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The Amalekite Genocide

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One of the standard ways that the New Atheists attack Christianity is by using some of the Old Testament war passages to argue that God is violent and petty. One of the favourite passages for this is the so-called Amalekite Genocide of 1 Samuel 15. But difficulties with passages such as this are not restricted to atheists. In 2009, the popular website **Ship of Fools** ran a feature called “Chapter and Worse—because the Good Book could be Better”. Readers were invited to submit their least favourite Bible passages, and an evangelical acquaintance of mine submitted 1 Samuel 15:3.¹

And Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’” (1 Sam. 15:1-3, ESV)

People argue, with a fair bit of justification, that this looks like God is commanding genocide, and therefore that this creates some problems for our understanding of God’s goodness—and there are various standard solutions to the problem.

- Some people try saying that the Bible isn’t accurate in reporting this event. But that then implies that the Bible isn’t an accurate record for knowing God’s character, so we can’t really know God at all.
- Some people try saying that this is Samuel’s command, not God’s, and that Samuel is only saying that it comes from God. However, that runs into problems when you remember that 1 Samuel presents Samuel as an ideal prophet—the prophet like Moses from Deuteronomy 18 who accurately speaks from God.²

It also gets worse for people who try to avoid the force of these verses. Saul doesn’t obey Samuel’s command—he spares the life of King Agag (probably a title for the king of the Amalekites, like Pharaoh is of the king of the Egyptians), and also of some of the animals and so on, as a result of which God gets annoyed with Saul, and rejects him as king (vv. 10-25).

I think we have to take the full force of these verses. God commands a genocide, and yet somehow he is good and loving. What on earth (or in heaven) is going on?

The standard evangelical response appeals to the sovereignty of God and to the depths of human sinfulness. And of course it is true that God can command what he wants. And of course it is true that we all deserve the same fate as the Amalekites because of our sin. But it seems to me that the real issue at stake here is not God's right to command a genocide, or whether the action commanded is fair—though those are important. The real issue is what it means for the same God who loved a world of sinners so much that he sent his Son to die for them also to command a mass indiscriminate slaughter of some of those sinners. Before we can answer that, we need to think about several key issues.

Who were the Amalekites?

First up, who were the Amalekites? What made them so bad? The Amalekites were the descendants and followers of Amalek, grandson of Esau³, brother of Jacob also known as Israel. As such, the Amalekites weren't total foreigners to God. Esau was the one who had sold his birthright and his part in God's promise.⁴ He had been part of God's covenant people, but he valued his own appetites more. So the Edomites (Esau's descendants, including the Amalekites) were people who had opted out *en masse* of the covenant which defined God's people.

They weren't Canaanites. Israel was not a threat to them; Israel was not going to take their land. Israel's relationship to the Amalekites was like their relationship to the other Edomites when Israel said—

Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory.⁵

But the Amalekites really really didn't like Israel. At the very birth of the nation of Israel, when they came out of Egypt and were at their most vulnerable, before they even got to Sinai and when they didn't even have any water, the Amalekites came and attacked them.⁶ Israel were forced to fight their very first

battle, fighting for their lives against the Amalekites, under the leadership of Moses. After God gave Moses an amazing victory, Exodus 17 says this:

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.'

Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."⁷

The Amalekites were the people who hated Israel, right from the start. And though Moses said that God would be at war with them, it looks very much as if it was the Amalekites who were at war with him. Israel have a lot of wars between the time of Moses and the time of Saul, but they never once attack the Amalekites.

The Amalekites attack Israel though. In Numbers 14:45, they attack Israel again while they are still in the desert. In Judges 3:13 they join in with the Moabites in attacking Israel. In Judges 6:3, they invade Israel 'whenever the Israelites planted their crops', and together with the Midianites 'did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys'. Later in Judges 6 and 7 they invade again and are fought off by Gideon. The Amalekites show that generation after generation, they are at war with Israel and with God.

Even long after Saul (and Saul's successor David) have fought against and mostly eradicated the Amalekites, we get one more Amalekite coming up. Six hundred years after them, the Persians are ruling the whole area, and a man called Haman, an Agagite gets a lot of power. 'Agagite' probably means that he was descended from the Amalekite kings, known as Agag.

After these events, King Xerxes (of Persia) honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour. Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, 'Why do you disobey the king's command?' Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a

Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.⁸

The Amalekites weren't just any old people. They were the nation who more than any other tried to destroy Israel. They had been trying to eradicate and plunder Israel from the very birth of Israel, 200-400 years before the command in 1 Samuel 15, and they would continue for another 600 years.

That explains some of the background to the conflict in 1 Samuel 15. It shows that what is being commanded is an act of war in a conflict which the Israelites didn't start, and which was never going to be resolved by negotiation. But it could still be seen as just God taking sides in an old argument between two nations. Or as someone put it, 'A toddler-God here, kicking over his blue toy soldiers, because today he likes the green ones better.'⁹ It doesn't fully explain or justify the command—that needs us to think about the theological context as well.

The Amalekites in Salvation History

Israel was God's chosen people. But they weren't chosen so God could bless them and curse everyone else. They were chosen to be God's conduit of blessing to the whole world.¹⁰ As God's original promise to Abraham says: 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'.¹¹

Israel was God's chosen conduit of blessing to the whole world. Amalek had actually had a chance to be there as well, being descended from Esau. But Esau had renounced his blessing, trading it in for a bowl of soup, and Amalek continued in that. They had decided that they would oppose the very means that God had chosen to bless them and every other nation, and by the time we reach 1 Samuel 15, they have been consistently opposing it for hundreds of years and show no sign of letting up.

In his book *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*,¹² Hans Boersma points out that hospitality requires the potential for violence. Suppose that Britain welcomes a refugee from Burma. In Burma, they are being hunted by the

authorities because of their statements about human rights violations, or something like that. If Britain really welcomes them, part of that is being willing to resist the Burmese government sending agents over here to kill them, and resisting in a violent way if necessary. Part of hospitality is willingness to protect the people you are being hospitable towards.

In the same way, God is determined to bless the world, and at the stage of 1 Samuel 15, the way he has decided to bless the world is through Israel shining as a light for him among the nations. As it turns out, they're rubbish at that, but that's a different story. Even so, we still get people like Ruth and like the Gibeonites coming in from outside Israel to experience some of God's blessing to the world through Israel. And so part of what it means for God to bless the world is for God to protect Israel, his pipeline for blessing to the world. The Amalekites had chosen not to be part of the means by which God blessed the world, and now they chose to oppose the means God was using to bring blessing to the world. If God was going to keep on blessing the world, he needed to stop the Amalekites. But what about the children?

So far, I've established a decent reason for why God should want people to fight against the Amalekites. But we still haven't really dealt with the issue—why does God seem to command a genocide here? There are several reasons. Minor ones include that the Amalekites seem to have been notorious for killing children when they attacked (1 Sam. 15:33), so it is repayment in kind. But while there's a kind of grisly poetic justice about that, it's not the main reason, and neither is it adequate as a response. The standard answer about the way that wars were conducted in the Ancient Near East does not work for the simple reason that we should not expect an eternal God to be limited by the morality of the time.

A better reason is the one given in Exodus 17. The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.¹³ God knew that the Amalekites would always oppose Israel—that the children of the Amalekites would do it when they grew up, and their descendants too—as we see with Haman in the book of Esther.

Time for an analogy. Suppose that you met Stalin, or Harold Shipman, or some notorious evil person, before they had done the majority of their evil, but after

they had set themselves irrevocably on that course. Suppose you somehow knew all the evil they would do, all the lives they would destroy, and that the only way you could stop it was by killing them, and that was within your power. Could it be right to kill them in such a situation?

It isn't an easy question. I think it's probably similar to the one that Bonhoeffer wrestled with. He was a pacifist church leader in Nazi Germany, and was eventually executed for his part in a plot to kill Hitler. He wrestled with it for a long time, and eventually concluded that he had to, not because of what Hitler had done—that's a matter for God's judgement—but because of what Hitler would continue to do if he was not stopped.

My point is this. In a situation like that, God could command the killing of a young Joseph Stalin because he knows the future and knows for certain what would happen if we didn't do it. If we were absolutely 100% certain that we were hearing God correctly, it wouldn't be wrong to obey God on something like that. Of course, it would be necessary to consult older and wiser Christians first, to check that you were not insane, as well as praying through the issue carefully and making sure that the desire to kill Stalin did not arise from inside you.

The situation in 1 Samuel 15 is that God knew the Amalekites. He knew they were a nation that had rejected a part in God's plan to bless the world. He knew that their actions for hundreds of years had been set on destroying and stopping God's plan to bless the world. He knew that if they weren't destroyed, they would continue to try to stop his plan. In fact, they weren't destroyed and they did continue to try to thwart God's plan, so he was proved right by that.

It's an issue of protection. If the Amalekite army had been defeated once in battle and left to retreat, they would have come back eventually. It would have been limited protection for a limited time. But God wants total protection for his plan to bless the world, forever. Without total destruction of the Amalekites, they were going to keep on coming back and God's plan would not be safe. But this still sounds, well, merciless. We can see how a good God might do it, but it isn't clear how this fits with the God who does not desire the death of sinners but rather that they should turn from their wickedness and live.

Mercy for the Amalekites?

The first place to start looking for an answer is in the passage itself. In verse 5, Saul reaches the city of the Amalekites. But he doesn't attack immediately. Instead he sends a message to another tribe—the Kenites. According to Judges 4:11, the Kenites were the descendants of Moses' father-in-law, variously called Jethro and Hobab, and there's an interesting contrast here.

The first two groups of people that the Israelites meet after coming out of Egypt are the Amalekites in Exodus 17 and the Kenites (Jethro and his family) in Exodus 18. The Amalekites try to destroy Israel. Jethro and his family help Israel. They want to be in on God's blessing which is coming to the whole world, and they help Israel and worship the God of Israel. So when Saul comes to fight against the Amalekites, the first thing he does is to send a message to the Kenites—"Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.¹⁴

Now, that makes it look very much as if the Kenites are mingling with the Amalekites fairly freely. Suppose an Amalekite decided that they didn't want to fight against Israel. There doesn't seem to have been anything stopping them from deciding to be a Kenite—dressing themselves up as a Kenite and just slipping off. The Amalekites had a way out, if only they were willing to deny their identity as Amalekites.

You see, the Amalekites' national identity is set up against Israel and against God's plan to bless the world. But there is a way out—they just have to renounce that identity and join in with the people who worshipped and served God. They have to get rid of the thing that means they will be going against God. Maybe some of them did. But many of them didn't.

The second way out is the one given in Deuteronomy 20, which is where the laws for how Israel was meant to fight its battles are set out. "When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labour for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword ..." ¹⁵

I don't know if Saul followed this rule or not when he attacked the Amalekites, but he should have done. If the Amalekites had surrendered, they would have been spared. But once again, they would have had to renounce their identity as Amalekites and become vassals of Israel. The only way they would have been destroyed is if they refused to surrender to God's plan. The Amalekites as a group had the opportunity to surrender to God's plan to bless the world, and the Amalekites as individuals had the opportunity to renounce their group and join in with the people who had sought to be a part of God's plan. It's not exactly genocide, is it?

Paul Copan¹⁶ points out that the command is to kill whoever is there, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they kill women and children. As Goldingay writes: "When a city is in danger of falling, people do not simply wait there to be killed; they get out ... Only people who do not get out, such as the city's defenders, get killed."¹⁷

So the command in 1 Samuel 15:3 looks a lot less like genocide, and a lot more like "If anyone—man, woman, child, whoever—doesn't take the chance to give up their identity as Amalekites and therefore also their opposition to Israel, then kill them. And make sure that you don't profit from doing it." This is backed up by the way that Hebrew writers seem to use language when talking about war. Here's an example.

Hadad was from the royal family of Edom, and here is how the LORD made him Solomon's enemy: 'Some time earlier, when David conquered the nation of Edom, Joab his army commander went there to bury those who had died in battle. Joab and his soldiers stayed in Edom six months, and during that time they killed every man and boy who lived there. Hadad was a boy at the time, but he escaped to Midian with some of his father's officials...'¹⁸

Killing every man and boy who lives in Edom doesn't mean "killing every man and boy who lived in Edom and making sure that none escape". It seems that it means "making sure there aren't any men or boys living there any more." In the same way, killing all the Amalekites seems to mean killing everyone who keep on identifying themselves as Amalekites and who keep setting themselves against God's plan.

This is about breaking and destroying the identity of Amalek as a nation, so they as a nation cannot continue to oppose God's plan to bless the world. It isn't about hatred of individuals, or about killing those individuals, unless they want to keep on being Amalekites and to keep on fighting against God's plan.

It is then questionable whether it is a genocide in the modern sense. It doesn't involve dehumanisation of the ethnic group; it doesn't seem to involve lack of mercy or love. But it is destroying the identity of a nation that has set itself against God and his plan to bless the world, and all who cling to that identity. And as such, it is indeed a picture of the eventual fate that awaits all those who set themselves irrevocably against God and refuse to repent. But we're still looking at it through a Jewish rather than a Christian lens. What does it mean to think about the Amalekite genocide through the lens of the cross?

Jesus is the True Israel

The first thing I want to note is that the theme of Israel as God's means of blessing the whole earth finds its fulfilment in Jesus. Jesus is where God reveals himself perfectly; Jesus is the one the nations stream to; he is the one who obeys God perfectly. Again and again, the gospels present Jesus as the True Israel. As Jesus says, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them'¹⁹ As such, Jesus is the one whom God defends, and the one whom he appoints as judge over the nations.

Jesus is made the True Amalek

As the Bible goes on, it becomes clear that the enmity to God and his plans which was so clear in the Amalekites is found in each individual person. We all try to resist God's plan, to reject our part in it and oppose Jesus' lordship. And the Bible calls that sin. But in one of the most shocking verses of the Bible, we read this—'God made him who had no sin [i.e. Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'²⁰

Jesus became the personification of all opposition to God. He was made the true Amalek as well as the true Israel. He became the one who had to be killed so that God could bless the whole world. And he did that for us, for those who reject him and oppose him, so that we can know what it means to be part of God's true people. That is the true and lasting significance of the sentence to

destruction in 1 Samuel 15. It is the sentence that God himself in the person of Jesus chose to take on himself for us. Jesus becomes the person whom God destroys so that in him we can become the people whom God defends.

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ENDNOTES

1. The resulting discussion can be read at <http://forum.ship-of-fools.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=76;t=000021>
2. E.g. 1 Samuel 3:19, chs. 9-10.
3. Genesis 36:12,16
4. Genesis 25:29-34
5. Numbers 20:17, NIV
6. Exodus 17:8
7. Exodus 17:14-16, NIV
8. Esther 3:1-6, NIV
9. From the thread on **Ship of Fools**.
10. See, for example, C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2006).
11. Genesis 12:3b, NIV
12. H. Boersma *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2004).
13. Exodus 17:16b, ESV
14. 1 Samuel 15:6, ESV
15. Deuteronomy 20:10-13, ESV
16. P. Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites—Divinely Mandated Genocide or Corporal Capital Punishment?" *Philosophia Christi* vol. 11.1, 2009:73-90.
17. Cited by Copan, p. 83.
18. 1 Kings 11:14-17, CEV. The example comes from S. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).
19. Matthew 5:17, NIV
20. 2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV