Abraham's Battle with the Mesopotamian Kings and His Encounter with Melchizedek[1]

James K. Hoffmeier
Trinity International University, Divinity School
jhoffmei@tiu.edu

Abstract: The events described in Genesis 14 have been of great interest to biblical scholars and theologians over the centuries, especially seeking to understand the nature of the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek and the significance of the priest-king of Salem offering bread and wine to the Patriarch. While theological readings typically dominate the literature on this mysterious meeting, the intent of this study is to examine this encounter in its military setting side-by-side with other Old Testament texts and ancient Near Eastern parallels. The latter will include focusing on Gen 14:13–18 alongside the Tale of Sinuhe, Tanaach Tablet 6, Papyrus Anastasi I, and other sources. It will be suggested that Melchizedek's actions are consistent with one seeking to appease a military victor.

Introduction

Genesis 14 is one of the most perplexing and intriguing narratives in the book of Genesis, both for literary and theological reasons. Critical scholars have long admitted that something very different is occurring in Genesis 14 than in the surrounding chapters of the Abrahamic narratives. Indeed, many source critics are baffled that this chapter does not easily conform to any of the purported Pentateuchal sources, J, E or P, as E.A. Speiser (1964: 105) observed sixty years ago: "On one point, however, the critics are virtually unanimous: the familiar touches of the established sources of Genesis are absent in this instance," and then asserted that Genesis 14 "has to be ascribed to an isolated source." Early modern scholarship recognized in this narrative elements of historiography. John Skinner (1910: 256) in his Genesis commentary of 1910, for example, considered the "antiquarian glosses and archaic names," along with "the annalistic official style" as literary characteristics that distinguish Genesis 14 from the preceding and following chapters. Even Hermann Gunkel (1910: 273–74), who preferred to see the genre of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis as sagas and legends, had to acknowledge that there is "a historical style" in Genesis 14, and he presented linguistic analysis of the names of the Mesopotamian kings. He then concludes "the account contains very ancient information to be considered historical… The figure of Melchizedek can also be historical," but then in a rather counterintuitive move, he identifies Genesis 14 as a type of hero story that in its present form is "a legend from the period of Judaism" (i.e., the Maccabean or Hellenistic period) (Gunkel 1910: 282–

---

83). This late dating tendency has been embraced more recently by other scholars like John Van Seters (1975: 309–12) and Holger Gzella (2022: 151–58). On the other hand, Anson Rainey (2006: 113) maintained that the pericope "about the four kings who came to attack the five kings of the 'cities of the plain' is the oldest military tradition preserved in the Bible. It contains pre-Israelite geographical data exemplified by the double names of most of the towns." Gary Rendsburg (2019: 443–448) proposes that the Melchizedek episode in Genesis 14 served as a 10th century apologetic for David allowing Zadok, the presumptive Jerusalemite priest to serve in the priesthood of Yahweh, the new deity in Jerusalem who attained his status due to David's religious priority.

In addition to the foregoing literary matters, there is the mysterious figure of Melchizedek the king of Salem and his presentation of bread and wine and blessing for Abram/Abraham. His identification as both a king (מֶלֶךְ) and a priest (כֹּהֵן) is unexpected. The fact that Melchizedek is a priest, presents bread and wine to Abraham and receives his tithe might lead to the notion that something of a religious, almost eucharistic nature transpires in this meeting.

No doubt that his peculiar appearance and his dual roles have influenced the author of Psalm 110, who binds together these distinctive qualities in God's anointed king, traditionally understood as David, the architype for the messianic king. This royal priest motif is picked up in the New Testament where it is applied to Jesus Christ in the book of Hebrews where Melchizedek is mentioned in three different passages (Heb 5:1–10; 6:20; 7:1–17). They too comment on the two leadership offices mentioned about Melchizedek in Gen 14:18 and Ps 110:4. Because of the Israelite Psalmist's and the Christian author of Hebrew's references to Melchizedek and their interpretations of this obscure figure, scholarly attention for over the centuries has had a more theological focus. While some commentators have briefly addressed Melchizedek's actions, missing has been a contextually focused investigation of the significance of Melchizedek offering bread and wine to the Hebrew patriarch. To do this, we begin by a review of this gesture in the context of Genesis 14, followed by seeking to understand it compared with other narratives in the Hebrew Bible and in its ancient Near Eastern setting.

The Biblical material and context

The broad setting of Genesis 14 is warfare. It has already been observed that this chapter has some of the hallmarks of historiography. The battles described therein are fought by a coalition of four warrior kings from Mesopotamia who are named along with their respective nations: Amraphel king of Shinar (=Babylonia) (Davila 1992, 1220), Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim (=Anatolia) (Gen 14:1). They were at war with Transjordanian kings, Bera of Sodom, Birsha of Gomorrah, Shinab of Admah, Shember of Zeboiim and the king (unnamed) of Bela (i.e., Zoar) (Gen 14:2). For twelve years, Gen 14:4 records, the Transjordanian cities served Chedorlaomer as vassals (עָבַד), but "in the thirteenth year they rebelled" (מָרַד), and then, not surprisingly, the Mesopotamian

coalition struck back in the fourteenth year.[2] This recurring pattern of subjection, submission and taxation, followed by rebellion is found in the Bible and throughout the Near East.

Commentators, even from the early 20th century regularly offered Near Eastern etymologies of these names of the Mesopotamian kings, thereby seeking to connect Abraham to the era when these rulers flourished (Skinner 1910: 257–259; Gunkel 1910: 273; Driver 1916: 155–158). None of these individuals have been specifically identified, however. Over the years Kenneth Kitchen (1966: 43–47; 2003: 319–321) has offered a compelling analysis of the names, demonstrating that they linguistically correspond to known personal names of the second millennium BC and are authentic to the regions from which the kings originate. For example, Tidal corresponds to the Hittite name Tudkhalia. Four different rulers of Hatti bore this name between ca. 1400 and 1200 BC. Similarly, the name Arioch is attested to in the Mesopotamian name Arriwuk/Arriyuk that has been documented at Mari and Nuzi between the 18th and 15th centuries BC. Lastly, Kitchen (2003: 319–20) regarded the nature of the coalition of four Mesopotamian kings as reflective of this same general period when coalitions of kings joined forces with a lead ruler, whereas in the first millennium powerful imperial Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian kings campaigned in the Levant as a unified mighty force and not as coalitions of smaller kingdoms.

One could devote many pages to trying to identify the individuals and kingdoms or city states represented by the nine leaders. Enough is known about the geography and toponymy, along with the etymologies of the personal names to touch directly on "the question of the antiquity and historicity of the core of the narrative," Nahum Sarna (1989: 102) opined, and then he determined that these elements in the narrative "undoubtedly favors an early date for the original story." Decades earlier, Speiser (1964: 109) came to the same conclusion that "the narrative itself has all the ingredients of historicity." Kitchen (2003: 322–23) too has concluded that "it is entirely reasonable to trace back the history of the main content of Gen. 14 to the first half of the second millennium (B.C.)." It is my assumption, standing on the shoulders of these experts, that Genesis 14 preserves an early tradition with its historical verisimilitude. It stands to reason, then, that the nature of the interaction between Abraham and Melchizedek likewise reflects known social and diplomatic customs of the second millennium BC in the ancient Near East.

The military background

The narrative offers interesting geographical, toponymic and strategic details of the invasion of the Mesopotamian kings and Abraham's counterattack. Genesis 13:10–13 reports that when Lot, Abraham's nephew separated from his uncle, he settled somewhere in the Rift Valley near the Dead Sea in the infamous city of Sodom, while Abraham went south and pitched his tents at Hebron "by the oaks of Mamre" (13:18). Sometime later Abraham received a message of the battles from one who had escaped and knew that Lot had been taken prisoner (Gen 14:13). Upon hearing this, Abraham

---

[2] For a recent discussion of the geography and toponymy of the campaign of the Mesopotamian kings in Genesis 14, see (Chavalas 2023).

mustered his 318 "trained men" (חָנִיךְ) (NIV, NET) or "retainers" (NJPS) to pursue the enemy and rescue Lot.

One might wonder how Abraham, a pastoralist, had such a force on the one hand, but on the other, how could he take on the armies of four kings with just 318 warriors? The idea that Abraham was just a poor nomad with a small flock of sheep must be set aside in view of the various descriptions of Abraham's status in Gen 12–23. Cyrus Gordon (1958), based on tablets from Ugarit that describe the trading activities of merchants in the Late Bronze Age, considered that the picture provided by these texts served as the cultural background to the activities of Abraham and his family. Similarly, William F. Albright (1961) understood Abraham to be a donkey caravanner and that Hebron was an important center for such activity. Donald Wiseman has shown that Abraham was recognized as a man of status, worthy of respect when he negotiated the purchase of property to bury Sarah in Genesis 23. Ephron the Hittite calls him "my lord (אֲדֹנִי), you are a mighty prince (נְשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים)" (Gen 23:6). While נְשִׂיא is applied to Judah's king Rehoboam (1 Kgs 11:34), the translation "tribal chief" or "sheikh" is fitting in this setting (*HALOT* 727). Wiseman (1980: 147–48) argued that as a נְשִׂיא Abraham acted as a local governor, which involved diplomacy and collecting tribute and taxes, entertaining important travelers.

In this regard, one thinks of the story of Sinuhe, an Egyptian exile who was attached to a local chieftain somewhere in Retenu (northern Canaan/Syria).[3] Ammunenshi, an Amorite, was the ruler (*ḥq3*) or tribal chieftain who adopted Sinuhe and gave his eldest daughter in marriage and made him a *ḥq3* of a *wḥwt/wḥyt*, clan or fife (*Wb* I, 351). Sinuhe's children grew up, and like their father, became "master of his (own) clan (*wḥyt*)" (Lichtheim 1975: 227). We learn that Ammunenshi's tribe made alliances with other countries and tribes. When another ruler acted hostilely towards Ammunenshi, he acknowledges that "I do not know him; I am not his ally (*sm3y*)." The basic meaning of *sm3y* is friend or comrade (*Wb* I, 449–50). Sinuhe then engaged in single combat against the opposition's champion strongman,[4] killing him and then plundering his camp. Then too, Sinuhe refers to leading numerous military operations against other opponents. Rainey (1972: 379; 2006b) noted that these battles were with other foreign lands or countries (*ḫ3s(w)t*), not just rival tribes. This picture likewise aligns with Abraham's military actions against kings from other countries.

Then too, in his capacity as a chieftain, Sinuhe reports that "the (Egyptian) envoy who came forth and went south to the residence stayed with me. I let everyone stay with me. I gave water to the thirsty …" (Lichtheim 1975, 227). The envoy (*wpwty*) is a royal messenger who was dispatched from the royal palace in Egypt to carry communications to other rulers in the Levant. In so doing, Sinuhe plays an intermediary role between the Egyptian capital of Itj-tawy and Levantine polities.

The parallels with Genesis 14 are striking. Abraham's military actions mirror those of Sinuhe, and he hosts distinguished guests and feeds them as they pass through his territory (see Gen 18). These considerations show that tribal chieftains of the Bronze Age in the Levant fought battles against antagonistic tribes and various city-states, meaning that Abraham's rallying his force of 318 חָנִיךְ fits

---

[3] For a translation, see Lichtheim (1975: 222–233); for a text edition, see (Blackman 1932).

[4] On the idea of single combat, see (Hoffmeier 2011: 84–110).

the sort of military action that would have transpired in ancient Near East. Then too, like Sinuhe, Abraham had dealings with various rulers (e.g., Abimelech of Gerar, Pharaoh of Egypt).

The recent publication of inscribed fragments from a 12th Dynasty biographical mastaba-tomb inscription from Dahshur sheds further light on Egyptian interest in the same region as that of Sinuhe, but about a century later (i.e., the 19th century BC). The new fragments match those discovered by Jacques de Morgan in 1894. James Allen (2008), working with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's project, has pieced together the newly discovered fragments and offered some important preliminary observations. The tomb belongs to Khnumhotep III, son of Khnumhotep II whose famous tomb at Beni Hasan features the celebrated scene of the elder Khnumhotep receiving the band of thirty-seven Asiatics or *'3mw* "Amorites"[5] in middle Egypt (Allen 2008: 29). The new historical text describes the hostilities between the city states of Byblos and Ullasa (ca. 30 km north of Byblos).

It is not clear what role if any Khnumhotep III played in this incident, and therefore why it was included on the inscription on the outer wall for any literate person to see. It seems that he acted in some capacity, however, or there would be no reason to mention it. It appears that the younger Khnumhotep followed in his father's footsteps in the foreign service and had dealings with *'3mw* of the Levant. Perhaps he was engaged in diplomacy after the military clash between these two coastal cities from which cedar was shipped to Egypt as described in the inscription. At that time Ullasa, rather than Byblos, seems to be the port with which Egypt did business. Due to strife between these cities, the king of Byblos dispatched a small force of 100 *'3m* "Asiatics" led by his son to deal with Ullasa. This militia seems quite small. Could it be that allies of Byblos joined the operation, while Egypt was siding with Ullasa? It does illustrate that smaller units of soldiers (hundreds rather than thousands) were engaged in battles, like that which Abraham spearheaded during the Middle Bronze to Late Bronze I periods.

A further comment on the word חָנִיךְ is in order. The word is a *hapax* in the Hebrew Bible, but is attested elsewhere. It was suggested by Albright and Thomas Lambdin (1953:150) that חָנִיךְ is derived from Egyptian *ḥnk*, and they connected it to the writing of *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka* in a cuneiform tablet from Taanach in Canaan (Allen 2008: 34). Albright (1944: 24, n. 87) subsequently abandoned his original position. Specialists in Egyptian-Semitic loanwords lately are following the view that an Egyptian root is not in play, but rather that the root *ḥnk* is Semitic and therefore a loanword into Egyptian, and not the other way around (Muchicki 1999: 243–244; Breyer 2019, 115). In a very recent study of חָנִיךְ, Holger Gzella too agrees that an Egyptian derivation is incorrect, but that it derives from a Semitic word meaning "train/ed" (see Prov 22:6). He cavalierly dismisses any connection to the Akkadian-Canaanite *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka*, despite the linguistic and semantic connections in Gen 14:14's usage on the grounds of the "implausibility" that חָנִיךְ could be connected to a second millennium lexeme since the narrative is "a post-exilic literary composition" of the Achaemenid or Hellenistic period (Gzella 2022, 153). He, however, can point to no occurrence of חָנִיךְ in the Bible or other ANE literature of the first millennium that shares the same meaning as found in Gen 14:14 and Taanach letter no. 6.

---

[5] On Amorites in Egypt, see Burke (2019).

Contrary to the view advanced by Gzella and others, Rainey (1999: 159*), as recently as 1999, maintained that "an Egyptian origin for *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka* still seems to be the most likely." In their 2006 published compilation of cuneiform texts discovered in Canaan, Wayne Horowitz and Takayoshi Oshima (2006, 142) followed Rainey's understanding, stating "*ha-na-ku* is most probably an Egyptian loanword that also appears in Genesis 14:14." I concur and am not ready to jettison the Egyptian derivation of חָנִיךְ for the following reasons.

1. Typically, Semitic loanwords that enter Egyptian (especially in the New Kingdom, ca. 1500–1100 BC) are written syllabically (like the Akkadian *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka*), that is in group writing. But this orthographic device is not found in hieroglyphic writings. Rather *ḥnk* appears as ⟨hieroglyphs⟩ and means "*Vertrauer*" (=confidant, i.e., someone trustworthy) (*Wb*. III, 118). It also is written with a *mem*-preformative as ⟨hieroglyphs⟩ *mḥnk* which is attested in the Old and Middle Kingdoms with the same meaning (*Wb*. II, 129). Neither writing, therefore, is treated like a loanword orthographically.

2. Alternatively, *ḥnk*/חָנִיךְ could derive from a Proto-Semitic term, both belonging to the Egypt-Semitic language branch. *Ḥnk* then, could be Egypto-Semitic, though this option seems less likely.

3. In his major compendium on Semitic loanwords into Egyptian, James Hoch (1994) does not include the word *ḥnk,* indicating that he did not consider it a Semitic loanword into Egyptian.

4. Let me make some observations about the vital occurrence of *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka* in Taanach letter no. 6. It likely dates to the 15th century BC (certainly pre-Amarna) (Rainey 1999: 153*–154*; Horrowitz and Oshima 2006:141). Firstly, the term *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka* is mentioned in a military context and refers to military personnel, sometimes rendered as "retainers" (Lambdin 1953: 150; Speiser, 1964, 104; Hamilton 1990: 407; Sarna 1989:108).

In Abraham's case, they are specifically identified as having been born in his house (Gen 14:14), which suggests that they would naturally be more loyal than hired mercenaries (Wenham 1987: 314; Sarna 1989: 108). Here is where the word "retainer" – an old English term – expresses one facet of חָנִיךְ. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines "retainer" as "a servant who has usually been with the same family for a long time."[6] Clearly, their military capabilities are understood by their involvement in the battle against the invading army, and that squares with the meaning in Taanach tablet no. 6.

Secondly, the occurrence of *ḫa-na-ku-u-ka* is in a directive from an Egyptian officer named Amanḫatpa = Amenhotep to the ruler of Taanach, Talwišar.[7] Amenhotep is ordering him to send his troops and chariots to him at Gaza for a military operation, but regarding his retainers (*ḫa-na-ku-u-ka*), they were to stay with him. In this context it appears that the retainers are not to be dispatched elsewhere but would stay with their master. In other words, they were closely attached to their lord.

---

[6] I owe this suggestion to Richard Steiner.

[7] See line 8 of text (Rainey 1999: 159*).

Finally, it is not surprising that an Egyptian officer would use an Egyptian term also known in the Levant in his communiqué.

Thus, I still consider an Egyptian derivation of *ḥnk* in both Genesis 14 and Taanach no. 6 to be likely. In the end, it matters not whether the word *ḥnk* is Egyptian, Semitic or an Afro-Asiatic. The meaning is clear in the military milieu of both texts. These are loyal servants connected to a chief or ruler who when not working in pastoral capacities, served as militia to defend their master's interests. Similarly, it might be recalled in the confrontation between Jacob and Esau (after the former returned from his exile in Haran) that he approached Jacob with 400 men (Gen 33:1), and at one point in his rise to power, David had "about four hundred men" (1 Sam 22:2). It is clear, then, that chieftains or petty kings in Western Asia had militias numbering in the hundreds to protect their territories, economic assets and family members.

Some may think that Abraham and his 318-armed men, a number that appears not to be figurative,[8] was no match for the four kings and their victorious army. But the text of Genesis reports that at Hebron Abraham had allied himself (בַּעֲלֵי בְרִת) with Mamre, Aner and Eschol who are identified as "Amorites" (Gen 14:13). When the battle concluded, Abraham insisted that his three Amorite allies should take their share of the spoils (יִקְחוּ חֶלְקָם). To share in the booty, Aner, Eschol and Mamre, must also have contributed troops to this military operation. Indeed, military historian, William Hamblin (2006, 281), surmises that "Abraham's tribal army of 318 men was perhaps matched by similar numbers from his three allied Amorite nomadic chiefs …; this would give the nomads an army of 1000–1200 men, a force which was apparently strong enough to ambush and defeat the combined field armies of the four enemy kings."

The encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek

While the enemy kings and their booty, including Lot (and other family members?) made their exit from the lands east of the Jordan River, Abraham learns of the fate of Lot, and gathers his small force to rescue his nephew. While the route taken by Abraham is not detailed in the text, Dan in northern Canaan is where his troops caught up with the unsuspecting Mesopotamian armies (Gen 14:14), apparently causing them to flee north where they were pursued and routed at Hobah, north of Damascus (Gen 14:15). Based on the mention of Salem (i.e., Jerusalem), Rainey posited that Abraham led his expedition north from Hebron on the ridge road or the Way of Ephrath (Aharoni 1979: 57), but then he peeled off to the east to the Jordan valley in order to ford the river before turning north to Dan where he caught up with the enemy.[9] The return route seems to have been on the Trans-Jordanian "King's highway" to judge from the fact that the king of Sodom met the triumphant force in the "Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley)" (Gen. 14:17). Shaveh is thought to be located in the Moabite plateau in what will be the tribal territory of Reuben," according to Aharoni (1979, 55). This means that Bera of Sodom would have traveled north from the general area around the southern end of the Dead Sea, while Melchizedek came from Jerusalem in Canaan to

---

[8] I am not convinced by those who see a symbolic use of this figure. See for example (Thompson 1974: 190).

[9] Based on the map in (Rainey and Notley 2006, 114).

Shaveh, assuming that the meeting between Abraham's party and the two kings occurred at the same time.

Alternatively, the narrative about Abraham's meeting with Bera and Melchizedek could be telescoped to appear as a single event.[10] It could be that they were separate encounters that occurred at different locations: Bera in the Transjordan and Melchizedek closer to Jerusalem after Abraham departed from the Moab region and crossed back to Canaan to return to Hebron. After all, why would Melchizedek traverse the Jordan as he did not have a stake in the outcome of the battle as Bera did? The rationale for telescoping the two encounters is in part to contrast the generosity and goodly character of Melchizedek compared to the churlish Bera's demanding attitude. Accordingly, Sarna (1989: 109) commented: "The king of Sodom 'came out' empty-handed to meet his benefactor, and the first word he uttered was 'give!' The king of Salem 'brought out' bread and wine and offered a blessing …" Likewise, Wenham (1989: 305) considers the manner in which the two king's deal with Abraham "would accentuate the benevolence of Melchizedek and the hostility of the king of Sodom."

If my proposal is correct – that the two meetings are telescoped into one for literary reasons – it may explain how at one level the two elements of the narrative "do not fit together" as Gunkel (1910: 134) thought. Moreover, he held that the relationship between the three sections of the narrative, Gen 14:1–11 (the battles), 14:12–16 (Abraham's intervention) and 14:17–24 (the encounter with Melchizedek), "is not clear" (Gunkel 1910: 134). This reading has resulted in the view that the Melchizedek pericope is a later, intrusive addition to Genesis 14. Understanding the meeting(s) of Abraham and the two kings as a telescoping of two events removes the need to see the Melchizedek pericope as some later intrusion into the story.

It was on the return from the campaign, with booty and liberated captives in tow, that Melchizedek met Abraham, presenting him with bread and wine. The main point of the present investigation is to determine what this act meant in the military setting of the narrative despite the interpretive challenges. Wenham (1987: 316) speaks for many Bible scholars when he concedes: "The precise significance of this gesture is uncertain," and then adds "clearly it was a token of goodwill."

As mentioned above, there has been a tendency to make theological or eucharistic connections. For example, Matthew Henry, the early 18th century pastor-theologian commented: "Bread and wine were suitable refreshment for the weary followers of Abram; and it is remarkable that Christ appointed the same as the memorials of his body and blood, which are meat and drink to the soul."[11] Similarly, John Sailhamer (1990: 123) considered the presentation to Abraham "as a priestly act."

Others, however, rightly interpret Melchizedek's act in the aftermath of battle. The 19th century commentator, Franz Delitzsch (1885: 207), believed that Melchizedek's presentation was "to supply the exhausted warriors with food and drink, but more especially as a mark of gratitude to Abram, who had conquered for them peace, freedom, and prosperity." More recently, Victor Hamilton (1990: 408)

---

[10] My idea of telescoping the two royal encounter episodes was anticipated in Skinner's treatment of this passage, which I came across after advancing my thoughts in this paper. He opined: "It may rather have been the writer's object to bring the three actors on one stage together in order to illustrate Abram's contrasted attitude to the sacred (Melkiẓedek) and the secular (king of Sodom) authority" (Skinner 1910: 269).

[11] Matthew Henry's Abridged *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, accessed through Accordance Software.

proposed that the offering of bread and wine was "to toast the victor" and providing sustenance for "the exhausted warriors." Likewise, Sarna (1989: 109) believed that Abraham's reception by Melchizedek was a fitting response to the military hero whose victory "benefitted the entire region."

Bruce Vawter (1977: 197–199) offered a different interpretation, proposing that the presentation of bread and wine was a part of a ceremonial meal between allies, an interpretation based on Albright's theory that there was an alliance between Melchizedek and Abraham. Wenham (1989: 316) thought Vawter's understanding has some merit, adding Melchizedek, the presenter, is "the dominant ally." Vawter's view partially rests on Albright's (1961: 51–53) belief that the word שָׁלֵם does not refer to Jerusalem in Gen 14:18 but means that Melchizedek and Abraham were at peace (שָׁלוֹם), and hence, possibly allies.[12] As intriguing as this proposal is, evidence is lacking that they were treaty partners. Earlier in the chapter Aner, Eshcol and Mamre were described as allies (בַּעֲלֵי בְרִת) who joined the battle. Melchizedek is never described as Abraham's ally and there is no indication that he contributed troops to the recovery operation. I do, however, believe that those who consider that Melchizedek's treatment of Abraham needs to be understood in the light of the recent military activity are on the right track. I propose that a military-diplomatic angle is in view.

Recently I wrote an article suggesting that the story of Jacob and Esau's reunion after the former's self-imposed exile in Haran has the characteristics of a diplomatic encounter (Hoffmeier 2022). In this case, Jacob treats his brother as the superior and, consequently, surrenders to him to avoid a slaughter by the militarily superior Esau. The presentation of gifts, in Jacob's case including sheep, goats, and other farm animals, was part of the diplomatic norms of the Bronze Age. So too was the involvement of women and children in the meeting. Their presence was to evoke sympathy towards the victor by the surrendering party. Thereby Jacob out of fear submits to Esau (Gen 33:1–3). Jacob explains to Esau that the generous gift was "that I may find favor (חֵן) in your sight" (Gen 32:5). Clearly there is an attempt to curry favor with his hostile brother with his 400-man militia by offering a bountiful peace offering of domestic animals.

The story about David, Nabal and Abigail might add another perspective on both the Melchizedek-Abraham meeting as well as the one between Jacob and Esau. When David was on the run from King Saul, he had amassed a small army, initially of four hundred (1 Sam 22:2) and later six hundred (1 Sam 23:13) and then up to 3000 "chosen men" (אִישׁ בָּחוּר) (1 Sam 24:2). He conducted raids against opponents of Israel in the Judean Wilderness, the Negev and even south in Northeastern Sinai (1 Sam 23; 24; 27:8–12; 30). David and his motley crew, some have proposed, were extorting certain communities and pastoral clans, demanding "protection money" (McKenzie 2000: 97). He and his militia obviously needed to be sustained while outlaws from Saul, and thus they conducted raids on the Philistines (1 Sam 23:1–14) and on Israel's ancient nemesis, the Amalekites (1 Sam 30). Those who benefitted from David's protection might naturally be expected to compensate him. David clearly figured that the prosperous Calebite chieftain, Nabal, had profited from his protective services in the region, and he had not mistreated the Calebite workers (1 Sam 25:7–8). Thus, he believed he was entitled to some remuneration. It was shearing season, hence a time of economic prosperity and festivity (McCarter 1980a: 396); and an occasion when one might expect generous gifts to be

---

[12] O the diplomatic use of שלם, see (Wiseman 1982: 311–326).

distributed. Thus, David sent ten of his "young men" (נְעָרִים), understood to mean "warriors," to Nabal (*HALOT* 707; Tsumura 2007: 265). This was certainly not a large, intimidating force sent by David and they were extremely deferential in their request to Nabal: "*please* give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David" (1 Sam 25:8). נָתַן appears as an imperative plus the particle נָה, meaning something like "please, I pray," (Lambdin 1971: §136), indicating the polite nature of the request.

Moreover, David instructed his representatives how to greet Nabal: "Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have" (1 Sam 25:7). While שָׁלוֹם is a typical greeting in ancient Israel, as Wiseman (1982) noted, it also describes a state of non-hostility towards another party, especially when used by envoys. Evidently, David was trying to make that point.

Given David's prudent, diplomatic approach to Nabal, it is surprising that he summarily dismissed David's request. But Nabal (the fool!) insulted David and sent the ten away empty handed, not before saying "Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" (1 Sam 25:11). The implication seems to be that offering bread, water and meat was the proper way to avoid an attack by the military party. Not only was Nabal treating David like a nobody, but he seems to think he would not dare to attack Nabal's superior clan.

When Nabal's wife, Abigail, learns of the snub to David's emissaries, she understood what the consequences could be. She acted quickly to mollify David and undo Nabal's folly and stave off inevitable retribution: "Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine, and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs" and had them transported by donkey to David (1 Sam 25:18).

Avraham Malamat (1956:114–121) made an astute observation about Abigail's gift to David in 1 Samuel 25 based on a literary parallel with Papyrus Anastasi I. In this Ramesside text,[13] the writer boasts about his knowledge of different matters, including his familiarity with the geography of Canaan, and how Egyptian military operations in the region were provisioned by local allies or subjects. Malamat argued that this was what David had in mind when he approached Nabal. Furthermore, he recognized that the food ration in the Egyptian text was nearly identical to that supplied by Abigail, viz., "bread, sheep and goats, and wine" and these are referred to as – *šrmt* = *šlmt*. This is the Semitic word שלם written syllabically indicating that it was a loanword that in Egyptian means "complimentary gift, provisions," however, when *šrm* is written with different semantic indicators, viz., or , it means "beg for peace" (Lesko 1987: 163). In other words, the two lists of commodities represent the standard provisions for a military force. Malamat (1956: 118) then determined that "David's messengers asked for no less than a peace offering, to use the terminology of Papyrus Anastasi I."

David again is the recipient of food offerings during Absalom's rebellion. Forced to abandon Jerusalem, David took his immediate family and a close circle of leaders and troops and headed for Moab (2 Sam 15:13–37). As he passed over the Mount of Olives, David was met by Ziba, the steward

---

[13] For recent translations see (Wente 1990: 98–110) and (Allen 2002: 9–14).

of Mephibosheth (Jonathan's son). He presented the king with "two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits and a skin of wine" (2 Sam 16:1). This gift to David and his force is similar to that contributed by Abigail. The circumstances for David, however, are different, viz. he was retreating and not a victorious army. The motivation for Ziba's gift could be to show his allegiance and loyalty to David and against Absalom,[14] especially as Mephibosheth had apparently deserted to the rebellion and against David (cf. 16:3).

One of the remarkable scenes that adorns the walls of the Ramesseum, Ramesses II's Theban mortuary temple, shows the chariot charging Pharaoh attacking the walled city of Dapur (about 40 km NE of Qatna). (Fig. 1). With the city's defenses collapsing, the ruler of the city makes a desperate move to end the attack by personally exiting the city with his wife (and possibly his daughters) to surrender (Hoffmeier and Janzen 2022: 205–208). He is shown kneeling before prince Montu-hir-khopeshef, who is poised to decapitate him. Behind the ruler stands a woman, apparently his wife, with her hands extended towards the prince in a gesture thought to signal "beseeching mercy" (Spalinger 1978: 48). (Fig. 2). Her posture corresponds precisely to that of the hieroglyphic sign 𓀒 in the Egyptian word of *šrm* – begging for peace, while offering various types of food.

Figure 1: Ramesses II attacks the city of Dapur at the Ramesseum (Photo by Peter Brand).

Although no accompanying text identifies the peace offering, the iconography is clear. The lead figure, standing just in front of the ruler's wife, bears a sealed amphora of wine on her shoulder. This type of "Canaanite" amphora varies in size, with a capacity of 18–20 and up to 30 liters of liquid.[15] Behind the ruler's wife are two other woman carrying large baskets piled high with food. Kitchen (1996:83) has described this scene as an "Asiatic with wife and offspring has come forth to surrender,

---

[14] For a discussion about how 1 Samuel 15–16 contain several episodes treating the theme of loyalty and infidelity, see (McCarter 1984: 374–275).

[15] In our excavations at Tell el-Borg (N. Sinai) we uncovered a number of Canaanite amphorae which would be used for transporting wine or olive oil, see (Duff 2014: 436–481). Regarding the volume capacity of these amphorae, see (Mumford 2014: 505 nos. 1, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 20).

bringing a bull, flagon of wine and baskets of bread." Regine Schultz (2016: 287) has interpreted this scene in the same way, the purpose being to beg for life. As with Abigail's peace offering and the food rations in Papyrus Anastasi I, the Dapur scene depicts wine, bread and meat (an ox) for the offering to Ramesses II and his princes. The actions of the lady of Dapur and Abigail were in part meant to assuage the opponent from dispatching their husbands. The military setting is common to all four of these texts and pacifying a military force and provisioning troops is the motivation.

Figure 2: Close up of Fig. 1 showing the offering of food and drink to the victors.

Melchizedek's presentation of bread and wine to Abraham, I suggest, should be viewed from this military perspective. Abraham had proven that, with the help of his allies from Hebron, he was a powerful regional force to which the king of Jerusalem would want good relations and, accordingly, Melchizedek treats him with respect by offering provisions, a peace offering, for the victor and his small army. What is unexpected in this military setting is Abraham's response of giving a tenth of his booty to Melchizedek. Evidently, Abraham recognized that Melchizedek is not just another petty king of a city-state in the Levant. Rather he was also a priest of El-Elyon, a deity with whom Abraham clearly could identify. Indeed, in later Scripture, El-Elyon and Yahweh the God of Israel are equated (e.g., Deut 32:8–9; 2 Sam 22:14; Ps 9:1–2; Ps 18:13; 21:7; Ps 47:2; 83:18). Abraham's tithe is likely an acknowledgment that El-Elyon had indeed blessed him with victory in battle from is enemies as Melchidezek's blessing makes clear (Genesis 19–20).

Bibliography

Aharoni, Yohanan. 1979. *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Albright, William F. 1944. "A Prince of Taanach in the Fifteenth Century B.C." *BASOR* 94: 12–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/1355152.

———. 1961. "Abraham the Hebrew: A New Archaeological Interpretation". *BASOR* 163: 36–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/1355773.

Allen, James P. 2003. "The Craft of the Scribe (Papyrus Anastasi I)". In *Context of Scripture III*, edited by W.W. Hallow and K.L. Younger, Jr., 9–14. Leiden: Brill.

———. 2008. "The Historical Inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur: Preliminary Report". *BASOR* 352: 29–39. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/basor25609300.

Blackman, A.M. 1932. *The Story of Sinuhe*, Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca II. Brussels: Egyptology Foundation of Queen Elizabeth.

Breyer, Francis. 2019. *Ägyptische Namen und Wörter im Alten Testament*, ÄAT 93. Münster: Zaphon. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18654687.

Burke, Aaron. 2019. "Amorites in the Eastern Nile Delta: The Identity of Asiatics at Avaris during the Early Middle Kingdom". In *The Enigma of the Hyksos I: ASOR Conference Boston 2017−ICAANE Conference Munich 2018 – Collected Papers*, edited by Manfred Bietak and Sylvia Prell, 67–91. Wiesbaden: Horrowitz. https://doi.org/10.13173/9783447113328.069.

Chavalas, Mark. 2023. "The Travels of the 'Kings of the East': A Geographic Analysis of Gen 14". In *Lexham Geograhhic Commentary on the Pentateuch*, edited by Barry J. Beitzel, 206-220. Bellingham: Lexham Press.

Davila, James. 1992. "Shinar". *ABD* V: 1220. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261912-1051.

Delitzsch, Franz and C.F. Keil. 1885. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, Vol. I: The Pentateuch.* Edinburgh: T & T Clarke.

Driver, S.R. 1916. *The Book of Genesis*. London: Methuen & Co.

Duff, Catherine. 2014. "Levantine-Egyptian Interconnections at Tell el-Borg, North Sinai". In *Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I*, edited by James K. Hoffmeier, 436–481. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Gordon, Cyrus. 1958. "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura". *JNES* 17: 28–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/371420

Gunkel, Hermann. 1910. *Genesis Translated and Interpreted*, trans M.E. Biddle of 3rd ed. 1997. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Gzella, Holger. 2022. "On the Origin and Meaning of *ḥānīḵ* in Genesis 14:14". In *"Now These Records are Ancient": Studies in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History, Language and Culture in Honor of K. Lawson Younger Jr.*, edited by J.K. Hoffmeier, R.E. Averbeck, J.C. Howard and W. Zwickel, pages 151–158. ÄAT 114. Münster: Zaphon.

Hamblin, William J. 2006. *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC*. New York/London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203965566.

Hamilton, Victor, 1990. *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-0092.

Hoch, James. 1994. *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400863884.

Hoffmeier, James K. 2011. "David's Triumph Over Goliath: 1 Samuel 17:54 and Ancient Near Eastern Analogues". In *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism and Ideology*, edited by D. Kahn and J.J. Shirley, 84–110. Leiden, Brill, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004194939.i-370.34.

Hoffmeier James K. and Mark Janzen 2022. "Towards a Diplomatic, Contextual Reading of the Encounter Between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33. In *"Now These Records are Ancient": Studies in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History, Language and Culture in Honor of K. Lawson Younger Jr.*, edited by J.K. Hoffmeier, R.E. Averbeck, J.C. Howard and W. Zwickel, 201–212. ÄAT 114. Münster: Zaphon.

Horowitz, Wayne and Takayoshi Oshima. 2006. *Cuneiform in Canaan: Cuneiform from the Land of Israel in Ancient Tim*e. Jerusalem: Hebrew University.

Kitchen, Kenneth A. 1966. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

———. 1996. *Ramesside Inscriptions: Translated and Annotated II*. Oxford: Blackwell

———. 2003. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Lambdin, Thomas O. 1953. "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament". *JAOS* 73: 145–155. https://doi.org/10.2307/595204.

———. 1971. *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Lesko, Leonard. 1987. *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian III*. Providence, RI: BC Scribe Publications.

Lichtheim, Miriam. 1975. *Ancient Egyptian Literature* I. Berkely: University of California Press.

Malamat, Avraham. 1956. "Military Rationing in Papyrus Anastasi I and the Bible". In *Melanges Bibliques Rédigés en L'Honneur de Andre Robert*, 114–121. Paris: Bloud & Gay.

McCarter, P. Kyle. 1980. *I Samuel: The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261196.

———. 1984. *II Samuel: The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261202.

McKenzie, Steven L. 2000. *King David: A Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195132731.001.0001.

Muchiki, Yoshiyuki. 1999. *Egyptian Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Mumford, Gregory, 2014. "Tell el-Borg Pottery Volumes". In *Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I*, edited by James K. Hoffmeier, 502–505. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Rainey, Anson F. 1972. "The World of Sinuhe". *Israel Oriental Society* 2: 369–94.

———. 2006. "Sinuhe's World". In *"I will speak the riddles of ancient times" – Archaeological and historical studies in honor of Amihai Mazar on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday*, edited by Aren Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji, 277–299. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Rainey Anson F. and R. Steven Notley. 2006. *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World*. Jerusalem: Carta.

Sailhamer, John. 1990. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol II: Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Sarna, Nahum. 1989. *Genesis: JPS Torah Commentary*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Schultz, Regine. 2016. "Dapur: ein Triumph über die Feinde von Hatti – Die Idealisierung des Königs und Ehrenrettung der Prinzen". In *Mit archäologischen Schichten Geschichte schreiben:*

Festschrift für Edgar B. Pusch zum 70. Geburstag, edited by H. Franzmeier, Th. Rehren and R. Schultz, 269–291. Hildesheim: Verlag Gebrüder der Gerstenberg.

Skinner, John. 1910. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Spalinger, Anthony. 1978. "A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Reliefs". *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* VIII (2), 47–60.

Speiser, E.A. 1964. *Genesis: The Anchor Bible*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Thompson, Thomas. 1974. *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narrative*. Berlin: de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110841442.

Tsumura, David. 2007. *The First Book of Samuel*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-008q.

Van Seters, John. 1975. *Abraham in History and Tradition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Vawter, Bruce. 1977. *On Genesis: A New Reading*. New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Wb = Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. 1926–1931. *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache I–V*. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung.

Wenham, Gordon. 1987. *Genesis 1–15*. Word Biblical Commentary. Waco: Word Books.

Wente, Edward. 1990. *Letters from Ancient Egypt*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Wiseman, Donald J. 1980. "Abraham Reassessed". In *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, edited by D.J. Wiseman and A.R. Millard, 147–153. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

———. "'Is it peace': Covenant and Diplomacy". *VT* 32: 311–326. https://doi.org/10.2307/1517918.