

Genesis 14:1-16

Abram and the War of the Kings

We have seen both the best and the worst of Abram. He had been willing to leave all behind and embark on a distant journey without knowing his ultimate destination, simply because his God commanded him to do so. He trusted God for his safety, his livelihood, and his future. But he also failed to believe that God would protect him from powerful Egyptians, so he persuaded his wife to commit an act that almost led to adultery.

Abram had repented and matured. When a potential conflict with his nephew presented itself, it was Abram who chose to be generous, and offered half of what God had promised to him to ease the situation. Abram trusted that God would provide for him, and for his still unborn offspring, whatever Lot chose. Abram had settled down in Canaan and waited on the Lord. He waited on God to fulfill the promises for land and seed that he had received on two separate occasions. And as he waited, circumstances evolved that gave Abram yet another opportunity to trust in God's promises.

This narrative is the second of the three Abram-Lot accounts in Genesis. Again, as in the first account, the point is to contrast the behaviors and values of the two men. In this episode, we see Lot as the passive and impotent character, whereas Abram is the one who takes initiative and provides leadership. Lot was unable to protect his own household; Abram was the one who comes to the rescue. As in the first account, it was Abram who proved the greater figure.

The narrative in brief is this. There was a conflict between two coalitions of kings. The details of persons and places give credence to the veracity of the account. In the battle, the alliance led by the king of Sodom was defeated and, as collateral damage, Lot and all he possessed was taken into captivity. This, in turn, provided the motivation for the second episode in the narrative in which Abram led a force that defeated the invading kings, retrieved Lot and his family, and solidified Abram's emergence as a leading figure in the region.

The Kings and the Cause

We see here a different narrative pattern from other sections we have been studying regarding Abram. Instead of personal stories we now see an event on the larger scene. The pastoralist-shepherd-sojourner has become a warrior king. In addition to the apparent changes in the role Abram played, another interesting facet of the passage is that this is the only narrative in the Abram logos in which God does not speak. As a result of these distinctives, many have suggested that this account is an anomaly and therefore consider it either a late addition to Scripture or simply a fabrication. However, we must argue that these kings have names and territories which correspond to real names and places of the time, and there is nothing in the text that is contrary to what we know from extra-biblical sources about the military campaigns and diplomatic alliances of the early second millennium BC. That is, if we found this narrative in another ancient sources such as the Ugaritic texts or Amarna letters historians would accept it a face value. There is no reason to discount the historical accuracy of the narrative simply because it is found in a piece of religious literature.

The account is recorded in a straightforward manner.

“¹And it came about in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, ²that they made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³All these came as allies to the valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). ⁴Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but the thirteenth year they rebelled” (v. 1-4).

Though these narratives are clearly credible and historical, we cannot specifically identify all of the participants, and too often certain connections with known historical figures have been forced.

Though not listed first, it appears that Chedorlaomer king of Elam is the leader of the coalition (v. 4). In fact there is no historical record of an Elamite king by that name, but his name is Elamite in its construction. Elam was a son of Shem (Genesis 10:22). His people had settled in a region of ancient Persia that today would be southwest Iran. The center of their civilization was Susa. Chedorlaomer was now the ruler of this people and, apparently, the head of a diplomatic alliance in the region.

For a time Amraphel, king of Shinar, was thought to be Hammurabi, giver of the famous law code that bears his name. However, this is one case where the need for historical figures to buttress the historical reality of Scripture has been overextended. While Shinar has been identified with Mesopotamia in general and Babylon in specific (Genesis 11:2; Zechariah 5:11), Hammurabi (r. c. 1792-1750 BC.) lived a full 300 years after Abram. Whoever Amraphel is, he is not Hammurabi.

Arioch is a well-documented name in both the Mari and Nuzi texts, but much more than that is mere speculation. The name of both his country (Ellasar) as well as that of Tidal (Goiim) simply mean ‘peoples’ and thus only adds to the mystery. Tidal is a name known among the Hittite kings of later years. The land of Goiim is found in cuneiform texts among the Cimmerians and Scythians in the northern Mesopotamian regions. Perhaps the best we can suggest is that these kings all ruled various regions in the lands north and east of Canaan.

The five kings involved in the rebellion are equally difficult to place accurately and without doubt. Bera is related to the verb “be evil” and Bersha is related to the verb “be wicked” so these may be as much descriptive of the character of those kings as well as the names of specific people. Shinab can be translated “the moon god is my father” which is not surprising in a place and time when paganism required such descent from the gods to justify rulership. Shemeber is simply “Shem is powerful” while the name of the fifth king is not mentioned. Thus we are left with little more than a general understanding that these were rulers of principalities in the southern and parts of Canaan.

The relationship between the two alliances is indicated by the verbs *‘abad* and *mārad*. Both of these words are frequently used in the Old Testament to describe political relationships. The first means “to be subject to” and the second “to refuse allegiance to” a particular person. Interestingly, they are often used in describing the relationship of Israel to their God.

ābad - “And He [God] said, ‘certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain’” (Exodus 3:12).

“You shall say to him, ‘the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, ‘let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness. But behold, you have not listened until now’” (Exodus 7:16).

mārad - “Only do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them” (Numbers 14:9).

“Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, ‘what is this unfaithful act which you have committed against the God of Israel, turning away from following the Lord this day, by building yourselves an altar, to rebel against the Lord this day?’” (Joshua 22:16).

The narrative states that having been subject to the foreign powers led by Chedorlaomer for twelve years, the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah and their allies felt powerful enough to rebel.

The Opening Phase of the War

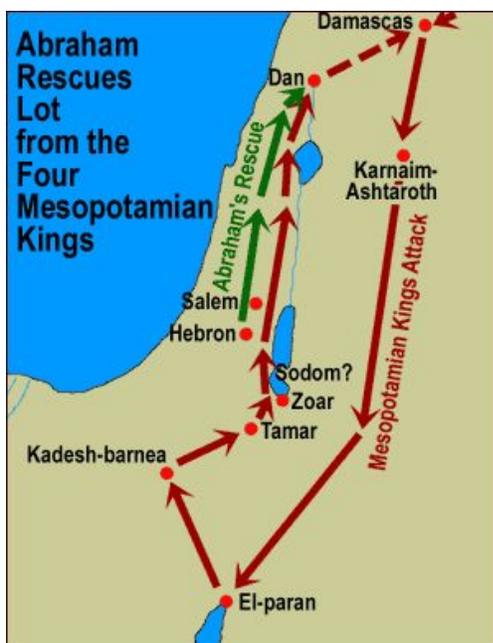
The eastern kings heard of the rebellion and chose to take action. However, there is no reason to think that the four invading kings brought all their force to bear in their invasion. They may have been leading merely exploratory raids to assess the extent of the resistance. No ancient king would take his entire army with him to battle a distant foe, as he needed to defend his own cities and lands as well as deal with rebellion in distant areas he wished to control.

There is much geographical exactness in the description of the route the invaders took.

“⁵In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim and the Zuzim in Ham and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶and the Horites in their Mount Seir, as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. ⁷Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who lived in Hazazon-tamar” (v. 5-7).

The route followed by the invaders was known as the “King’s highway” (Numbers 20:17). The progression of the invading kings was north-to-south. Ashteroth-karnaim was located in modern southern Syria. This was one of the cities of the Rephaites whose last king was Og of Bashan who was conquered by the invading Israelites centuries later and whose land was given to the tribe of Manasseh (Deuteronomy 3:11-13).

The precise location of the Zuzites living in Ham is not known but was likely between Bashan and Shaveh-kiriathaim which was in what would become Moabite territory (Numbers 32:37). To the Israelites of Moses’ time, all three peoples (Rephaites, Zuzites, and Emmites) were considered one group and were as formidable as the Anakim (Deuteronomy 2:20).



The Horites lived in Seir, known later as Edom (Genesis 36:8). The desert of Paran was associated with Ishmael (Genesis 21:21). Having reached the southern extent of the peoples over which they extended suzerainty, the invading kings turned to the northwest and subdued the Amalekites in Kadesh-barnea and then the Amorites at Tamar. The Amalekites were descendants of Eliphaz, the grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:11-12). Critics would argue that this means that the narrative is not historical, that it was a fabrication added later. A better explanation is that Moses, as we have seen before, was simply writing for his audience and used names and places to which his audience could relate.

That there are other names mentioned as being subdued by the invading kings indicates that the uprising centered in Sodom and Gomorrah may have been a part of a larger movement. The point of the narrative, though, is that despite the numbers of kings and peoples in rebellion, no one could stand before the invading armies. Another purpose of the narrative is motivational. This would be the general route traced by the Israelites as they entered Canaan themselves centuries later. It may well be that Moses was trying to reassure his reluctant followers that if Abram could defeat the four kings who conquered these people, so, too, could they.

The five rebelling kings did not simply await their fate. Instead, they took the initiative against the formidable invaders.

“⁸And the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah and the king of Admah and the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) came out; and they arrayed for battle against them in the valley of Siddim, ⁹against Chedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim and Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar - four kings against five.” (v. 8-9).

Unfortunately for the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and their allies, the battle did not go well.

“¹⁰Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell into them. But those who survived fled to the hill country. ¹¹Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply, and departed. ¹²They also took Lot, Abram’s nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom.” (v. 10-12).

The rebellion was no match for the invaders, who apparently took advantage of the terrain to defeat their enemies. That the survivors fled to the hills was not unusual; the defenseless often seek higher ground in remote areas. And it foreshadows Lot’s escape route when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed later.

It may seem unusual to find that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into tar pits only to emerge again later in the narrative apparently without injury (Genesis 14:17). The difficulty is solved when we

understand that the word for 'fell' can also mean "to be lowered into" something. For example, when Rebekah first saw her future husband, Isaac, Scripture records that "Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel" (Genesis 24:64). As tempting as it might be to think that Isaac was so handsome that Rebekah fell off her mount when she laid eyes on him, a better construction of the language would seem to be that she simply got down off her camel. Thus the tar pits likely served as a means of eluding their captors (and almost certain execution) once the battle had been lost.

Naturally, as they conquered, the attackers also took the spoils of their victory. Prisoners, who would be either enslaved or ransom back, were a valuable asset to acquire. Portable wealth in the form of silver or golden objects, livestock, and food were also taken. Among the casualties of the conquest was Abram's nephew Lot. This is a point of irony in the narrative. Had the attacking kings merely been satisfied with taking goods rather than people, Abram likely would never have been brought into the war and the invaders would have left Canaan with great success and their spoils of conquest.

Abram Joins the War

Scripture does not record the name of the person who escaped the battle and reported to Abram what had happened. We simply are informed that "a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram" (v. 13). We must mark that in this passage, Abram is called the Hebrew. This is the first use of the term in the Old Testament.

In Scripture, the word Hebrew is using sparingly and usually by others such as Egyptians (Genesis 39:14; Exodus 1:15-16) and Philistines (1 Samuel 4:9; 13:3) rather than by the Israelites themselves. Joseph referred to himself as a Hebrew, but that was more a reference to his homeland when he said "for I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews" (Genesis 40:15). Jonah also, called himself a Hebrew, but that was a reference to his faith. On board the ship bound for Tarshish he said "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).

Though the origin of the term is likely the ancestor of Abram named Eber, a contemporary term, *Apiru* or *Habiru*, is common among extra-biblical sources. This is an Akkadian word which meant outcast or fugitive. The people group referred to is mentioned in many ancient texts from the 20th to the 11th centuries BC. They were a migratory people who settled in different parts of the Near East. They were usually without substantial property. They often became mercenary soldiers fighting on behalf of one ruler or another in some local conflict. They were always considered outsiders. When the principalities of the Near East settled into a more orderly and stable grouping in the 11th century BC, these people disappeared from history.

These were not the people of Israel, however. Though migratory, they were not nomadic, but rather tended to settle in the cities and villages. And most importantly, they were not homogeneous in their racial composition. It seems instead, that though Abram and his fellow Hebrews distinguished themselves from the *Habiru*, others peoples of the time were not so careful to do so. That is, the word was used by other people in the region to describe the Israelites as social and ethnic outsiders. To others, both the *Habiru* and the descendants of Abram were one general people group.

When he heard of Lot's capture, Abram responded immediately. "When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan" (v. 14). Abram bore his nephew no ill will for leaving. There were no grudges or bad feelings between them. Neither did Abram simply think that Lot had made his bed and ought to now sleep in it. After all, Abram could have reasoned that Lot had chosen to live near Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot had chosen to leave the Promised Land of Canaan. Abram could have shrugged his shoulders and considered that Lot deserved whatever consequences God was pleased to use to humble him.

That Abram took three hundred eighteen men and was able to rescue his nephew is credible, even though he fought against four kings. After all, he had the assistance of his allies and, as we have suggested, it is unlikely that the invading kings brought all of their military force with them just to put down the rebellion of a handful of uncooperative local leaders. Plus the strategy Abram used worked to his advantage if he was outnumbered. Notice also that now the Amorites fight with Abram. Their defeat by the invading armies had not dissuaded them from resisting the four kings.

Abram was able to muster such a force due not only to his wealth, he did possess many slaves and servants, but also due to his reputation. The term used for "trained men" is *hānīk* which can mean any type of household worker or someone on a retainer. That is, Abram may have been supported not only by all his able bodied servants and slaves, but others whom he paid, and who were willing, to accompany him.

Yet, while such precision in numbers can lend credibility to the narrative, it can also be a source of speculation to those who do not take Scripture at face value. For example, one theologian begins with the understanding that the number seven is very prominent in the narrative. Abram's name is mentioned seven times in the chapter. Also, each of the two blessings offered by Melchizedek (which we will study soon) has seven words. Then the author notes that the sum of all prime numbers between seven and forty-nine (seven squared) [7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47] add up to 318. Therefore, he concludes that this is the true origin of the number! It seems much better if we simply take Scripture for what it says rather than try to perform such mental gymnastics. I believe that Abram went to rescue Lot with his men of fighting age and ability, and there were 318 of them.

Abram and his men were not alone. He had remained in the land of Canaan and had made alliances with other local leaders. Mamre and his relatives, Eschol and Aner, are not mentioned in Scripture except in this chapter, though there are place names associated with each to which they may be related. They are not the focus of the narrative however. It was Abram who led the attack.

Abram may have considered that his force was inadequate to defeat the four kings. So, he planned a nocturnal campaign in which he surprised his adversary. "He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus" (v. 15). This strategy was also used by Gideon in attacking the Midianites (Judges 7). The plan worked to perfection. Abram was so successful that his enemy retreated beyond Damascus to the settlement

known as Hoba. Two different sites have been suggested for this location, but both are clearly beyond the boundaries of Canaan. Abram had been victorious and driven out the invading kings.

To the victor, the spoils. Therefore, Abram “brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people” (v. 16). The phrasing implies that Abram took not only Lot and the belongings that had been taken when he was abducted, but the entire wealth of the four kings that had been abandoned when they retreated. All that had been acquired by the four kings in their invasion was not in the possession of Abram.

Takeaways

God keeps His promises. When God first called Abram God said

“¹Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;
²And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
³And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Though Abram had not always believed that God would “bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” God’s protection of Abram had always been evident. So, too, with us. We have received promises of God. That “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6), that “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:29), that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28) to name but a few. Whether we have faith or not, God will be faithful to honor His promises. Let us rejoice in that, and strive to be faithful in return.