

Old Testament Studies: Amalek

By Bob Young

Where did the Amalekites come from?

In Genesis 14:7, the "field of the Amalekites" is mentioned, though the person Amalek (Gen. 36) had not yet been born. How can we explain this reference? Was there an earlier person named Amalek? Some scholars explain that this is a reference to the territory that was later inhabited by the Amalekites (what is known as an anachronism—literature written later uses a description that did not exist at the time of reference). That is, when the Pentateuch was written down, the description used in Genesis 14 reflects a later usage.

On the other side, certain Arabic writings claim that the Amalekites existed long before Abraham. Some historians claim that the Amalekites who fought Joshua were a different group. It is possible that the name Amalek may have been given to two different nations.

According to the Bible, Amalek was the son of Eliphaz (himself the son of Esau, ancestor of the Edomites). Amalek is described as the "chief of Amalek" among the "chiefs of the sons of Esau," from which it is surmised that he ruled a clan or territory named after him.

The Amalekites as a tribal group are associated with the steppe region of ancient Israel and the area of Kadesh (Genesis 14:7). This region was depopulated around the 14th century BC and then was occupied by Edomites. Therefore, in the same region, there were Amalekites, and later Edom came to live in much of the same area, probably an area populated by both a remnant of Amalekites as well as Edomites.

Biblically, it seems to me that there is a group that were enemies of Israel that is to be identified as a distinct group from the later descendants of Edom. Perhaps Eliphaz named his son after a known historical figure who was known as a warrior. Today, the process is illustrated by those who wear the name Miguel Angel, Jesus, Adonai, Bolivar, etc. Or in the United States, names such as Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, etc.