgment was recorded for the Ammonites, but the Lord would restore the fortunes of the Ammonites (Jer. 49:1-6).

Ishmael

Before we finish, we need to include what was God's plan with Ishmael, the son that Abraham had with the servant girl, Hagar (Gen. 17:19-21). Ishmael grew to become a skilled hunter and archer. He fathered the nomadic Arab nations and lived to 137 years old. He had twelve sons. Their warrior tribes eventually inhabited most of the countries in the Middle East (Gen. 25:12-18).

Summary of this strange saga

In this strange story, we see that the grace of God extended to the relations of Abraham. That was despite the fact that Esau, Moab and Ammon had huge blemishes in their past. That did not put them outside of the grace of God. God chose Jacob, but He did not cast out the twin brother. Lot was not exactly a likable person, but he left the Ur of the Chaldees together with Abraham and journeyed with him 'not knowing where they were going'. He put his future together with Abraham and they enjoyed the blessing and grace of the Lord.

However, despite having received the grace and blessing from God, they rebelled against God. Edom harboured deep hatred against the Israelites, the descendants of Jacob. For this, God punished them.

King David great grandmother was Ruth, a Moabite. King Rehoboam's mother was an Ammonite. There was judgment on both Moab and Ammon, but they remained close relations of Israel. God has not finished with them and on that day when peoples of all nations gather before Christ, we will meet with Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites.

The situation in the Middle East is indeed a complex one. I am no expert in Middle Eastern affairs. However scripture gives to us a complex picture of grace and the rejection of grace. Edom, Moab and Ammon had been given land by the grace of God as they were part of the family of Abraham. Despite the fact that Moab and Ammon were not in the direct line of descent from Abraham, yet they have a part in the plan of God for His people. That is the grace of God and that is God's prerogative. God has a purpose for the descendants of Ishmael, Esau, Moab and Ammon. We do not know how this will be worked out.

The gracious dealing of God with those whom He chose is not the subject of our determination. That is not to say that we cannot judge what is bad and evil in our society or country. But what we must not do is to say that what does not fit with our practice is not of God. We cannot take all the inhabitants of the Middle East as one entity. We need to see some of them as the recipients of God's grace. We need to respect their territorial claims, but we also need to take note of those who defy the sovereign God. We must not draw rigid lines derived from our own conception of right and wrong. Yes, there are atrocities and those issues need to be dealt with.

Why is this section as well as the subsequent one included in the book of Deuteronomy? It is to underscore the theme of God's grace in the book. The covenant of God is not determined by the rightness or wrongness of humanity. It is solely determined by God and He deals graciously with His creation. The laws of Deuteronomy must be seen in this context.

(The Amorites – Was there an alternative for them?)

Reading: Deuteronomy 2:24-37, 3:1-11

The narrative on Edom, Moab and Ammon highlighted the fact that these relations of Abraham were also the recipients of the blessing of God in some ways though they were not in the direct line of descent through Jacob, Judah, then David and to Jesus. We noted that they were not morally upright. These recipients of God's blessings do not fit well into the mind set of our modern Christian culture. However, what this is saying to us is that firstly, God is sovereign and He will bless whom He chose. Secondly, His blessing is not the result of human uprightness or effort. In other words, in God's covenant, forgiveness has already been factored into it. What God asks of us is to trust in Him. Our achievements or lack thereof, do not determine where God's blessing should flow.

There is a story of the famous chariots race in the movie *Ben Hur*. Charlston Heston was the actor there. He asked the director how he could win the race. The director's reply was that he just needed to stay on the chariot and he would win the race for him. That is exactly where we stand. We just need to stay on the job that God has given to us and do it well. God will do the rest for us. We need to believe in that.

The topic on the Amorites is one of the difficult questions for people through the ages because it involves judgment on a group of inhabitants of the Promised Land. Judgment is a difficult issue to handle because we don't like it. It is much easier to preach on the blessings of God, especially the watered down version.

All creation is the gift of God. We saw that God had given territories to Esau, Moab and Ammon. Those territories or lands were not to be occupied by Israel. The question of land is the reason for much of the disputes in the Middle East today. We know the issues involved in much of the arguments on both sides – the Palestinians and Jews. I am no expert in those issues and will not engage them. My brief is to explain what is recorded in this chapter of scripture.

For a start, we need to see the genealogy of the Canaanites and their religion. The Amorites referred to in this chapter belonged to a broader grouping called the Canaanites. We need to go back to Noah to see the racial grouping. Noah had three sons, Japheth, Ham and Shem. Japheth went to colonise Europe and Asia. Ham formed the racial groups in Southwest Asia, Canaan and Africa, and Shem formed the Middle Eastern Shemites. Canaan was one of the

sons of Ham. They occupied most of Palestine and their territory extended to today's Turkey and Iraq. They became a very powerful group of people.

Their religion was polytheistic, i.e. they worship many gods. Much of the influence came from Mesopotamia in the north and Egypt in the south.

They had many vile practices. I only need to mention two. One was the practice of child sacrifice.

²¹ You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. (Lev. 18:21)

What kind of a god would demand the offspring of the people? What kind of people would make that kind of sacrifice? That was sheer depravity and why shouldn't they be totally removed? There was no respect for the sanctity of life.

Another depraved practice of the Canaanite was temple prostitution.

¹⁷ None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. ¹⁸ You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to the LORD your God. (Deut. 23:17-18)

We need a word of explanation here. How did this practice come about? It had its beginnings in the worship of nature, the rising and dying of the seasons. The land comes to life with spring and dies in winter. To improve the fertility of the land, a sex cult was developed as sexual activity is about the creation of life. This was thought to bring about the fertility of the land. So arose male and female temple prostitutes, and Israel was drawn into it.

Before going into the land of Canaan, Moses told the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites and remove these abhorrent practices 'so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God' (Deut. 20:18). The practices of the Canaanites were like the gangrene of the land. Unless these practices were removed, they would eventually destroy the whole land and infect Israel with the same depravity. This is an important lesson for our day. Some Christian communities think that they can co-exist with these depraved practices. No, we can't. They will eventually take us over. James wrote,

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

The Amorites were defeated badly. The Canaanites continued to weaken subsequently and their kingdom vanished. Was there an alternative for the Amorites? Well, there was.

²⁷ "If you let me pass through your land, I will travel only along the road; I will turn aside neither to the right nor to the left. ²⁸ You shall sell me food for money, so that I may eat, and supply me water for money, so that I may drink. Only allow me to pass through on foot— (Deut. 2:27-28)

If only they had acknowledged the Lord and His people, they could be spared, but they did not.

³⁰ But King Sihon of Heshbon was not willing to let us pass through, for the LORD your God had hardened his spirit and made his heart defiant in order to hand him over to you, as he has now done.

We need to ask one more question before we finish this morning. Since Israel also adopted the practices of the Canaanites after they entered the Promised Land, was there a preferential treatment for the Israelites? Answer is a firm no. The sins of Israel were not tolerated by their holy God. There has to be judgment. We need to face that. We are all

aware that the problem with our justice system is that it is so lenient. Kids will be naughty when they know that there is little or no punishment for their misdeeds. The judgments of God are judgments of mercy. They are there to bring us back to Him. Their function is firstly restorative.

God raised the sinful and vicious Assyrians to conquer North Israel, and the Babylonians to capture South Israel. The Israelites repented while in captivity, but they still had to serve out their seventy years. The key in all these happenings is the word 'repentance'. God is the God of covenant and forgiveness is part of the covenant relationship. He enables the repentance because He has forgiven. His people need to accept that in faith. It is precisely this lack of faith that Moses started with in his address to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land.

The Amorites and the larger grouping of the Canaanites could have been spared if only they had acknowledged the God Yahweh. The opportunity was given to them as the Israelites moved into the land, but they refused. Israel was to subdue them and establish the rule of Yahweh, but sadly they did not and instead adopted the practices of the Canaanites.

There is a lesson for us today. Like the Israelites, do we adopt the secular practices of the world today into our lives and churches, or do we make a stand for the rule of God in our midst.

Let us come back to the two statements I made earlier. God is sovereign and He will bless whom He chose and His blessing is not the result of human uprightness or effort. The two go together. We have seen the contrast. The Amorites sinned and were annihilated. Israelites adopted their practices, but were punished and restored. Edom, Moab and Ammon continued their hatred against Israel and were punished and scattered. Scripture tells us of their restoration one day, but has not given any details. I don't have a logical answer to all these except to repeat that the gracious dealings of God are not the subject of our determination. Yes, theology needs to be anthropological because God has become man, but theology should not start with sinful anthropology.