

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

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Overview

This chapter and the next are closely linked, and in fact the last eight verses of this chapter are more closely related to the next. We have three military campaigns, followed by three encounters of Abram with distinguished individuals.

- 1-16 three military campaigns,, culminating in one in which Abram rescues Lot from Mesopotamian raiders. (It seems Lot is not the only one to envy the richness of the cities of the plain!)
- 17-20 and 21-24 describe two encounters that Abram has with local kings, in both cases yielding his spoil from the battle to them. Ch. 15 describes his encounter with the Lord over the same issue.

So the basic structure here is conflict followed by reward, the “reward” section continuing into ch. 15.

1-16, Three Battles

The history records three conflicts, centered around two coalitions of kings: one resident in the lower Jordan valley, the other invading from the north. First, the northern kings subdue the cities of the plain (1-4a). Next, the cities of the plain rebel, and the northern kings punish them (4b-12). Finally, Abram goes to the rescue of Lot, and defeats the invaders (13-16).

1-4a, The Original Subjugation of the Cities of the Plain

None of the kings named in this section can be identified with certainty, although there are intriguing possibilities.

The northern kings (v.1) come from

- Shinar: site of Babylon, center of Nimrod’s kingdom, lower Mesopotamia
- Ellasar: uncertain; perhaps Pontus (eastern Turkey, south of Black Sea) or Cappadocia (further south)
- Elam: later Persia, east of Tigris, modern Iran
- “Nations”: probably the Hittite empire, lower eastern Turkey and northern Levant, around the corner of the Mediterranean.

The southern cities (2) include a reference to Zoar, which is known to be at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Lot fled there from Sodom (18:22,23), so Sodom was in the vicinity, and the others are assumed to be in the same area.

The episode illustrates several geopolitical realities of the period:

- Canaan’s political structure consisted of a set of city-states, not a modern country as we know it today.

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

- City-states formed federations for mutual defense, but these loyalties could shift.
- Particularly powerful federations would go on campaign to terrorize other regions and demand tribute from them (just like playground bullies). This was so regular that the appropriate season was designated “the time when kings go forth,” 2 Sam 11:1. We have many records of such campaigns by Mesopotamian and Egyptian kings; they routinely see-sawed back and forth across the Levant, and the land of Canaan was always caught in the middle between them. At this period, Mesopotamia is in the ascendancy, and so the attack comes from the north.

The outcome was that the southern cities for twelve years “served” the northern kings, led by Elam. This service took the form of paying tribute. They would send a caravan to Elam to deliver their taxes and pledge their allegiance to the northern confederacy.

Application: Two things to observe here:

1. The sinful tendency of Nimrod to try to establish a great kingdom through military might here continues. Beware the seduction of political aggregations.
2. This imagery lies behind the picture of the coming Messianic kingdom in Isaiah 60. One day all the nations of the earth will be subdued beneath the rule of the Lord Jesus. Only he has the right to impose his rule over all the earth.

We can also make an interesting chronological observation. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran (12:4), which is before Lot left him for the cities of the plain. He was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (16:16), which appears to be some time after he left him. The intervening period is only 11 years. This means that the conquest of the cities of the plain by the northern kings took place *before* Lot went there to live. He is moving into territory that is under the thumb of powerful overlords, which ought to be a warning of trouble to come. The land that seemed so attractive to him was already claimed by the northern kings, who were siphoning off the riches of the land in the form of tribute. He thought he would be enriched by living there; in fact he was impoverished.

Application: Beware of the world’s riches; Satan already has claim to them, and if we try to lay hold of them, we come under his power.

4b-12, Rebellion and Repression

4b, Rebellion.—After twelve years of paying tribute, the cities of the plain decide that they can stand up to their overlords, and stop the payments. The result is that in the next campaign season, the kings come to punish them.

5-7, The Route of Attack.—The route followed by the northern kings is of interest for two reasons.

1. It follows the ancient route known as “the king’s highway,” along the tableland east of the Jordan valley, where the traveling is much smoother than through Canaan. They travel south to El Paran, probably Eilat, on the shores of the Red Sea, then north-west to Kadesh Barnea, then north-east to the Dead Sea area.
2. The list of peoples that they subjugate is calculated to impress the reader with their strength. Most of these peoples are designated as “giants” in Deut 2:10-12, 20-21. (Zuzim is identified

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

in the Genesis Apocryphon with the Zamzumim of Deut 2:20; “Rephaim” is “giant” in Deut 2:11). We are meant to conclude that this northern coalition is really powerful.

8-12, The Battle.—When the battle is joined with the kings of the plain, they are routed. The troops are scattered, some falling into tarpits, others running to the mountains, and the cities are left undefended before the invaders.

- 8-11 are sequential
- With 12, the camera zooms in on the train of spoil that the kings of the north are leading away from the cities. Among them we find Lot. In Hebrew, the phrase “who dwelt in Sodom” comes last, by way of explanation. “they took all the goods, and went their way. In particular, they took Lot, and went their way [same verbs], for he lived in Sodom.”

Thus we see both Lot’s weakness and his reward.

- His weakness: he first chooses the region of the wicked city (13:11), then camps near it (13:12), and now we find him living in it.
- His reward: instead of prosperity, he now finds himself not only despoiled, but enslaved.

Application: Beware the seduction of the world. Compare John 17:11-19. We must live *in* the world, as our Lord was in it, and in fact he has sent us into it, v.18. But he prays specifically for us that we would be protected *from* the world, “sanctified” = set apart.

13-16, Abram to the Rescue

Abram learns of the attack from an escapee. He is pictured still living in the territory known by the name of one of its principle inhabitants, Mamre (cf. 13:18).

13, The Allies

We are told that Mamre’s relatives are in a covenant with Abram. This prepares us to learn that they join him in the attack on the northern kings; see 14:24.

But why can he enter a covenant with the Canaanites, while later Israel is forbidden from such covenants, Deut 7:2?

- Progressive revelation. It is a mistake to assume that God imposes his law all at once on people. What is permitted in one age may be forbidden in another, and vice versa.
- Abram’s circumstances are different from those of Israel.
 - Throughout Genesis, Abram and his descendants are “strangers and pilgrims” in the land, not fully possessing it. They are never authorized to enter into conflict with the Canaanites; the only conflict recorded of Abram is this battle, which is with the Northern kings, not Canaanites. In fact, in the next chapter God expressly tells Abram that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full” (15:16), so it is not yet time for him to take over their territory.
 - In Deuteronomy, Israel is poised to enter the land and take possession of it, destroying the Canaanites in judgment for their sin (Deut 7:1,2,5).

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

- Abram *does* avoid the main hindrance against which Deut 7 warns, intermarriage (7:3,4). When the time comes to find a wife for Isaac, Abram explicitly instructs his servant Eliezer, “thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac” (Gen 24:3,4).

Application: Like Abram, we are not yet in possession of what shall one day be ours, but live as strangers and pilgrims in the earth. In our condition, we must enter into various contracts and covenants with those who are spiritually alien to us. But we must guard against agreements that compromise our spiritual standards, and in particular, we must be very careful when entering into marriages, not to become unequally yoked.

14, *The Army*

The fighting force consisted not just of his Canaanite allies, but also of servants from his own household, who would be particularly loyal to him.

14-15, *The Attack*

Note his *motive* and his *methods*.

Motive.—“his brother was taken captive.” Out of love for his relative Lot, he places himself and his household at great risk, even though Lot got himself into this mess by his selfishness.

Compare

- Judah’s willingness to remain in Egypt as a slave in place of Benjamin, even though it appears that Benjamin has stolen Joseph’s cup, Gen 44:33
- Christ’s willingness to die for us while we were yet sinners, Rom 5:8.

How much more should we be tolerant of one another’s foibles, and exert ourselves to care for one another, even when the problems that we are confronting come from our own sin.

Manner.—Abram is a clever general.

- He attacks them by night,
- Using a surrounding tactic.

Application: Trusting in God does not mean that we should act stupidly. We should be prudent and wise in our actions.

16, *The Achievement*

In spite of the might of the northern empire and the nations of giants that they have conquered, they cannot stand before one whom God has blessed. God gives him victory, and he is able to recover the spoil that the northern kings had taken.

Application: When God is our helper, we need not fear what man may do to us: Psa 56:4; 118:6; Heb. 13:6.

17-24, Kings of Sodom and Salem

Note the chiasmic structure of the interviews. The King of Sodom meets him first, but converses with him only after the interview with Melchizedek. These two exemplify two kinds of people that we can expect to encounter in our pilgrimage through the world, and reflect the two kinds of people anticipated in 12:3

1. Some will bless us. Other believers can enrich our spiritual walk, though they may be of a different background
2. Others will curse us. Unbelievers will try to lure us into compromise.

18-20, King of Salem

Melchizedek, King of Salem, is an example of a believer of a different background. He is not of Abram's line, but worships the same God. He reminds us that not all true believers belong to our assembly or have had the same experiences we may have had.

18-20a, Melchizedek's Actions

Melchizedek has two titles, each associated with a characteristic action.

- As king of Salem (apparently, a short name for Jerusalem), he brings forth bread and wine.
- As priest of Most High God, he offers a blessing and receives tithes.

As **king of Salem**, Melchizedek brings forth bread and wine.

- These are not emblematic of the sacraments, for they are associated with his royal office, not his priesthood.
- Bread and wine are the basic elements of food in the ancient world (cf. Judges 19:19; 2 Sam 6:19; Neh 5:15), a step more elegant than bread and water (the bare minimum, 21:14; Num 21:5; etc.).
- His purpose is to feed Abram and his troops, thus showing his alliance with Abram.
Comparisons:

- 2 Sam 17:27-29, Barzillai the Gileadite brings food, drink, and equipment to David and his people after their flight from Jerusalem. Barzillai thus expresses his loyalty to the king.
- Judges 8:4-7, the response of the men of Succoth to Gideon. Failure to support Gideon's campaign shows that they are allied with the enemy.
- Judges 11:17, Edom and Moab refuse to host Israel during their wanderings, though according to Deut 2:29 they did sell food. As a result, they are excluded from the congregation, Deut 23:3-8 (longer for Moab, because of their role in the Balaam affair).

As **priest**, he blesses Abram. God promised Abram that others would bless him, and here we see the first instance of that blessing. Two features of his blessing set Melchizedek apart from the pagan Canaanites, and show that he retains a memory of the true God from the descendants of Noah. (In fact, Jewish tradition identifies him with Shem, but without justification.)

- The title he uses for God is most interesting. It combines three elements, all known from pagan Canaanite mythology, but combined in a most unusual way. The pagans believed in a

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

genealogy of gods. Three generations in this genealogy were “Elyon and Be’erot” (Most High and Deep Springs), “Heaven and Earth,” and then the gods of the cult, El, Dagon, Astarte, etc. People only worshipped the final generation; the others were dead and powerless. (Ref: Sachuniathon, via Cross, “The ‘Olden Gods’ in Ancient Myths”, p. 335). Melchizedek collapses this mythical sequence.

- Heaven and earth are still “begotten,” as in the Canaanite lore: *qoneh* can mean “begetter” in addition to “buyer, acquirer,” and usually has this sense when God is the subject.
 - Deut 32:6, // (*asah* and *kwn*; subject God as “father,” perhaps with sense of “begetter.” Cf. 32:18 *yld*)
 - Prov 8:22, parallel to *xwl* “bring forth”
- But heaven and earth are no longer the children of Elyon, now old and impotent, and the parents of El, the new high God. There is only one God, both El and Elyon, who is absolutely sovereign over heaven and earth.
- His blessing also merits notice. It is a dual blessing. Both aspects of the blessing acknowledge that Abram’s victory over the kings is a mark of God’s favor.
 - He declares God’s blessing on Abram, thus aligning himself with what God told Abram directly in 12:1-4. Thus he reminds Abram that his victory comes from God. “Abram, you have triumphed because you find favor in the eyes of the Most High God, begetter of heaven and earth.”
 - He also blesses God, which throughout Scripture is an act of worship. This is always the appropriate response to make when we recognize that God has blessed us; cf. Eph. 1:3.

Motive:

- Unlike the king of Sodom, he had no personal interest in the outcome of the battle. His people were not defeated or despoiled.
- He is asserting his position as king of that region, and offering hospitality to an honored visitor.

20b, Abram’s Response

Abram recognizes M’s position as a priest and king by offering him tithes, a form of tribute. Cf. the interpretation of Heb. 7:4,7, concluding from the blessing and the tithe that Abram recognizes the superiority of Melchizedek.

Consider the implications of this in the light of God’s promise to Abram in 13:14-17. He has already constructed altars in Bethel (13:4) and Hebron (13:18). Jerusalem is midway between these two, smack in the middle of the land that he has been promised. He have the attitude, “God has promised me this land; Melchizedek has no business asserting either political or spiritual authority over me.” But he recognizes the legitimacy of Melchizedek’s faith and the primacy of his residence there, and is willing to share his inheritance with him.

Application: This is an important lesson for us in our relation with other believers. Not all true believers in AA are in WIBC. We do not define the sole standard of orthodoxy. We must answer

to the Lord for our belief and conduct; so must those who do not fellowship with us. When we meet those outside our fellowship who, like Melchizedek, understand the crucial distinctions of the faith, it is important for us to acknowledge them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must strive to guard the unity of the Spirit that we recognize with them, while working to grow into the unity of the faith and of the son of God.

***sign of tolerance, in light of end of 13; cf. Heb 7.

21-24, King of Sodom

The last time we saw him, he was diving into a tarpit, probably to hide from the invaders.

21, King of Salem's Actions

Melchizedek's actions were all in the nature of a gift to Abram, both physical (food) and spiritual (a blessing). The King of Salem is just the opposite: his attitude is completely one of demand. In fact, Abram has a right to all that he has recaptured, but that would put the King of Salem out of a job. He demands that Abram return his subjects who have been taken captive.

22-24, Abram's Response

Here is a good example of how we are to conduct ourselves toward unbelievers.

- Testimony: He identifies the God proclaimed by Melchizedek, "El Elyon, begetter of heaven and earth," with YHWH, the one who appeared to him. He states his position with a solemn oath. Probably we should understand this as made at this point, not previously. The point here is that he makes it clear to the king of Sodom that his action is based on spiritual grounds. He identifies God as his lord, and gives God the credit for the position that he takes.
- No Compromise: He will not give the king of Sodom any grounds to claim to have enriched him. He refuses to retain even the smallest item, "from thread to shoelace." One might think this an extreme scruple, but it shows the importance of not compromising. Perhaps he has learned from his encounter with Pharaoh at the end of ch. 12, when a pagan rebuked him for his lack of trust.
- Tolerant: At the same time, he does not expect his unsaved associates to share his scruples, and is careful not to deprive them of the reward they may legitimately expect for their part in the campaign.

Comparison

God promised to bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. Consider the subsequent histories of the cities represented by these two kings.

- The king of Salem blessed Abram, and his city, Jerusalem, becomes the capital of Israel and will one day be the capital of the world.
- The king of Sodom behaves selfishly toward Abram, and his city is subsequently destroyed (ch. 18).

Notes:

Syntax of vv. 1-2

Because of the lack of narrative verb forms, Waltke wants to read this as a circumstantial clause, which would make v.4 pluperfect: “At the time when the kings of the north made war against the kings of the south, all these were gathered together... They had served C. 12 years, but in the 13th year they rebelled.” Such a reading would be in line with other proposed “epic margins,” e.g.,

- 1:1-2 as margin to v.3 (see discussion in Waltke’s Bib Sac articles)
- 2:4b-6 as margin to v.7 (Steve Kempf,)

(I accept the extended margin in ch. 2, but question it in ch. 1.)

In ch. 14, it is doubtful. Observations:

- Waltke’s reading makes *bymy* govern (&*w* in v.2. Two problems with this:
 - When *bywm* governs a verbal form rather than a noun, it is always singular. *Bymy* never governs a verbal form, but is common in settings such as “in the days of PN, PN, PN...”
 - When *bywm* governs a verbal form, it is usually the infinitive with suffix as subject, not a finite form as here.
- There are good parallels to continuing a margin (*wyhy* + *bymy* + PN) with a non-narrative form (cf. also Gen 10:25):
 - Esther 1:1-2 as margin to v.3 (&*h* (here, as in Gen 14, the person governed by *bymy* is also the subject of the verb)
 - Isa 7:1

Conclusion: Follow Wenham. 1-4 is record of earlier battle that brought the kings of the plain into submission to the northern kings.

Foreign Policy in the Exodus

Compare the actions of Edom, Moab, and Bashan toward Israel during the exodus, and the results in Israel’s attitude toward them. This helps us understand the issue of foreign alliances in Abram’s time.

	Edom	Moab	Bashan
History	Num 20:14-24 14 ¶ And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom,		Deut 2:28-35 26 And I sent messengers out of the wilderness of Kedemoth unto Sihon king of Heshbon with words of peace, saying,

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

	Thus saith thy brother Israel, Thou knowest all the travail that hath befallen us: 15 How our fathers went down into Egypt, and we have dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians vexed us, and our fathers: 16 And when we cried unto the LORD, he heard our voice, and sent an angel, and hath brought us forth out of Egypt: and, behold, we <i>are</i> in Kadesh, a city in the uttermost of thy border:		
	17 Let us pass, I pray thee, through thy country: we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards, neither will we drink <i>of</i> the water of the wells: we will go by the king's <i>high</i> way, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed thy borders.		27 Let me pass through thy land: I will go along by the high way, I will neither turn unto the right hand nor to the left.
	18 And Edom said unto him, Thou shalt not pass by me, lest I come out against thee with the sword.		
	19 And the children of Israel said unto him, We will go by the high way: and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it: I will only, without <i>doing</i> any thing <i>else</i> , go through on my feet.		28 Thou shalt sell me meat for money, that I may eat: and give me water for money, that I may drink: only I will pass through on my feet; 29 (As the children of Esau which dwell in Seir, and the Moabites which dwell in Ar, did unto me;) until I shall pass over Jordan into the land which the LORD our God giveth us.
	20 And he said, Thou shalt not go through.		30 But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the LORD thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as <i>appeareth</i> this day. 31 And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have begun to give Sihon and his land before thee: begin to possess, that thou mayest inherit his land.
	And Edom came out against him with much people, and with a strong hand. 21 Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border:		32 Then Sihon came out against us, he and all his people, to fight at Jahaz.
	wherefore Israel turned away from him.		33 And the LORD our God delivered him before us; and we smote him, and his sons, and all his people. 34 And we took all his cities at that time, and utterly destroyed the men, and the women, and the little ones, of every city, we left none to remain: 35 Only the cattle we took for a prey unto ourselves, and the spoil of the cities which we took.
Jdg 11:17	Judges 11:17 Then Israel sent messengers unto the king of Edom, saying, Let me, I pray thee, pass through thy land: but the king of Edom would not hearken thereto.	And in like manner they sent unto the king of Moab: but he would not consent: and Israel abode in Kadesh.	

Genesis 14, The Battle of the Kings

God's Command, Deut 2	<p>2 And the LORD spake unto me, saying, 3 Ye have compassed this mountain long enough: turn you northward. 4 And command thou the people, saying, Ye <i>are</i> to pass through the coast of your brethren the children of Esau, which dwell in Seir; and they shall be afraid of you: take ye good heed unto yourselves therefore: 5 Meddle not with them; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as a foot breadth; because I have given mount Seir unto Esau <i>for</i> a possession. 6 Ye shall buy meat of them for money, that ye may eat; and ye shall also buy water of them for money, that ye may drink. 7 For the LORD thy God hath blessed thee in all the works of thy hand: he knoweth thy walking through this great wilderness: these forty years the LORD thy God <i>hath been</i> with thee; thou hast lacked nothing.</p>	<p>8 ¶ And when we passed by from our brethren the children of Esau, which dwelt in Seir, through the way of the plain from Elath, and from Eziongaber, we turned and passed by the way of the wilderness of Moab. 9 And the LORD said unto me, Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle: for I will not give thee of their land <i>for</i> a possession; because I have given Ar unto the children of Lot <i>for</i> a possession. 17 That the LORD spake unto me, saying, 18 Thou art to pass over through Ar, the coast of Moab, this day: 19 And <i>when</i> thou comest nigh over against the children of Ammon, distress them not, nor meddle with them: for I will not give thee of the land of the children of Ammon <i>any</i> possession; because I have given it unto the children of Lot <i>for</i> a possession.</p>	<p>24 ¶ Rise ye up, take your journey, and pass over the river Arnon: behold, I have given into thine hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land: begin to possess <i>it</i>, and contend with him in battle. 25 This day will I begin to put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations <i>that are</i> under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble, and be in anguish because of thee.</p>
Exclusion, Deut 23	<p>7 Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite; for he <i>is</i> thy brother: thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian; because thou wast a stranger in his land. 8 The children that are begotten of them shall enter into the congregation of the LORD in their third generation.</p>	<p>3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever: 4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee. 5 Nevertheless the LORD thy God would not hearken unto Balaam; but the LORD thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the LORD thy God loved thee. 6 Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever.</p>	