

Who were the Amalekites?

The Amalekites were a formidable tribe of nomads living in the area south of Canaan between Mount Seir and the Egyptian border. They resisted the Israelites during the time of the exodus, and they remained perennial foes of God's people.

The Amalekites are not listed in the table of nations in Genesis 10, as they did not originate until after Esau's time. The "territory of the Amalekites" is mentioned in Genesis 14:7 as being conquered by kings during Abraham's time, but this reference is likely an example of prolepsis, a representation of something "out of time." The territory was designated by the name of its future, well-known inhabitants during Moses' time. Balaam refers to the Amalekites as "first among the nations" (Numbers 24:20), but he most likely meant only that the Amalekites were the first ones to attack the Israelites upon their exodus from Egypt or that the Amalekites were "first" in power at that time. Genesis 36 identifies the Amalekites as descendants of Amalek, the son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau (verses 12 and 16). So, the Amalekites were somehow related to, but distinct from, the Edomites.

Scripture records the long-lasting feud between the Amalekites and the Israelites and God's direction to wipe the Amalekites off the face of the earth (Exodus 17:8-13; 1 Samuel 15:2; Deuteronomy 25:17). Why God would call His people to exterminate an entire tribe is a difficult question, but a look at history may give some insight.

Like many desert tribes, the Amalekites were nomadic. Numbers 13:29 places them as native to the Negev, the desert between Egypt and Canaan. The Babylonians called them the Sute, Egyptians the Sittiu, and the Amarna tablets refer to them as the Khabbati, or "plunderers."

The Amalekites' unrelenting brutality toward the Israelites began with an attack at Rephidim (Exodus 17:8-13). This is recounted in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 with this admonition: "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind [typically women and children]: they had no fear of God. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

The Amalekites later joined with the Canaanites and attacked the Israelites at Hormah (Numbers 14:45). In Judges they banded with the Moabites (Judges 3:13) and the Midianites (Judges 6:3) to wage war on the Israelites. They were responsible for the repeated destruction of the Israelites' land and food supply.

In 1 Samuel 15:2-3, God tells King Saul, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them, put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

In response, King Saul first warns the Kenites, friends of Israel, to leave the area. He then attacks the Amalekites but does not complete the task. He allows the Amalekite King Agag to live, takes plunder for himself and his army, and lies about the reason for doing so. Saul's rebellion against God and His commands is so serious that he is rejected by God as king (1 Samuel 15:23).

The escaped Amalekites continued to harass and plunder the Israelites in successive generations that spanned hundreds of years. First Samuel 30 reports an Amalekite raid on Ziklag, a Judean village where David held property. The Amalekites burned the village and took captive all the women and children, including two of David's wives. David and his men defeated the Amalekites and rescued all the hostages. A few hundred Amalekites escaped, however. Much later, during the reign of King Hezekiah, a group of Simeonites "killed the remaining Amalekites" who had been living in the hill country of Seir (1 Chronicles 4:42-43).

The last mention of the Amalekites is found in the book of Esther where Haman the Agagite, a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, connives to have all the Jews in Persia annihilated by order of King Xerxes. God saved the Jews in Persia, however, and Haman, his sons, and the rest of Israel's enemies were destroyed instead (Esther 9:5-10).

The Amalekites' hatred of the Jews and their repeated attempts to destroy God's people led to their ultimate doom. Their fate should be a warning to all who would attempt to thwart God's plan or who would curse what God has blessed (see Genesis 12:3).