

# Battle Tested

Exodus 17: 8-16

Pierre Cannings

## I. Right People vs. 8-10

### a. Enemy

#### i. Amalek –

1. The hostilities between Amalek and Israel began during the Hebrew sojourn in the Sinai. Exod 17:8–13 describes this first encounter, an apparently unprovoked attack upon Israel at Rephidim. It is possible that the Amalekites feared the Israelite incursion into the region of Kadesh (cf. Gen 14:7, where this place is linked with Amalek). Perhaps the Amalekites thought the Hebrews represented competition for water or would interfere with their trade routes. At any rate, Deut 25:17–18 says that the Amalekite attacks were merciless; this harassment led to great enmity between Israel and Amalek. The Amalekites were defeated (Exod 17:13), and they were placed under a permanent ban (17:14–16; Deut 25:17–19). Memory of Amalek's opposition to Israel was still alive in the days of Samuel and Saul (1 Sam 15:2–3)
2. The Amalekites had domesticated the camel and used its swiftness effectively in surprise attacks. Not only did the Amalekites attack Israel at Rephidim, but a year later they attacked them again at Hormah, when the Israelites had been driven out of southern Canaan and were on the run after their foolish attempt to enter the promised land in spite of God's command through Moses that they could not (Num 14:43–45).
3. The Israelite encounter with the Amalekites at Rephidim represents an example of Old Testament holy war, an instance that anticipates the fuller delineation of the concept in later texts. The principles of holy war are codified in Deut 20:1–20,

#### ii. Rephidim

1. Rephidim Three significant events occur while Israel is situated at Rephidim. The Israelites complain of being in a place where "there was no water for the people to drink" so Moses is instructed to provide water by smiting the rock. Rephidim became known as Massah, "testing," and Meribah, "contention," because Israel determined to test the Lord to see if he was among them or not (Exod 17:1–7).

### b. Right People

- i. Joshua- Joshua's name in Heb., יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, "Yahweh delivers" or "deliverance, salvation," fits; he appears in this military setting for the first time and leads Israel to a victory orchestrated by Yahweh's power. The author, as he often does, introduces a person in a setting that anticipates future significance in the narrative (cf. Exod 2:10).
  1. Joshua's piety and loyalty to Yahweh is apparent in Exod 33:11 where he is depicted spending time in the tent where Yahweh spoke to Moses, even when Moses is not there.
  2. Joshua - He was a member of the tribe of Ephraim. In the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, Joshua serves primarily as Moses' assistant or right-hand man in both religious and military situations
- ii. Choose the right people –
  1. That is, Joshua probably had the challenge of finding men who could fight rather than paring down to a manageable amount the size of the group that would be needed from among all those who were qualified
  2. Moses' instruction to Joshua to "pick out" (בחר) men reflects the selection of a fighting elite (a motif taken to an almost humorous extreme in Judg 7) from the larger group of Israel.
- iii. Aaron - is already well known as Moses' brother and the coleader of the Israelite exodus
  1. Aaron was the spokesperson of Moses (Exod 4:14). His role as an intermediary between Moses and the people foreshadows his later intermediary role as the high priest. He is seen alongside Moses throughout the Exodus narratives until the time of his death. Aaron appears to have shared Moses' leadership duties, as Yahweh often gives his instructions to both brothers, who act together (e.g., Exod 6:13; 7:8–10; 9:8; Num:1:3, 17).
- iv. Hur — A friend of Moses is introduced here for the first time. His name seems to mean the equivalent of "Whitey" in Hebrew, in and of itself not special. More importantly, Josephus identifies him as the husband of Miriam Because of the prominence given to Hur as an appellate judge over the people in Moses' absence in 24:14, it would seem that he was one of the chief elders of the nation.
- c. Staff of God in my Hand
  - i. Staff- Staff- A symbol of "authority (divine) because of miraculous power connected with it
  - ii. By the rod of God" (מִטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים) time Joshua is ready and moves out with his force, "tomorrow," Moses will take a position overlooking the field of battle, and he will be equipped with "the staff of Elohim." This reference to the staff that is an authenticating symbol of Yahweh's powerful Presence

- iii. The use of “the rod of God” ties this story to the previous one, but in both cases it is the power of Yahweh that makes the difference. The Nile River, the Reed Sea, the water out of the rock, and now the victory against Amalek are all accomplished with the use of the rod of God in Moses’ hand. The men were to fight, but it is clear that the deciding factor is God’s rod
  - iv. [God reinforced this in the consciousness of Moses, Aaron, and Hur as well as the Israelite army by correlating the position of the staff with the fortunes of the army.](#) It was important that the Israelites understand unmistakably that the only reason they could win against the Amalekites was that God was fighting for them, giving them the victory. The staff functioned in the case of this battle just as it had in the case of the plagues. As long as the staff of God was raised high, just as in the miraculous plagues and the miracle of the water from the rock immediately preceding,
  - v. The rod of God in Moses’ hand is the determining factor to win this battle. It derives from God (Exod 4:1–5); its power is from God. This is a holy war for Yahweh and one of self-defense for Israel. The battle is won because of the raising of the rod in Moses’ hand, not the mere lifting of his hands. To miss this point misses the theological reason the rod is included in the story. Moses’ raised hands indicate his total dependence on Yahweh. His raised hands also suggest the raising of Yahweh as Israel’s banner (cf. 17:15)
- d. Joshua Fought

## II. Right Strategy (Take the Staff) vs. 11-13

- a. Prevailed
  - i. Hands Up Prevailed
    - 1. Prevailed – Superior
    - 2. The staff had to be above Moses’ head—symbolizing God’s superiority to all his people
    - 3. The fact that in the ensuing encounter the Israelites lost to the Amalekites except when Moses kept the staff of God elevated indicates the basic military superiority of the Amalekites to the Israelites, something they presumably were counting on in launching this raid in the first place.
      - a. Naturally would lose without God
    - 4. The problem was the fact that human beings cannot keep their arms above their heads indefinitely; anyone would eventually tire under the same circumstances.
  - ii. Hands Down Amalek Prevailed

1. God's decisive role was properly acknowledged symbolically and the army prevailed. When the staff was lowered (because Moses grew tired, as v. 12 makes explicit), "the Amalekites were winning." Thus the staff portrayed God's sovereignty in the consequences of battle.
- b. Support
  - i. Moses Hands Heavy
    1. Stone Under Him
      - a. The stone allowed Moses some rest and permitted Aaron and Hur to stand in a position where they could comfortably support Moses' arms while keeping their own in a lowered position. Moses showed himself to be both "servant of God and heroic giant" in this passage
  - ii. Aaron and Hur Supported
    1. Hands were steady
- c. Joshua overwhelmed
  - i. Overwhelmed – defeated
  - ii. With the edge of the sword
    1. Joshua "disabled" (וַיַּחֲלֹשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן) Amalek; that is, he weakened them through injury and decimation so that they were no longer a serious threat to Israel in the wilderness period.

### III. Remember the War vs. 14-16

- a. Write it in a book
  - i. Book - "The book" in which this writing was to take place is made definite by the article, and apparently a specific book
    1. Although this is the first description of writing something down in the Bible, "the book" was evidently well known (הַסֵּפֶר), for it bears the definite article in Heb. It could possibly refer to the book of the wilderness journeys in its early stages of formation,
    2. Write this as a memorial in the book," the book being the one Moses already knew from God's inspiration that he was going to have to write (i.e., at least Exodus and perhaps the entire Pentateuch).
  - ii. As a memorial
    1. Memorial – commemorative Something which keeps remembrance vivid. The ideas represented by the words "remember," "remembrance," and "memorial" are closely connected in common parlance as well as in biblical usage. The Hebrew and Greek words translated as "memorial" in the OT and

NT are nominal derivatives of the verbal roots meaning “to remember.” It is for this reason one cannot fully grasp the significance of the term “memorial” without first understanding something of the usage and meaning of the term “to remember.” Although “remember” is usually understood as simply recalling to the mind something from the past, and “memorial” as that which serves to preserve the memory of something from the past, there is often another dimension to these terms in biblical usage.

2. As a result of this Amalekite attack, and no doubt as well because of the ancient antipathy of Jacob and Esau and the continuing conflict between Israel and Amalek, Yahweh required Moses to record in “the book” a promise to destroy Amalek completely that has the effect of a curse. This writing is to serve as a or a “memorandum”

iii. Recite it Joshua

- iv. I will blot out- Amalek God’s prediction, “I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven,” constitutes a very early “oracle against a foreign nation,” a common form of oracle found later in the prophetic books. Such oracles predict the destruction or suppression of an enemy of Israel (and thus automatically an enemy of God) at some time of God’s choosing in the future.

b. Moses built an Altar

- i. Altar- Altars were for worshiping God, and worship always involves the expression of gratitude for blessing, whatever else it also properly includes. The patriarchs tended to build altars wherever they located because they understood their obligation to worship consistently. Moses was carrying on this tradition in building the altar at Rephidim to express thanksgiving to God for delivering the Israelites.
- ii. Named “Lord is my Banner”

1. Banner - Heb. nēs, meaning ‘ensign’, is often rendered ‘banner’ in It is usually employed to designate a rallying-standard.
2. Moses named the altar, in commemoration of the defeat of the Amalekites, “Yahweh is my standard.” דגל can mean “signal” as well as “ensign, flag, banner,” and renders the word “standard, as rallying-point” in this verse.
3. Most often it is used in military contexts, where the nēs is a signal pole around which an army or army unit can rally, regroup, or return for instructions. Accordingly, Moses’ name for the altar makes use of those connections. Because Yahweh had supplied the sign of his favor/presence/power by the staff—in effect a small military signal pole given to Moses—and had done so in the context of a military encounter, Moses stated by the name of the

altar that the staff he had held high during the battle was the signal pole of Yahweh, a visible rallying point for the army of Israel in holy war

4. Moses here follows that example as well, by including a divine name in the name of the altar just as Jacob, for example, had done. Moses chose the name, lit; Yahweh is my Signal Pole" (NIV "The LORD is my Banner").

c. Lord Has Sword

i. The Lord will have War against Amalek

1. Generation to Generation

- a. The battle between Yahweh and Amalek will continue across the generations because the Amalekites have raised a hand against Yahweh's throne, that is, they have challenged his sovereignty by attacking his people.
- b. guaranteeing the war against Amalek down through the generations; the statement of Moses, in agreement with Yahweh's promissory curse in v 14, refers to a war with Amalek to which Yahweh commits *himself*, not Israel. The "hand" is the power of Amalek in collision course with Yahweh's purpose in his people
- c. The "battle," that is, victory, is to Yahweh against (אֶל) Amalek forever. This holy war was instigated by Yahweh, not Israel, and had a theological-covenantal basis and goal, that is, the destruction of those who, like Pharaoh, would have destroyed Yahweh's people. It is Yahweh's war, for he has commanded it; hence, the "battle is Yahweh's" "book of the wars of Yahweh" (Num 21:14) or the "book of Jashar" (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18), now lost to us. It could have been the beginning of a proto-Pentateuch or proto-Exodus.