

Annihilate Amalek!

Christian Perspectives on 1 Samuel 15

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In the Academy Award winning movie *Patton*, starring George C. Scott, an important scene finds General Patton frustrated by bad weather. He summons the Third Army division chaplain and requests a “weather prayer.” Patton: “I want a prayer, a weather prayer.” Chaplain: “A weather prayer, sir?” Patton: “Yes, let’s see if you can’t get God working with us.” Chaplain: “Gonna take a thick rug for that kind of praying.” Patton: “I don’t care if it takes a flying carpet.” Chaplain: “I don’t know how this will be received, general. Praying for good weather so we can kill our fellow man.” Patton: “I assure you, because of my relations with the Almighty if you write a good prayer, we’ll have good weather. And I expect that prayer within an hour.” Chaplain: “Yes, sir.”¹

In the next scene Patton walks in the blowing snow, accompanied by a series of background images: violent explosions and flamethrowers spewing fire. As he strolls, battle helmet under arm, he reads aloud the chaplain’s prayer: “Almighty and most merciful Father we humbly beseech Thee of Thy great goodness to restrain this immoderate weather with which we’ve had to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that armed with Thy power we may advance from victory to victory and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.”² After the weather clears, Patton says to his aide: “Cod, get me that chaplain. He’s in good with the Lord and I want to decorate him.”

These “fighting words” for help in battle can be found throughout human history and raise the age-old question of the relationship between God and violence in human experience. The following essay discusses one incident in that vast history that also involved a chaplain and a military commander. In 1 Samuel 15,

Samuel, a priest, prophet, and judge confronts Saul, Israel's first king, who is preparing for war against the Amalekites. Samuel instructs Saul to attack Amalek and "utterly destroy [*herem*] all that they have . . . [and to] not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:3). Saul's army defeated the Amalekites but "Saul and the people spared [King] Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed" (1 Samuel 15:8–9). Samuel subsequently confronts Saul, charging him with disobedience for not fully carrying out Yahweh's command. He stresses the importance of obedience (1 Samuel 15:22) and says, "Because you [Saul] have rejected the word of Yahweh, he has also rejected you from being king" (1 Samuel 15:23). After Samuel has "hewed Agag in pieces before Yahweh in Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:33), he and Saul part company, never to see each other again. The incident concludes with the words: "And Yahweh was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35).

This Amalek narrative is only one of many so-called texts of terror in the Hebrew Bible (cf., e.g., Psalm 83:4; Isaiah 19:1–10; Exodus 17:8–16, Joshua 8:24–25). Raymund Schwager estimates that the Old Testament contains "over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying and killing others."³ How are we to understand such texts? Can we ignore them? Can we simply write them off as "typically Old Testament"? Sometimes Christians confine themselves to the New Testament and say that the texts of the Hebrew Bible have been "abrogated" by the New Testament. But do not Christians claim that the Old Testament is also the charter of *their* faith? Furthermore, such texts of terror also occur in the New Testament. Is not the Parable of the Pounds that Jesus tells also in the Christian Bible? "But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence" (Luke 19:27). And what about Acts 5:1–11 or Revelation 14?⁴

Many attempts have been made in recent years to come to terms with the issue of God and violence in human culture and the Bible. One thinks, for example, of the work of René Girard, Hector Avalos, and Mark Juergensmeyer, and in biblical studies the work of Susan Niditch, Terence Fretheim, Philip Stern, and others.⁵ These attempts have been admirable. However, Jonathan Klawans contends that "extravagant theorizing on the origins of religious violence will rarely stand up to scrutiny, for scrutiny after all requires evidence, and grandiose theorizing about such origins, by its nature, reaches beyond what the evidence can soundly support."⁶ Klawans's advice is to "focus instead on ways in which religion in general (and for our purposes biblical scriptures and beliefs in particular) serve to accentuate, exaggerate and otherwise bring about acts of human violence *in specific documented historical contexts*. This mode of analysis begins with clear (and meaning-

ful) definitions. It proceeds to work with historical data, and considers context. It then comes to grips with the religious and social dynamics in play, attending to the variables that lead to the manifestation of scripturally-justified biblical violence.”⁷

Here I will follow the general contours of Klawans’s advice and (1) consider 1 Samuel 15 in the context of the rise of kingship and the establishment of statehood in Israel; (2) explore the biblical concept of “utter destruction” or the “ban” (which is subsumed under the general idea of “holy war”) in 1 Samuel 15 and its trajectory into the latter prophets, Rabbinic literature, and the LXX; and (3) conclude with some comments on violence in the New Testament and how Christians might understand and come to terms with the specific text of terror that is 1 Samuel 15.

1 SAMUEL 15: CONTEXT

The Book of 1 Samuel highlights two major events in Israel’s history: (1) the establishment of the monarchy (chs. 8–12), and (2) preparing the way for David’s rise to power (chs. 16–31).⁸ Furthermore, 1 Samuel also establishes the principle that Israel’s king is to be subject “to the prophet through whom God conveys his word. In other words, the obedience to the word of God is the necessary condition for a king acceptable to the God of Israel.”⁹

David Jobling calls 1 Samuel 12 through 2 Samuel 7 the “Book of the Everlasting [i.e., unconditional] Covenant.”¹⁰ The covenant operative up to 1 Samuel 13, however, is conditional. First Samuel 12:25 concludes: “But *if* you still do wickedly you shall be swept away, both you and your king.” First Samuel 13 begins the “everlasting covenant” with the house of David, which is central “to the Israelite consciousness (and, through the theology of Jesus as Messiah, the Christian consciousness).”¹¹ It ends with 2 Samuel 7 and the succession narrative, with the promise that David’s “throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise is denied to Saul from the beginning of his kingship in two episodes, 1 Samuel 13:8–15 and 1 Samuel 15, both involving cultic offenses where Samuel confronts Saul.

According to David Tsumura, since “Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena* (1878), there has been a general tendency to view these passages [13:8–15; 15:1–34] as doublets, that is two versions of the same incident.”¹² They report Saul’s offense at Gilgal, emphasize obedience to Yahweh, and “are similar in structure.”¹³ The basic difference between the two episodes is that Saul’s transgression in 1 Samuel 13 is not as “explicit as we might like.”¹⁴ Did Saul usurp Samuel’s role as priest, or was his failure that he did not wait long enough for Samuel to arrive? It appears that Saul usurped priestly authority by making offerings that Samuel, the chaplain, was to have made. In the transition from the institution of judgeship to prophecy, and

from the institution of judgeship to kingship,¹⁵ clear boundaries needed to be established among the institutions of leadership. General Patton could very well have written that weather prayer himself, but he did not. He followed military protocol and, so it appears, Saul should have done so regarding the sacrifices in 1 Samuel 13.

The precise nature of Saul's transgression in 1 Samuel 13 has been the subject of considerable discussion. According to Klein, "Sacrifices were normally offered before a holy war (1 Samuel 7:9), and God's permission was frequently sought (cf. Judges 20:23, 27; 1 Samuel 7:9; 14:8–10; 14:37; 23:2, 4, 9–12; 28:6; 30:7–8; 2 Samuel 5:19, 23)."¹⁶ Samuel, of course, was initially opposed to kingship (1 Samuel 8:6). His opposition had been "tempered by a new system in which the charismatic savior's (or judge's) responsibilities were assigned to the king (in leading the troops) and to the prophet (who had to communicate to the king Yahweh's authorization for war)."¹⁷ Another view is that Saul was in effect combining the roles of priest and king. In any event, Saul's "foolishness" (1 Samuel 13:13) may not have been that he actually offered the sacrifices but that he failed to acknowledge Samuel's "higher role as the divine messenger and to listen to the word of God."¹⁸

In 1 Samuel 15, on the other hand, Saul's transgression is very clear and explicit. He fails to be obedient down to the last detail in instituting the *herem* and annihilating the Amalekites. Consequently, Saul is rejected as king. Now, it is true that when Samuel confronts Saul in 15:14 about the bleating sheep and lowing cattle, Saul does say, "*They* have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to Yahweh your God but the rest *we* have utterly destroyed" (15:15). The problem is that to sacrifice and to carry out the ban were not one and the same thing. Sacrifice usually implied that some of the meat was set aside for human consumption. The command was to devote everything to God. If, in fact, Saul believes he had carried out the ban to its fullest extent, why does he say *they* have brought and *we* have utterly destroyed, instead of *I*?

DEFINING THE WORD *HEREM*

Because the root *hrm* has a broad range of semantic meanings, there is no single generally accepted scholarly definition of the term. According to Brekelmans, the noun *herem* occurs twenty-nine times in the Old Testament. The root *hrm* "referred originally to that which is forbidden either because it is accursed and should be destroyed (*res exsecranda*) or because it is very holy (*res sacrosancta*)."¹⁹ Philip Stern's discussion of the philological background of the root *hrm* emphasizes that *hrm* denotes a separation between "that which is God's and that which is human matched by a corresponding physical action or course of action making and marking the separation."²⁰ The *herem*, then, is a "consecration through destruction (to

a deity) of a designated enemy, with some or all of the spoils of victory set apart to the deity by destruction, not subject to the usual division among the army.”²¹ Susan Niditch succinctly defines the *herem* simply as “God’s portion.”²²

Saul’s transgression in 1 Samuel 15 is his failure to give the most valuable portion of the booty from the attack on the Amalekites to God. As Niditch puts it, “To mix humans, the highest of God’s breathing creations, with sickly or less valuable animals is to break the whole concept of the ban as sacrifice.”²³ Furthermore, sparing King Agag from the destruction meant that the most prized part of the booty was not offered to God, which was contrary to the whole idea of the ban.

THE *HEREM* AS SACRIFICE

Leviticus 27:28 states that “every devoted thing is most holy to Yahweh.” Here, as well as in Leviticus 27:21, the words *qodesh* (holy) and *herem* (devoted to destruction) are juxtaposed. In these instances the *herem* is not an object or person that has been destroyed, but something devoted and sacrificed for the benefit of God or the priests.²⁴ While Stern thinks that these Levitical references are later, “domesticated” uses of the term *herem*, Niditch believes the lateness of these texts “proves only that the sacrificial nuance of the ban is alive and well in late biblical works.”²⁵

Consider, for example, the interesting “honey incident” just before our text in 1 Samuel 15. In 1 Samuel 14:24, we read that Saul “committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, ‘Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies.’ So none of the troop tasted food” (v. 24), except, that is, for Saul’s son Jonathan who ate some honey (14:27–29). Some of Saul’s troops slaughtered the sheep, oxen, and calves taken from Michmash and “ate them with the blood” (14:32). Saul, hearing what his troops had done, hastily built an altar where the animals were slaughtered and their blood sacrificially burned.

When Saul decided to attack the Philistines once again, he this time “inquired of God” (14:37), unlike in 1 Samuel 13; but he received no answer, perhaps implying God’s anger because of the previous violations of Saul’s oath on the part of Jonathan and some of the troops. Attempting to find out how the situation had unraveled, Saul swore that even if his own son Jonathan were responsible, that person would die. The lot was cast and pointed to Jonathan and Saul. Saul ordered the lot to be cast once more and this time it fell to Jonathan, who readily admitted he had eaten some honey and was prepared to die (14:44). Fortunately, the people “ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die” (14:45). The point of this narrative is that vows made to God are clearly a matter of “do or die.” What is set apart, holy, devoted to God must be wholly regarded as such.

DIVINE PARTICIPATION IN AND
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE *HEREM*

Patton said to his division chaplain, "Let's see if you can't get God working with us." In Israel's concept of holy war, the "sanction and active participation of the national god" was a presupposition for war.²⁶ We are told that when Saul "saw any strong or valiant warrior, he took him into his service" (1 Samuel 14:52). In fact, however, the number of warriors was irrelevant because "nothing [could] hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few" (1 Samuel 14:6). The warriors do not war alone. When Saul gives his eldest daughter, Merab, to be David's wife, he tells David, "only be valiant for me and fight Yahweh's battles" (1 Samuel 18:17).

Indeed, Exodus 15:3 states, "Yahweh is a warrior; Yahweh is his name."²⁷ In one of the oldest known fragments of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament, the so-called Song of Miriam (Exodus 15:1–18), Yahweh is the one who "triumphed gloriously" and threw "horse and rider into the sea" (v. 1). For Israel, more often than not, it was Yahweh who conducted war. During Israel's journey to Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt, they were attacked by the Amalekites at Rephidim (Exodus 17). The Hebrew people prevailed not because of their military prowess but because of Yahweh's power and because *Yahweh* would "have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16).

Before the rise of the monarchy, the Hebrew Bible tends to avoid the idea of human beings conducting war with the support of the deity and instead sees God himself in charge of war.²⁸ For example, in Joshua 10 it was Yahweh who "threw" the Amorites "into a panic" and Yahweh who "chased" them and "threw down huge stones from heaven upon them" (vv. 10–11). It was Yahweh who "gave the Amorites over to the Israelites" (v. 12). Indeed, Joshua even enlisted the sun and the moon (v. 12) until victory was won. Similarly, in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), the "stars fought from heaven . . . against Sisera" (v. 20) and "the torrent Kishon swept them away" (v. 21). There are also numerous instances where "Yahweh's spirit" (*ruach*) comes to the rescue (cf. Judges 6:34, for Gideon; 14:6, for Samson) or where the enemy is routed because the enemy is frightened by Israel's God (cf. Judges 7:22; 1 Samuel 7:10; 14:15).

It is the transition to the monarchy when the people demand to have a king who will "go before us and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:20). However, never in Israel's history does Yahweh appear to be a mere spectator or figurehead with regard to national politics or military affairs. In the ideology of kingship, it is clear that it is not the king but Yahweh who is the subject of war and victory. It is God who strikes the king's enemies "on the cheek" and breaks "the teeth of the wicked" (Psalm 3:7), and God "who sits in the heavens and laughs" (Psalm 2:4) and breaks the nations "with a rod of iron" and dashes them "in pieces like a potter's vessel" (v. 9).

In addition to divine leadership and sanction, a “holy war” also required the support of religious officials. In the protocols of holy war outlined in Deuteronomy 20 the instruction is given, “Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops, and shall say to them: ‘Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them; for it is Yahweh your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory’” (vv. 3–4).

A desire to “get God working with us” was not confined to Israel. The Mesha Stone, dating from the ninth century B.C.E., speaks about how King Mesha liberated his land and people from the sovereignty of Israel’s kings with the help of the god Chemosh.²⁹ The stone reports how Mesha viciously carried out “ethnic cleansing” of Israelite settlements: “Now the men of Gad had always dwelt in the land of Ataroth, and the king of Israel has built Ataroth for them: but I fought against the town and took it and slew all the people of the town as satiation [intoxication] for Chemosh and Moab. And I brought back from there Arel [or Oriel], its chieftain, dragging him before Chemosh in Keriotl, and I settled there men of Sharon and men of Maharith.”³⁰ While the concept of the “ban” does not appear here, it seems to be implied. The inhabitants were eradicated completely for the sake of Chemosh, and all of the remaining material possessions (houses, land, household goods), thanks to Chemosh, fell into the hands of the Moabites. The text continues: “And Chemosh said to me, ‘Go, take Nebo from Israel!’ So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction [*herem*] for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the [. . .] of Yahweh, dragging them before Chemosh. And the king of Israel had built Jahaz, and he dwelt there while he was fighting against me, but Chemosh drove him out before me.”³¹ Here, again, the extermination of the population is mentioned. But in this instance, the women also are included and the word *ban* (*herem*) is used (the same word as in Hebrew). Everything is dedicated to the god Chemosh, whose task it was to give land and to guide people in times of war.³²

In addition to the Mesha Stone, there are further parallels to genocidal actions among the Hittites and in some ancient Greek and Roman literature.³³ The Mesha Stone, however, is clearly the “closest parallel to the biblical command against Amalek.”³⁴ The difference is that the context of the Mesha Stone is set within a dream and, unlike the biblical injunction, it is not commanded by a god.

Did Israel, then, like its neighbors, actually practice this kind of holy war? Can 1 Samuel 15 be considered, per Klawans’s advice above, a *specific documented historical context* of holy war? These are difficult questions to answer definitively because of the paucity of the data. The Book of Deuteronomy provides us with only a handful of texts concerning the conduct of the *herem* in Israel. Deuter-

onomy 7:1–2 unequivocally states that when Yahweh brings the people into the land, he will clear away “many nations,” including the “Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites,” and when he does, these nations are to be “utterly destroyed.” Not all wars, however, resulted in the *herem*. Deuteronomy 20 sees at least three possible outcomes of war: (1) If a city accepts terms of peace and surrender, all the people in it “shall serve you at forced labor” (v. 10). (2) If the terms of peace are rejected and the people continue to fight, the city is besieged and all the males are put “to the sword” (v. 13), but the “women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil” (v. 14) is taken as plunder. (3) However, the cities of the “people that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance” (v. 16) are to be “annihilated” [*herem*] . . . so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do (v. 18). The only exception to annihilation is the trees that produce food (vv. 19–20).

Deuteronomy 21:10–14 mentions that marriage to captured women is possible, but if, after a time, the husband is not “satisfied with her” (v. 14), he is to set her free and not sell her like a slave. Apparently, the military camps where Israel was billeted were considered sacred space. Deuteronomy 23:9–14 speaks about guarding against “any impropriety” (v. 9), including nocturnal emissions and the disposal of bodily excrement (vv. 10–12), because “Yahweh your God travels along with your camp” (v. 14). Furthermore, a newly married man “shall not go out with the army or be charged with any related duty. He shall be free at home one year, to be happy with the wife whom he has married” (24:5).

Whether or not Israel actually implemented the ban is also a controversial issue. According to Moshe Weinfeld, the ban in Deuteronomy is a “utopian program,” a *Kulturkampf* against the gods of the Canaanites and the “abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and [by which] you thus sin against Yahweh your God” (Deuteronomy 20:18).³⁵ In her study of war ideology in the Hebrew Bible, Susan Niditch maintains that “the ban in its ferocity cannot simply be rejected as a later accretion or an untrue reflection of the real religion of Israel.”³⁶ And C. Brekelmans concludes that “one cannot prove that the *herem* was a permanent element of the holy war. It was apparently promised and executed only in particular crises in order to assure God’s aid (cf. Numbers 21:2ff.; Judges 1:17).”³⁷

An important related matter is the dating of 1 Samuel 15. McCarter assigns 1 Samuel 15 to a middle, though still pre-Deuteronomic, prophetic strand,³⁸ while Stern thinks 1 Samuel 15 goes “back to the earliest part of the Samuel traditions, certainly no later than the ninth century B.C.”³⁹ Zevit claims that the “literary sources conveying the story [1 Samuel 15] date to the ninth-eighth century (Exodus), and the seventh (Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel), while the narratives concern events that occurred, according to the historiographic tradition, in the twelfth, eleventh, and tenth centuries BCE.”⁴⁰ Other scholars consider 1 Samuel 15 to be the begin-

ning of a hypothetical source called the History of David's Rise (HDR), which attempts to explain Saul's rejection and David's subsequent rise.⁴¹ According to Klein, because the HDR is a hypothetical document "whose exact limits cannot be determined, the purpose or intended audience of the document may never be determined to everyone's satisfaction"⁴² In the end, there is no certain date that can be assigned to 1 Samuel 15. Its composition could have happened any time from the reign of Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.) to the postexilic era (550 B.C.E.).⁴³

Is 1 Samuel 15, then, a *specific documented historical* text? It is difficult to say with certainty, but surely the narrator of 1 Samuel 15 presents it as historical. The ban was considered to be "God's portion,"⁴⁴ and involved "rooting out the cancerous and contagious 'other,' that which is unclean because of sin."⁴⁵ Saul was assigned the task of rooting out the Amalekites and giving God his required "portion"; but he failed and thus was rejected as king, and the "spirit" (*ruach*) of YHWH departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from God began tormenting him (1 Samuel 16:14). One wonders whether in those moments when David was playing the lyre to dispel that evil spirit from Saul (1 Samuel 16:23), Saul may have thought, Why? Why did God bring Saul so far only to cast him off?

According to Walter Dietrich and Christian Link, there may have been three possible reasons:⁴⁶

1. The biblical narrator had to come to terms with a basic datum of the beginning of the monarchy where the sovereignty of Saul, the Benjaminite, and his family had to be transferred to the Judean, David, and his successors. Such transference of sovereignty was not typical of the monarchical system, and the biblical historiographers did not have an adequate explanation for it. They were certain, however, that God was involved in this fundamental change. Saul's rise, then, could not go counter to God's will; he had to blaze the trail to make way for David.
2. According to the biblical account, God was forced to initiate and allow the monarchy, and had not freely agreed to it or freely instituted it. Before Saul ever entered the scene, it was "all the elders" who came to Samuel and insisted that he "appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations" (1 Samuel 8:5; cf. 8:19–20). Samuel considered the request "evil" (*ra*); God himself perceived it as a dethronement. God would not or could not prevent Israel from doing something so dangerous and wrongheaded. Consequently, God even helped the people by providing in Saul a suitable candidate for kingship (1 Samuel 9:1–10, 16). Indeed, God had "chosen" Saul to be king (1 Samuel 10:24), but it was a chosenness joined to specific expectations: Saul was to fulfill his responsibilities and entrust himself to Samuel's leadership. Instead, he began to make decisions solely on his own and those decisions became increasingly catastrophic. A second reason, then, why God rejected

Saul as king was that God wanted the best for Israel, and Saul was not the best Israel had.

3. An omnipotent and omniscient God should have known whom he was choosing to be king, and whether that person was capable of performing the task. The Saul narrative shows that “in this sense the God of the bible is not omniscient and omnipotent. He will or must allow human beings and relationships to develop in unexpected and even negative directions.”⁴⁷ Saul was not, essentially, an evil person. Had he followed protocol and strictly adhered to the rules of the game, he might have been an effective ruler. When that did not happen, God intervened to protect Israel from ruination. Was Saul, then, a victim of the failure of divine foresight? No. “Rather, Saul was an admonitory example of the freedom of human beings (who are entrusted with enormous power) to act faithlessly toward God and their fellows, and for the freedom of God to counter such faithlessness.”⁴⁸

Dealing with Amalek would now be left to a “neighbor” of Saul’s, a “better man” (1 Samuel 15:28), named David. As the Book of 1 Samuel nears the end, the Amalekites reappear in chapter 30, but this time it is not Saul who has to deal with them, but David. Had Saul carried out the *herem* against the Amalekites back in chapter 15, this second battle would not be necessary. As chapter 30 opens, the Amalekites have successfully raided, burned, and looted Ziklag, and have carried off David’s two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail (v. 5). Before pursuing the raiders, however, David, in direct contrast to Saul, seeks “strength in the Lord his God” by consulting with the priest, Abiathar. Permission is granted to pursue the raiders (v. 8) and David eventually recovers everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives (v. 18). In the process of attacking, “four hundred young [Amalekite] men” mount camels and get away (v. 17). Consequently, not even David completely annihilates the Amalekites. At least four hundred of them live to fight another day.

The fate of the Amalekites after David’s time is mentioned briefly in 1 Chronicles 4:42–43, where we are informed that “five hundred men of the Simeonites . . . destroyed the remnant of the Amalekites that had escaped.” According to 1 Chronicles 4:41, this incident occurred “in the days of Hezekiah,” which would have been sometime in the eighth century B.C.E.

The very first verse of 2 Samuel begins: “After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag.” During this time, a young man came and reported the deaths of Saul and Jonathan to David (cf. 1 Samuel 31). The young man confesses to having killed Saul, and twice tells David that he is an Amalekite (vv. 7, 13). Finally, David has the young man killed, not because he was an Amalekite, but because he “killed Yahweh’s anointed” (v. 15). According to Feldman, Pseudo-Philo 65.4 identifies the young

messenger as “Edabus, the son of Agag, the king of the Amalekites whom Saul had spared, thus stressing the lesson that Saul had to pay for his failure to carry out the divine command.”⁴⁹

WHO WERE THE AMALEKITES?

Why was it so important that the Amalekites be destroyed? Why were they such a hated and intractable enemy? Genesis 36 provides a genealogy of Esau’s descendants. According to Genesis 36:11, 12 and 1 Chronicles 1:36, Amalek was born to Timna, the concubine of Eliphaz, Esau’s son. While not mentioned by name in any extrabiblical source, they were probably nomads and, as the Bible describes them, Israel’s most despised enemy. The Amalekites were not considered part of the Canaanite population, but were probably a western branch of the Edomites (Genesis 36:12; Psalm 83:7–8) active somewhere in the Negev (cf. Genesis 14:7; 1 Samuel 27:8).⁵⁰ Starting at Genesis 14:5, the story is told how in the “fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and subdued . . . all the country of the Amalekites.”⁵¹ While Numbers 13:29 records that they lived in “the land of the Negeb,” their nomadic travels, according to 1 Samuel 15:7, extended “from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.” What their precise relationship was to the Israelites and why they were so despised is difficult to determine. First Samuel 15:2 says they were to be punished “for what they did in opposing the Israelites when [they] came up out of Egypt.” Exactly what they did, however, is never mentioned. Deuteronomy 25:17–19 implies that the Amalekites attacked the Israelites when they were “faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind.” Ziony Zevit translates Deuteronomy 25:18 as “and he ‘untailed’ in you all stumblers behind you,” implying that the Amalekites attacked “stragglers behind the main group from the rear.”⁵²

The Amalekite king, Agag, is mentioned seven times in 1 Samuel 15. A king named Agag also appears in Balaam’s oracle in Numbers 24:7. In that same oracle, Amalek is mentioned twice in v. 20, but, according to Feldman, Balaam’s oracle is “apparently deliberately ambiguous as to whose responsibility it is to eliminate the Amalekites.”⁵³ The word *Agagite* also appears as a Gentilic name for Haman, the hated enemy of the Jews in the Book of Esther (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24).⁵⁴ In the only other reference to Amalek, Exodus 17:8–13 says that he “came and fought with Israel at Rephidim” (v. 8), but does not call him a king. This is the well-known episode where Aaron and Hur held up Moses’s weary hands “until the sun set. And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword” (vv. 12–13).

Finally, 2 Samuel 8:4 indicates that “Yahweh gave victory to David wherever he went.” Amalek is listed in 2 Samuel 8:12 as one of the nations that David “subdued” (v. 11), and after the days of Saul and David, as mentioned above, the Amalekites were “no longer named as serious opponents.”⁵⁵

THE AMALEKITES AND *HEREM* IN THE PROPHETS,
RABBINIC LITERATURE, AND THE LXX

While the concept of the *herem* and the threat of the Amalekites play important roles in the stories of Saul's decline and David's rise, they do not figure prominently in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Israel's prophets use the word *herem* very sparingly in their oracles, and do not mention Amalek at all. One might wonder, for example, why Amalek is not at the top of Amos's list in his oracles against the nations (1:1–2:8). Stern is no doubt correct when he says: "It would be futile to speculate as to why the earlier prophets, such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, did not choose to employ the *herem* as part of their formidable rhetorical arsenals."⁵⁶ And where the prophets do use the word *herem*, they tend to use it in a figurative, metaphorical sense.⁵⁷

In Isaiah 34:2, 5 (which has not been clearly dated to the exilic or postexilic period), the poet writes: "For Yahweh is enraged against all the nations and furious against all their hordes; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter [*herem*]. . . . When my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, lo, it will descend upon Edom, upon the people I have doomed to judgment [*herem*]." Here the deuteronomic concept of the *herem* extends to all nations. The loss of identity in the exilic and postexilic era becomes almost delusional,⁵⁸ and the idea of the *herem* is reinstituted in its harshest form in order to denounce all forms of non-Yahwistic, nonorthodox thinking in the sharpest terms. "One can, perhaps must, be startled by such uncompromising harshness. However, one should not overlook that what might be present here is a bloody, painful self-critique."⁵⁹

In Malachi 3:24 (English RSV: 4:6) and Zechariah 14:11, the word *herem* is used as a metonym for war and wrath. Malachi ends with the words: "He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a ban of utter destruction [*herem*]." The land was Yahweh's and access to the land depended on "family harmony,"⁶⁰ and if such harmony was not achieved, "Yahweh would smite the land *herem*, meaning that he would remove the land from the human sphere by force, for the world order could not be achieved by YHWH's word alone."⁶¹ Zechariah 14:11 then states: "And it [Jerusalem] shall be inhabited, for never again shall it be doomed to destruction [*herem*]; Jerusalem shall abide in security."

Later, in Rabbinic literature, the demand to eradicate the Amalekites still applied. However, according to Feldman, the rabbis "left considerable latitude as to when the eradication of the Amalekites will be carried out."⁶² The tendency among the rabbis was to place the final elimination of the Amalekites not in history but at the end of time.

In one of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments, 4Q252, Col IV, we read: "It was he whom Saul sl[ew], as he said through Moses in respect of the last days, 'I will erase

the memory of Amaleq from under the heavens.’”⁶³ The scroll fragment here is no doubt commenting on Deuteronomy 25:19: “Therefore when Yahweh your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.” However, the scroll fragment substitutes “in respect of the last days” for “when Yahweh your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand.”⁶⁴ This appears to be in harmony with the Rabbinic idea that Amalek’s final destruction will not happen in history but at the eschaton.

It is most interesting that when the LXX deals with Old Testament passages that speak of Yahweh as a warrior God, the translators drastically alter the texts. For example, Exodus 15:3, “Yahweh is a man of war,” becomes “the Lord brings wars to nothing” in the LXX; and Isaiah 42:13, “Yahweh goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his wrath,” reads, “the Lord crushes war.” According to William Klassen, “apparently influential members of the Jewish community sought to minimize the bellicose depictions of Yahweh.”⁶⁵ Why or what circumstances prompted such a change is unknown. Yahweh is described as a god of war, and if he has the power to wage war, he also has the power to destroy it.

CHRISTIAN MODES OF REFLECTION ON THE BIBLICAL RECORD

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that Christians cannot simply evade or ignore texts of terror like 1 Samuel 15, because the Old Testament is also the charter of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, those of us who walk daily into a classroom or face a Sunday morning Bible class know the challenge of trying to answer questions about “that Old Testament God” who is not only involved in but commands violence and the total destruction of entire peoples and nations. According to Raymond Schwager, “No other human activity or experience is mentioned as often, be it the world of work or trade, of family and sexuality, or that of knowledge and the experience of nature. For the biblical authors, the most impressive and distressing experience seems to have been that human beings war with and kill one another.”⁶⁶

In his “Concluding Reflections on Religion and Violence: Conflict, Subversion and Sacrifice,” Stephen Marini writes, “Our students always ask why religion seems to be such a cause of violence, when it proclaims universal values of peace and harmony. . . . From a cultural and historical perspective, it is certainly difficult to deny that religion is indeed a major source of human violence.”⁶⁷

How, then, do we deal with it all, make some sense of the senseless violence? Do we suppress it, avoid it, explain it away? Attempting to spiritualize, historically adjust, idealize, view as metaphor, or reduce to “God’s mysterious ways” such tough texts is dishonest.⁶⁸ Somehow we have to come to terms with it. How, then, might Christians come to terms with the “fighting words” that are 1 Samuel 15?

First, one needs to remember that 1 Samuel 15 is situated in the context of establishing a national identity. At such a time, it is not impossible to imagine invoking God's help. It is also easy to invoke God's help when that national identity is shattered and lost, as it was in the exilic and postexilic era. According to Psalm 72, Israel's kings were responsible not only for the military protection and defense of God's people, but also for establishing justice in the land. The psalmist proclaims: "Give the king your justice, O God, and righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor" (vv. 1–4). And in Third Isaiah's hopeful description of the coming of God, the redeemer and transformer of Zion, we are told that "Peace" will be appointed the overseer and "Righteousness" the taskmaster: "Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise" (60:17–18). As Fretheim puts it, "Such a resolute divine *opposition* to human violence is important to remember in reflecting upon divine violence. In sum: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence."⁶⁹

Second, one might cite a more contemporary example: the terror of Auschwitz. In this regard, Dietrich and Link provide the following scenario.⁷⁰ What if a legion of well-trained Allied soldiers—or a legion of angels—had gathered together the torturers and murderers of the Nazi concentration camps and invoked Deuteronomy 20:13, 16: "You shall put all its males to the sword. . . . You must not let anything that breathes remain alive." How might the victims of the Shoah have reacted to that? Might they not also have affirmed and shouted the words of Psalm 58:11: "People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth?'"

We know that no avenging soldiers—or angels—appeared at Auschwitz or any of the other death camps. By the time the Allies did arrive to liberate the concentration camps it was too late. Violence had taken its course—but on the *other* side.⁷¹

Third, while the idea of the *herem* is not present per se in the New Testament, it would be incorrect to claim that the New Testament does not have a concept of divinely sanctioned war. According to Sigmund Mowinckel, there is mention in Rabbinic literature of a Messiah ben Joseph, who will defeat Gog at the end of time.⁷² This "War-Messiah" was thought by some to be even more warlike than the expected Davidic messiah.

Furthermore, as Terence Fretheim states, "The New Testament especially, with its talk about hell, even envisions an eternal violence, in which God is very much involved (e.g., Matthew 13:36–50; Revelation 14:9–11)."⁷³ Christians should not overlook that the Book of Revelation contains considerable violence. In Revelation 19, for example, the rider on the white horse, the Lamb (Jesus Christ), initiates the

final, decisive battle against evil. The rider is described as “clothed in a robe dipped in blood. . . . [with] the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, . . . following him on white horses” (19:13–14). This imagery is very reminiscent of Isaiah 63, where Yahweh’s robes are red with the blood of the Edomites (the descendants of Esau), whose “juice splattered” on Yahweh’s garments and “stained all his robes” (v. 3). The “armies of heaven” (Revelation 19:14) recall numerous Old Testament texts that extol the deeds of Yahweh of hosts (literally, Yahweh of the armies) and speak of his wrath (cf., e.g., Isaiah 9:19; 10:23; 13:4, 13; 31:4). However, according to Wilfrid Harrington, “In all of this Christians endure—they do not take violent action against the worshipers of the beast. The message of Revelation is, in its apocalyptic dress, the message of Jesus. There must be a response to injustice, to oppression. That courageous response which may and can demand the ultimate sacrifice, is always non-violent.”⁷⁴

Fourth, and most important, however, is that the Old Testament shadow of violence and brutality follows Jesus himself from the beginning to the end of his earthly life, which finds its denouement in a passion story.⁷⁵ It is the story of a violent death, which, yes, happens with God’s permission. Jesus is crucified between two criminals (Luke 23:33). However, long before this final act of violence, the gospels narrate Jesus’s entire life under that shadow of violence. His life began with the flight into Egypt, where the infant Jesus narrowly escaped Herod’s genocide in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:13–15), and the connection is made with the Exodus from Egypt, which certainly would have recalled the death of the firstborn in the tenth and final plague (Exodus 11:4–8; 12:29–30).

Then, at the midpoint of Jesus’s earthly career, a voice from heaven reminiscent of another foundational event in the Old Testament called out. The words “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17) surely would have called to mind Abraham’s son, Isaac, who also is described as “your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,” and who was to be offered “as a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:2). The passion history records an event where God permits what, at the last moment, God did not permit in the Abraham/Isaac story. God, as Paul says, citing Genesis 22:16, “did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us.”⁷⁶

In Mark 14 (cf. Matthew 26; John 18), after Jesus finished praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Judas arrived with a crowd of people who were carrying swords and clubs. Jesus was betrayed and arrested, and then “one of those who stood near [John 18:10 identifies this person as Peter] drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear” (v. 47). In Matthew’s account of this incident, Jesus does say, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26:53–54).

The violence continues when Jesus is spat upon, blindfolded, struck, and beaten (Mark 14:65). A crown of thorns is placed on his head and he is struck with a reed

(Mark 15:18). A murderer, Barabbas, is chosen to be set free instead of Jesus, who had done no evil (Mark 15:6–15).

In the final scene of the gospel passion account, Christ is crucified between two criminals and all of the violent history of the past is cast in a new light. According to Luke, one of the convicts crucified with Jesus says, “And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong” (23:41). This, by the way, may have been how the Old Testament writers thought about the condemnation of the Amalekites. They were receiving just punishment for their oppression of the Hebrew people. However, for the New Testament witnesses, Jesus’s crucifixion was not just, and even Pilate could find no fault in him (Luke 24:4, 14; John 18:38; 19:4, 6). In the crucifixion, God himself stepped into the world’s violent web and put his divinity on the line. Christians confess that God became human in the form of his only son, Jesus, when the good of his creatures was threatened by violence.

Christians do not have easy answers or quick remedies to the problems of war and violence. God’s history with his people has not yet reached its goal. There is still suffering, death, and tears. And, sad to say, there is always another Amalek out there that someone wants to annihilate. Nations, like individuals, have long memories and they bear grudges. On the one hand, it is understandable that Israel would want to retaliate. After all, when the people were leaving Egypt, the Amalekites attacked from the rear, terrorizing the “faint and weary,” those who lagged behind (Deuteronomy 25:17–18). Such violence against the most vulnerable and helpless of the refugees could not go unpunished. As the story is told, it would have to wait until a later time, but there would be retaliation. Christians and others continue to identify their nemeses as Amalekites. You might Google the words “modern day Amalekites” sometime. I found 21,700 results, associating everybody from Ahmadinejad to Zionists, from Al-Qaeda to the Palestinians, as well as every evil from the sins of the “flesh” and spiritual lethargy to gay and lesbian lifestyles, with the ancient cohorts of Amalek. Such searching for Amalek only compounds the violence and deepens the bitterness. All faith traditions call upon their communities to reject violence and to cease looking for Amalek. Christians certainly are summoned not only to reject violence but to “let the same mind” be in them that was in Christ Jesus, “who emptied himself, took on the form of a slave, and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6–8).

. . .

In the very last scene of the movie *Patton*, Patton (George C. Scott) recalls the tradition of Roman conquerors who rode in a triumphal chariot while a slave stood behind the conqueror holding a golden crown and whispering in his ear a warning that *all glory is fleeting*.⁷⁷

Saul’s glory was indeed fleeting. As Jobling puts it, “if the Bible has a figure

comparable to the tragic heroes of Greek drama that figure is King Saul.”⁷⁸ He may have “killed his thousands,” but David killed his “ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7) and in every sense became the “engine of Israel’s imagination.”⁷⁹ In the end, there is no glory in violence. None. It was not Saul’s glory, or David’s, that mattered, but Yahweh’s. Centuries later, another Benjaminite named Saul, “also known as Paul” (Acts 13:9), himself no stranger to violence and persecution (cf. Galatians 1:13, 23; Philippians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Acts 8:1), would draw attention to that glory when he spoke to the Christians in Rome:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” [cf. Proverbs 20:22; 24:29]. No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17–21)

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6. Jonathan Klawans, "Introduction: Religion, Violence, and the Bible," in Bernat and Klawans, *Religion and Violence*, 14.

7. Ibid., 14–15. Italics in original.

8. David Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

73. For a general discussion of the date, authorship, and religious background of 1 Samuel, see pp. 11–46.

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41. See, e.g., Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 13 and n. 55; Klein, *1 Samuel*, xxxi–xxxii.

42. Klein, *1 Samuel*, xxxi–xxxii and 147–148.

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50. See Zevit, “The Search for Violence,” 33.

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Fighting Words

*Religion, Violence, and the
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Edited by

John Renard



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