
Lesson 9: A United Kingdom

Text: Chapters 15-16

The Biblical story of the battle against Amalek is a typical prophetic passage. The central themes of the story are the sin of Saul and the rebuke of Samuel, and throughout we are reminded of the prophetic teaching about life and religion. In a striking verse, Samuel summarizes this teaching (15, 22):

And Samuel said:
“Hath the Lord as great delight
in burnt-offerings and sacrifices,
as in hearkening to the voice of the Lord?
Behold to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to hearken than the fat of rams.”

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל
הֲתִפְזַח ה' בְּעֹלֹת וּזְבָחִים
כְּשֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹל ה'
הֲגַה שְׁמֵעַ מִזְבַּח טוֹב
לְהִקְשִׁיב מִתְּלַב אֵילִים

It is not surprising to find this emphasis in the prophetic teaching, even to the extent of blurring the plot of the story. The Bible, even where it tells a story, is primarily a book of prophecy.

Yet, if we are to understand the prophetic message, we have to know the history of the prophetic teaching.

Let us examine the history of Amalek. The people made their first acquaintance with Amalek soon after the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 17, 8):

Then came Amalek,
and fought with Israel in Rephidim.

וַיָּבֹא עַמְלֵק
וַיִּלָּחֶם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרֶפְדִּים

It was the first attack upon the Israelites since they had left the shores of the Red Sea, and the pain it inflicted was more than physical. Israel was instructed not to forget that unprovoked attack (Deuteronomy 25, 17-19):

Remember what Amalek did
 unto thee
 by the way as ye came out of Egypt;
 how he met thee by the way,
 and smote the hindmost of thee,
 all that were enfeebled in thy rear,
 when thou wast faint and weary;
 and he feared not God.
 Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God
 hath given thee rest from all thine enemies
 round about, in the land which the Lord thy God
 giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it,
 that thou shalt blot out the remembrance
 of Amalek from under heaven;
 thou shalt not forget.

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה
 לְךָ עַמְלֵק
 בְּדַרְךָ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:
 אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדַרְךָ
 וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל
 הַנְּחָשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ
 וְאַתָּה עָיֵף וְיָגֹעַ
 וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים:
 וְהָיָה בְּהִנָּחֶיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ
 לְךָ מְכֹל-אֲרָצֶיךָ מְסֻבִּים
 בְּאַרְצֵי אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
 נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ,
 תִּמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עַמְלֵק
 מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם
 לֹא תִשְׁכַּח

Even if the Israelites had wanted to forget, the Amalekites did their utmost to keep the memory fresh. Amalek was a people of incorrigible robbers who would never refrain from attacking a peaceful settlement or traveler. They were no conquerors but liked to attach themselves to an invading army and share the plunder. Twice in the book of Judges we are told of the marauding exploits of the Amalekites. When the king of Moab organizes an army against Israel, the Amalekites join the fray (Judges 3, 13). And when Midian invades Israelite territory to loot the harvest, Amalek once again participates in the attack (Judges 6, 4).

A typical example of Amalek's methods of warfare is the story related in chapter 30 of the book of 1 Samuel. Whilst David and his army were away, the Amalekites raided the area, burning down the town of Ziklag and capturing the women and the children (30, 1-3). The Amalekites carried out no open warfare and could not be fought in the battlefield. Their methods were those of hit-and-run gangsters.

One day a traveler passes a small settlement, and asks a few seemingly harmless questions. He looks carefully at the approaches of the town, counts the number of warriors in the place, and tries to find out when they are likely to go away. Some days later, the stillness of a peaceful night is suddenly pierced with the wild war-cries of Amalekites, the fearful shrieks of women and children, the howling of oxen and sheep, the braying of camels and donkeys. The following morning nothing is left of a flourishing and bustling settlement but the grey ashes of arson and destruction. Amalek had attacked.

For generations Amalek presented a dire threat to the Israelite settlements. It was a flaming sword of marauders who made life tenuous in the Israelite settlements of the south. In far-flung slave markets the Amalekites were trading Israelite captives.

Now, at last, the time of reckoning had come. The new Israelite kingdom was going to put an end to this. The prophet told the king that God had commanded him to go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy this people (15, 1-3).

Saul's behavior in the battle against Amalek was strongly criticized by the prophet. The king was found guilty and declared unsuitable for the royal throne. But Saul's failure was "prophetic" only. In the critical eyes of the prophet he had failed the test of leadership capability.

Yet, from the point of view of the people, Saul's campaign against Amalek was anything but a failure. The long-suffering southern tribes, who had been especially exposed to the Amalekite raids, were grateful to the king for his success in suppressing the Amalekite threat. This can be gauged from the fact that when Saul later pursued David he was helped on several occasions by the inhabitants of the towns of Ziph and Keilah (23, 10-12; 23, 19-25; 26, 1), although they belonged to David's tribe, Judah. This would have been unthinkable. No tribe would have helped a king who belonged to another tribe by informing against their own tribesman. The action of Ziph and Keilah shows that by then Saul had been accepted as king of the whole nation and an authority overriding tribal divisions. Saul had achieved this through his three outstanding victories. He had impressed the central tribes by defeating the Philistines, the southern tribes were grateful to him for his campaign against Amalek, and the Transjordan tribes remembered his battle against the Ammonites in defense of Jabesh-Gilead. When Saul died in the battle on Mount Gilboa, the people of Jabesh-Gilead endangered their lives and took away the body of their revered king in order to give him an honorable burial.

Within a short time the new king succeeded in overcoming the old jealousies and internecine quarrels of the tribes. Saul moulded the tribes into a united nation headed by one king.

This was something that was hitherto unheard of in the land of Canaan. From time immemorial the country was populated by small peoples and tribes who were continuously at loggerheads with one another. No nation had ever succeeded in creating a unified kingdom in this divided land. And now Saul did just this. There was now one kingdom of Israel, and all tribes acknowledged the authority of King Saul.