

Amalekites

from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

AMALEK was the son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau (Gen. 36:12, 16), and as a collective noun, the Amelekites, were his descendants (Ex. 17:8; Nu. 24:20; Dt. 25:17; Jgs. 3:13; etc.). His mother was Timna, Eliphaz' concubine. He was one of "the chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom" (Gen. 36:16).

Some writers distinguish the nomadic Amalekites normally found in the Negeb and Sinai area from the descendants of Esau, because Gen. 14:7, which antedates Esau, refers to the "country of the Amalekites." This may be merely an editorial note, although no doubt some of the descendants of Esau became incorporated into Amalekite groups, as they did into other tribes in Transjordan.

The origin of the Amalekites is obscure. They do not appear in the list of the nations in Gen. 10, although it is likely that they were of Semitic origin. Their first contact with Israel was at Rephidim in the wilderness of Sinai, where they made an unprovoked attack on the Israelites and were defeated after a desperate conflict (Ex. 17:8-13; Dt. 25:17f). Because of this attack the Amalekites were placed under a permanent ban and were to be destroyed (Dt. 25:19; 1 S. 15:2f; cf. Ps. 83:7). A year later, following the report of the spies, Israel ignored the advice of Moses and sought to enter southern Palestine. They were defeated by the Amalekites at Hormah (Nu. 14:43, 45). The spies had reported their presence in the south along with Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites (Nu. 13:29).

From the days of the judges two encounters are recorded. The Amalekites assisted Eglon king of Moab in his attack on Israelite territory (Jgs. 3:13). Later they combined forces with the Midianites and the "people of the East" (*benê qedem*), and raided Israelite crops and flocks in the days of Gideon, who was able to drive them out (Jgs. 6:3-5, 33; 7:12).

During these years the Amalekites were to be found mainly in the Negeb region, although for a time they gained a foothold in Ephraim (Jgs.

12:15). The foreign prophet Balaam looked away to their lands from his vantage point in Moab and described them as the "first of the nations" (Nu. 24:20), which may mean in regard either to origin or to status. When Samuel commanded Saul to destroy them they were in the Negeb area, S of Telaim in Judah. Saul drove them toward Shur in the wilderness toward Egypt (1 S. 15:1-9). On that occasion Saul spared Agag their king, for which he was rebuked by Samuel, who slew Agag personally (1 S. 15:33).

David fought the Amalekites in the area of Ziklag, which Achish king of Gath had given to him (1 S. 27:6; 30:1-20). It was an Amalekite who brought to David the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (in which he had a part), and who was put to death by David (2 S. 1:1-16).

After David's time the Amalekites seem to have declined. In Hezekiah's day the sons of Simeon attacked "the remnant of the Amalekites that had escaped," taking their stronghold in Mt. Seir (1 Ch. 4:43).

J. ARTHUR THOMPSON