

# UNIT 31

## VICTORY OVER THE WORLD

### (Exodus 17:8-16)

#### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

#### Text and Textual Notes

**17:8** Amalek came<sup>2</sup> and attacked<sup>3</sup> Israel in Rephidim. **17:9** So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our<sup>4</sup> men and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I shall stand on top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.”

**17:10** And Joshua fought against Amalek just as Moses had instructed him;<sup>5</sup> and Moses and Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. **17:11** And whenever

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<sup>1</sup> In this short passage we have the first account of Israel's holy wars. The war effort and Moses' holding up his hands go side by side until the victory is won and commemorated. Many have used this as an example of intercessory prayer--but the passage makes no such mention. In Exodus so far the rod of God is the token of the power of God; when Moses used it, God demonstrated His power. To use the rod of God was to say that God did it; to fight without the rod was to face defeat. Using the rod of God was a way of submitting to and depending on the power of God in all areas of life.

The first part of the story reports the attack and the preparation for the battle (8,9). The second part describes the battle and its outcome (10-13). The final section is the preservation of this event in the memory of Israel (14-16).

<sup>2</sup> Literally, “and Amalek came”

<sup>3</sup> Or, “fought with”

<sup>4</sup> This could be rendered literally “choose men for us.” But the *lamed* preposition probably indicates possession, “our men,” and the fact that Joshua was to choose from Israel, as well as the fact that there is no article on “men,” indicates he was to select some to fight.

<sup>5</sup> The line in Hebrew reads literally: And Joshua did as Moses had said to him, to fight with Amalek. The infinitive construct is epexegetical, explaining what Joshua did that was in compliance with Moses' words.

Moses would raise his hands,<sup>6</sup> then Israel prevailed; but whenever he would rest<sup>7</sup> his hands, then Amalek prevailed. **17:12** When<sup>8</sup> the hands of Moses became heavy,<sup>9</sup> they took a stone and put it under him, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side and one on the other,<sup>10</sup> and so his hands were steady<sup>11</sup> until the going down of the sun. **17:13** So Joshua destroyed<sup>12</sup> Amalek and his army<sup>13</sup> with the edge<sup>14</sup> of the sword.

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<sup>6</sup> The two verbs in the temporal clauses are governed by *w<sup>h</sup>ayah ka'asher* --“as long as” or, “and it was that whenever.” This indicates that the two imperfect tenses should be given a frequentative translation, probably a customary imperfect.

<sup>7</sup> Or, “lower”

<sup>8</sup> Literally “now the hands of Moses,” the disjunctive *waw* introduces a circumstantial clause here--of time.

<sup>9</sup> The term used here is the adjective *k<sup>e</sup>bedim*. It means “heavy,” but in this context the idea is more that of being tired. This is the important word that was used in the plague stories: when the heart of Pharaoh was hard, then the Israelites did not gain their freedom or victory. Likewise here, when the rod was lowered because Moses’ hands were “heavy,” Israel started to lose.

<sup>10</sup> Literally, “from this, one, and from this, one”

<sup>11</sup> The word “steady” is *'emunah*, from the root *'aman*. The word usually means “faithfulness.” Here we have a good illustration of the basic idea of the word--firm, steady, reliable, dependable. There may be a *double entendre* here; on the one hand it simply says that his hands were stayed so that Israel might win, but on the other hand it is portraying Moses as steady, firm, reliable, faithful. The point is that whatever God commissioned as the means of agency of power--to Moses a rod, to the Christians the Spirit--the people of God had know that the victory came from God alone.

<sup>12</sup> The verb means “disabled, weakened, prostrated.” The verb is used a couple of times in the Bible to describe how man dies and is powerless (see Josh. 14:10; Isaiah 14:12).

<sup>13</sup> Or, “people”

<sup>14</sup> Literally, “mouth of the sword.” It means as the sword devours--without quarter (Driver, p. 159).

**17:14** And Yahweh said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in the<sup>15</sup> book, and rehearse<sup>16</sup> it in the ears of Joshua; for I will surely wipe out<sup>17</sup> the remembrance<sup>18</sup> of Amalek from under the heavens. **17:15** And Moses built an altar; and he called its name, Yahweh- Nissi:<sup>19</sup> **17:16** for he said, “For a hand was lifted up to the throne of Yahweh<sup>20</sup>--that Yahweh will have war with Amalek from

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<sup>15</sup> The presence of the article does not mean that he was to write this in a book that was existing now, but in one dedicated to this purpose (book, meaning scroll). See GKC, par. 126s.

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word is “place,” meaning that the events were to be impressed on the heart of Joshua. The word “rehearse” means to go over and over something, and that may not be the intent of this verb, although the point of writing the events in the book would add that goal.

<sup>17</sup> The construction uses the infinitive absolute and the imperfect tense to stress the resolution of Yahweh to destroy Amalek. The verb *makhah* is often translated “blot out”--but that is not a very satisfactory image, since it would not remove completely what is the object. Efface, erase, scrape off (as in a palimpsest) would make a better image.

<sup>18</sup> This would seem to be defeated by the preceding statement that the events would be written in a book for a memorial. If this war is recorded, then the Amalekites would be remembered. But here God was going to wipe out the memory of them. But the idea of removing the memory of a people is an idiom for destroying them--they will have no posterity and no lasting heritage.

<sup>19</sup> The name means “Yahweh is my banner.” Note that when Israel murmured and failed God, the name commemorated the incident or the outcome of their failure. When they were blessed with success, the naming praised God. Here the holding up of the rod of God was preserved in the name for the altar--God gave them the victory.

<sup>20</sup> The line here is very difficult. The Hebrew text has *ki yad 'al kes Yah*, “for a hand unto the throne of Yah.” If the word is “throne” (and it is not usually spelled like this), then it would mean Moses’ hand was extended to the throne of God, showing either intercession or source of power. It could not be turned to mean that the hand of Yah was taking an oath to destroy the Amalekites. The LXX took the same letters, but apparently saw the last four as a verbal form; it reads “with a secret hand.” Most scholars have simply assumed that the text is wrong, and the *kes* should be emended to *nes* to fit the name, for this is the pattern of naming in the Old Testament with popular etymologies--some motif of the name must be found in the sentiment. This would then read, “My hand upon the banner of Yah.” It would be an expression signifying that the banner, the rod of God, should ever be ready at hand as the Israelites fight the Amalekites again and again.

generation to generation.<sup>21</sup>

## EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

There are few passages that have been abused in preaching more than this one. It is the account of holy war, the first that Israel had to engage in. The war effort and Moses' holding up the rod of God on top of the hill go on simultaneously until the victory is won. Many people have tried to make the activity of Moses prayer, i.e., they won the battle because Moses interceded for them. However, the text never mentions intercession or prayer. What seems to be the case is that the rod of God so far in Exodus has been the means God used to demonstrate His power. When Moses used it, God did wonders. Thus, to use the rod of God was to show that it was God who did the wonders, whether it should be devouring Egyptian snakes, separating the sea, hitting the rock, or holding it up over a battle. It became the token of God's power, and to use it was to recognize God's power and be submissive to it. It is like prayer, but at the same time it is not prayer that is being conveyed.

Right at the outset you will have to deal with the major hermeneutical problem of this and other war passages--holy war then and now. To fight an actual military battle in the wilderness near Amalek is the literal level of the story. You must define what holy warfare we are to be fighting. Do not leave it in the biblical jargon of war, for people often think only on the literal level. Take them to Paul, especially Ephesians and 2 Corinthians, where warfare terminology is used on the spiritual level. We have different enemies (not flesh and blood), we use different weapons (not actual swords, shields and breastplates), but we have the same hope of victory, that the LORD fights for us and enables us to gain the victory. I would mention that the battle in this passage is defensive, that the Amalekites came out to fight them; so too in the Christian world believers are often under attack from Satan and his fiery darts. The key for the exposition will have to be built on this analogy, and in the process explain how one might be victorious over the enemy.

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<sup>21</sup> The message of this short narrative, then, concerns the power of God to protect His people. We have the difficulty, the victory, and the commemoration. The victory must be retained in memory by the commemoration. So the idea could focus on that: The people of God must recognize (both for engaging in warfare and for praise afterwards) that victory comes only with the power of God. In the New Testament the issue is even more urgent, because the warfare is spiritual--we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. So only God's power will bring victory.

### *I. God's people will face attack from the world (8, 9).*

The first part of the passage reports the attack and the preparation for it. When the attack came, Moses immediately responded to the challenge. The Amalekites were not aboriginal in the land; they were ruthless invaders who had come in and slaughtered people to take over their lands. War against them was not a war against innocent or harmless people.

The response is twofold (human responsibility and divine power): Joshua would go out and fight and Moses would take the rod of God up on top of the hill. This is the first time the rod is used in league with human efforts. One could work an application this way: In a similar way we are to take the weapons of our warfare and defend the faith by the power of God. (Do not say this passage teaches Christians to . . . , because it does not). Do not get into the weapons yet, for that will be point two. But for this point stress that Christians are in a warfare too, even though it differs dramatically, and that they must respond to the challenge by their fighting back--but not simply in their own power. They must engage in the struggle fully planning on God's intervention.

### *II. God's people find victory in the power of God (10-13).*

The second part describes the battle and its outcome. The story reports that when Moses raised his hand with the rod of God, then Israel prevailed (*gabar*), but when his hands drooped, then Amalek prevailed. The point now is that victory comes only from the power of God, not from human efforts. Here we have the added incident where Moses' hands had to be stabilized by rocks so that he could hold them up (there may be a double entendre with *'emunah*, meaning both "secure" and "faithful"). Now would be the time to explain how God's power can be tapped today. Naturally one cannot do it through a rod; it now comes with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Here you will need to correlate the many teachings on receiving power by the Spirit and using the spiritual weapons. I think something can also be made of the constancy of Moses throughout the skirmish--he was faithful, steady, firm, reliable.

### *III. The people of God memorialize the victories of God (14-16).*

This story also has a naming incident. The last part calls for a memorial (*zikkaron*) to be written in the book and read in the hearing of Joshua (17:14-16). The lesson God wanted them to remember was that He would utterly destroy the Amalekites for this attack. To write this in the book and rehearse it would give the Israelites confidence, a mandate of sorts, to fight valiantly against these enemies. The final victory is sure.

But Moses also built an altar here in worshipful response to God. The passage includes a commemorative naming: *Yahweh Nissi*. Note, by the way, that when Israel murmurs or fails God, the naming commemorates their failure as a warning to future generations; but when they are triumphant through God's power, the naming commemorates the LORD. This altar and its naming gave Moses and Israel the opportunity to offer thanksgiving to God for the victory and to remember the incident. The point obviously would be that God desires His people to worship and praise Him for the great victories that He gives them.

The word play on the name is a little tricky to handle. The word playing off the name is *kes*, possibly related to “throne”--but this would then mean “A hand upon (up to) the throne of Yah” in the explanation. Many have followed the old suggestion of emending *kes* to *nes*, “banner.” If the MT is retained as it stands, the explanation would signify swearing-raising the hand to Yahweh's throne. If the emendation is accepted, there is a closer harmony with the name: “Yahweh is my banner” would be explained by “a hand on the banner of Yah.” It would commemorate Moses' holding the rod of God.

## CONCLUSION

Now the entire message has to be put together. The exposition will have to center on either the second or third part as the major point in the argument. This will determine how the sentence will be worded, i.e., which part gets subordinated. For examples:

When the power of God enables the people of God to gain the victory,  
the people of God must commemorate the victory with worship and praise.

Or:

The people of God must recognize  
(=both for engaging in the warfare and afterwards in praising)  
that victory over the world comes only with the power of God.