
Lesson 17: David Against Amalek

Text: Samuel I, chapters 27 and 30; Samuel II, chapter 1

Saul's war against the people of Amalek is described in chapter 15 of the first book of Samuel. It was an important war, and its consequences were as significant to the military security of Israel (I Samuel 15:7) as they were fateful to the royal throne of Saul (15:26 and 16:1). But the military consequences didn't last. Saul's campaign wrought destruction in the Amalekite territory in the Negev. But the Amalekites did not live only in the Negev; their tribes and clans were encamped all over the Sinai peninsula, and some of them went as far as the Syrian desert. They first attacked the Israelites soon after the exodus from Egypt in Rephidim, which is in the southern area of Sinai (Exodus 17, 8 and 19, 2). On several occasions the Amalekites invaded the land of Canaan from the east (Judges 6:3 and 33:7, 33:12, 10:12). It was therefore impossible to destroy the Amalekite people in a single military campaign. Saul succeeded only in cutting off a branch of the ramified Amalekite tree. It was probably a heavy blow to these roving tribes, but it was not fatal. Soon they recuperated and once again went back to their traditional exploits of robbery. From Sinai the Amalekite hordes drove northwards and endangered the Israelite settlements of the Negev.

In chapter 27 of the first book of Samuel there is a brief description of David's intermittent forays against Amalek (verses 8-9). David had then taken refuge with his troop in the Philistine kingdom of Gath (27, 1-4), and he could only engage in such raids against Amalek by pretending that he fought the Israelites (verses 10-12).

Overwhelmed by the strong kingdoms of Israel and Philistia, the Amalekites dared not engage in open war. They could carry out occasional robberies. But when the Israelites and the Philistines were locked in a life-and-death struggle, the Amalekites saw an opportunity to come into their own. The great battle between the Israelites and the Philistines was fought far from the Negev. The two armies were gathered in the valley of Jezreel, and the main battle was fought on mount Gilboa (29, 1 and 31, 1). All able-bodied men of both peoples went north, and in the camped the women and children. The Amalekites knew this, and they were eager to avail themselves of the opportunity.

How did they know? From the Biblical account it appears that they had a kind of intelligence service. In the first chapters of the second book of Samuel we read of an Amalekite who came to David's camp to tell of Saul's death. This story casts an interesting light on the Amalekites' activities during the Israelite-Philistine war. In verses 6-10 the Amalekite relates how he killed king Saul: "As I happened by chance upon mount Gilboa, behold, Saul leaned upon his spear, and lo, the chariots and the horsemen pressed hard upon him. And... he saw

me... And he said unto me: Who art thou? And I answered him: I am an Amalekite. And he said unto me: Stand, I pray thee, beside me, and slay me... So I stood beside him, and slew him... And David said unto the young man that told him: Whence art thou? And he answered: I am the son of an Amalekite stranger.”

A comparison of the Amalekite’s story with the description of Saul’s death in chapter 31 of the first book of Samuel (verses 3-4) shows that the Amalekite young man mixed the facts with fancy. It is not only that his story of the manner of Saul’s death is not true. No less significant is his opening remark: “As I happened by chance upon mount Gilboa”. Surely, people don’t go for a stroll on mount Gilboa and happen by chance to come upon a battlefield. No doubt, this young man was lying. But he was telling the truth when he said he was an Amalekite. Apparently there were many young Amalekites who were travelling all over the country and “happening by chance” upon places where important events took place. These Amalekites formed a kind of intelligence service, and they supplied valuable information to their people. David’s informer lied in telling that he killed Saul, but many Israelites were probably killed by those Amalekite informers. This is why David told the Amalekite: “Thy blood be upon thy head!” (verse 16).

The Amalekites lost no time in using the great war in the north for their own purposes. As soon as the Israelite and the Philistine warriors had left the south the Amalekites attacked the defenseless settlements. The Bible describes in detail the story of the attack on David’s town of Ziklag (Samuel I, chapter 30). But Ziklag was not the only place that was raided during this short period. In verses 1 and 14 we read that the Amalekites had made raids upon several areas of the Negev. When David caught up with them they were celebrating their success “because of all the great spoil that they had taken out of the land of the Philistines and out of the land of Judah” (verse 16). The Amalekites were neutral, and when they went on a robbing spree they made no distinction between Israelites and Philistines; they attacked and robbed both peoples.

This raid ended for the Amalekites in utter defeat, and David recovered all their loot (verses 16-20). In one decisive battle David had taken back all that the Amalekites had stolen in the lands of Judah and of the Philistines. There was so much that it almost caused a serious quarrel amongst David’s soldiers about the division of the spoil (verses 21-25). David did not only insist upon a fair distribution amongst his soldiers; he also “sent of the spoil unto the elders of Judah” (verse 26). We have here a list of the places who received “of the spoil”; eleven towns are mentioned by name, besides “the cities of the Jerahmeelites” and “the cities of the Kenites”, and also “all the places where David and his men were wont to frequent (verses 26-31).

Why was David so generous? In lesson 12 we discussed the customs of the “troop” which was organized by David when he fled from king Saul. On the one hand, the troop lived on loot, but at the same time the troop depended to a great extent on the goodwill and friendship of the neighboring settlements. When David embarked upon his career as captain of a troop of outcasts there were settlements who helped Saul to hunt him down (chapters 23-26). Only

gradually did David succeed in winning the friendship of these settlements, and when he gained much loot from the Amalekites he shared it with his friends (verse 26).

There was another important reason for David's generosity, and a clue to this is found in verse 26: "Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the Lord." David was eager to let the Israelites know that his sojourn amongst the Philistines was only a temporary refuge, and that he was still fighting the "enemies of the Lord".

The distribution of the Amalekite spoil was not an isolated gesture. Its significance lies in the fact that it conformed with David's behavior throughout the testing period of his exile. He never went over to the Philistines, and he fooled the king of Gath (chapter 27); he helped the town of Keilah (chapter 23); he did not raise his hand against king Saul "the anointed of the Lord", not even in self-defence (chapters 24 and 26). In all his vicissitudes David remained the chosen man who was destined to become king of Israel.