

WILDERNESS BATTLES

All of the wilderness battles have certain elements in common each battle is provoked by an enemy of righteousness. These enemies remain constant thorns in the side of Israel. The Amalekites, Canaanite, Amorite, and Midianites, chief enemies of God and Israel. They represent the root problems that plague mankind; idolatry, immorality, and pride. Each battle occurs at a time of great weakness for Israel. Not unlike the challenges to our own faith the outcome depends on faith, courage in the face of overwhelming attack, and total obedience to the Lord's will. My mother had a saying that speaks to the heart of any warrior on these occasions. There are only two reasons for ever doing anything first because God wants you too, and second because you want to please God.

The first battle occurs about two months after the Exodus. The Amalekites attack Israel. Some scholars identify the Amalekites as descendents of Edom because Esau has a son, Eliphaz, whose concubine Timna has a child named Amalek. Thus it is inferred that this was the origins of the Amalekites.

However, much earlier in the book of Genesis we find a coalition of kings occupying the land of the Amalekites. This would predate Esau by a couple of generations. This same coalition attacks Sodom and takes Lot and his family captive.

Further, we learn that the Amalekites are 'first among the nations.' (Numbers 24:20). I suspect that the Amalekites origins could be traced back to one of the first post flood tribes directly related to either the Nephilim or Rephaim. These people were known for their illicit activity with the fallen angels in Genesis 6. This evil beginning would account for the notorious manner in which they always treat God's people.

The Amalekites as a nation serves as an example of what happens when one attacks God's people. The Amalekites were a nomadic group with primary residence in the Negev but frequently migrating in the Transjordan area. They often join with other groups as seen in various biblical passages

When Moses and the children of Israel are at Kedesh Barnea and the 12 spies come back with a negative report. Moses is told by the Lord to withdraw and in disobedience; some of the people join in an attack driving north from Kedesh into Amalekite territory. Israel is met by a joint coalition of Amalekites and Canaanites who drive them back.

During Gideon's time we find Amalekites and Midianites, and other eastern peoples joining forces to strip Israel of its produce. The Midianites seem to be the major partner with the Amalekites providing additional support. This coalition is defeated by Gideon.

During the early period of the Judges we learn that Eglon, a Moabite, gets the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, in an attack against Israel, and they successfully take possession of the City of Palms. (Judges 3:13).

Again we find during the time of King Saul at the direction of Samuel Saul is preparing to go to war with the Amalekites and forewarns the Kenites, to leave the Amalekites for their own protection.

Apparently, the Amalekites are able to get along with everyone but Israel. The beginning of the enmity is the unwarranted attack by the Amalekites while Israel was in the wilderness of Sin.

According to Exodus 17 Israel has no water. Israel camped at Rephidim begins to complain against Moses. Again the people are demanding water. The Lord instructs Moses to strike the rock and it will produce water.

As this is happening the Amalekites attack the end of the column where the stragglers are located. The straggles, mostly made up of the weak, and sick, which are defenseless against attack, bear the blunt of the raids by the enemy.

We can only conjecture what occurs from this point. Moses later faced with going to war against the Midianites pulls one thousand men from each of the twelve tribes to go to war. Perhaps the same thing happens here. It is May-June military training is far from complete and there would still be a dearth of weapons.

Facing Israel were probably around 3000 of the Amalekites. Again this is a pure guess. Normally the Amalekites traveled with their families except when making forays with raiding parties. This appears to be raiding parties probably mounted on camels. This is no easy battle. The two armies struggle back and forth. The battle rages back and forth from near dawn and continues nearly 12 hours. The Amalekites are fierce fighters. They are acquainted with the territory, and are heavily armed and prepared for battle. Israel is not prepared for war. They have little trust in the Lord and almost no experience. Morale is at an all time low, and they question Moses leadership.

Joshua is battle commander. This is his first engagement. Moses has entrusted to him leadership, and everything about his appearance screams power. It is his eyes. Fierce afire with zeal. Strength abounds in every movement. The huge bronze sword at his side is swallowed up in hands like iron. He welds it well.

Others are drawn to him like a magnet. If ever there was a man you would follow into battle this is the man. Each of his warriors handpicked and trained for battle are eager for action.

While the battle is engaged Moses is on a nearby hill with the task of holding up his hands in full view of the battle. As Moses holds up his hands the battle turns in favor of Israel, when he lowers them the Amalekites gain control.

This is the first battle in which the battle is left to Israel. Before this God fought and destroyed the enemy by Himself.

This is a real life training exercise that reveals Israel's readiness for combat. Israel is fighting a fierce enemy on his battle ground. Armed to the teeth, mounted on swift camels the enemy lives to fight and has laid low many an enemy. Defeat is not known to this people. They never give up. But today, this day they meet their match.

Moses aids indirectly in that he occupies a hill above the battle and lifting his hands in prayer before the throne of God provides the power and strength for the warriors engaged in warfare below. As Moses weakens and lowers his hands Israel suffers. Strengthened by the aid of others Moses again raises his hands before the throne of God in supplication. This passage testifies to the importance of God's warriors depending on the Lord for the victory.

Joshua is given credit for the win and the text indicates that he did so with the sword. Probably the sickle sword. It is one of the few times in history when the sword serves as the main weapon. Man prefers for his killing the longer range weapons, arrows, spears, and javelin, which put greater distance between him and the kill. God prefers the sword for it strikes terror in the heart of the enemy.

The sickle sword is an Egyptian style weapon made of bronze. The copper and tin necessary to make these weapons would have been available in the area in which Israel is

moving. The people certainly had the skills necessary to make an idol so the swords would have been no problem.

The Amalekites have made a serious mistake in judgment. They know whom they were attacking for the stories about the Exodus and the defeat of the Egyptians spread quickly. So the Amalekites have challenged the God of Israel. They are now defeated on the battlefield.

The Lord God Almighty declares that He will utterly blot even the memory of this nation. Other than the biblical reference almost nothing exist about the nation. Perhaps one needs to take seriously biblical warnings that address God 'blotting out' whether it is to blot out a remembrance of us as individuals, or as a nation or blotting out a record of our sins. "He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels." (Revelation 3:5). As for Joshua, we will meet him again.

FIRST VENTURE INTO THE LAND

The second major battle fought in the wilderness occurs near Kedesh.

It is somewhat puzzling why the Lord has Israel poised at Kedesh- Barnea. Nearly 14 months after the Exodus God has led the people here. Now spies are venturing into the Promised Land.

None of the training to date is conducive to fighting in the manner which the enemy conducts war. Israel has no chariots, the enemy has many. Israel has less than a years experience with the phalanx the method of warfare utilized by the Hittites. These are the same Hittites who fought the mighty Egyptian army to a standstill at Kedesh only a few years before.

Just a year before the Lord tells Moses that He did not allow the people to go north because “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle. (Exodus 13:17). After a year of training are they prepared to face the enemy?

Is Israel truly ready to enter combat with an enemy as powerful as the Canaanite, Amorite, Amalekites, Hittite, and the others who possess this land? What conditions existed in the land of Canaan? Moses had to have more on site information so he sends out a reconnaissance patrol with specific instructions.

“Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not? Do your

best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.) (Numbers 13:20)

Moses needs to know what type of terrain his army will traverse. Knowledge of this nature determines the type of training necessary. How thickly was the area populated will Israel be facing a sparsely populated area which will be easier to manage or will it be heavily populated with fortified towns throughout. The presence of fortified towns is a huge problem. The people have had no training in attacking reinforced walled cities. They possess neither, the tools or skills necessary to fight this type of action.

Moreover will the land support the people? How fertile is the land and where are the fertile areas located. The tribes will be divided and justice demands that each tribe received a just parcel.

So the spies set out. This is where they went:

21So they went up, and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, to the entrance of Hamath. 22They went up by the South, and came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the children of Anak, were there. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) 23They came to the valley of Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bore it on a staff between two. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs. 24That place was called the valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the children of Israel cut down from there. 25They returned from spying out the land at the end of forty days. 26They went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, to the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word to them, and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. 27They told him, and said, “We came to the land where you sent us; and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is its fruit. (Numbers 13:21-27).

True to the orders of Moses the reconnaissance patrol travels the length and breadth of the land. The team finds the land as the Lord promised, flowing with milk and honey. The inhabitants of the land were described as; “people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The

Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”(Numbers 13:28-29).

The spies give an excellent summary of what they have seen and even bring back fruits of the land to show Israel. However, the patrol should have stopped their report at this point. What follows is commentary born of fear and anxiety gathered from their observations.

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” (Numbers 13:31-33).

Indeed the land teemed with fortified towns and warriors who far out classed Israel. The conclusions of ten godless men, who had seen the Lord’s mighty hand in battle. Leaders, no less, of Israel. They represented the faithless nation as a whole. One needs to be careful about accepting the conclusions of others. The Lord’s people are to filter the information observed in their surroundings through the prism of Godliness. Principles of scripture, godly wisdom and discernment are to be applied to the experiences around us.

Ten of twelve spies failed because they had learned nothing in the year of training provided by the Lord. It appears that the leadership is the problem. The complaints and rebellion of the people are merely a reflection of the attitudes rampant among those charged with overseeing the needs, and education of Israel.

What did these men see that terrified them so much? The answer is found in two essential elements, the nature of the defenses posed by the inhabitants, and the size and strength of the enemy.

First consider the problem of the defenses, the walled cities. Yigael Yadin is an expert in warfare both in present Israel and in ancient Israel. As a military commander during the Six Day War his army helped destroy multiple attacks from nations surrounding Israel armed with modern weapons provided by the Soviet Union. When not at war Yadin is an archeologist whose work is revered worldwide. Here is what Yadin has to say about the type of warfare facing ancient Israel.

There were five possible ways of conquering a fortified city, sometimes one was enough. At other times a combination of two or more was necessary.

The five methods were: penetration by force from above the fortification, penetration through the barrier, penetration from below, siege, penetration by ruse.

The first three methods demanded sufficient resources at the disposal of the attackers to enable them, at specific stages of the battle, to cover their penetration units, so that they could work without interference, by maintaining steady fire on the defenders and preventing them from using their weapons.

Penetration from above the fortifications was achieved by scaling the walls, mostly with the aid of ladders. Directing penetration through the fortifications could be gained in several ways. It could be affected by breaching the wall, either by primitive methods using hammers, axes, spears, and swords, or by a special instrument called the battering-ram. It could also be done by demolishing the doors of the gate or setting them on fire.¹

¹ Yigael Yadin. The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, Vol. I, p. 18.

Israel had no experience with any of these methods. The walls of these cities were tall, thick, and heavily defended. Jericho serves as a good example. It is surrounded by a retaining wall fifteen foot high. On top of that was mud brick wall six feet thick and 26 feet high. Outside the retaining wall was another wall four stories high. No wonder the spies were overwhelmed.

But the problem does not end there. What really frightens the spies is the Nephilim. Initial attacks would engage this enemy first.

The Nephilim are a people of great size. Just as footprints of huge animals in ancient times exist so do human footprints of great size. Evidently a whole race of men the size of Goliath existed in this time. Men upwards of ten foot high inhabited this area. The sight must have been overwhelming.



It is not that the spies gave a false report. No they were accurate in sharing their observations. It is that they forgot who was on their side. Nor did they listen to the fear that these people had of them, and their God, a mighty God, who had defeated the Egyptians.

The Hittites, Canaanites, Amalekites, all of the people knew Israel was coming and they were shaken to the core and well they should be. It is a paradox. The enemies of God are shaking in the wind from fright. God's people are quaking with terror that they have to face the enemy in battle.

Why did the Lord send in the spies? It was not the Lord's idea. The Lord simply told Moses to send Israel to take possession of the land. Moses in accordance with God's instruction tells the people to take possession of the land that God had promised and then tells them not to be afraid.

The people however, had an urgent sense of foreboding. Let's send in a patrol so we know where we are going and the location of the towns, the people say. Then Moses agreed saying it seemed like a good idea. Moses, these people have not had a decent idea since they left Egypt. Why listen to them now?

The report of the ten spies indicates the real purpose of the people. They are fearful and they need to justify their fears.

Did the Lord intend to start at Kadesh-Barnea and little by little drive out the inhabitants? Yes, everything had been prepared. How was that going to be achieved? How Lord, are you going to overcome the massed phalanxes of the Canaanite? How will you stop the thousand chariots the Hittite will bring against your people?

Child what will the horses pulling the chariots do when I send hornets against them?

Son what will happen to the phalanxes when the hornet infiltrates their midst?

The Lord had already fashioned a weapon against the enemy. The nests built. The ground burrows already filling with the deadly swarms. Now all is for not. Old plans scraped and new ones created. Is it not remarkable how the Lord has to change His perfect plans because of our indiscretions?

CANAANITE KING ARAD (Numbers 21)

The third major battle fought in the wilderness occurs in the fortieth year of the wanderings. Scripture only devotes three verses to the battle. “When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.” The Lord listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.” (Numbers 21:1-3)

Arad is an ancient city located about twenty miles south of Hebron. The Canaanite king upon hearing of Israel passing near his city attacks Israel probably in the rear as the Amalekites did. This would be a poorly defended section of the group and subsequently some of the Israelites are taken prisoner.

Usually it is the Lord who puts a ban or order for complete destruction like He does on Jericho. In this circumstance the people vow to the Lord if He will help then they will

completely destroy the Canaanite cities. The Lord does, and they do. Notably Israel is now going from one military action after another, and the Lord blesses them.

Arad later in Israelite history becomes a model city of piety. A replica of the temple in Jerusalem is erected in Arad and it becomes a center of worship of the Lord.

SIHON and OG (Numbers 21)

According to the rules established by Moses before going into battle the army is to offer the enemy peace terms.

When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Deuteronomy 20:10-18).

Sihon and Og were nations that Moses was to negotiate with. Moses was not to outright attack these nations unless they attacked God's people. Moses asked to be

allowed to pass through Sihon's and later Og's countries along the King's highway.

Sihon refused to allow Israel's passage and musters his entire army and attacks Israel at Jahaz. The Amorites are utterly destroyed and Israel begins to occupy land on the east side of the Jordan River up to the large city Heshbon which is located opposite Jericho.

Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the desert against Israel. When he reached Jahaz, he fought with Israel. Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified.

Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements. Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken from him all his land as far as the Arnon. (Numbers 21:23-26).

Israel continues north on the King's Highway capturing all the settlements. Og king of Bashan marches out to meet Israel in battle at Edrei. Og and his whole army are slaughtered and all of the land up to the Hermon mountain range falls under Israelite control.

After Moses had sent spies to Jazer, the Israelites captured its surrounding settlements and drove out the Amorites who were there. Then they turned and went up along the road toward Bashan, and Og king of Bashan and his whole army marched out to meet them in battle at Edrei. The LORD said to Moses, "Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you, with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon." So they struck him down, together with his

sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land. Numbers 21:31-35).

Now Israel returns and settles in the plains of Moab camped along the Jordan across from Jericho. The war delivers up to Israel much land and a great deal of plunder, including weapons.