The biblical Amalekites are the Israelites’ enemies—and their kin

Enemies are real. They are also closer to us than we may care to imagine.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler in the April 21, 2019 issue

Gustave Doré, *La mort d'Agag,* illustration, 19c.

I have never preached about the Amalekites, ancient Israel’s hereditary enemy, passed down from generation to generation. I can imagine the wide eyes and ashen

faces staring back at me. My pastoral intuition tells me to clean up the Bible's violence, to justify God or those who misheard God. I want to alleviate the terror of such stories.

In our Christian tradition of proclamation, we often cut carefully around the edges of our scriptures, clipping troubling stories out of their place within the Bible's narrative arc. At the Islamic school in my city, the young students not only study the Qur'an but work toward memorizing it. They are formed for a discipline of encountering the text as a whole, able to recite their holy writ for hour after hour. The Christian tradition in which I was raised was more interested in committing individual verses to memory, plucking them from context to be wielded however we desired.

A reading practice of cutting and stitching back together will not serve us well in our encounter with the story of the Amalekites. For ancient Jewish readers, Amalek is swept into the long story of God's faithfulness to Israel, the complicated choosing of a king, and the protection of God's people from their enemies. It's one response to terror among the internal tensions of stories, prophecies, and teachings of compassion and forgiveness that directly contradict more violent commands. Earlier readers, our foremothers and fathers, show us how to live within the broad reach of the Bible. We have to read the entire story.

One of the most difficult Amalek passages is in 1 Samuel. "Go and attack Amalek," Samuel tells Saul, speaking for God. "Utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3). Saul carries out the command—though he preserves everything of economic value, along with the Amalekite king, Agag. "All that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed" (15:9).

Many of us read the Bible without any experience having the kinds of enemies that ancient communities knew. Their world was blood and retribution, rape and slaughter. We can imagine, if we try, what it must have been like to read that God was *for* you: for your life in the face of powerful enemies who ruthlessly sought out the lives of you and your children. When Samuel declares God's word of judgment against Amalek, the Israelites receive the command as a reassurance that God has taken their side. Early Jewish communities turned to this story as they rummaged through the rubble of their burnt-out homes, searched for the bodies of their murdered loved ones, and sorted through their longing for vengeance. Did Samuel's call of wrath upon babies, innocent of the crimes of their forebearers, give these

communities pause?

What if we stay for a while with these ancient readers, lingering instead of turning away? Perhaps we would discover that our discomfort comes from God creating space for us to see ourselves here—our own vengeful desires, our own fears mirrored in the text. What will I do in God's name? Do I want to read scripture as warrant to punish people, as permission to make someone else's life vile?

In the pages of scripture, the human and divine bleed into each other.

The Bible tells the story of God and the story of humankind—each enfolded into the other, inseparably bound in a single volume. From page to page, book to book, we encounter the human and divine in the same ink, as one bleeds into the other. The text blurs as we read; the subject shifts in the mystery of the story. Is it about God or about us? Does a narrative tell us what God thinks, or what a human character thinks about God? And is that person right?

The story of the Amalekites draws us into these questions. The people born of Amalek wander through the Old Testament. They are a people who generations of interpreters have charged with moral turpitude, a filthy and disgusting people. They are said to be such an infectious curse that the Bible records God's call to eradicate them from the earth. The Amalekites hold an exceptional place in the Old Testament. No other people are assigned a permanent place of dishonor, generation after generation.

When Samuel calls for the Amalekites to be destroyed, he reminds Saul of their multiple attempts at plundering the Israelites (1 Sam. 15:2). "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt," we read in Deuteronomy, "how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget" (Deut. 25:17–19).

Moses speaks these words to his people, his voice outlining God's law for Israel. What do we learn about Moses here? What do we learn about the desire of his people—the pastoral words they need to hear, given their experience of persecution and their struggle for survival in the wilderness? And what do such words and desires reveal about God?

The Amalekites' story takes us deep into the landscape of Israel's generational trauma, far into the country of human enmity, grief, and terror. Amalek is Israel's persistent enemy. The Amalekites provide an explanation for the irrational and intense hatred for Jews that echoes through human history. In Jewish history the Amalekites—a tribe with genocidal intentions against God's people—came to symbolize all those who sought to eradicate the Jewish people, from Titus to Hadrian, Khmelnitsky to Hitler. The interpretive work for the rabbis was to explain how the command to blot out Amalek's line forever had been fulfilled through the death of Haman in the book of Esther. Israel was no longer under obligation to enact physical vengeance upon an extant people. Amalek remained as a metaphor, lurking in human history as a persistent force of evil.

It may seem precarious to say that 1 Samuel's report of the utter destruction of the Amalekites contains the words of a people traumatized, the memories spoken down through every generation to remind the people that they are not alone. It might seem troubling to hear that while this is God's Word, these may not be God's words. After all, what will keep us from simply removing the pages of the Bible that aren't to our liking, as Thomas Jefferson did?

But it's a different disposition to look back at the Bible as a record of God's interweaving with human life. It's different to see that there is something for us here, in the text—truth in the words. These stories call us to a form of remembering that we, too, pass down, each time we open these pages of the Bible. Each time we read, we explore our fear, our enmity, and our vengeance. Walter Brueggemann says that God is a recovering practitioner of violence. But perhaps when we read these stories we instead discover a startling truth about ourselves.

Enemies are real. There are destructive forces of violence that haunt the lives of the vulnerable. We need a God who names evil, who is on the side of the oppressed and forgotten. But this acknowledgment is not meant to be done in the isolation of this or that narrative. Our questions stretch across biblical stories, carried from generation to generation by all of us as we work out our relationship to God and our neighbors. The Bible provides scripts for how to read these relationships. It invites us to position ourselves as characters within the stories, to feel our way into God's life. That's what we experience as we wrestle with the Amalekites. And as we involve ourselves in these stories, we are drawn into family history, a family feud.

To know the story of the Amalekites, we have to know the story of Amalek: the 13th son born to Jacob's twin brother Esau and his nameless concubine.

I have a penchant for biblical losers. The Old Testament is in the habit of unsettling our piety through these marginalized characters. They frustrate the lines between those who are in and those who are out. The story of Esau offers a tender and frustrating tale of ambiguous prophecies that change destinies, prophetic words that introduce us to a God who works toward the good of all.

Before Esau and Jacob are born, their futures escape their control. Imagine what it must be like: your body curled next to that of your twin brother, your mother whispering words over your crib. Imagine hearing the women talking as the two of you walk along. Imagine them telling you, Jacob, the story of how you grasped at your twin's foot—you, the grasper, always at his heel.

"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided" (Gen. 25:23). With this announcement, God appears to Rebecca. She has gone through a season of barrenness, a strange condition for the woman prophesied to carry on the line of God's chosen people. Now not one but two nations wrestle within her body, until she can bear it no longer. Brothers are born, twins distinct yet the same whose struggle will reverberate through time—all the way to those of us who call these scriptures our own today.

When it comes to the birth story of Jacob and Esau, it is difficult for us to stand back from the text. We know where the story ends. It is Jacob through whom the promise will extend, Jacob through whom God's people will flourish. According to Matthew, it is through Jacob's line that Jesus comes into the world. But if we can find our way back, reading without this ending in sight, we can see that the story's outcome is thorny, that the relationships are woven together, inseparable—brothers returning to each other even as they attempt to separate.

After the initial prophecy to Rebecca and the jockeying in the womb, the twins grow up together. Over time the differences between them blossom. Esau: the red one, hairy and strong, beloved of his father, a hunter in the wood. Jacob: the grasper, sly and zealous, dear to his mother, living in the tents.

One day Esau returns from a hunt famished, and Jacob offers him stew in exchange for his birthright. Strange as it may seem, Esau takes the bait. The terms are switched: Esau will have one-third of his father's inheritance while Jacob takes the

rest.

In this story, no one comes out looking good. Jacob is a plotting usurper, taking advantage of his brother at a vulnerable moment. Jacob envisions the expansion of property and wealth as implicit in God's promise. He sees an opportunity and grasps at it. Esau, on the other hand, comes across as bumbling and oafish, a hungry animal-like teenager who makes bad decisions. He's impulsive and coarse.

At no point, however, does the Bible apply a moral judgment to either of the twins. They aren't described as evil, nor are their actions condoned by God. They act very much like people. We get no clear moral judgment out of this story—though we do find a caution about trying to make the world work out the way we think God intends it to be.

God's haunting words to Rebecca—two nations divided—include no indication of how this will work itself out. The prophecy is ambiguous, the words in Hebrew unclear. As the plot develops, we readers decide who will serve whom—as Esau and Jacob jostle with each other, fighting for their own version of the prophecy, scrambling for a future in which one beats the other. We are like Rebecca, deciding and plotting which brother will win.

According to Rebecca's intention, God has chosen her favorite child, Jacob, to carry on God's covenant. And Jacob knows the course this usually takes: inheritance, lineage, power, a name. It's a promise Jacob plans to follow through with steadfast devotion. He is bent on fulfilling this single purpose.

The breaking point for Esau and Jacob comes when their father is on his deathbed. In addition to passing down the birthright, Isaac will place a blessing on each of his children. In a reenactment of the scene of that meaty stew traded for the birthright, Jacob disguises himself as his brother and tricks his old, blind father into giving away Esau's blessing. Esau cries out, "Do you only have one blessing? Bless me, too, father!" (Gen. 27:38). Isaac places his hand on Esau and tells him these are the only words left for him:

> See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck. (39–40)

Esau pledges to kill his twin in retaliation. Yet this isn't where the story ends. These two lives will not be separated. They weave in and out, bearing the consequences of the past while being drawn toward one another.

After exile and separation, Esau and Jacob are reunited. Jacob sees his brother again, as if for the first time. "Seeing you is like seeing the face of God," he says. "Please accept the blessing that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need" (Gen. 33:10–11). Jacob has discovered the truth of the God he encountered at Bethel, making a way between heaven and earth; the God who wrestled him to the ground and marked him for life. Jacob cannot undo all the violence he inflicted upon his brother, but he gives what he can: a replica of the gifts of the birthright inheritance intended by their father. The blessing intended for Esau is repaid.

We may read this passage as a story about winners and losers, the chosen and the rejected. But all along God is there in the ruins, showing these brothers that there is enough for all: enough blessing, enough love, enough of everything. It isn't simply that God disrupts social formulas and lines of inheritance. God does this in such a way as to work toward restoration.

Maybe the story of Jacob and Esau gives us a chance to see that God's sovereignty, God's ability to move in the world, can coexist with us being wrong. Maybe it helps us to see that God's sovereign work is also to undo our wrongness, to undo us. When we think we know what God intends, when we hear words we believe are God's, we might be wrong. We could follow these words to our own devastation, but even then God is in the business of turning all things toward good.

Maybe Jacob and Rebecca were wrong. Maybe Isaac—who has seen his own brother Ishmael blessed, who has seen God take the knife from his father Abraham's hand—has learned to see this other possibility, the hope found in having enough for two blessings.

Jacob spends the rest of his life undoing the wrong he has done; he gives back what he stole from Esau. That's how God works in the world. God turns us around, back toward redemption. God sets things right—not just in the end, but all along the way, even when the terms we set for good and evil bring about disaster.

From the progeny of Jacob and Esau arise the allies and enemies that dot the stories of the Old Testament. The Amalekites are the siblings of the Hebrew people, bound

together as ancestral brothers. When the call comes to blot out the memory of Amalek, it is not a call to destroy an outsider. This is an internal struggle, a working out of enmity within a people. Whenever we hear the stories of Amalek, of God's call to "blot them out," this other story—the story of Esau—lingers in the background. It nags at us, reminding us that these, too, are our brothers.

The story of Esau ends in blessing; the story of Amalek ends with a call to eradication. The redactors of the Bible allowed these stories to coexist. Enemies are real, and must be named for the brokenness they inflict. They are also closer to us than we may care to imagine.

In the book of Exodus there is a curious line about the Amalekites that reminds us that these lost siblings will always be within us. "Write this down in the memory book," God says to Moses. "I will blot out the memory of Amalek forever" (Exod. 17:14). The passage contains the historical memory of how the Amalekites appear in the Bible as enemies of Israel, a story planted at the foot of the Promised Land.

My memory, like all our memories, is scattered. It's a path along which I have erased certain markers, while in other places I have built towers out of what were likely only small piles of rocks. The memory book of the Bible, too, contains markers set along the way, built by human memories like mine. We can retrace our steps, encountering again the rocky places and the smooth valleys—finding that memories change, and they change us. Maybe these words are meant to be remembered for the work they do on us from age to age.

In the memory book of Israel, God's command to blot out Amalek was written down as a marker. Each time these words are read, as they are each year in synagogues right before Purim, Amalek is remembered—undoing the very forgetting the words describe. There is something here that God wants us to remember. Perhaps Amalek gives us time to puzzle over the catastrophes of our enemies and our interconnectedness with them. Perhaps we are meant to wonder about our vengeance, and to remember that God is setting all things right, often in spite of us.

We carry the story of Amalek alongside others—with Esau, with Moses, with those who recite these words and hold up the memories of others who have watched their people led to slaughter. We work out within us our own capacity to break open the world with violence, to take God's words and turn them into our own and to have them undone again before us.

Esau and Jacob let us see that when we read the Bible, we explore God's nature and our own. We find our words in God's mouth and God's words in ours. We are working out who we are and who we think God is along the way, in the long faithfulness that is reading the Bible. This Bible is a discovery of God through human lives, a story that scatters signposts of memory showing us the way home again. We get lost; we find our way back. The way is there, waiting.

The trouble is that we are usually in a rush to make sense of these stories of violence, to pull them out and hold them up for judgment—because we are not entirely sure we want them to be ours. We are not convinced we want this God to claim us. I suspect we want something easier: a plain text about a God who stands outside and above us, setting up morally clear judgments for all time. Instead, we get questions. What will we hear? What will we believe? What will we live?

There aren't that many images of Esau, whom the church has so often treated as an enemy. I did come across an icon commissioned by Pax Christi for the Catholic peace organization's 1999 international assembly, which was held in both Jerusalem and Amman, Jordan—places where the blood of Jacob and Esau's warring nations drenched the land. The top panel depicts the two brothers' reunion. They are shown in motion, a step away from embrace. Their faces are already touching. The sword from Esau's sheath is on the ground, and both brothers stand on it, rendering it useless.

In the background, propped against a rock, is Jacob's ladder. After his deception sent him into exile, Jacob saw angels ascending and descending from heaven. Here again we discover that the line between God and people is unclear. We see the place where God's life is complicated within the story of people, and we are there, observing it all.

Without stories like Jacob and Esau and Amalek, it would be difficult for me to take the Bible seriously. The Old Testament would consist of colorless platitudes idealizing heroes and villains. Instead, the Bible makes room for terror and hope, for what is possible and what is not. The Amalekites complicate our desire for vengeance. We are shown the far edges of enmity, and our fear is exposed. The text holds a space for the complication of that enmity, as we discover the enemy within us—how the Bible calls for each generation not to forget.

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