

REMEMBERING AMALEK TWICE

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This paper proposes to show that the two exhortations in Scripture (Exodus and Deuteronomy) concerning Amalek are based on two separate episodes. This is a departure from the traditional view that Deuteronomy is a replication or extension of Exodus.

Twice in Scripture, Exodus 17:8-13 and Deuteronomy 25:13-15, Israel is called upon to remember Amalek and efface its memory from under the heavens. Who was Amalek, and why so harsh an edict that was not pronounced upon any other people?

An ancient, nomadic, and pugnacious tribe, residing in the vicinity of the Negev, Amalek's lineage is traced to Eliphaz, son of Esau and a concubine. (Gen. 36:12). When the Israelites were in the wilderness after the Exodus, Amalek launched a surprise, unprovoked attack upon them at Rephidim. A fierce battle ensued, which was nip and tuck. First one side gained the upper hand, then the other. Eventually, the Israelites, under the command of Joshua, managed to discomfit them.

To discomfit [Hebrew *vayahalosh*] is to weaken. The Amalekites were weakened, but by no means demolished. That the victory was less than a total triumph can be judged by its aftermath. When the battle was over, there was no jubilation, no chant of glorious success. In scriptural terminology, when a foe is defeated decisively, *vayakh* is used. Psalms 135 and 136 list *mighty kingdoms* vanquished by God, but no mention is made of Amalek at Rephidim.

Moreover, far from rejoicing, Moses is instructed to inscribe in the Book of Remembrance and rehearse in Joshua's ears that the Lord will erase Amalek's memory from under the heavens and *the Lord will wage war on Amalek from generation to generation* (Ex. 17:16).

Deuteronomy likewise exhorts Israel to remember Amalek. The reason given here is Amalek's cruelty in *smiting the enfeebled when you were faint and weary* (Deut. 25:17-18). Consequently, when Israel will be settled

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in its land and at peace with its neighbors, it is then to settle accounts with Amalek by obliterating its memory from under the heavens.

What is noteworthy is what is absent in Deuteronomy. No mention is made of Rephidim, but only of Amalek's brutality *when you were faint and weary*. Did that occur at Rephidim? Were the Israelites, having just left Egypt, already *faint and weary*? Were the combatants under Joshua, having overcome a ferocious attack, *faint and weary*?

Moreover, no allusion is made in Deuteronomy of God's oath. Nor is there any reference to Joshua, into whose ears this was rehearsed. That is to say, when Joshua will become supreme commander, at the top of his agenda will be dealing with Amalek. In his day, Joshua fought multiple battles with myriads of kingdoms, but Amalek was not amongst them. In the entire Book of Joshua, Amalek's name does not appear even once.

Even the pronouncements on wiping out Amalek are dissimilar. In Exodus, an oath is taken that God will blot out Amalek's memory from under the heavens. The Lord will wage war on Amalek in every generation. In Deuteronomy, Amalek is to be dealt with only after Israel is firmly established in its land and at peace with its neighbors.

A wide disparity exists between Exodus and Deuteronomy. The latter is no replication of the former. Can it be that Exodus deals with Israel's first encounter with Amalek and there is a second encounter reflected in Deuteronomy?

In Numbers 14:41-45, it is related that the Israelites suffered a crushing blow at the hands of the Amalekites. So great was the magnitude of their defeat that here the text states *vayakum* [smote] and then adds *vayaktum* [beaten down] to describe the enormity of the drubbing they received at the hands of the Amalekites (allied with the Canaanites). The text continues that it was *ad l'Hormah*. According to Ibn Ezra, Hormah was not necessarily the name of a locality they recently captured but *vayakoumum*; that is, utterly destroyed. It would appear that all the Israelites who participated in the battle were wiped out.

In his commentary on the Pentateuch, J. H. Hertz writes: "So devastating was this blow that all hopes of a quick and easy entry into Canaan were completely dashed." It was to be 38 years before a fresh military enterprise could be undertaken.

In its encounters with Amalek, Israel had not one but two harrowing experiences. The exhortation in Exodus is based on that which occurred at Rephidim. Had Amalek been successful at Rephidim (and it nearly was), Israelite history would have ended then and there. For Amalek did not attack Israel simply to engage in tribal warfare; that is, in order to loot, pillage, and plunder, and then move on. Amalek's objective was far more sinister. This is reflected in the first exhortation in Exodus.

Why did Amalek attack? It was, as Psalm 83:5 states, *to cut off Israel from being a nation so that there be no remembrance of it*. In short, Amalek's motive was genocidal. Even though the psalmist lists a number of nations as part of a league, only Amalek attempted to bring about the liquidation of Israel. Thus, the exhortation in Exodus to wage war with Amalek for generations to come meant that Amalek could not be overcome in one generation.

In the second encounter with the Israelites, Amalek came even closer to achieving its objective. So severe was the beating the Israelites received, that they were compelled to wander helplessly in the wilderness for nearly 40 years before they were able to muster enough strength to invade Canaan. Amalek turned out to be Israel's chief antagonist and, as the rabbis state, Israel's unreconcilable enemy (P. R. 42).

The second exhortation, after the second encounter, was based on Israel's recognition that Amalek was too formidable a foe to take on in conjunction with others. That is why Deuteronomy stipulates that only after Israel was well-established in its land can it carry out the second exhortation.

It is no wonder that Joshua, preoccupied with battling other kingdoms, failed to deal with Amalek. It was only when conditions changed later on and Saul became Israel's first monarch that the culmination of the biblical encounter of the two nations occurred with a decisive victory over Amalek.

The two injunctions to remember what Amalek did were based on the two encounters with Amalek in the wilderness. This explains why the exhortation to remember in Deuteronomy is so markedly different from that in Exodus. Amalek was out to strangle Israel before it became a nation. On two occasions, it nearly succeeded. For Amalek was not just a foe but a genocidal one. As long as its memory and spirit remain alive, Israel will never feel safe and secure.