THE TREES WHICH ARE NOT PEOPLE (DEUT 20:19): AN ANCIENT MISTRANSLATION?

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When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees, and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls." (Deut 20:19,20 NIV).

This early sample of ecological concern strikes, no doubt, sympathetic chords in our time. Even the argument that trees are not people, and therefore not a proper object for siege, is not lacking in a certain homely philosophical appeal, even if somewhat naive. People who are tempted to cut trees do not perceive them as enemies, but the humorous thought might be effective.

A closer examination of the text, however, may disturb our satisfaction with the usual renditions of the passage. One wonders why this kind of argument occurs in a context of sober legal injunctions. Such injunctions seldom give the reader any rationale, let alone a homely philosophy. But if motivation is to be given in selected cases, why would this commandment have been selected, when the usefulness of the prohibition is rather obvious?

When proceeding from the context to an examination of the passage itself, more disturbing facts appear. The translation "that you should besiege them" does not accord well with the Hebrew *lābō' mippāneykā bammāṣ ôr,* literally, "to go in front of you in the siege (works)." If the possibility is envisioned of Israelites besieging trees, then it is not clear who is doing the "going" in the Hebrew phrase, since (1) the Israelites can hardly be said to go in front of themselves when besieging trees, (2) the trees cannot go anywhere when besieged, and (3) besides the Israelites and the trees, the context offers no other possible subject for the infinitive *lābō',* "to go."

The translation "Are the trees of the field people?" for *kâ hā'ādām 'ēṣ haśśādeh* is also highly questionable. Many versions, taking the lead from the Targum and the LXX, read a negative ("the trees of the field **are not** people") for which there is no manuscript evidence. Other translators (as the NIV above) managed to obtain

the same effect by employing a rhetorical question mark, which implies a repointing of *hā* in *hā'ādām*.[1] But one would expect the clause, if interrogative, to open with the interrogative *he*, not with *kî*, which was left untranslated in the NIV. Further, the subject *ēs* would in such a case take the article: *he 'ādām hā 'ēs haśśādeh?* As it stands, the text does not sound like a question. Nor should the problem be solved by a conjectural insertion, as of "life" in the KJV ("for the tree of the field is man's life").

There may be no need for any emendation if we pay close attention to the syntax of the Deuteronomic commandments. The structure of v. 19 belongs to a very large class of prohibitions (constructed with *lō'* + imperfect) followed by a "but" (*kî*) and then a command (in the imperative) to do the opposite of what was forbidden in the first part. For instance, the previous commandment reads, "In the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing [*lō'* + imperfect] that breathes, but [*kî*] you shall utterly destroy [imperative] them" (Deut 19:16-17 RSV). In this example, the prohibition against "saving alive" is followed by a contrasting "but" which introduces the opposite course of action, a positive order to "utterly destroy."

In 20:19, too, a *kî* opens the last clause after the prohibition (*lō'* + imperfect) against cutting down the trees. This clause appears to contrast with the first part of the verse by introducing a different category of trees. Instead of the "city trees" (*ēsāh*, with a *mappiq* in the *Hē*, referring to the city) mentioned in the first part of the verse, presumably trees planted by the inhabitants of the city in its vicinity, we read here in the last part, of "trees of the field" (*ēs haśśādeh*). Just as "beasts of the field" refers in Hebrew to wild animals as opposed to domestic beasts, so the "trees of the field" could refer to the native flora as opposed to cultivated trees. In this way, both the syntactic structure and the vocabulary would lead us to expect in the latter part of 20:19 a contrast with the foregoing prohibition, a positive order to do the opposite of what was forbidden at the beginning of the verse. This would imply an imperative in the last clause, but it is hard to recognize in it any such verb.

However, one word in this clause, *hā'ādām,* though extremely common as a noun ("the man"), could also be taken as the imperative of a rare verb. One possibility is to parse it as a Hiphil imperative of *'ādam*. This would require no changes in the Hebrew consonantal text and only a very slight one in the traditional vocalization (*hā'ādem*). Though *'ādam* as a verb does occur at least eight times in the OT, it does so mostly in the presumably original sense of "being red," which does not suit the context here. A denominative sense for the same root may be posited, however. Denominatives are especially frequent in the Hiphil stem.[2] On

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[1]William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, 2d English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 296 (§100m).

[2]Gesenius, 145 (§ 53 g).

the possibility of a verb having both a primitive and a denominative sense, William Gesenius observes,

> Denominatives: verbs derived from nouns. . . . This does not exclude the possibility that for nouns from which denominative verbs are derived, the corresponding (original) verbal stem may still be found in Hebrew or in the dialects. The meaning, however, is sufficient to show that the denominatives have come from the noun, not from the verbal stem.[1]

With a denominative force, the verb *'ādam* may be inferred from the noun to mean "gather, mass" (cf. the collective sense "people" for the noun), "set people to work with" (cf. the sense of the English verb "to man" in "Man the guns!"), or other senses still to be determined. But there are other possibilities for a verbal identification of this word. It could be considered a variant spelling of the rare verb *'āṭam*, a building term related to frames or windows (1 Kgs 6:4; Ezek 40:16; 41:16), which would suit the context of wooden siege works; possibly "to peg (together)" (cf. "stopper" in Prov 17:23; Isa 33:15). Even *'ādam* itself may have originally meant "to build,"[2] which would also fit the context.

Whatever the exact identification or sense, a verbal force for *hā 'ādām* in this context would necessarily fall within the general semantic area of "making use of." This, together with a literal translation of several Hebrew words, as indicated below in bold letters, would yield for Deut 20:19-20 the following sense:

> When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, **since** you can eat their fruit, nor cut them down, **but instead** you shall **make use** of trees of the field **to go in front of you** in the siege. You may **only** cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees, and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.

Read in this way, Deut 20:19-20 would recognize a basic distinction in warfare between cultivated and spontaneously growing trees. The former may not, as a general rule, be utilized to build siege works. An exception may be made in the case of trees cultivated for ornamental or other purposes not related to sustenance. The needs of warfare must be carefully balanced with the possible future use of the land once conquered. Fruit trees might be crucial to the economic welfare of the. Israelites, who are to replace the original population of the besieged city, especially at the beginning of their occupation. The trees should therefore be spared. Ornamental trees in the vicinity of a city, on the other hand, would occur mainly in gardens kept for pleasure and would not be so important from an economic

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[1]Gesenius, 114 (§ 38 c,d).

[2]Fritz Maass," *adam*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-80), 1:78.

viewpoint. The Israelite army may employ them and so save itself the trouble of obtaining native trees from more distant places.

In this understanding of the text there are no difficulties in translating "to go in front of you" literally. The trees of the field are cut and used as construction material for siege works, which literally "go in front" of the Israelites. The usual translations of this passage, in contrast, not only stumble upon this phrase (as shown above), but also force two different meanings on the relationship of trees to siege works, occurring in two consecutive verses. The trees of the field at the end of v. 19 are envisioned as liable to be besieged by the Israelites unless especially protected. However, in v. 20 the more reasonable relationship of trees with siege works (*māṣôr*) as construction material is recognized by these same versions. The proposed translation maintains the same relationship between the trees and the siege works throughout these two verses, and it does so at the sober level of military engineering, not at the surrealistic level of people besieging trees.

To explain why these advantages were not realized by translators till the present time, it may be assumed that the verbal sense (or variant spelling of the verb) was rare and unknown to the translators in antiquity. Hence the desperate recourse to emendations: a conjectural negative before *hāʾādām* in the Targum and LXX, a non-existent interrogative in other versions which follow their lead (as the NIV), or a groundless insertion of "life" in the KJV. By recovering the verbal force of this word we lose a picturesque argument but gain clarity and consistency in translation, and refrain from unnecessary emendation of the Hebrew text.