

## 8. Preparation for Sinai Exodus 17:8–18:27

### War with Amalek

#### (Exodus 17:8–16)

This section has a lot in common with the previous incident (17:1–7). Both accounts are based at Rephidim; a great test or period of suffering occurs in both stories; the rod of God plays a significant role in each; Yahweh intervenes to save his people both times; and there are similar-sounding words (i.e. examples of assonance) in the two episodes (cf. 17:2, 7, 15). The major difference is that up to this point the adversity experienced by Israel after leaving Egypt has been of an inanimate nature. Now the people are confronted with human power and military might. This episode describes the first fight against another nation since the Hebrews left Egypt.

17:8. Then the Amalekites came and they fought with Israel at Rephidim.

As if Israel does not already have enough problems at Rephidim (17:1), now they are attacked there by a pagan, warring nation. The Amalekites were a semi-nomadic people who lived in the desert lands to the south of Palestine (e.g., Gen. 14:7). Some analysts believe that they were fighting over control of the Kadesh Oasis, a most important caravan centre. The exact location of the battle is unknown, however. Probably the most that can be said is that the Amalekites attacked Israel because they feared encroachment on their control of oases and caravan routes, in general.

Their method of attack is described in Deuteronomy 25:17–18: ‘Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary.’

17:9. And Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose men for us, and go forth to fight against the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand upon the top of the hill, and the rod of God will be in my hand.’

Israel does not respond by fleeing—as they did in Egypt—but they make their own necessary defence against the aggressor. In the escape from Egypt, the people merely stood and watched Yahweh stunningly defeat the Egyptians; now they must help to defend themselves.

The man ‘Joshua’ is mentioned for the first time in Scripture, as he is appointed field commander to choose capable warriors to drive back the Amalekites. We later learn that he was the son of Nun (33:11), and the assistant to, and successor of, Moses (24:13; Josh. 1:1–3). It was he who later led Israel in the conquest of Canaan.

Moses was advanced in years, and so he could not lead the military attack. He would do his part, however, by placing himself on top of a hill at the battlefield so as to be seen by Israel. There he would hold the staff of God, as he said, ‘in my hand’—that powerful instrument that had channelled God’s power to bring plagues on Egypt and to produce water from the rock at Rephidim.

In the original a question exists regarding whether the word ‘tomorrow’ should be attached to the activity of Joshua (first clause) or to the work of Moses (second clause). Perhaps it refers to both.

17:10. So Joshua did as Moses said to him—to fight against the Amalekites. And Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

As in the case of Joshua in verse 9, so too the figure of Hur is first introduced here. He was later to become an important judicial figure in early Israel (24:14). Perhaps he was from the tribe of Judah and was the grandfather of Bezalel, the leader in the construction of the tabernacle (31:2; 35:30; 38:22). Jewish tradition also claims that he was either the husband or the son of Miriam, the sister of Moses.

17:11. And whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; whenever he lowered his hand, then the Amalekites prevailed.

The battle begins. Whenever Moses holds up ‘his hand’ Israel dominates, but when he rests ‘his hand’ the Amalekites sway the battle. Much ink has been spilled regarding Moses’ part and activity in the conflict. Sarna, for instance, argues it is ‘highly plausible’ that ‘Moses held up a standard bearing some conspicuous symbol that signified the presence of God in the Israelite camp’. Confirmation of this

position rests in the name Moses gives to the battle site in verse 15: 'Yahweh is my banner.' Others insist we are witnessing an act of prayer—when Moses' hands are raised for divine intervention, God responds. There is absolutely nothing in the text to support this idea. Still others believe Moses is acting as a cult-magician, employing magical powers much like those of the magicians of Egypt. Coats remarks, 'By quasi-magical ritual, he determines the proceedings of the battle.'

The answer is quite simple. Moses has God's rod in his hand—see verse 9 in which 'hand' is also singular. The rod is the mediating instrument of God's power. It is God who is fighting for Israel, and he who is to be glorified. And the reason Israel does not prevail when the rod is lowered is to show the people that God contributes more to their victory than do sword and shield.

17:12. When Moses' hands [became] heavy, they took a stone and they set it under him and he sat upon it. And Aaron and Hur held his hands up, one on one side and one on the other. And his hands were steady until the setting of the sun.

The problem for the aged prophet was that 'the hands of Moses' were 'heavy'. This is a noun clause in Hebrew (it has no verb) and its purpose is 'to emphasize very strongly the unconditional relation between the subject and predicate'. If Israel was to be victorious, Moses needed help.

With the aid of Aaron and Hur, Moses, in a sitting position, was able to keep his hands 'steady' until the going down of the sun. The basic meaning of the word 'steady' is 'faithful/trustworthy/true'. It is normally used in moral contexts, and this is the only time in Scripture that it relates to a physical activity.

17:13. So Joshua overcame Amalek and his people by the edge of the sword.

Joshua's defeat of the Amalekites was not one of total destruction or annihilation. The verb 'overcame' has the basic sense of 'to weaken/disable' (cf. Isa. 14:12). The use of this verb has an ironic twist to it. A possible word-play exists between the verb (*hālāš*) and the noun used in Deuteronomy 25:18 to describe the Hebrew stragglers/weak ones (*hännēhšālīm*) being picked off by the Amalekite army. Thus Joshua made weak and disabled those who preyed upon the weak and disabled!

17:14. Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'Write this memorial in the book, and put it in the ears of Joshua, that I will surely blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the sun.'

Because of the hostility of Amalek, Yahweh commands (imperative mood) Moses to record 'a memorial in the book'. The term reflects a historical record of what God promises. The pledge is to be kept orally and in writing from generation to generation.

The content of the memorial inscription is directly stated: 'I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek.' The statement is intensive, because the infinitive absolute of the verb is followed by an imperfective form of the same verb. It literally reads, 'Blotting out, I will blot out.' In addition, it should be noted that the word 'memory' is related to 'memorial' from earlier in the verse. The point is to contrast the eternity of God's command and justice with the eventual demise of the people of Amalek (see 1 Sam. 15:1–33).

17:15. And Moses built an altar, and he called its name 'Yahweh is my standard.'

On account of the great deliverance at Rephidim, Moses erects an altar to Yahweh and he names it Yahweh nissi, that is, 'Yahweh is my standard.' Similar memorials are known elsewhere in the Old Testament: for instance, Jacob constructs an altar at Shechem, and he calls it 'El the God of Israel' (Gen. 33:20). These altars were not for sacrifice, but were erected in commemoration of the event that had taken place at the site.

The Hebrew term often translated 'banner' is really a 'standard' or signal-pole. In antiquity, a standard was a rallying-point. Often it bore an emblem, symbol, or banner on its top. A standard was normally raised on a hill or other high place to be seen by all (see Num. 21:4–9). It was an object of focus and hope for the people.

Moses' appearance on top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand acted much like a standard. The rod on the hill served as a symbol of Yahweh's power. Yahweh was thus seen to be the standard beneath which Israel rallied. The standard as a figure of the divine is known from other places in the Old

Testament. In Isaiah 11:10, the Messiah, the ‘root of Jesse’, is one who ‘will stand as a standard for the people’.

17:16. And he said, ‘Because a hand was against the throne of Yahweh, Yahweh will make war against Amalek from generation to generation.’

The difficulty in interpreting this verse has been recognized by commentators for a long time. My concern is not to analyse each and every proposal—Childs has already done that masterfully. I will generally present the problems, and then explain what I think to be the best solutions.

The first part of the verse is fragmentary, and it appears to have a poetical form. It literally says, ‘Because a hand upon kēs yāh ...’ The meaning of kēs yāh is much in dispute. The Septuagint translates it as ‘a secret hand’—which is a weak attempt. Some want to see a scribal error, and believe the word kēs should be nēs (standard/banner) in line with verse 15. The Vulgate and other translations view it as a scribal omission of a syllable and assume the word should be kîssē, meaning ‘throne’. The latter is probably correct.

The yāh is the abbreviated form of Yahweh seen previously in 15:2. See commentary on that verse.

The preposition ‘upon/to’ in the clause is probably being used in an oppositional sense, meaning ‘against’ (see Exod. 20:3). Thus the entire phrase would read, ‘Because a hand was against the throne of Yahweh’.

In other words, the Amalekites assaulted the rule and sovereignty of the Hebrew God.

As a result, Yahweh will do battle against Amalek for generations to come. And that provides the setting for what follows in Scripture regarding the relationship of Israel and Amalek (see 1 Sam. 15; 30).

### **Application**

The medieval writer Dante wrote a book called *The Inferno*. In it, the Roman poet Virgil leads Dante through hell and its different compartments. In Canto III, Dante is introduced to the souls of the dead who in life were neither for good or evil but only for themselves—their only banner was ‘me’. They race round and round in a black haze pursuing a wavering banner on a standard. Dante relates the scene: ‘I saw a banner there upon the mist. Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause. So it ran on, and still behind it pressed a never-ending rout of souls in pain ... These wretches, never born and never dead, ran naked in swarms of wasps and hornets that goaded them the more they fled, and made their faces stream with bloody gout [drops] of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.’ These dead ran after a standard to call their own, a banner to give them identity, meaning and significance. In *The Inferno*, the dead could never catch the banner.

Christians, like the church of old, are to proclaim, ‘The Lord is my Banner.’ He is the ensign on the standard around which we are to rally, and which is to lead us into battle. It is the emblem of whom we serve!

Onward Christian soldiers,

Marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before:

Christ, the royal Master,

Leads against the foe;

Forward into battle,

See his banners go.

Onward Christian soldiers,

Marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before.