

Holy War



Exodus 17:8-16

Last week we studied how the Children of Israel repeatedly complained and tested the Lord's provision. At the end of the Massah and Mirabah episode they even questioned the Lord's presence among them, adding insult to their lack of faith. As we commence this week's study we are presented with the battle against the Amalekites.

This battle with the Amalekites highlights not only Yahweh's presence and provision for the Israelites, but also reveals Yahweh's wrath against those who persevere in their contempt for Him. Yahweh disciplines those He loves. This war is an opportunity for Yahweh to show Israel his protection and provision first hand (yet, again!). First, as he promised, he is present among them. He is physically in their midst and fully aware of all that is going on with them in the desert. He knows their needs, whether it is food and water, or divine military protection. He knows their needs even before they are aware of what those needs might be.

Yahweh also promised to protect them. He is their shield and their strength in the face of not only nature, but also their enemies. He displayed his protection of Israel at the Red Sea when the Egyptian army was bent on capturing Israel to return them to a life of slavery in Egypt. Yahweh stood between the camps all through the night protecting the people of Israel and preparing the way for them to cross the Red Sea at daybreak. The Lord protected Israel and defeated the Egyptian army as it was swallowed up by the Red Sea. When Israel trusts and obeys Yahweh's instruction through Moses, he is able to protect Israel from their enemies.

This war against the Amalekites is an instance of Holy War. Yahweh, through Moses, instructed them to fight the Amalekites. This is made evident in the fact that only when Moses upheld the staff did they advance against the Amalekites. It is unmistakably obvious that the only way they could defeat the Amalekites is by Yahweh's intervention. Israel itself does not yet possess the military strength and training to fight for themselves.

The Amalekites were descendants of Amalek, the Grandson of Esau, who did not maintain the family covenant with the Lord as did his brother Jacob. Could there have been some residual "bad blood" between the descendants of Esau and the descendants of the favored son Isaac, and the brother of Jacob? Jacob had used deceit to steal Esau's birthright and

blessing¹. Esau, the elder brother was to inherit the promise God made to Abraham, namely that Abraham's nation would descend through him. It was not to be. Jacob obtained that blessing and birthright, and it was confirmed by God when God renamed Jacob, Israel. All of Jacob's descendants would be known by the name Israel. Jacob's deceit in stealing Esau's birthright came at a great price. Esau wanted to murder his brother for his treachery, and Jacob had to flee his family and home. Eventually there would be peace between Esau and Jacob, but evidently the descendants of Esau still resented Jacob and his descendants. The Amalekites would forever be enemies of the Israelites (Ex. 17:16).

Numbers 13:24 mentions the Amalekites living in the Negev, the desert stretching between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea. They were a nomadic tribe known to be violent. They raided settlements and other nomadic tribes for plunder and to control oases vital to their own herds. Something of their cruel nature is described in Deuteronomy 25:18, *"When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God."* Despite their ancestry going back to Esau and Isaac and Abraham, they had no fear of God. They surely knew who he was. But evidently they had turned their back against God when they turned their back against the descendants of Jacob. They had no respect for God. Because of their violent and "ungodly" attitude, Yahweh, and therefore Israel, would be at war with them from generation to generation (Ex. 17:16). Both King Saul² and King David³ have encounters with the Amalekites, and the evil Haman of the story of Queen Esther is also a descendant of the Amalekites⁴. The intentions of the Amalekites towards the Israelites are evil, death and destruction.

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. ¹⁸ When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. ¹⁹ When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut 25:17-19)

Yahweh will not tolerate another people attacking His people unprovoked. Yahweh will win this battle for the Israelites, but the Israelites will be active participants in this fight. In Ex 17:9 Moses tells Joshua, *"Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites"*. This verse should literally be understood as: Choose men for us and go fight Amalek tomorrow. Most likely Joshua would have some difficulty finding men to pull together an army. These men were untrained militarily and very few would have had arms suitable for fighting against a well organized band such as the Amalekites. Moses' instruction can be understood to mean, "find

¹ This story can be read in Genesis 27.

² [1Sa 14:48](#); [1Sa 15:3](#)

³ [1Sa 30:18-20](#)

⁴ Esther 3:1; The Amalekite kings bore the hereditary name of Agag (or *Agagite*)—Easton's Illustrated Dictionary

some men who are suitable for this battle amongst the Israelites". The Israelites are not up for this battle on their own. Moses goes on to say, *"Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands."* Clearly Moses is following Yahweh's instruction even though it is not recorded in scripture. Just as Yahweh had instructed Moses to use his staff as a visible symbol of God's power and authority throughout the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and in providing fresh water at Massah and Mirabah, Yahweh's presence can be seen symbolically in Moses raising up the staff during the battle. As Moses' holds up the staff, Israel wins because they are placing their faith in Yahweh to fight the battle. The staff is raised in seeking Yahweh's help. As the staff lowers, Israel begins to lose. The lowered staff symbolizes Israel's attempt to fight the battle on their own, a feat for which they have no strength or ability. With the assistance of Aaron and Hur, the victory was assured. Not only by Moses' faith, but by the faith and obedience of Israel (represented in Aaron and Hur) did God win the victory on their behalf. This divine victory was dependent upon Israel's faith in Yahweh's protection and obedience to Yahweh's instruction.

The evil intentions of the Amalekites can be seen in Yahweh's response. Yahweh alone knows the hearts and motives of all peoples everywhere. He knows the motives of the Amalekites who are bent on death and destruction. This battle with the Amalekites is Holy War. A Holy War is differentiated from other battles and wars in five respects⁵:

1. A Holy War is different than other battles and wars in that only Yahweh could call for a Holy War to be launched. The Lord alone could decide when a war could be undertaken. We know enough about Moses to know that he sought Yahweh's instruction before commanding Joshua to prepare for battle. We know that Moses is faithful and obedient, and waits upon the Lord before he takes action. This battle against the Amalekites is initiated by Yahweh, not Moses.
2. The call for war could only come through a prophet. Prophets were the Lord's spokesmen and only they could pass on this message. Kings and high priests could not fulfill this role. Moses is a prophet of God.
3. Yahweh does the real fighting in a holy war because it is *His* war. The Israelites would be defeated without Yahweh's presence. With His presence the Israelites were carrying out His command.
4. The goal of Holy War was the destruction of an evil culture. A culture is deemed evil by Yahweh's judgment alone. Only when a culture has become progressively corrupt to the point that Yahweh decides it is time to destroy that culture so it can no longer infect Israel. There is a similar parallel in Genesis 15:16 regarding the "sins of the Amorites" reaching its "full measure". Yahweh, in his mercy and sovereignty, gives ample opportunity for all people to repent, but he also knows when they reach the point of no return. The Amalekites have reached that point. See Deuteronomy 25:18-19. The

⁵ Stuart, Douglas K.; *New American Commentary: Exodus*; 2006;pg. 395-397.

Amalekites have no fear of God, and at the right time God will institute a holy war against them.

5. Finally, decisive, rapid victory characterized holy war. The expectation was that if it was truly Yahweh's war, it would be concluded in *one day*. There would be no question as to the victors of the day. God's war would be won swiftly, soundly, and completely.

This battle against the Amalekites did not annihilate their population, but it served to punish them for arrogantly and without provocation attacking the Israelites. This battle left the Amalekites defeated and wary of Israel for a long time to come. As the bitter enemy of Israel, they would come to fight another day, but in the mean time they were no longer a threat to Israel. God used this battle to teach Israel obedience to his command and to reinforce the idea that Yahweh is their protector. It also was a beginning in teaching Israel to fight alongside Yahweh. Israel would be trained to be a military force that would cause Canaan to fear them. Their reputation would precede them into the Promise Land. It would be known that Yahweh was with them, and with Yahweh on their side they could not be defeated.