

ISRAEL'S FIRST WAR—THE WAR WITH AMALEK
Duane L. Christensen, Graduate Theological Union (retired)
SBL / Warfare in Ancient Israel Consultation
[Presented in San Antonio, TX—Nov. 20, 2004]

In biblical tradition the war against the Amalekites of Exodus 17:8–15 marks the beginning of an enmity that continues throughout the whole of canonical Scripture in ancient Israel. The initial war with Amalek includes the figure of Moses, with his hands held aloft by Aaron and Hur—“one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set” (Exod 17:12)—for as long as his hands were upraised, Israel prevailed over the Amalekites. The story contains the fragment of an archaic war poem, which has been reconstructed as follows (see Christensen, *Prophecy and War*, p. 48):

For the hand is on YHWH's banner;
the battle belongs to YHWH,
against Amalek from generation to generation (Exod 17:16)

This conflict with Amalek is the starting point in the account of YHWH's Holy War, as the Divine Warrior brought his people from the land of Egypt to their home in the land of Canaan.

The forty-three laws in the 49th of the 54 weekly portions of Torah readings (*Parashot*) in Deut 21:10–25:19 conclude with a curious commandment to remember to hate the Amalekites, which makes specific reference to this same event:

Remember what Amalek did to you
on the way when you went forth from Egypt;
how he encountered you on the way
And he smote the hindmost of you, all the stragglers behind you;
And you were famished and weary, and he did not fear God.
And it shall be when YHWH your God grants rest to you
from all your enemies round about in the land that YHWH your God
is giving to you as an inheritance to possess it;
You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven;
you shall not forget.

This peculiar law stands at the conclusion of a careful nesting of parallel laws on human affairs in relation to others, which may be outlined as follows:

1st level menorah: Laws on Human Affairs in Relation to Others		21:10–25:19
A	Marriage with a woman captured in war	21:10–14
B	Social justice: right of firstborn in polygamous marriage	21:15–17
C	Family law: insubordinate son	21:18–21
X	Humanism, social ethics, marriage and war	21:22–25:4
C	Family law: levirate marriage	25:5–12
B	Social justice: honest weights and measures	25:13–16
A	Remembering Amalekite aggression (holy war)	25:17–19
2nd level menorah: Humanism, Social Ethics, Marriage and War		21:22–25:4
A	Humanism: treatment of executed criminal's body	21:22–23
B	Social ethics: helping with lost and fallen animals	22:1–5
C	Humanism: releasing a mother bird; parapet on the roof	22:6–8
X	Illicit mixtures, marriage, war and “true religion”	22:9–24
C	Humanism: deferral of a new husband from the army	24:5
B	Social ethics: taking care of poor and vulnerable	24:6–22
A	Humanism: limits on flogging and not muzzling the ox	25:1–4
3rd level menorah: Illicit Mixtures, Marriage, War and “True Religion”		22:9–24:4
A	Sex: adultery and other illicit mixtures prohibited	22:9–22:29
B	Prohibition of marrying one's father's former wife	23:1
C	Restrictions on entry into the assembly of YHWH	23:2–9
X	Sanctity of the military camp	23:10–15
C	Asylum for escaped slaves	23:16–17
B	Prohibition of prostitution	23:18–19
A	Sex: forbidden remarriage	24:1–4

In addition to the narrative in Exod 17:18–15, the law concerning Amalekite aggression in Deut 25:17–19 is subsequently used to shape three other significant narratives in the Former Prophets and the Writings. In the first of these, King Saul's rejection by the prophet Samuel is tied to the fact that he failed to observe the terms of YHWH's “Holy War” against Amalek, when “he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword” (1 Sam 15:8). The name (or title) Agag is the only known Amalekite proper name.

The second narrative is the account of the burning of Ziklag and David's subsequent pursuit of the Amalekites in 1 Sam 30:1-31, where we read that "David attacked them from twilight until the evening of the next day. Not one of them escaped, except four hundred young men, who mounted camels and fled" (1 Sam 30:17). David's victory over the Amalekites was won with only 400 men, while 200 others who were too exhausted to cross the Wadi Besor with David remained behind (1 Sam 30:10). After the battle, David insisted that all 600 of his men share the booty equally—"the share of the one who goes down into the battle shall be the same as the share of the one who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike" (1 Sam 30:24). If Saul destroyed all the Amalekites except for their king Agag, it is surprising to find here another story in which David destroyed this same people again—with 400 young male Amalekites escaping on camels.

A brief reference to the Amalekites after the time of David is found in 1 Chron 4:43 where we find that only a "remnant of the Amalekites" was left in the time of Hezekiah (late 8th century B.C.E.), and this group was defeated by the Simeonites in Mt. Seir. In this regard, Landes suggests that Amalekite history ends where it started, in the land of Edom—at least within the Torah and the Prophets.

Centuries later, however, in the story of Esther we find a third significant narrative account, which is shaped by the command to remember to "hate the Amalekites." The wicked Haman, who plotted the destruction of the Jews, is introduced as "the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha" (Esther 3:1), to draw the observant reader's attention to the story of Saul and Agag of times past—and to find here the possibility of other Amalekite proper names beyond that of Agag in the distant past. Esther's cousin Mordecai, who plays such a pivotal role in the story, is introduced as "the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite" (Esther 2:5), suggesting that he is a descendant of King Saul. Thus at the end of the story of ancient Israel within the canon of sacred Scripture, we return to the beginning of that epic story in the exodus from Egypt and to the injunction to "remember what Amalek did to you" (Deut 25:17). Esther remembered and the Jews finally fulfilled the words of Moses: "the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews [were impaled]; but they laid no hand on the plunder" (Esther 9:10). Thus the law of Deuteronomy was fulfilled, "You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek under heaven; you shall not forget" (Deut 25:17–19).

Since the Amalekites, who are presented as “first among the nations” (Num 24:20), become the traditional enemy of the Jews, it seems strange that we know nothing about them so far as history is concerned. As George Landes has noted, “No reliable accounts of the Amalekites are preserved outside the OT. Archaeological exploration and excavation have so far thrown no light upon them” (*IDB I* [1962], p. 102). Gerald Mattingly reaches the same conclusion: “no recovered data are attributed to Amalek with any degree of certainty” (*ABD I* [1992], p. 171). The only source of information we have is the Bible itself, and that information presents problems.

Amalek is 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). Gen 36:15–16, however, lists Amalek as the seventh son of Eliphaz the son of Esau. However this textual problem is resolved, Amalek is clearly linked with the land of Edom (i.e., Esau). Nonetheless, In Genesis 14:7 we read that Chedorlaomer and the coalition of eastern kings “subdued all the country of the Amalekites” in the region of Kadesh—an episode that clearly antedates Esau, Eliphaz, and Amalek. From an historical point of view, what little we know about the Amalekites is problematic.

Num 13:29 notes that “the Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb,” but this verse simply isolates this people from other peoples who lived in the same proximity at a point in time. The full scope of the Amalekites wanderings, at least in the time of Saul, is reflected in 1 Sam 15:7—“And Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.” This appears to be the same geographical territory as that of the Ishmaelites in Gen 25:18. According to Judges 6:5 and 7:12, the Amalekites used camels for transportation, though the narrative in Exodus 17 makes no reference to this fact.

In my doctoral dissertation, *Transformations of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy* (HDS 3 [1975]), I was preoccupied with the question of history—and with specific allusions to battles in antiquity that could be dated. I understood the role of the prophet in ancient Israel to be a political one, alongside the king, with responsibilities in shaping foreign policy within the context of what Gerhard von Rad, and others, have called “holy war.” I now understand how important it is to distinguish this kind of “holy war” from YHWH’s “Holy War,” which ultimately must be understood symbolically as Israel’s epic story. Though the prophets of ancient Israel functioned in the world of real

politics and hence in actual wars between Israel and other peoples, they spoke the language of symbolic speech that concerns war as metaphor.

I am keenly interested in this Consultation on Warfare in Ancient Israel and would enjoy working with others in this group in the months and years ahead because I believe that we are on the edge of exciting new discoveries due to recent developments in interdisciplinary study, which have much to contribute on this topic. Earlier this year I published a little book entitled, *Explosion of the Canon: The Greek New Testament in Early Church History*. This is what Prof. Ernest McClain wrote for the back-cover of that volume:

This powerful narrative of how Bible texts were chiseled from the agony of Jewish and Christian experience may cause an explosion of its own, for Duane Christensen's vast scholarship exposes to public view a verbal technology most of us have never heard of. He makes plain how the Wars of YHWH started and why as spiritual events they can never end.

At the time I wrote this book, I knew very little about Ernest McClain's methodology of musical metaphor, which is based on the long-forgotten science of harmonics in Middle Eastern antiquity. My own methodological breakthrough, which I call "Logoprosodic Analysis," was generating all sorts of interesting numbers that got Ernest McClain very excited. I am not a musician, but for some reason my methodology was producing a host of musical numbers that could only be understood by someone with training in tuning theory.

When I submitted the abstract for this paper some months ago, I had hopes that I would be able to explore the concept of symbolic "warfare" in antiquity in relation to ancient tuning theory based on base-60 arithmetic, which is closely related to the world of mythology throughout the whole of the ancient Middle East (and subsequently the Greek world as well, as transmitted via Pythagorus and others). That task will eventually be achieved, but there is much more preliminary work to do than I anticipated.

The system of base-60 arithmetic is ideally suited for use by musicologists in antiquity who developed sophisticated computational skills to explore observations in the fields of music, astronomy, geometry and arithmetic. Otto Neugebauer and Abraham Sachs published their monumental work, *Mathematical Cuneiform Texts* (AOS 29) in 1946. Other important works followed; and now Jens Hoyrop, Joran Friberg, and

Eleanor Robson are doing startling analyses of ancient scribal thought as they penetrate more deeply into the shattered shards of cuneiform arithmetic. The scribes of nascent Judaism were exposed to this world of thought in Babylon during the 6th century B.C.E. Long before that time, however, they were already skilled in the basics of musical metaphor as Ernest McClain has shown.

We have long suspected that the line between history and metaphor is tenuous at best throughout the whole of sacred Scripture. The literal reading of the text of a book like Joshua presents a moral dilemma, which cannot easily be reconciled with the ethical monotheism of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, let alone the teaching of Jesus in the Greek New Testament. Does God command the slaughter of innocent children in Jericho and Ai—and elsewhere? Are the inhabitants of the land to be ruthlessly annihilated so that God's chosen people can receive their inheritance at the expense of those who lived peacefully in that land for generations? The violence we call warfare may indeed be a necessary evil at any time in history; but the God who reveals himself in the Hebrew Bible is a Divine Warrior and violence is championed as the norm in the epic story we call the "Wars of YHWH." At the beginning of that epic story we find Israel's first war—the war with Amalek.

The key to interpreting the war with Amalek in terms of harmonics is probably to be found in placing Amalek within the context of the Midianites, with whom the Amalekites are frequently allied—especially within the context of the "holy war" against Midian in Numbers 31:1-54. Hebrew reductionism in the numerology requires this "defeat of Amalek" and the deception of Esau.

Jacob and Esau are what Plato calls "arithmetic and harmonic means," of equal importance in harmonic theory except that Esau as symbolic 40 (meaning two-thirds of 60) correlates with Gilgamesh and Jacob correlates instead (as symbolic 45, doubling to 90, 180, and 360) with "three fourths" (meaning $\frac{3}{4} \times 12 = 9$ in the "musical proportion 12:9::8:6 and this is symbolic equivalent to "the wild man of the steppes," Enkidu after he is "tamed" by a week of uninterrupted copulation with Uruk's prostitute. There is no prestige in being the "arithmetic mean" for normal divisions are always by halving, and symbolic 45 is "further from the One God" in both base 10 and base 60 (depending on how one thinks about it). These two means (our modern "dominant" and "sub-dominant" in the octave remain each other's foil and "counter-dominant." So the conflict is entirely within YHWH's interests and control. It was necessary to transfer the "double blessing" of

the firstborn from Esau to Jacob because cosmology was required to surrender its Sumerian base on $15 - 30 - 60 = 120 - 240 - 480$ etc. to one on "little Lot" as 45 doubling $45 - 90 - 180 - 360$ (the Marduk calendar), etc. as the desired calendrical correlation.

Ernest McClain sees no history in this story except the early history of harmonic science. Everything is governed by the principle E. A. Budge saw a century ago: The whole aim and energy of "polytheism" became centered on a "reduction of the gods" in the direction of monotheism. According to McClain, "perfect inverse symmetry" is what symbolic warfare is all about. The Marduk model that everybody copies makes "above" and "below" equal and opposite meanings of the same arithmetic, which remains about as brilliant an example of both polarity and reason as one can find or invent. Babylonian "regular" numbers possessed an extensive use of paired reciprocals. (We divide by multiplying by the reciprocal.) Base 10, instead, uses the *same* integers to mean *both* multiple and submultiple, thus achieving the *same* result.) Platonic dialectics requires considerable preparation for "warfare" (in "wrestling teams" of 2 to 10 men each), necessary training for later politics. YHWH insists on our experiencing "warfare" as a normative part of education (the wholly innocent do not survive). Gnostic warfare between the sons of light and the children of darkness has exactly this background model. Gilgamesh dramatizes it as wrestling; and the outcome is friendship between equals (dramatized in Jacob's wrestling with the angel).

The problem is to become educated to and friends with the self. And it's not easy for most of us. The Deuteronomic tradition, which corrects some early errors, also errs in overemphasizing real warfare and hatred and contempt of the enemy, an imbalance the New Testament tries to restore. But in times of grave danger it remains difficult to "love your enemy as yourself." Aristotle posed the problem differently as "loving and hating correctly." We have accumulated a huge commentary on the debilitating effects of hate; it demeans and destroys the self, however understanding it is. In short, the command to remember to hate the Amalekites (Deut 25:17-19) is to be understood on a symbolic level or we will fail to do justice to the message of the Bible as a whole, or even to the best of ancient Greek philosophical thought as understood in antiquity.