

In the Ring

Exodus 17:8-13

Pierre Cannings, Ph.D

I. The Fight v. 8

a. Amalek

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
4. Amalek was the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12, 16). His name describes his descendants (Exod 17:8; Num 24:20; Deut 25:17, etc.). Israel is defeated by this people (Num 14:43, 45) after further disobedience in the desert.
5. Those who curse Yahweh's people, Yahweh will curse (Gen 12:1–3). In both reports the Amalekites demonstrate no fear of God (Deut 25:18), even in the face of the destruction of the Egyptians by Yahweh.

b. The Ring

- i. Rephidim
- ii. Right Level - 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).
 - 2. An enemy attacks Israel at a time when she is exhausted. In the brief note in Deuteronomy Amalek employs guerrilla or ambush tactics to pick off the stragglers and the weak among Israel as they traveled.
 - 3. since both Sinai and Rephidim cannot be located, and since the Amalekites appear to have been a nomadic group who roamed Sinai and the Arabah north of Ezion-Geber as well as the Negeb there is no reason that they could not have turned up on Israel’s route toward Sinai, wherever it lay. The conflict may even have been connected with Israel’s discovery and use of water in a difficult area where none was known before.
 - a. You saw you just tested Jesus and and he still one...

II. Your Corner

- a. Soldiers v. 9-10
 - 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 - [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.
- b. Right Weapon
- i. Staff- Staff- A symbol of "the rod of God" (מִטָּה 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
 - ii. 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
 - iii. [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,
 - iv. 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)

- v. The use of "the rod of God" (מִטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים) 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. Joshua's
 - 1. Just split a rock and Red Sea with it. That's the first thing you pick up. Just like the Bible that's the first thing you pick up because you know it won you your last battles.

c. Joshua Fought

III. Hands (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

- b. Ecclesiastes 4- Two are greater than one
 - c. Galatians 6:2 Bear burdens
 - 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 יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) 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.

IV. Right People vs. 8-10

- a. Enemy- Away from the Philistines to Amalek – His Holy War – His time for His enemy.
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a. You saw you just tested Jesus and he still one...

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Word Studies

Amalek - **AMALEK** (PERSON) [Heb *ʾămālēq* (אַמֶּלֶק)]. AMALEKITE. One of the six sons of Eliphaz and a grandson of Esau, whose mother was Timna, Eliphaz's concubine (Gen 36:11, 12; cf. 1 Chr 1:36). Amalek was one of the "chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom" (Gen 36:15, 16). In the biblical tradition, the terms "Amalek," "Amalekite," and "Amalekites" are used to designate the descendants of Eliphaz who, like Esau, are linked with the land of Edom. The Amalekites were a nomadic or seminomadic people, descendants of Esau and one of Israel's traditional enemies. They are not mentioned by name in any extra-biblical source, so the OT provides the only written evidence on this relatively obscure people.¹

C. History

Because of Amalek's occupation on the border of Palestine, in Sinai and the Negeb, these tribes were in conflict with the Hebrews from the time of their wilderness wanderings until the early monarchy. Indeed, every encounter between Amalek and Israel recorded in the OT is marked by hostility. It is likely that the other sedentary peoples near ancient Israel (e.g., Egypt, Edom, Moab) had similar problems with the Amalekites, but information on these other lands is unavailable.

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

¹ Gerald L. Mattingly, "[Amalek \(Person\)](#)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 169.

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).

With the defeat of the Amalekites, Israel controlled Kadesh-barnea (cf. Num 10:11–21:3). When the Hebrew spies returned to Kadesh (13:26), they reported that the Amalekites, among other peoples, blocked Israel's ambition to enter and occupy Canaan (13:29). According to Num 14:25, the Lord warned Israel to avoid contact with Amalek and take a more circuitous route to the promised land. This warning was not heeded, the Hebrews attempted to enter the hill country of southern Canaan, and they were repelled by the Amalekites and Canaanites (14:44–45; Deut 1:44). The Israelites were pursued all the way to Hormah (Tel Masos?), a settlement that was probably in Amalekite hands during other periods. One of the most interesting references to the Amalekites from the period of the Israelite wilderness wanderings is found in Num 24:20, where Balaam makes what could be interpreted as the only positive statement about this people in the whole Bible. Also important is the fact that Balaam "looked on Amalek," presumably from "the top of Peor, that overlooks the desert" (23:28), perhaps localizing the Amalekites to the ²S Jordan Valley.³

Rephidim – Uninhabited Place – A place where the Israelites camped during their wilderness journey

A station of the Exodus located between the Wilderness of Sin and the Wilderness of Sinai (Exod 17:1, 8; 19:2; Num 33:14, 15)⁴

Choose - elite soldier

²S south (ern)

³ Gerald L. Mattingly, "[Amalek \(Person\)](#)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 170.

⁴ Jo Ann H. Seely, "[Rephidim \(Place\)](#)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 677.

Commentary Studies

More detail about this is found in Deut 25:17–19. Exodus 17 and 18 have several linkages that will be noted (cf. Deut 25:17–19; 1 Sam 15:2–3). The general condition of Israel as “weary and worn out” fits the situation just described in vv. 1–7 above, although now there is a report of a major attack by Amalek on Israel as she is encamped at Rephidim. An enemy attacks Israel at a time when she is exhausted. In the brief note in Deuteronomy Amalek employs guerrilla or ambush tactics to pick off the stragglers and the weak among Israel as they traveled.

The entire story is loaded with covenantal theology.¹⁸⁵⁷ Those who curse Yahweh’s people, Yahweh will curse (Gen 12:1–3). The provisions of the covenantal metanarrative are effected as the writer depicts metahistory, the actions of God in this event in time and space. In both reports the Amalekites demonstrate no fear of God (Deut 25:18), even in the face of the destruction of the Egyptians by Yahweh. This kind of arrogance is haughty, like the boasting of Pharaoh. The result for both Pharaoh and his retinue and the Amalekites is eventually the same: total destruction (Exod 17:14; Deut 25:19).

The author records Yahweh’s marvelous intervention for Israel, as he had been doing all along, recording his faithful preservation of his people throughout their wilderness journeys. Yahweh deals with both military as well as natural disasters. Amalek’s attack now is especially threatening, since Israel was, so she thought, in danger of starvation and death by thirst. The wilderness was taking its toll. The way Yahweh deals with this enemy is significant: at a time when Israel could not possibly defend herself, Yahweh, through Moses, gives victory.

The location of the Amalekites is difficult. It depends on where Mount Sinai is, for the Israelites are not far from Sinai. Har-el locates them in the vicinity of Mount Sinn Bisher.¹⁸⁶⁸ The origin of this people is obscure. No extrabiblical evidence is available that mentions them.

⁵¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸⁸ Har-el, “Exodus Route,” 73–75.

Amalek was the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12, 16). His name describes his descendants (Exod 17:8; Num 24:20; Deut 25:17, etc.). Israel is defeated by this people (Num 14:43, 45) after further disobedience in the desert. They were a powerful people, according to Balaam (Num 24:20). David largely completes their demise as a significant people (cf. 1 Chr 4:43). It is possible that the group that attacked Israel was a group of raiding or nomadic Amalekites found in the Negev or Sinai.¹⁸⁷⁹

17:9–10 The use of “the rod of God” (מִטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים) 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. Joshua’s¹⁹⁸⁰ 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). Joshua’s obedience is highlighted and is vital to the success of the operation. He demonstrates that he is fitted to lead the armies of Israel faithfully. Joshua’s name appears seven times in Exodus (17:9, 10, 13, 14; 24:13; 32:17; 33:11), twenty-one times in the Pentateuch (three times seven). In the book of Joshua it appears 154 times, in Judges six times, and in the OT a total of 198 times in the Heb. text. It is the equivalent of the name the Messiah bore in the NT (cf. comments on Joshua in introduction, “Author”).

17:11 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) at this time in her formation, since there is no ark to raise (Wells, 222, suggests this as the significance of the raised hands of Moses). The hands of Moses were weak, but Yahweh’s strength was more than enough—just as it had been in Egypt. This theme ties the story to the exodus and God’s continuing power and presence among his people.¹⁹⁹¹ The literary connection is unmistakable. The continuation of the power of God on Israel’s behalf is assured; God continues to work with his rod (14:16) through Moses and his hands, just as in Egypt.¹⁹¹⁰² Amalek would dominate Israel without her God, just as the wilderness could destroy her without his help.

Hur was possibly the grandfather of Bezalel (31:7; 35:20; 38:22, etc.), or, according to late Jewish tradition, Miriam’s husband. At any rate, he held a position of prominence in Israel at this time, one of the many capable men in early Israel.

17:12–13 The view from the hill demonstrated for the leaders the vital involvement of Yahweh in the battle. Interestingly, Moses was tired, and Yahweh employed Hur and Aaron to aid Moses as he continued to hold up the rod of God for victory. The stone allowed Moses some

⁷¹⁸⁹ Cf. ABD 1:169–71; ISBE 1:104.

⁸¹⁹⁰ See K. Möhlenbrink, “Joshua im Pentateuch,” ZAW 59 (1942–1943): 14–59. He gives a thorough discussion of Joshua’s significance.

⁹¹⁹¹ Cf. Robinson, *Israel and Amalek*, 18.

¹⁰¹⁹² Cf. G. Coats, “Moses versus Amalek,” VT 28 (1975): 34–35.

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.¹⁹¹¹³

The battle was won by sunset, and the power of Yahweh had prevailed. Not only Moses but also Aaron and Hur were involved in this victory. They, as well as Moses, could recount the story orally and in writing, but Moses was the central human figure.

Joshua "disabled" (וַיַּחֲלֵשׁ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) 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. Yahweh effectively defended his people against both human and nonhuman dangers during this time. But a curse is placed on Amalek, just as on Pharaoh and Egypt. "They who curse you, I will curse" was Yahweh's promise to his chosen (Gen 12:3).¹²

8 The reference to Rephidim as the location for the battle with the Amalekites has sometimes been regarded as "out of place" (Noth, 141) and "dependent on v 1" (Hyatt, 183), in part because of the connection of the Amalekites with Kadesh in Gen 14:7 and with the Negeb in general in Num 13:29 and 1 Sam 15:7 and 27:8 and in part because of the placement of Rephidim by the sequence of the narrative of Exodus in proximity to Sinai. None of this information is conclusive, however, and since both Sinai and Rephidim cannot be located, and since the Amalekites appear to have been a nomadic group who roamed Sinai and the Arabah

¹¹¹⁹³ Ibid., 39–41; cf. also Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God: The Moses Traditions in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

¹² Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus*, vol. 1, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 593–596.

north of Ezion-Geber as well as the Negeb (cf. Landes, “Amalek,” *ID¹³B* 1:101 § 2; Grønbaek, *S¹⁴T* 18 [1964] 26–29), there is no reason that they could not have turned up on Israel’s route toward Sinai, wherever it lay. The conflict may even have been connected with Israel’s discovery and use of water in a difficult area where none was known before. After a long history of conflict, the Amalekites are said finally to have been dealt a concluding blow in Hezekiah’s time (1 Chr 4:34–43), but as Hyatt (183) points out, their antagonism may be preserved even in the Book of Esther in the designation of the villainous Haman as an Agagite (Esth 3:1), after the most infamous of the Amalekite kings (1 Sam 15). As Grønbaek (29–31, 42–45) has suggested, traditio-historical analysis of this pericope against the other OT references to the Amalekites may reveal the expansion of earlier traditions to accommodate later ones.

9 The attack of Amalek prompts Moses to give instructions that appear to be the result of another cry for help to Yahweh, though such an exchange is missing from the narrative. Joshua is mentioned without elaboration as a military commander clearly subject to Moses’ command; note Beer’s (92) somewhat Prussian designations: Joshua is “Der eigentliche Heerführer,” Moses “der Oberfeldherr.” Joshua is clearly understood in this narrative as the younger assistant of Moses and as the military leader he came to be (cf. Exod 32:17). He is presented here as someone we should know already, a fact that may lend further support to the suggestion that this narrative may have come from the collection of Yahweh war-narratives known as the Book of the Wars of Yahweh.

Mölenbrink has made a detailed analysis of the references to Joshua in the Pentateuch in comparison to the Book of Joshua and has posed a *Josua-recension* (20–24) that has inserted Joshua into the Pentateuchal narrative. The oldest stratum of this recension, he holds (*ZA¹⁵W* 59 [1942–43] 56–58), lies in the story (*Sage*) of the Amalekite war in Exod 17:8–16 and in the Joshua-recension of Num 13–14. This would account for the abrupt introduction of Joshua in some passages outside the Book of Joshua, but it is not sustained by others, in which Joshua is an essential figure (see, for example, Exod 33:11 and Num 11:26–30). The abrupt introduction of Joshua in the passage at hand and in other passages as well may suggest that Joshua’s early training as Moses’ assistant was too well known to make details necessary, rather than that the Joshua references are secondary (see Good, “Joshua Son of Nun,” *ID¹⁶B* 2:995–96).

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. By the 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 (see *Comment* on 4:2–4; 7:16–17; and *Explanation* on 7:8–13), despite the fact that the staff is not mentioned again in this section, is an indicator of the motif of the narrative: what is about to take place is firmly and surely under Yahweh’s control.

10 Joshua carries out his instructions, presumably on the schedule Moses has set, and Moses proceeds to his position, accompanied by both Aaron and Hur. Hur, the son of Caleb and

¹³*IDB* Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible

¹⁴*ST Studia theologica* (St Th)

¹⁵*ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

¹⁶*IDB* Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible

Ephrath and the grandfather of the famous artisan Bezalel (1 Chr 2:19–20), is mentioned along with Aaron as an assistant to Moses also in Exod 24:14. There is probably more to the Aaron-Hur partnership in relation to Moses than we can now recover from the text of the OT. Seebass (*Mose und Aaron*, 25–28) has made the imaginative though undemonstrable proposal that the primary form of the tradition preserved in this narrative involved only Hur and that originally the battle with the Amalekites was fought by Aaron and Hur, who were replaced in the expansion of the tradition by Moses and Joshua.

11–13 The reason for Moses' position on the brow of the hill can be seen in what he does during the battle. Moses lifted his hands, in symbol of the power of Yahweh upon the fighting men of Israel, surely, but in some miraculous way Moses' upraised hands became also conductors of that power. As long as he held his hands up, Israel prevailed in the right; but when in weariness Moses allowed his hands to drop, the Amalekites prevailed. Noth (142) and Hyatt (184) speak of magic, and Childs (315) aptly cites the parallel of Balaam's involvement in blessing, and cursing Israel and Moab (Num 22–24). In fact, the text does not make clear what Moses did, apart from raising his hands, with or without the staff of Elohim (cf. the comment of Schmid, *Mose*, 63). But about Yahweh's consequential involvement in the battle, an involvement closely linked to Moses' raised or lowered hands, there can be no doubt. When Moses through weariness could hold his hands up no longer, Aaron and Hur provided him a rock for a seat and held his hands up for him. His hands were then "firmness itself," right through the daylight fighting hours, and as a direct result, Joshua was able to cripple the Amalekite attack.¹⁷

¹⁷ John I. Durham, [*Exodus*](#), vol. 3, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 235–236.

17:8 Moses did not mention the reason for the Amalekites' attack on Israel, but even his very first readers would have known something of the history of enmity against Israel that carried on from the Esau-Jacob rivalry described in Genesis and something of the Amalekite *modus operandi*. Amalek was a grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12), and his descendants organized themselves into a very early national nomadic group ("first among the nations," in the words of Balaam, Num 24:20) that lived partly by attacking other population groups and plundering their wealth (cf. Judg 3:13). The Amalekites had domesticated the camel and used its swiftness effectively in surprise attacks.¹⁹¹⁸⁰ 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).

The Amalekites may have traveled farther south on this occasion than was their usual habit in order to attack the Israelites¹⁹¹⁹¹ perhaps because they had heard that Israel was far from any population center and relatively defenseless. 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.

17:9 Joshua appears here for the first time in the narrative, thus the first time in the Bible. He apparently had spent time during the days on the march from Egypt helping instruct the Israelites in martial skills and strategy, which would now see their first testing in actual combat. He was surely much younger than the eighty-year-old Moses since later he became Moses' successor. In 33:11 Moses referred to Joshua as his "young assistant," which suggests that he was a right-hand man to Moses in various ways, though at this point the ability to lead the people in battle appeared paramount.

The NIV translation "Choose some of our men" sounds potentially misleading since it may be understood to imply that there were many Israelites ready for battle and Joshua selected only some out of the entire army (as later at Ai, e.g., as described in Josh 7:3–4). In fact, an opposite sort of scenario probably presented itself: The text literally says, "Choose men for us and go out to fight against Amalek tomorrow." 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

¹⁸¹⁹⁰ Judg 6:3–5; 7:12; cf. 1 Sam 15:3. Over short distances camels can run forty-five miles per hour, considerably faster than a horse, and they were suited for transporting Amalekite raiding parties across desert/wilderness expanses to the outskirts of settlements, from which attacks on the settlements could be quickly accomplished.

¹⁹¹⁹¹ Various scholars have noted that all other extant historical records about the Amalekites place them normally in the northern Sinai or Midian or the Negev of Canaan, making the battle at Rephidim their most southerly foray on record.

would be needed from among all those who were qualified. Joshua may have approached this task of *choosing* on the basis of what later became regularized: the criterion that people who fought in battle should be healthy males between the ages of twenty and fifty.¹⁹²⁰²

Of interest is that the Israelites had a day to prepare for battle. The Amalekites may have arrived gradually at Rephidim, signaling their presence early in the process, or else advance parties may have encountered the Israelites then gone north to get the main body of warriors with which to engage them, thus alerting the Israelites and allowing them time to prepare. Alternatively, the Amalekites may have announced to the Israelites that if they did not surrender their valuables, they would be attacked the next day. At any rate, Joshua had to pull together an army with a single day's notice, and part of the criteria he used for selecting fighters may well have been simply identifying those who had a sword. Many men may have begun to carry some sorts of knives or short swords, but it is hard to imagine that the Egyptians had allowed the Israelites much by way of armament while they were still in Egypt. Whatever arms the men now owned had probably been manufactured in the wilderness and may not have been of the highest quality—and almost surely not the greatest quantity.¹⁹²¹³

This is the first account in Exodus of Moses' making special use of the staff of God without being instructed by God to do so ("Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands"). Does this wording mean that he was now confident of his own authority to use the staff as he saw fit? Almost surely not. By this time Moses expected his readers to realize that he would never use the staff unless commissioned by God to do so. In this relatively brief account of Israel's first warfare, many potentially supportive details are omitted, and one of them surely is the fact that God was behind the call to battle and the determination to use the divine staff as a symbol of God's presence with the people during the battle.²²

17:10 The next day the battle began, with Joshua leading the Israelite army on the battleground and Moses "on top of the hill" with "Aaron and Hur" accompanying him. The identity of the hill in question remains uncertain since the region all around Sinai/Rephidim has plenty of hills, and anything from a small elevation to a mountain can be called a "hill" (*gib'āh*) in Hebrew. Aaron is already well known as Moses' brother and the coleader of the Israelite exodus. But Hur 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.²⁰²³⁶ 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

²⁰¹⁹² On the assumptions behind these figures for the lower and upper age limits for fighting men, see "Excursus: How Many Israelites Left Egypt?" at the commentary on 12:37.

²¹¹⁹³ The possibility cannot be ruled out that some or many Israelites obtained swords and other weapons of war directly from the Egyptians at the time of the Passover (see comments on 12:36, where "plundered the Egyptians" may be conjectured to include implicitly the taking of the enemy's weapons of war).

²² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 393–395.

²³²⁰⁶ Whether this is nothing more than a speculation on Josephus's part or the preservation of a valid tradition cannot be discerned from the available evidence.

nation. Whether or not he was the Judahite Hur whose grandson was the supervising craftsman for the temple furnishings cannot be determined. The name is common enough (cf. the Midianite Hur mentioned in Num 31:8; Josh 13:21) that many people bore it.²⁰²⁴⁷

17:11 This verse does not teach the efficacy of “prayer without ceasing” but rather the fact that Israelite holy war was God’s war. 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, 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.²⁰²⁵⁸

17:12 The staff had to be above Moses’ head—symbolizing God’s superiority to all his people²⁰²⁶⁹ as the leader in holy war—so when Moses became so tired that he could not keep it above his head long enough for the Israelites to succeed against the Amalekites, an intervention was necessary. The problem was not Moses’ age or physical condition. He died a strong man.²¹²⁷⁰ The problem was the fact that human beings cannot keep their arms above their heads indefinitely; anyone would eventually tire under the same circumstances. With Moses seated on a (low) stone and his hands held above his head by Aaron on the one side and Hur on the other, the staff could be above the height of his head because Aaron and Hur could keep their arms at a comfortable hanging height under Moses’ elbows, probably with their fingers locked together cradling his elbows.

17:13 By nighttime this arrangement, fulfilling the purpose of having the staff along for the battle (v. 9), resulted in a total victory for Israel over Amalek. Note that the text says that

²⁴²⁰⁷ Cf. also 1 Chr 2:50; Neh 3:9.

²⁵²⁰⁸ This does not ignore the fact that in the ancient world the posture of prayer was with hands held up to heaven, as such passages as Pss 28:2; 63:4; Lam 3:41; 1 Tim 2:8 indicate. Ancient pictures of prayerful supplication do not generally suggest that the hands were held above the head or over the shoulders but rather in front of the chest or face, pointed upward in what we today think of as a typical posture of prayer with clasped hands or hands “kissing the mouth” (the language of worship in Job 31:27, properly translated). See Pritchard, *ANE*, plates 102, 123, 125, 130, 138. Moses was not simply praying however; he was serving as the representative of Yahweh, whose presence was manifested symbolically by the staff.

²⁶²⁰⁹ As already in 9:29, “I will spread out my hands . . . to the LORD” and 9:33, “spread out his hands to the LORD.” It is God whose power is symbolized by Moses’ uplifted hands containing the staff of the Lord. Moses’ hands had no power in themselves. Cf. B. D. Lerner, “Could Moses’ Hands Make War?” *JBQ* 19 (1990–91): 114–19.

²⁷²¹⁰ Deut 34:7; cf. W. F. Albright, “The ‘Natural Force’ of Moses in the Light of Ugaritic,” *BASOR* 94 (1944): 32–35.

“Joshua overcame the Amalekite army,” not because he alone deserved credit but in keeping with standard ancient narrative style that identifies events with their leaders.²¹²⁸¹²⁹

²⁸²¹¹ This is, of course, hardly limited to the ancient world. It is perfectly natural in English to speak of “Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin” as having beaten “Hitler and Mussolini” in WWII even though the two groups had no direct contact, their respective armies having accomplished the victory. Similarly, General MacArthur is said to have “beaten the Japanese” or Alexander the Great to have “conquered the known world of his day.”

²⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, [*Exodus*](#), vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 397–399.