

Article of the Month – July 2009

Power Encounters as Missionary Method – II – Amalek & Balaam

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Alternating with our series of twelve missionary themes in Genesis we look into biblical examples of power encounters in areas of spiritual frontline battles. Earlier we looked at such an encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, which was a battle between God and Egypt's gods.

This month we consider Israel's next opponents: Amalek and Balaam. Israel had hardly left Egypt when Amalek appeared. One may argue that it would be incorrect to call this physical battle of army against army a power-encounter because its nature was not purely spiritual. In response can be said, that also the Plagues of Egypt, although having a spiritual foundation, had a very physical outcome; a principle we will see often during other articles in this series. Now, what is important to understand about Amalek and Balaam?

In Egypt the people of Israel had been an undistinguished bunch of slaves; during their walk through the desert they became a distinct nation. God's main purpose with Israel was to make them different from the nations around them,¹ with as goals: to remember God's Name from generation to generation, to know that there is no one like the Lord and that the earth is the Lord's.² In other words: Israel should know God intimately, so that from that relationship they would be able to show God to the surrounding nations.

The first expression of Israel's distinction after the separation from Egypt is the war with Amalek³ — a war *from generation to generation*. Amalek was Esau's grandson⁴ and lived in Edom. He was the third generation that God hated for his indifference and disobedience.⁵ God mentions Amalek again in Deuteronomy, where He reminds Israel to never give up the battle against that people.⁶ Much later, Israel's first king, Saul, failed in this assignment.⁷

Ex. 17 shows 'how to fight Amalek' who is typical of the carnal nature, as was Esau. This is achieved by prayer, as we see in Moses who raised his hands to heaven and was supported by Aaron and Hur. God proclaims His 'war against Amalek from generation to generation' because *every* believer has to fight his carnal nature *all* his life – but his God is his Ally in that battle. It would have been impossible for Israel to be a blessing to the nations when not at least a beginning of the battle against Amalek had been made. The same applies to the Church today: it will never become a

¹ Ex. 19:5,6

² Ex. 3:15; 8:10; 9:14,29; 10:2

³ Ex. 17:8-16

⁴ Gen. 36:12,16

⁵ Mal. 1:3; Rom. 9:13. See also: 'Twelve Missionary Themes in Genesis, # 2, 6, 9, 11 & 12, some still to be published at this website)

⁶ Deut. 25:17-19

⁷ 1 Sam. 15

blessing to the nations when the battle against flesh and sin is not taken seriously; nor will any individual who fails in this area, be.

Another power-encounter that Israel had in the desert we see in the story about Balaam.⁸ It contains elements of what in NT times would become known as spiritual warfare. In the Balaam story Moab engaged Israel in spiritual warfare and met Israel's God as a powerful Enemy. The effect of such meetings invariably is that the nations learn something about the *God of the nations*. It is the principle of the power-encounter of which the enemy is usually the initiator and always the loser. Core text in this story – also of significance to the Church – is 'There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel'.⁹

Israel had no intention to attack Moab but the Moabites were terrified after what Israel did to the Amorites who had attacked them. They resorted to witchcraft and hired Balaam from Aram to curse the people God had blessed.

It is important to understand in World Missions, that God's enemies will seek to attack His people, the Church to thwart her missionary purposes. When His people come to bless the nations they will always be hindered by the devil and his demons. Paul made clear that our struggle is 'not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'.¹⁰

Whoever works for the expansion of God's Kingdom needs to understand this spiritual battle. In our story we see how the enemy fails in his *spiritual* attack. Unfortunately in the next chapter and appealing to the cravings of the *flesh*, he succeeds. Israel's men fell for sexual immorality. Where the Moabite king, his princes, the elders and Balaam failed, Moabite women succeeded (which was also Balaam's idea).¹¹

There is no sorcery or divination against Israel: God's people enjoy spiritual protection. But where self-control is replaced by indulgence, the flesh becomes a willing recipient of the enemy's temptations. Of course Moab was the source of the temptation, but that did not free Israel from her responsibility to resist it. The same applies today: we are responsible to resist temptations. The danger facing God's people is the longing for the *world's* pleasures. Israel had *physically* left Egypt, but when would it drive Egypt from their *hearts*?¹²

Israel learned that physical battles can be won by spiritual means (Amalek). They found that God protects against spiritual attacks (Balaam). They also learnt that disobedience was dangerous: 24,000 men died after their fornication.¹³ This was a practical lesson, the memory of which must have made much sense to them when God warned them again to not mingle with Moabites or adopt their practices.¹⁴ The commission was to 'drive out, destroy and demolish'. We understand now why failing to do so is deadly. God is impartial: He won't tolerate from His *people* what He judges in the *nations*. Balaam too, died in the process.¹⁵

⁸ Numb. 22 – 24

⁹ Numb. 23:23

¹⁰ Eph. 6:12

¹¹ Numb. 31:16

¹² See e.g. Numb 15:39b

¹³ Numb. 25:9

¹⁴ Numb. 33:50-56

¹⁵ Numb. 31:8