

The Amalekites

1. Israel's great enemy

Debbie Hurn

*"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you; and he did not fear God. Therefore when the LORD your God [Yahweh your Elohim] has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the LORD [Yahweh] your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget" (Deut. 25:17,18).**

THE AMALEKITES were the first and most ferocious of the enemy nations that the Israelites encountered on their way to the Promised Land. In this first article we look at their origin, their territory, and their enmity towards Israel. In the second we consider the intriguing idea that they were the Hyksos who dominated Egypt for many years.

Origins

In Bible genealogical tables, Amalek is named as the son of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, who was himself the grandson of Abraham (Gen. 36:12; 1 Chron. 1:36). If this man Amalek was the primogenitor of the nation that molested the Israelites in the wilderness, there was not enough time for his descendants to have multiplied to the numbers required. When Jacob entered Egypt with seventy of his offspring, his twelve sons were all mature men with children of their own (Ex. 1:1-5). These children were the equivalent generation to Esau's grandson, Amalek, and thus outnumbered him many times from the start. Besides this, the nation of Israel were blessed with extra-rapid growth during their time in Egypt (vv. 7,12,20). Over the same four generations, Esau's grandson Amalek could not have become a nation comparable in size and strength to Israel (Ex. 17:8-13; cf. Gen. 15:16).

In the book of Genesis, Moses records that there were already Amalekites in the Negev during Abraham's earliest days in Canaan. The four northern kings (Chedor-laomer and his allies) who came down to defeat the first inhabitants of the Transjordan region also "subdued all the country of the Amalekites" around Kadesh Barnea (14:7). Some have supposed this reference to be an anachronism (an incongruity in time), as though it should read "subdued all the country

that the Amalekites *later inhabited*". In the light of the above comparison of the strength of the two nations by the time of the Exodus, it is preferable to accept that the nation of the Amalekites predated Esau's Amalek by many generations: "for these were the inhabitants of the land *from of old*, as far as Shur, to the land of Egypt" (1 Sam. 27:8).

Islamic historians consider Amalek to be one of the most ancient of the Arab tribes. According to Velikovsky, "Abulfeda, an Arab scholar of the thirteenth century, wrote: 'Shem [son of Noah] had several sons, among them Laud,¹ to whom were born Pharis, Djordjan, Tasm, and Amalek'.² The Bible lists no descendants for three of the five sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur and Lud (Gen. 10:21-24; cf. 1 Chron. 1:17, 18). It is feasible, therefore, that Arab tradition has preserved the knowledge and lineage of other Semitic tribes, among them the original Amalekites. But there are other Arabian historians who declare this tribe to have been of Hamitic stock, and give its genealogy correspondingly.³

According to Arab historians, the Amalekites originally lived on the shores of the Persian Gulf.⁴ From there they were pushed westwards by the growth of the Assyrian Empire, and spread over a portion of Arabia at the period before its

* All quotations are from the RSV unless stated otherwise.

1. The Lud of Genesis 10:22. Josephus also renders the name 'Laud'. *Antiquities*, Bk. I, ch. vi, 4.
2. Velikovsky, *Ages in Chaos*, 1952, p. 60, citing Abulfeda, *Historia Anteislamica*, edited by H. O. Fleischer (Leipzig, 1831), p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 61, citing M. Seligsohn's article "Amalik", *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden and London, 1908-38).
4. *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited W. Smith, 1863, p. 56.

occupation by the descendants of Joktan,⁵ a Semite through Eber (Gen. 10:25-31). Thus the extra-Biblical account of their origin harmonises with their first appearance in Genesis, in which the Amalekites are mentioned several generations before the birth of the Edomite Amalek.

Perhaps this Semitic/Hamitic tribe was taken over at a later period by Esau's Amalek, who may have been a powerful or charismatic leader. A similar and related merging of bloodlines occurred when Esau intermarried with the Horites of Mount Seir and then "dispossessed them, and destroyed them" (Deut. 2:12). In fact, such confusion of descent was a frequent occurrence. Those were days when one tribe seized women and children from another to increase numbers, and victorious nations absorbed the surviving populations of the vanquished (20:12-14).

Amalek's territory

Scripture paints the territory of the Amalekites with a broad brush-stroke from west to east. During the Exodus, the Amalekites terrorised the nation of Israel all the way from the Red Sea shore to Mount Sinai (Deut. 25:17, 18). When the twelve spies came back to Kadesh to report on the inhabitants of Canaan, they referred to the Amalekites as dwelling "in the land of the Negev" (Num. 13:29). In Biblical terms this describes only the northern Negev, as we know it today, specifically the Beersheva and Arad basins, the adjoining section of the Mediterranean coast and the foothills of the Negev Heights rising to the southeast.

Early in the period of the Judges, Amalek allied with Moab and Ammon to attack Israel (Judg. 3:13), which implies a common border in the vicinity of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea). Their next liaison was with Midian and "the people of the East [Bne-Kedem]" (6:3,33; 7:12; cf. Job 1:3) across the Aravah (the valley between the Salt Sea and the Gulf of Eilat). It is possible that by this time the Amalekites had overrun the Ishmaelite domain and displaced or absorbed some of their tribes, perhaps by intermarriage; for in Gideon's time the confederacy of Amalekites, Midianites and Bne-Kedem were called "Ishmaelites" (Judg. 8:24).

In the time of Saul and David the Amalekites were a scourge who spread themselves "from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt" (1 Sam. 15:7; 27:8). Shur was probably an Egyptian gateway town at the end of the Way of Shur, on the north shore of Lake Timsah, "the waters

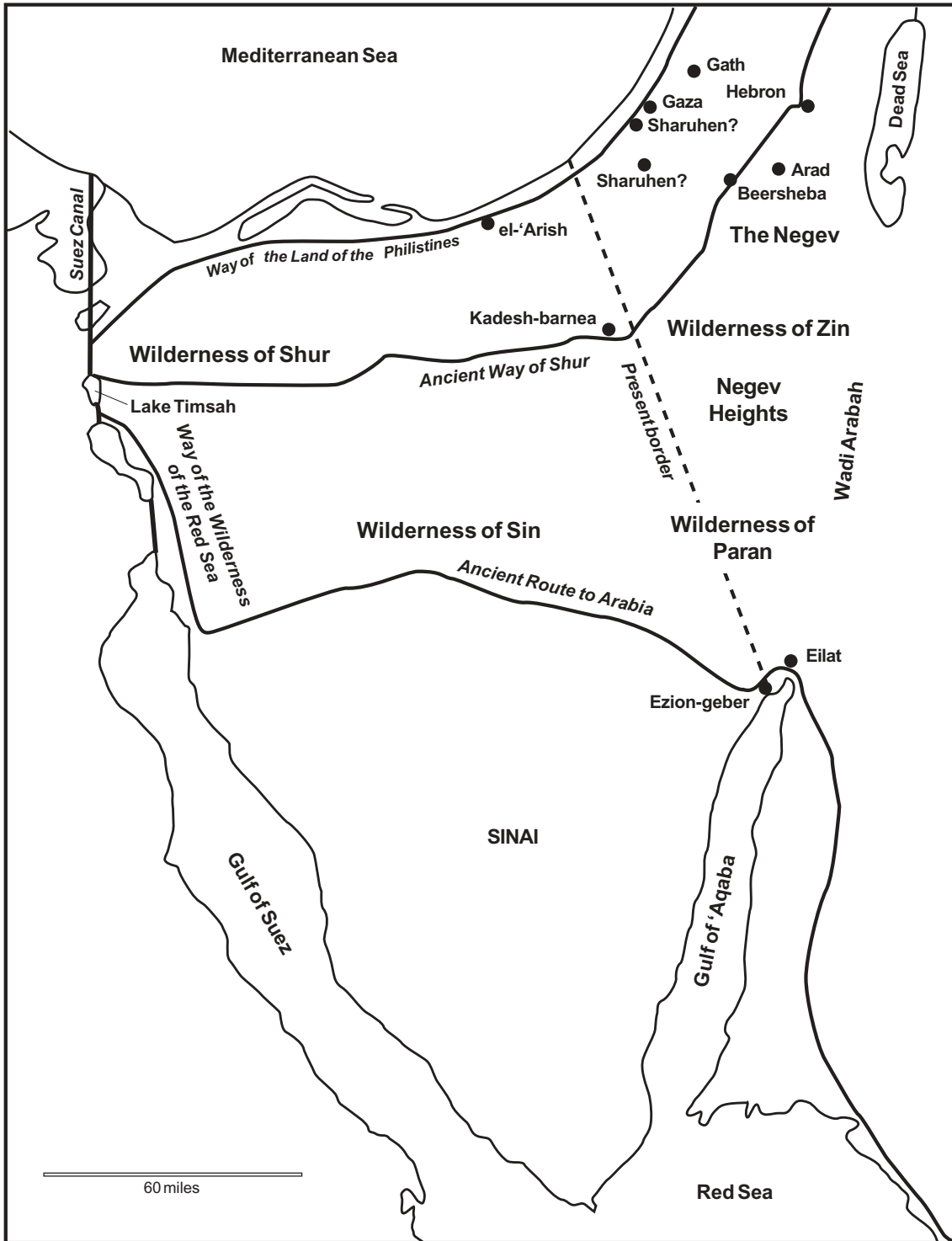
of Sihor" of Jeremiah 2:18 (AV, cf. Josh. 13:3) in the Suez Isthmus (see [map](#)). The modern equivalent is the city of Ismailia, also on the shore of the lake, which is now in the line of the Suez Canal. In other words, the Amalekites could be found as far as Egypt's western border. Their eastern limit is uncertain, and hinges on the location of the place or area named Havilah. "Havilah to Shur" was originally inhabited by the Ishmaelites (Gen. 25:18), although Ishmael himself first dwelt in "the wilderness of Paran" (21:21).

Amalek's northern limit in the Sinai region would naturally have been the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Their interests would lie in what spoil could be made of the travellers on the coastal highway, the Way of the Land of the Philistines, although this route was chiefly for military traffic. It is likely that Amalekite bands were most prevalent along the Way of Shur, the nomads' route into Egypt, which passed through the Kadesh district where they were based (14:7). Here converged many routes through the Sinai and Negev, making this the strategic hub of the region. Because of their Arabian origins, it is reasonable to assume that their southern limit extended far enough into central Sinai to cover the Egypt-Arabia route that ran from the Gulf of Suez to the Gulf of Eilat. Along this route, camel caravans connected the great world economies of Babylon and Egypt with a trade in luxury goods.

Hence the Amalekite plunderers had the opportunity to oversee the passers-by on all three routes into Egypt from the east, extracting provisions from the migrants and 'taxes' from the traders (1 Sam. 14:48). Any remains of the Amalekites in the Sinai, Negev and Southern Canaan are probably indistinguishable from those of other nations of their times. They would have stolen from travellers any ceramics and artifacts they used, which, when broken and discarded in the way, would reflect only the civilisations in which the original owners lived.

These descriptions, when pieced together, show that the Amalekites patrolled a wide swathe of semi-arid land. They were to be encountered

5. Joktan was the progenitor of no less than thirteen southern Arab tribes and is remembered among modern Arabs as 'Yaqtan'. The purest Arabs, it is still maintained, are Semitic Arabs descended from Joktan, whilst Hamitic Arabs are referred to somewhat disdainfully as *musta 'rabs*, 'pretend Arabs' (*After the Flood*, B. Cooper, 1995, p. 174).



anywhere from the Suez Isthmus to the Aravah, and possibly even beyond in some periods. In their final days the survivors of Amalek retreated

into the Negev Heights (western Seir), where few people would have been aware of their presence (1 Chron. 4:42,43).

Conflict in the wilderness

It is difficult to determine for how long these terrorist tribes were in the Sinai and Negev before Israel arrived. They did not have precise borders as we understand them, for they were migratory and predatory, and probably could not occupy or defend all their range at one time. Although the Israelites were in Sinai as soon as they crossed the Red Sea, it seems they had no trouble with Amalek until their departure from Elim, nearly a month later (Ex. 16:1).

The news of the mass escape of Hebrew slaves from Egypt would have taken a couple of weeks to reach the headquarters of the neighbouring nations. As the emigrants' abilities and intentions were as yet unknown, their chiefs would have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. Once the nation left the shore of the Red Sea in an organised manner and began to march into the interior of the peninsula, their intentions became a concern to the Amalekites. Not only did the transit of such a large group of armed exiles threaten their hegemony in the region, it was certain to affect the yield from their water resources. Amalekite supremacy in this extensive semi-arid region was strictly conditioned by their access to, and control of, the water holes.

From this time, Amalekite raiding parties would have shadowed the company across the Wilderness of Sin, seeking every opportunity to distress and demoralise them (Deut. 25:18). Bands of these wilderness warriors made guerilla-style attacks on the rear of the Israelite column. Cutting off the "faint and weary" who lagged behind was an effective tactic in every way. No matching of forces was required, and the chance of Amalekite victory in each encounter was high. These distressing incidents were surely intended by God as strong 'encouragement' to the Israelites to hurry on their way and banish all thoughts of remaining in the region.

When Moses later commissioned the people to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek", he made an interesting comment on their crimes at this time: that they "did not fear God" (vv. 18,19). Why should the Amalekites have feared God? They were not present during the plagues on Egypt, nor did they witness the parting of the Red Sea, though they may have heard of these events. Their own connection to the God of Abraham and Isaac through Esau's grandson Amalek was probably of no interest to them. Their only concern was to prevent these landless intruders from lingering in the Sinai and to dissuade them

from approaching their headquarters at Kadesh Barnea.

Nevertheless, the Amalekite raiders were witness to some astounding daily miracles. The first and most obvious one was the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that would have been visible from great distances in the clear desert sky. That the Amalekites dared to approach this phenomenon, let alone attack the people below it, is testimony to their hardened and aggressive nature. Early every morning their scouts may have peered from rocks and ridges as the entire company of Israel collected large quantities of a strange white substance on the ground, but neither did this evidence of supernatural provision deter them from their terrorism. In this way they "feared not God", and became the focus of His perpetual condemnation (1 Sam. 15:2,3).

It is probably from their base at Kadesh Barnea that the full army of Amalek at last came down to confront Israel, encamped at Rephidim at the periphery of the Wilderness of Sinai. This battle in which Amalek engaged Israel in formal warfare, recorded in Exodus 17:8-13, was an all-day affair with several reversals of advantage. The Israelites did not ultimately prevail until they were hard pressed and close to defeat, and only Moses' prayer saved them from destruction. There is no mention of a victorious pursuit by the Israelites back to the enemy headquarters, as on other occasions in the subsequent campaigns of Israel, starting with the victory over Arad (Num. 21:1-3). The Israelites' first war as a nation was a traumatic affair, and it is likely that they suffered considerable casualties. About a year later, however, Israel was able to camp at Kadesh, for the Amalekites had, in the interim, mysteriously disappeared.

Perpetual enemies

At the time of the Exodus the Amalekite army was comparable in strength to that of the Israelites. After struggling all day at Rephidim, Israel finally prevailed, and "Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword" (Ex. 17:13). Thereafter, with more respect for the tenacity of the Israelite warriors, the Amalekites allied themselves with other nations before attacking Israel.

The first of these incidents was about a year later, when the Canaanites and Amorites repulsed Israel's first attempt to enter 'their' land. The Amalekites of the Negev were only too willing to join in the chase (Num. 14:45), but the

combined force of these three nations was unable to eliminate the invaders. Although Israel was defeated far from the base-camp, and in unfamiliar territory, the majority of the men of war returned unharmed to Kadesh (Deut. 1:45).

Throughout the time of the Judges the Amalekites persisted as enemies of Israel, casting blight over the inheritance of the Promised Land (see [Amalek's territory](#) above). The first mention of Amalekites after their rout of Israel at Hormah is in Ehud's time (Judg. 3:13), up to eighty years later. In this oppression they joined forces with the Ammonites and Moabites. There is also an obscure mention of Amalek in Deborah's song about 100 years later: "Out of Ephraim [they came] whose root [was] in Amalek" (5:14, Green's Interlinear). Many translations omit this name in favour of "valleys" (from *'emek*). If it is indeed a reference to an Amalekite presence in Ephraim, then it is connected to Judges 12:15: "Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites". Perhaps, during the oppression by the Moabite king Eglon (3:13,14), his Amalekite allies built a garrison, strategically located in the heart of the land, which remained as a 'thorn in the side' for Israel throughout the period of the Judges.

In the time of Gideon, the fourth judge after Joshua and up to 150 years after Ehud,⁶ the Amalekites were once again active against Israel. They operated in alliance with the Midian-

ites and the Bne-Kedem, or "people of the East" (6:3; 7:12), whose combined territories covered the Arabian Peninsula. They readily joined with any and all of their eastern brethren against the common enemy, Israel. These nations made it their habit to invade just before harvest, driving their innumerable cattle and camels ahead of them to devour Israel's crops. By the end of their visits there was "no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or ass . . . so that they wasted the land as they came in" (6:4,5).

Gideon had a mighty victory over this latest Arabian confederacy, taking captive the two kings of the Midianites and slaughtering the army of the Bne-Kedem (8:10-12,28). Strangely, nothing is said of the Amalekites, who probably melted away when they saw the cause was lost. There is no further mention of them until the time of King Saul, up to 250 years later.⁷ Their history after the time of the Judges, and the case for their identity with the Hyksos of Egyptian history, will be the subject of Part 2.

(To be concluded)

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6. The figure of 150 years is obtained by adding together the years in Judges 3:14,30; 4:3 and 5:31.
 7. This figure is obtained by adding together the years in Judges 8:28; 9:22; 10:2,3,8; 12:7,9,11,14; 13:1; 15:20; and 1 Samuel 4:18; 7:2.

New evidence for the Flood

Tony Benson

THE IDEA that there could be anything of historical value in the Genesis account of the Flood does not carry much weight today, except of course amongst those who believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. It is interesting, therefore, that in recent years several books have appeared written by authors who are not believers in the Bible but nevertheless take the idea of a great flood seriously. They take into account not only the fact that the Bible records the occurrence of such a flood, but also that flood stories appear in the mythology of nations all over the world, especially ancient Mesopotamia.

During the past two years I have read four such books, and the following is a brief summary of the line they take over the flood:

- *Noah's Flood*, William Ryan and Walter Pitman.¹ Subtitled "The new scientific discoveries about the event that changed history". Advances the theory that flood stories are a memory of an inundation of the Black Sea area by water overflowing from the Mediterranean as a result of rising sea levels when the ice sheets of the Ice Age melted.
- *Before the Flood*, Ian Wilson.² Subtitled "Dramatic new evidence that the Biblical Flood was a real-life event". Supports Ryan and Pitman's theory, but examines flood stories more generally.

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1. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1998.
 2. Orion, London, 2001.