

Genesis 14

God's Power to Deliver

Introduction

At first, chapter 14 seems like an interruption to the narrative as an international power struggle is suddenly presented, and there are a number of style and theme distinctions to this chapter that set it apart from the rest of Genesis. As Hamilton explains¹, it is the only chapter with a military event, the only chapter between 12 and 22 when the divine voice does not speak, and the only chapter from which the promise theme appears absent. This has led many to think it inserted into the text by later editors.

However, its ancient references and style indicate an ancient source. And while its literary style has a similarity to chronicles of kings that describe the battles and events during the reign of a king, it could be that the original source of this narrative is just such a chronicle and some of that style was intentionally preserved. But even if that explains the literary style, the question still remains to why this story is included. Note that this story of Lot's predicament in chapter 14 and the continuation of Lot's predicament in Sodom in chapter 18 sandwich and highlight the key chapters of 15-17 that institute God's formal covenant with Abraham. Perhaps, with Abram's victory in this chapter, he is able to see how eventually the promise of the land will come about by God's power, but the other half of the promise, the promise of offspring remains unfulfilled.

Battle – Vs. 1-12

For the first time in Genesis, chapter 14 opens with a reference to a specific time in history when Amraphel was king of Shinar, and he, along with three allied kings from elsewhere in Mesopotamia (Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim) go to war in the Valley of Siddim with 5 Canaanite kings of city-states. However, scholars are unable to identify these 4 kings as any known figures, and so are unable to use this text to determine the actual dates of Abram's pilgrimage.

The lands of Shinar (later Babylon in lower Mesopotamia) and Elam (southwest of Shinar) are known. Educated guesses have been made that Ellasar is either Larsa in lower Mesopotamia or more likely north of Shinar in Hurrian land (or Assyria) near the head of the Tigris. Goiim is typically associated with the Hittite empire even further to the northwest of Mesopotamia because of a number of kings named "Tidal". However, *Goiim* means "multiple peoples" and thus may refer to "a coalition of 'barbaric' peoples"² from the North. The first map at the end of this handout indicates possible areas of these kingdoms.

In the second millennium BC, Canaan was composed politically of independent city states, each with its own king. Thus, the five kings here represent a pentapolis of five (5) such city states: Bera of Sodom, Birsh of Gomorrah, Shinab of Admah, Shemeber of Zoboim, and the king of Bela (later known as Zoar). The exact location of the first four is not known, but it is suspected that they may now be submerged under the southern part of the Dead Sea.

The first three verses of the chapter introduce a battle between these two sets of kings in the Valley of Siddim, part of the southern plain of the Dead Sea as indicated by the editorial gloss although the exact location again is not known. Verses 4-7 now describe what has led up to the battle, and while the chapter began with Amraphel, these verses indicate that Chedorlaomer is the actual leader of the alliance (e.g. in vs 5: "*Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him*"). A number of city states of Canaan had served Chedorlaomer for 12 years as vassals, but rebelled in the 13th year. And now in the 14th year, Chedorlaomer leads a military alliance into the land to stamp out that rebellion.

The description of the path of conquest (Ashteroth-karnaim, Ham, Shaveh-kiriathaim, Seir/El-paran, En-mishpat/Kadesh, Hazazon-tamar) follows what was known as the King's Highway, the major north-south route through the Transjordan, the valley east of the Jordan river. The triumphant army then heads around the Dead Sea

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1990

² John H. Walton, *Genesis, The NIV Application Commentary*; Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2001. p 416

into Amorite and Amalekite areas before turning around and heading back towards the north. This path is indicated in the second map below with the lighter arrows.

As the army turns back, the five kings previously introduced now go out to meet it in vs. 8-9. The battle itself is not described, but the result is clear in vs. 10 as the army of the five kings flees – either to hide in the tar pits or in the hills. The language for “falling into the pits” can also be used to describe “letting oneself down” as when Gen. 24:64 when Rebekah “lowers herself” from her camel. This is a more likely interpretation here and explains how the king of Sodom appears later in the chapter. Following the battle, in vs. 11 and 12, the victorious Chedorlaomer and his allies then take all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as Lot and his possessions and continue their return northward.

Abram Rescues Lot – Vs. 13-17

It is at this point in the story that the narrator returns to Abram. An escapee from the battle comes to Abram to report that his kinsmen had been taken. It is interesting to note that he is described as “Abram the Hebrew” as this ethnic distinction is typically only used by foreigners referring to Israelites. Perhaps it is used here given the international scope of this episode to distinguish Abram as separate from both the Mesopotamian kings as well as the Canaanite city-state kings. Interesting as well is that Abram, like the two other forces in this chapter, has his own allies in Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner.

Abram assembles his “trained men.” This term is not used elsewhere in the Bible but is likely of Egyptian origin. The phrase “born in his household” could mean these retainers have grown up among his servants and thus are more reliable or it could also refer to these as an elite set of men capable of mounting an attack. The number 318 is very specific, lending historicity to the narrative. It has also led to much speculation as to whether the number is in some way symbolic but nothing conclusive.

With these men, Abram pursues the Mesopotamian alliance northward to Dan (again see the map below). Again, not many battle details are provided other than the strategy of dividing his forces and deploying them at night is successful and the smaller force is able to defeat the enemy and route them. Although we learn later that Abram did have his allies with him and it is not clear how much bigger the opposing army actually was (it could have been a smaller foraging force), they had been able to defeat the reported “giants” of Canaan – the Rephaim, Emim, and Zuzim in vs. 5 as well as the 5 kings in the Valley of Siddim. Thus, Abram’s victory is significant. This is the first mention of war in the Bible, and it is interesting to note the model that is established when God is fighting with you. This is repeated again and again in Israel’s history – as they leave Egypt, in the wilderness against the Amalekites, in Canaan against Jericho, Gideon against the Midianites, David against Goliath, and so on. God’s power is made perfect in our weakness!

The rescue ends with Abram bringing back all the possessions taken by the opposing army as well as his kinsmen lot. We also now learn that women and other people had been taken as well, and are included in Abram’s rescue effort.

Blessing – Vs. 18-24

The scene now changes as Abram is returning to his home in Hebron. He is met in the Valley of Shaveh (clarified as the King’s valley) by the king of Sodom who has set out northward to meet Abram rather than wait for him to come to him. At the same time, a new king is now introduced, Melchizedek, another city-state king of Salem (traditionally identified as Jerusalem). It is not known if he is Amorite, Jebusite, or Canaanite. His name could mean “My king is Sedeq” where “Sedeq” is the name of a god or “my king is just” with commentators going both ways.

Melchizedek brings out bread and wine, likely in celebration of the Abram’s victory, and also as sustenance for the weary warriors. This might also be a strategic move to ensure peace with Abram who is living close by and has a proven and effective fighting force. Eating a meal together could be considered a covenantal act of establishing peace between parties. Melchizedek is also a high priest of El Elyon which in itself is not necessarily remarkable as according to Walton³, priest kings were common in the ancient Near East. And it is not known if he is truly a priest of Yahweh as El and Elyon were part of the Canaanite pantheon, but Abram clarifies that he

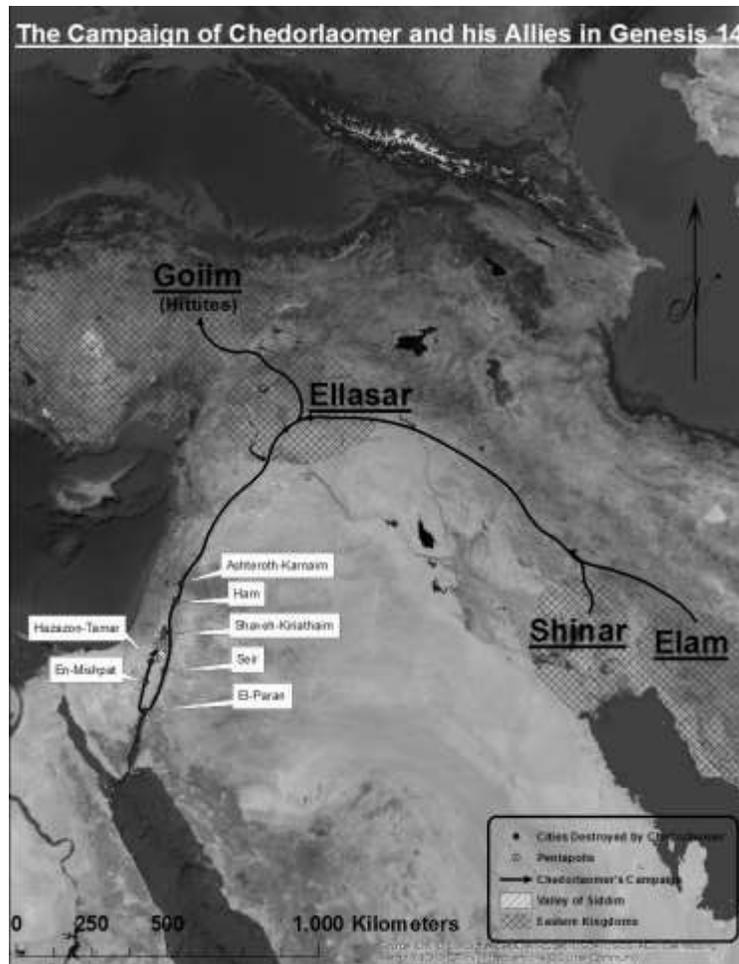
³ Ibid. p. 419

recognizes El Elyon as Yahweh in vs. 22. As a high priest, Melchizedek blesses Abram in the name of God Most High, continuing the theme of blessing that has flowed through Genesis from the beginning. He also blesses God Most High recognizing his role in Abram's victory. As Abram has been blessed, he in turn now "blesses" Melchizedek by presenting him with a gift, a tenth of everything brought back.

While Melchizedek suddenly appears and just as suddenly disappears, the symbolic nature of his character does not. In Psalm 110, the notion of a Davidic priest-king of Israel in the order of Melchizedek is introduced. The character of Melchizedek was further built up as an eschatological and/or messianic figure in the intertestamental period as indicated by Qumran scrolls. In Hebrews, then, the author draws on this mixture of the actual Old Testament figure and Jewish tradition to help illustrate the superiority of Christ over the Levitical priesthood.

In contrast with the interaction between Melchizedek and Abram, Abram appears to want to have little to do with the king of Sodom. In vs. 21-24, the king of Sodom offers Abram all the property that has been brought back. But Abram swears to Yahweh, God Most High, Himself, that he will not *take a thread or a sandal strap* (using something similar to an Akkadian phrase to denounce property rights). He may have had some premonition of issues if he interacted with this king. Both the name of the king of Sodom, *Bera*, and the name of the king of Gormorrah, *Birsha*, have something to do with wickedness. Or perhaps Abram does not want to profit from the loss of others even if it is due him. So he refuses his due, but also allows his allies (now mentioned for the first time) to take theirs if they wish.

Origin/Route of 4 Kings



Attack Route of 4 Kings, Battle with 5 Kings, Path of Abram

