

SAUL AND GENOCIDE

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God's biblical command to *blot out the memory* of the Amalekites (Deut. 25:19) has long been a source of consternation for Jewish thinkers. Michael J. Harris's book, *Divine Command Ethics: Jewish and Christian Perspectives*,¹ devotes an entire chapter to the issue. Critics of religion have, for their part, focused on the Amalekite "genocide" as an easy point of attack against biblical morality. The British *Guardian* newspaper recently ran an item by Katherine Stewart entitled, "How Christian fundamentalists plan to teach genocide to schoolchildren."² That article discusses the story of King Saul's battle against the Amalekites, and cites Philip Jenkins, a prominent American academic historian, as claiming that the story has been used to justify acts of genocide perpetrated by white settlers against Native Americans, Catholics against Protestants, Protestants against Catholics, and even Rwandan Hutus against Tutsis. In recounting the passage from Samuel, Stewart first quotes the command to wipe out the Amalekites that Saul received from Samuel (I Sam. 15:3) and then summarizes the rest of the story as follows: "Saul dutifully exterminated the women, the children, the babies and all of the men – but then he spared the king. He also saved some of the tastier looking calves and lambs. God was furious with him for his failure to finish the job." One can hardly blame Stewart for her interpretation of the biblical passage; as far as I know, it is universally accepted by Bible believers and Bible critics alike. A close reading of the actual text of Samuel, however, reveals a very different story.

It is the prophet Samuel himself who offers the first clue to the new interpretation. It should be remembered that, having been spared by King Saul, the Amalekite king Agag is brought before Samuel, who promptly executes him, but not before uttering this harsh goodbye: "*As your sword has bereaved women, so shall your mother be bereaved among women*" (I Sam. 15:33). There is apparently a logical contradiction in this verse. If Saul has killed all the Amalekite women, Agag's mother should be long dead, but if she is dead, what sense is there in declaring that she will be bereaved!?! Evidently, some

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of the women –Agag's own mother at least – must have survived Saul's onslaught. However, for those who have read beyond the story of Saul's battle there is no need for pedantic demonstrations that some Amalekites survived the war. After all, just twelve chapters later (I Sam. 27:8) we find David attacking the Amalekites, who later return the favor: *By the time David and his men arrived in Ziklag, on the third day, the Amalekites had made a raid into the Negev and against Ziklag; they had stormed Ziklag and burned it down. They had taken the women in it captive, low-born and high-born alike* (I Sam. 30:1-2). If Saul had exterminated all of the Amalekites, who was left to fight against David?

In order to arrive at an interpretation that will solve these quandaries, our story must be dissected into its relevant sections. These are: 1) Samuel's command to Saul (I Sam. 15:1-3); 2) Saul's execution of the command (15:4-9); 3) God's complaint to Samuel and the latter's reaction to it (15:10-12); and 4) Samuel's condemnation of Saul (15:13-31).

The operative verse in Samuel's command is categorical and chillingly straightforward: *'Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses'* (15:3). Saul's actual execution of the command is more complicated. He first assembles his troops, approaches the Amalekite city, and warns the Kenites to stay clear of the fighting. Finally, we have arrived at Saul's attack, which is described as follows: *Saul destroyed Amalek from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is close to Egypt, and he captured King Agag of Amalek alive. He proscribed all the people, putting them to the sword* (15:7-8). Take note that these verses are written in the third person *singular*. What does this signify? We are surely not expected to believe that Saul vanquished the Amalekites single-handed; rather, we are to understand that in fighting the Amalekites Saul's troops served as instruments of his will. Saul alone decided what was to be done and his men simply followed his orders. At this point, however, the biblical narrator expands the compass of volition to include Saul's troops, and the text moves abruptly into the third-person plural: *But Saul and the troops spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second-born, the lambs, and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them; they proscribed only what was cheap and worthless* (15:9). Apparently, Saul has now abandoned his role as sole decision-

maker and has allowed his troops to have their say in how things will be done.

How does all of this relate to the prophetic critique of Saul's behavior? Samuel explicitly condemns Saul for not killing the animals – *'What is this bleating of sheep in my ears?'* (15:14) – and we should remember that Saul shared the decision to spare those animals with his troops. Ungraciously, Saul even tries to pin *all* of the responsibility for that misstep on his men and explains to Samuel: *the troops spared the choicest of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to the Lord your God, and we proscribed the rest* (15:15). Saul is claiming that the troops sinned (third-person plural) by sparing the animals of their own prerogative; for his part, he was only personally involved in the proscription (first-person plural) of the remaining livestock. Saul later confesses to having been culpably weak in his leadership: *'I did wrong to transgress the Lord's command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the troops and I yielded to them'* (15:24). It seems clear that Saul's wrongdoing involved his (passive?) participation in actions which reflected the will of his troops. From my earlier analyses, we know that this consists, specifically, of sparing Agag and the livestock.

The background developed above hardly contradicts conventional wisdom; now it is time to lower the exegetical boom. I have so far abstained from pointing out a glaring difference between Samuel's command and Saul's execution of it. While Samuel spares no words listing every section of the Amalekite population which must be destroyed, the verse describing Saul's execution of the command simply states: *He proscribed all the people, putting them to the sword* (15:8). Standard English usage would lead us to believe that the phrase *all the people* is just a briefer way of saying *men and women, infants and sucklings*. But is it?

In our passage, the New Jewish Publication Society translation (from which I quote) uses the word "people" to translate the Hebrew word *am*. In Modern Hebrew, *am* has come to denote solely a "people" in the sense of a large ethnic community, and it is in this sense that Saul's destruction of the Amalekite *am* can be seen as an ancient instance of genocide. However, while scripture does sometimes use *am* in this way, the word often bears another meaning. Consider Genesis 14:16, which reports how Abraham and his men recovered captives taken in war: *he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his posses-*

sions, and the women and the *am*. Whatever is meant here by *am*, it certainly does not include women! Later, we read of Pharaoh setting off to overtake the escaping Israelites: *He ordered his chariot and took his am with him* (Ex. 14:6). Now Pharaoh presumably did not muster Egypt's women and children to do battle; the word *am* actually refers to the *six hundred of his picked chariots, and the rest of the chariots of Egypt, with officers in all of them* mentioned in the next verse. As soon as one starts looking for such instances, it becomes clear that scripture is full of verses in which the word *am* refers to a military force. The Book of Samuel itself uses *am* in this sense, as, for example, in the verse *Saul divided the am into three columns; at the morning watch they entered the camp and struck down the Ammonites* (I Sam. 11:11). Even the story of Saul's battle against Amalek offers clear instances of this additional usage. In the JPS version, the word consistently translated as "troops" (i.e., Saul's troops) is, in fact, *am*!

All of the above points to the validity of a rather unconventional interpretation of our story. Saul did in fact kill all of the Amalekite *am*, that is to say, he put the Amalekite *warriors* to the sword, but he spared the non-combatants. It is no longer surprising that Agag's mother would live to mourn his death or that a few years later the Amalekite boys who were too young to fight Saul would grow up to do battle against David.

Interestingly, this interpretation helps clarify a well-known *midrash*. According to the Babylonian Talmud (*Yoma* 22b), when Saul received the divine command to destroy the entire population of Amalek and their livestock, he began questioning its morality: "If human beings sinned, what [sin] have the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what [harm] have the little ones done?"³ A divine voice is said to have replied with a quotation from Ecclesiastes (7:16): *Don't overdo goodness*. This *midrash* does not quite make sense, given the standard understanding of the war against Amalek. We can understand why Saul is depicted as questioning the order to kill the cattle, since the cattle were in fact spared. But why would the author of the *midrash* think that Saul was bothered by having to kill children? Given my interpretation, the *midrash* becomes more comprehensible: Saul spared both the cattle and the children – and, appropriately, it suggests that those decisions reflected his qualms about killing members of either category.

All of this does, however, leave us with a tricky theological problem. Saul had been commanded by God to kill every Amalekite man, woman, and child, yet he only killed the warriors. One would think that this merciful bit of improvisation would have called down at least as much divine wrath as did the sparing of mere animals. However, Samuel (and presumably God Himself) seems completely untroubled by it!

Since I believe my exegesis to be – up to this point – unimpeachable, I will build a somewhat radical theological conclusion upon it. As became clear above, Saul sinned by giving in to his warriors' desire to spare Agag and the livestock. The verse describing how the *am* was killed – and not the women and children – is written purely in terms of Saul's own (third-person singular) agency. Saul is blamed only for submitting to the will of his troops. Appropriately, Samuel chides him, *'You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel'* (15:17).

When God orders a king to commit genocide, He evidently respects the monarch's prerogative to refuse. God thus has no complaint about Saul's unwillingness to kill women and children. This perhaps demonstrates a sensitivity to the moral predicament of a human being who is asked to play God. What God will not condone is a weak king, who simply yields to his troops' desire when – without any real ethical qualms to explain their behavior – they wish to save proscribed animals for a barbecue in defiance of God's express command. While my interpretation of the story hardly leaves us without moral and theological questions, I think it is still far more palatable than the standard exegesis.

I shall conclude with a brief consideration of how my interpretation relates to a very recent discussion of the war with Amalek. In his latest book, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*,⁴ political philosopher Michael Walzer uses the Amalek episode to illustrate one of his central theses, i.e., that in the Bible "God's interests are represented by His prophets, while the full and often contradictory set of human interests – personal, dynastic, and national – is represented by the king" (p. 67). Walzer compares Saul's reluctance to kill Agag with King Ahab's statesmanlike decision to spare the people of Aram and their king in order to achieve a negotiated peace (I Kgs. 20:34), a bit of human wisdom that was also condemned by a prophet (I Kgs. 20:42). My conclusion is perhaps more discriminating. Indeed, God's inter-

ests, as voiced through prophecy, call for the total annihilation of the Amalekites and their animals, while Saul seems to have other issues in mind. However, Walzer may have been too quick to *completely* identify God's interests with the prophetic voice. By the end of the story, both the Israelite prophet and the Israelite king have given ground to each other's position. While Saul agrees that it was wrong to spare Agag and the animals, Samuel makes no complaint about Saul's decision to spare the non-combatants. It appears that God's ultimate "interests" (as expressed by the outcome of the whole narrative rather than by any single voice within it) lay somewhere between the strict commands of prophecy and the wisdom of human statecraft. Unfortunately, by failing to kill Agag and the animals, Saul failed on both accounts. Not only did he disobey God's command, but he did so in a demonstration of weak leadership by giving in to the narrow momentary interests of his troops. It was this double failure – of both piety *and* statesmanship – that doomed Saul's reign. Perhaps these further considerations can help complete our reading of the above-cited *midrash*. When God scolds Saul for his qualms, it is as if God tells him, "Right, don't kill the children. But must you spare the animals as well!? *Don't overdo goodness!*"

NOTES

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Dr. Joseph Lerner, z"l.

1. M. J. Harris, *Divine Command Ethics: Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) pp. 134-150.
2. K. Stewart, "How Christian fundamentalists plan to teach genocide to schoolchildren," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2012. Recovered June 7, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/30/christian-fundamentalists-plan-teach-genocide>.
3. Soncino translation. I thank Prof. Shubert Spero for suggesting that I mention this *midrash*.
4. M. Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).



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