The story of Amalek’s deed occurs twice in the Bible: in Exodus 17:8–16 and in Deuteronomy 25:17–19. The account in Exodus is quite succinct: “Then came Amalek and fought with Israel in Refidim” (Exodus 17:8); in contrast, the description in Deuteronomy paints a broader and more detailed picture: “Remember what Amalek did to thee by the way, when you were come out of Egypt: how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were feeble in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God” (Deuteronomy 25:17–18). The Exodus version, although sparing in its description of the particulars, offers the more dramatic account of the war between Israel and Amalek.

The Bible takes a harsh view of Amalek’s deed and, in Deuteronomy 25:19 an obligation is imposed on the people of Israel: “Thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget.” In the Exodus version, it is claimed that even God takes part in this war: “I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the Heaven” (Exodus 17:14), and the Lord will have war with them “from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16). In later times, king Saul is instructed by Samuel to annihilate Amalek: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Samuel 15:3).

What exactly was Amalek’s wicked deed that he should deserve such severe punishment? How does the war with Amalek differ from all the other wars fought by the people of Israel after the Exodus, and why is God involved in this particular conflict? Finally, should not the slaying of women, children, and later generations be seen as a patently immoral act?

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1 The name Amalek, while singular in Hebrew, can refer to both Amalek and his descendants. The biblical quotations in the article are from The Jerusalem Bible, ed. Harold Fish (Jerusalem: Koren, 1986).
In this article I shall examine three questions. First, how does Jewish tradition cope with these issues, both at the level of textual interpretation and at the halakhic level? Second, what do these various approaches teach us about the status of the moral element in this tradition? Does Jewish tradition support the notion of morality’s dependence on religion, does it view morality and religion as conflicting, or does it perhaps acknowledge the independence of the moral factor? Third, what is the relationship between the moral factor and the canonical text? Is the notion of an autonomous morality still relevant in the context of a canonical text?

The central thesis of this paper is that an analysis of the sources dealing with the punishment of Amalek will enable us to reach conclusions regarding the status of morality in the Jewish tradition. These conclusions rest on two assumptions, which at times are made explicit and at times are accepted implicitly. First, it is not assumed that a normative conflict prevails between morality and religion, and no attempt is made to justify Amalek’s punishment in terms of this conflict. Second, it is not assumed that morality is dependent on religion, and no attempt is made to claim either that the punishment was morally justified because God commanded it or that God determines morality.2

God’s command is assumed to rely on moral reasons, and these moral reasons endow the command with moral value and determine its normative, halakhic articulation. In other words, Jewish tradition acknowledges the autonomy of morality and assumes that divine commands abide by moral considerations.

The sources chosen to demonstrate this thesis extend over a broad range, including exegetical and halakhic material. I have opted for a synchronic rather than a diachronic method, placing stronger emphasis on the contents of the views suggested than on their historical development. Let us consider biblical exegeses first.

Main Trends in the Exegesis of the Biblical Text

Exegeses of the Amalek story can be grouped in two broad categories. I refer to these categories as the realistic and the symbolic approaches.

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2 On the concept of a normative conflict between religion and morality see Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, Religion and Morality, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), ch. 6. On the concept of morality’s dependence on God’s command see ch. 1 of the same book.