

1 Samuel 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 26 July 2020

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 15 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. So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Tellium, 200,000 men on foot and 10,000 men of Judah.

And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said 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. And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far ashore, which is east of Egypt.

[0 : 5 9] And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen, and of the fattened calves, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them.

All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. The word of the Lord came to Samuel, I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.

And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, Saul came to Carmel, and behold he set up a monument for himself, and turned and passed on, and went down to Gilgal.

And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, Blessed be you to the Lord, I have performed the commandment of the Lord. And Samuel said, What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?

Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction. Then Samuel said to Saul, Stop, I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night.

[2 : 1 5] And he said to him, Speak. And Samuel said, Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel, and the Lord sent you on a mission and said, Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.

Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord? And Saul said to Samuel, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord.

I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.

And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.

[3 : 26] Saul said to Samuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord.

And Samuel said to Saul, I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel. As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe and it tore.

And Samuel said to him, The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret.

Then he said, I have sinned, yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God. So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the Lord.

Then Samuel said, Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites. And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, Surely the bitterness of death is past. And Samuel said, As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.

[4 : 40] And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. Then Samuel went to Arama, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death.

But Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. Saul has already failed as king in a number of ways. In chapter 14, his unbelief and ineffectiveness was shown up by the faithfulness of his son Jonathan.

And in chapter 15, the Lord finally rejects him as king. Saul is instructed here to carry out heron warfare against Amalek, to blot them out from under heaven.

He has to follow the pattern of Deuteronomy chapter 20, verses 16 to 18. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.

People under the ban must be utterly destroyed. In the case of Amalek, there was more history involved. In Exodus chapter 17, Amalek fought against Israel when they came out of Egypt, when they were at their very weakest.

[6 : 03] They were defeated by Joshua, as Moses held up his hands, supported by Aaron and Hur. Exodus chapter 17, verses 13 to 16 read, And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord.

The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. This is referred to also in Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 17 to 19. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

You shall not forget. This describes the events of Exodus chapter 17, and speaks of a time when they have rest in the land, that they will have to settle this particular issue, and that time has arrived.

[7 : 17] The law concerning Amalek in Deuteronomy chapter 25 is given in the context of the law of the Leveret. There's a contrast between the man who comes to the aid of his brother when he is at his weakest, when he has died and his name is about to be lost, and he comes so that his name will not be blotted out.

And then a people who sought to blot out the name of their brother when he was at his weakest. Amalek is Israel's brother of a kind. Amalek is a descendant of Esau, a descendant of Esau who did not seem to surrender his opposition to Jacob.

Amalek's ancestry is given to us in Genesis chapter 36 verse 12. Before attacking the Amalekites, Saul instructs the Kenites to leave. The Kenites were associated with Midian and with Jethro, and there's a contrast between the Amalekites and the Kenites.

One of these peoples, the Amalekites, are being remembered for judgment for their actions at the time of the Exodus, and the other people, the Kenites, are being remembered for kindness for their actions at the same time.

The Amalekites are met in chapter 17 of Exodus, the Kenites in chapter 18. The Amalekites are to the south-west of the land of Israel, and Saul successfully pursues them to the east of Egypt.

[8 : 28] However, he does not do what the Lord has instructed. Saul and the people spare the best of the flocks and the animals and the goods for themselves. They don't destroy them. Saul also saves King Agag.

Why save King Agag? Maybe because he thinks that kings should be exempt from these sorts of requirements. King Agag, as a fellow king, should not come under the ban. Kings are above the law, not under it.

This is not pleasing to the Lord, and the Lord rejects Saul on account of his actions. The word of the Lord comes to Samuel and declares his rejection of Saul from the kingship. Samuel's response is anger.

He cries to the Lord all night. It is important to recognize that this does not please Samuel. Samuel is not Saul's opponent. As many scholars have presented him to be. He is like Saul's adoptive father.

He confronts Saul on a number of occasions and rebukes him harshly. But he does so because he cares about Saul. He wants Saul to succeed. Saul is like a son to Samuel, and Samuel does not want to see him fail and be rejected.

[9 : 30] Samuel goes and sees Saul. When Samuel confronts Saul, Saul lies. He declares that he has performed the commandment of the Lord, and when challenged about the voice of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen, he claims that they are going to be given as peace offerings at Gilgal.

The suggestion earlier on is that they kept the best for themselves. And here it says it's to sacrifice to the Lord, Samuel's guard. This might be the same thing. It might be referring to peace offerings at Gilgal.

But while it is presented as a pious act when it's described to Samuel, earlier on we see it's for the people's own purposes. They devote to destruction those things that are worthless and despised, while saving those things that look good.

Their decision to keep the best as peace offerings may be because they can eat the peace offerings themselves. It's not a whole burnt offering. It's not completely dedicated to destruction. What they're doing, in essence, is taking what belongs to the Lord.

And although there's a pious reason given, there is no pious motive involved. Saul is like Achan who took forbidden spoil and hid it. He is also like Haphne and Phinehas who took parts of the sacrifice that belonged to the Lord and parts that belonged to the people for themselves.

[10 : 40] We might also think of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5. Saul began his prophetic ministry with judgment against Eli's house, and now he will have to declare judgment against Saul's house.

Saul has taken the forbidden fruit. When confronted, his response is to blame the people, much as Aaron blamed the people in Exodus chapter 32 and Adam blamed his wife in Genesis chapter 3.

Like Moses and Joshua descending down the mountain, Samuel inquires about a commotion that gives away the rebellion that has occurred. This is all another fall event, And much as Exodus chapter 32 involved the breaking of the tablets, this will involve the tearing of the kingdom from Saul's hand.

Samuel rebukes Saul. Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

This is an essential truth about worship. Worship needs to be confirmed in practice. Worship that proceeds from disobedience is no worship at all. Praising God with your lips when your heart is far from him is an abomination to the Lord.

[11 : 48] Mercy is greater than sacrifice. Saul has rejected the kingship of the Lord, and so his kingship will be rejected. Samuel compares this rebellion with witchcraft.

Witchcraft involves turning to Satan, much as Eve heeded the voice of the serpent in the garden. Saul will end up turning to a witch in chapter 28. Saul admits his sin, but he does not repent.

Again, he blames the people. He says that he feared them and obeyed their voice, much the same as Aaron blamed the people in Exodus chapter 32. He is more concerned that Samuel, as the prophetic father of the nation, show a united face with him and not undermine his authority.

When Samuel turns from him, Saul seizes the skirt of Samuel's robe and it tears. And the torn robe represents the torn kingdom. We see a similar thing in 1 Kings chapter 11 verses 29 to 31.

And at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilohite found him on the road. Now Ahijah had dressed himself in a new garment, and the two of them were alone in the open country.

[12 : 52] Then Ahijah laid hold of the new garment that was on him and tore it into 12 pieces. And he said to Jeroboam, Take for yourself 10 pieces, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and will give you 10 tribes.

Perhaps one of the surprising things here is the reference to the fact that the Lord does not have regret in verse 29, when in verse 11 we're told that the Lord does have regret, and again in verse 35.

Seeing these seemingly contradictory statements so close to each other, should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with an apparent contradiction, not an actual contradiction. If there were an actual contradiction, they would not be in such close proximity.

Both statements must be taken as true, but they must be taken as true in particular senses. The challenge for us is to recognise how both of these things can be true after a particular sense.

One of the tasks of theology is to reconcile statements like these. So on the one hand, we recognise that statements about God, such as his regret concerning Saul, are true statements.

[13 : 56] They tell us something that is actually the case about God. On the other hand, it can't be the case that the Lord regrets the choice of Saul in the same way as a human being can regret a past action. The Lord does not change his mind.

God's omniscience also means that he can't make a decision or a choice and then later regret the outcome that he had not foreseen. God is not taken by surprise. God is not affected by moods and whims and fancies.

He is not fickle and changeable as a human being may be. Such statements then invite us to reflect, to think deeper, to think about the ways in which things can be held together even when they seem to be pulling apart.

We will often find scripture inviting us into the discovery of insight through the presentation of problems on the surface of the text. Samuel ends up giving public respect to Saul.

He is not going to overturn the monarchy and its authority. The direct overturning of authority is a very dangerous thing. However, there will be a replacement chosen for Saul and Saul will lose his dynasty.

[14 : 58] Samuel slays Agag before the Lord and judges him for his cruelty and the cruelty of his nation. Saul and Samuel then go their separate ways, divided from each other and never seeing each other again until the end of Samuel's life.

A question to consider. The story of the book of Esther has many allusions to the story of Saul and the Amalekites. It continues and completes that story in certain respects.

Can you discover many of these allusions? How do Mordecai and Esther succeed where Saul failed?