

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 15 (NRSV)

¹ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴ But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵ He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. ⁷ Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you **from Ur of the Chaldeans**, to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. ¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³ **Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴ but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." ¹⁷ When the sun had gone down** and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

SOURCE THEORY

J-Source – Regular Typeface **R-Source** – *Bold Italic Typeface*

Vs 1-12 and 17b-21 are from the earliest writers of Genesis; the J source (associated with the Southern Kingdom). Vs 13-17a are from the Redactor who put all the sources together into its final shape.

Notice the anthropomorphic God in this story. This is from the same source that gave us the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 2-4.

Verse 7. If this portion of the text is J, then the text would have said originally "brought you out of Haran." R would have changed Haran to Ur here to make this consistent with the combined text in Genesis 11:31-12:4.

Verses 13-17. The added section vs 13-17 uses language found in all three sources (J, E, P) and is an awkward insertion into the story line because it has nothing to do with the cutting of the covenant story. It came from a later redactor working after the return from exile and includes language from multiple places in the book of Exodus.

These verses appear to be an addition to this story because (1) it is enclosed by a resumptive repetition: the sun is about to set in v. 12 and then is reported to set in v. 18; (2) the prediction of the future that God gives to Abram has nothing to do with the covenant ceremony that is taking place; and (3) these lines merge terms that are characteristic of each of the sources: the phrase "alien in a land" is reminiscent of J (Exodus 2:22), the phrase "will degrade them" is reminiscent of E (Exodus 1:11-12), and the word for "property" otherwise occurs only in P (and once in the separate source of Genesis 14). The reference to four hundred years of slavery in Egypt may relate to the "thirty years and four hundred years" in P (Exodus 12:40).

GENESIS 15

Chapter 15 begins with a vision of God in which the Word of the LORD came to Abram, assuring him that he has nothing to fear because God will protect him and reward him greatly. Sometime later, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. He said, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” (Gen. 15:1). The first words of Genesis 15 are, “After these things” — and after a great deal of time — “the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid.’” After what things? After the events of chapter 14? After pursuing the armies of the kings from the east and winning back his nephew Lot in a daring attack?

The words “do not be afraid” (אַל־תִּירָא in Hebrew) comprise a stock phrase meaning, “You are about to hear good news.” Throughout the prophetic books and into the New Testament, when a message from God starts with “do not be afraid” it means that good news is about to be heard. (Correspondingly, when a message from God starts with “woe,” well, it is not going to be good news).

And what was the good news the Lord spoke? “I am your shield, your reward will be very great.” There are different ways to say “I” in Biblical Hebrew. One way is still in use in Modern Hebrew: Hebrew: אני (ani). Another more archaic term with the same meaning is used in the text above: אֲנוּכִי (anokhi). The Hebrew literally reads “I [am a] shield to you; your pay, very much.” The choice to translate the Hebrew term שָׂכָר (sakar) as “reward” is not ideal. The word is normally translated as “wages, reward, salary, payment;” as something someone receives for work done or faithfulness. Perhaps the best way to translate the phrase would be, “What you will receive will be very great.” To put it all together: “Good news, Abram! You are going to get something totally awesome!”

Rather than praising God for this new promise, Abram complains and reminds God that He and Sarai were still childless. Abram reminds God that there is still an unmet, unkept promise out there; that God hasn’t yet proven faithful. Abram complains that upon his death, all his goods will be passed on to Eliezer (אֱלִיעֶזֶר), one of his servants from Damascus. Eliezer will then become the heir to the covenant (vs. 1-3).

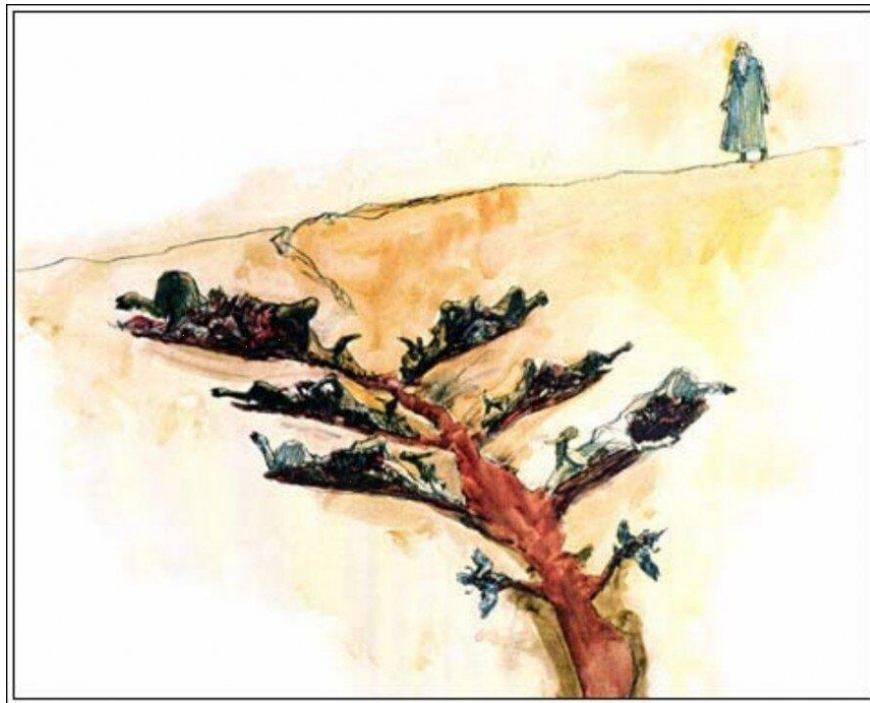
Eliezer of Damascus – His name is made up of elements that can be translated as: “My God is help;” “My God is assistance;” “My God is strength.” Eliezer of Damascus was the steward of Abraham’s house and his presumed heir, before the birth of Isaac. When Abraham saw that his son Isaac was already forty years old and still unmarried, he decided that the time had come to find a bride for his son. He sent his trusted servant Eliezer to his relatives in Haran, Mesopotamia, with instructions to bring back a bride for Isaac, because he didn’t want his son to marry any of the local Canaanite girls. According to Jewish Midrash, Eliezer may have been the son of Nimrod, an ancient Mesopotamian king and conqueror mentioned in Gen. 10:8–12 (cf. 1 Chron. 1:10) and Mic. 5:6 (cf. Heb. 5:5). In the latter passage, the “land of Nimrod” is a poetic term for Assyria. Nimrod is called the son of Cush, which in Gen. 10:8 seems to refer to Cossea, the country of the Kassites in Mesopotamia. The biblical Nimrod is presented as the first powerful king on earth, and the first cities of his kingdom are said to have been Babylon, Erech, and Accad in Babylonia, and Nineveh and Calah in Assyria (v. 10). He was also a mighty hunter “before the LORD.”

Is Abraham complaining? And if so, how does God respond to rhetorical attacks that suggest the Lord hasn’t been faithful, to an angry servant who reminds God of certain unkept promises — such as many descendants? How does God respond to complaints that border on the aggressive?

God responds by renewing the promise of many descendants. In fact, God responds by expanding the promise! God responds and tells Abram that the promised heir will be Abram’s own son and that Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens (vs. 4-5). In response, God took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And God added, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). When God took Abram outside he said, “look towards heaven and count the stars.” It is interesting that the phrase “look towards heaven” הִשְׁמַיְמָה הֶבֶט־נָא (hebet na ha-shamaymah) includes a very interesting word – נָא (na) – which is hard to translate. There is a semantic and pragmatic distinction between an utterance in which נָא is used, and an utterance in which it is not used. The word נָא (na) is typically used to emphasize the action of the verb, indicating the importance the speaker attaches to it. It can express an emotional request. Here God uses this language to stress the importance of Abram looking up.

Abram's response: "And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord declared him righteous because of his faith" (vs. 6).
:וְהֵאֱמַן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה: And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit. (Gen. 15:6) The Hebrew word צְדָקָה (*tsedakah*) can be variously translated as "justice, righteousness, vindication, equity." In Modern Hebrew, *tsedakah* has come to mean "charitable giving" (since true charity is a righteous deed). Today a person who is referred to as a "righteous/just person" is called a צַדִּיק (*tsadik*), while someone who is simply in the right in a disagreement is צוֹדֵק (*tsodek*). The Hebrew word וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ (*vayachshevehah*) is actually a phrase that can also be translated as "and he counted it/her" (in this case, the righteousness). It could also be translated "and he accounted it" or "and he reckoned it." For example, in Modern Hebrew a word from the same root is חֶשְׁבוֹן (*cheshbon*) "bill" or "account" (as with a bank).

Abram believes that God will give him a son, but he isn't so sure about the land. He wants more proof than just God's word on this one (vs. 8). To ratify the promise made to Abram, God makes a covenant sealed by blood (vs. 7-11). God told Abram to do something that people in the Ancient Near East were very familiar with – to prepare everything for making a formal agreement – a covenant between Abram and God himself. The idea was simple: the representative of the animal life was to be cut into half and left on the floor; literally cut, torn apart. As both parties passed between the pieces of flesh, they would make an oath to each other that would bind them by a sacred vow. The symbolism here is unavoidable – if one of the parties was unfaithful to the covenant promise, an awful curse would fall upon him – he would be torn apart – just like the animal that was laid on the floor.



THE CUTTING OF A COVENANT

When covenants were made in the ancient Near East, certain rites would accompany the agreement in order to signify what would happen if one or both parties failed to live up to their end of the pact. One common ritual involved dismembering animals and then laying the pieces in two rows side-by-side with a path in between. The individuals making the covenant would then pass between the animals and invoke a curse upon themselves if they broke the agreement. In performing this rite both parties were in effect saying, "If I do not fulfill the terms of this covenant, may the destruction that befell these animals also be upon my head."

As if God's word of promise were not enough, God finishes the encounter with Abram in Genesis 15 with this very same rite. In a theophany — a visible revelation of the divine — God appears as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (v. 17), a form similar to the pillar of fire God will use to guide the Israelites toward Canaan centuries later (Ex. 13:21–22). Fire symbolizes the Lord's glory (Pss. 29:1–7; 50:1–3), further displaying the Almighty's character.

Notice that it is God alone who passes between the animals; Abram is not invited to participate. He has already shown his trust and faithfulness. Here we have the Lord alone swearing by God's self that God will see to it that God's promises

will come to pass. This sworn oath is a promise and invokes death to God's self if it is not fulfilled, giving God's people confidence that God will accomplish all that God pledges (Heb. 6:13–18). It is an unparalleled manifestation of the Lord's grace, for God promises to care for Abram and his descendants forever.

Again, notice that the covenant in Genesis 15 is all about what God promises to do for Abraham. Other covenants from the ancient world between kings and subjects are a two-way street: "I am your king, and here is what I am going to do for you (protection from invaders), and here is what you will do for me (pay me tribute, worship me, don't rebel against me). God's covenant with Abraham is different: "I am your God and this is what I will do for you." Period.

In the form of a smoking firepot and blazing torch (God's appearances in the Old Testament are often in the form of fire), God passes in between the severed pieces of sacrificial animals. God was taking an oath: "May I be like these pieces, cut in half, if I don't follow through on the promise." God means business. The plan is going forward no matter what. (Later, in Exodus 2:24-25, we will see that the whole deliverance from Egypt business was all about God keeping this very promise to Abraham).

EXAMPLE IN JEREMIAH

In order to understand the meaning of the ritual, a story of a covenant between groups of humans is instructive. In Jeremiah 34, slave-owning Judeans set their slaves free by cutting a covenant of freedom — they set their slaves free when the city of Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian armies. As part of the covenant, the slave-owning authorities cut a calf in half and passed between the halves.

But when the Babylonian army suddenly departed (temporarily as it turned out), the slave owners re-enslaved the free people. Against the freed people's will, the slave owners proved faithless to the covenant they had cut.

Jeremiah 34:17–20 (NRSV)

¹⁷ Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸ And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts: ¹⁹ the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf ²⁰ shall be handed over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives. Their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth.

This scene shows that the symbolism of the covenant ritual is that the ones making the promise passes between dead animals as a ritual promise that should they be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant, they are to be cut in half just as the sacrificed animal.

In other words, when the Lord passed between the cleaved goat, sheep, ram and between the dead birds, the Lord was saying to Abram, "I promise to give you both descendants and the land. I pledge my very life — the life of God — as surety of this promise. If I fail to keep this promise, let me be slain just as the goat, the sheep and the ram were slain." Then God reveals to Abram the boundaries of the Promised Land, from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River (vs. 18-21).

SMOKING FIRE POT – Fire is a central element of theophany throughout biblical literature, e.g., the smoking pot and flaming torch that make a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17), the burning bush that appears to Moses (Exod. 3:2), the pillar of fire that leads Israel by night (Exod. 13:21–22), and the appearance of God in fire on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:18). Such fiery theophanies continue in the New Testament as well: Christ's appearance in the vision of John is with "eyes of fire" (Rev. 1:14; 2:18), and the descent of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by "tongues, as of fire" (Acts 2:3).

TROUBLE AHEAD

At sunset, Abram falls into a deep sleep and sees troubling visions (vs. 12). God then speaks to Abram in his sleep, telling him his descendants will be enslaved for four hundred years. God also tells him that the oppressors will be punished, and that Abram's descendants will be set free and depart with great riches (vs. 13-16). Does this remind you

of a story told about Abram's descendants? Are we being setup to for a future story to come? The next scroll of the Pentateuch? The Exodus!

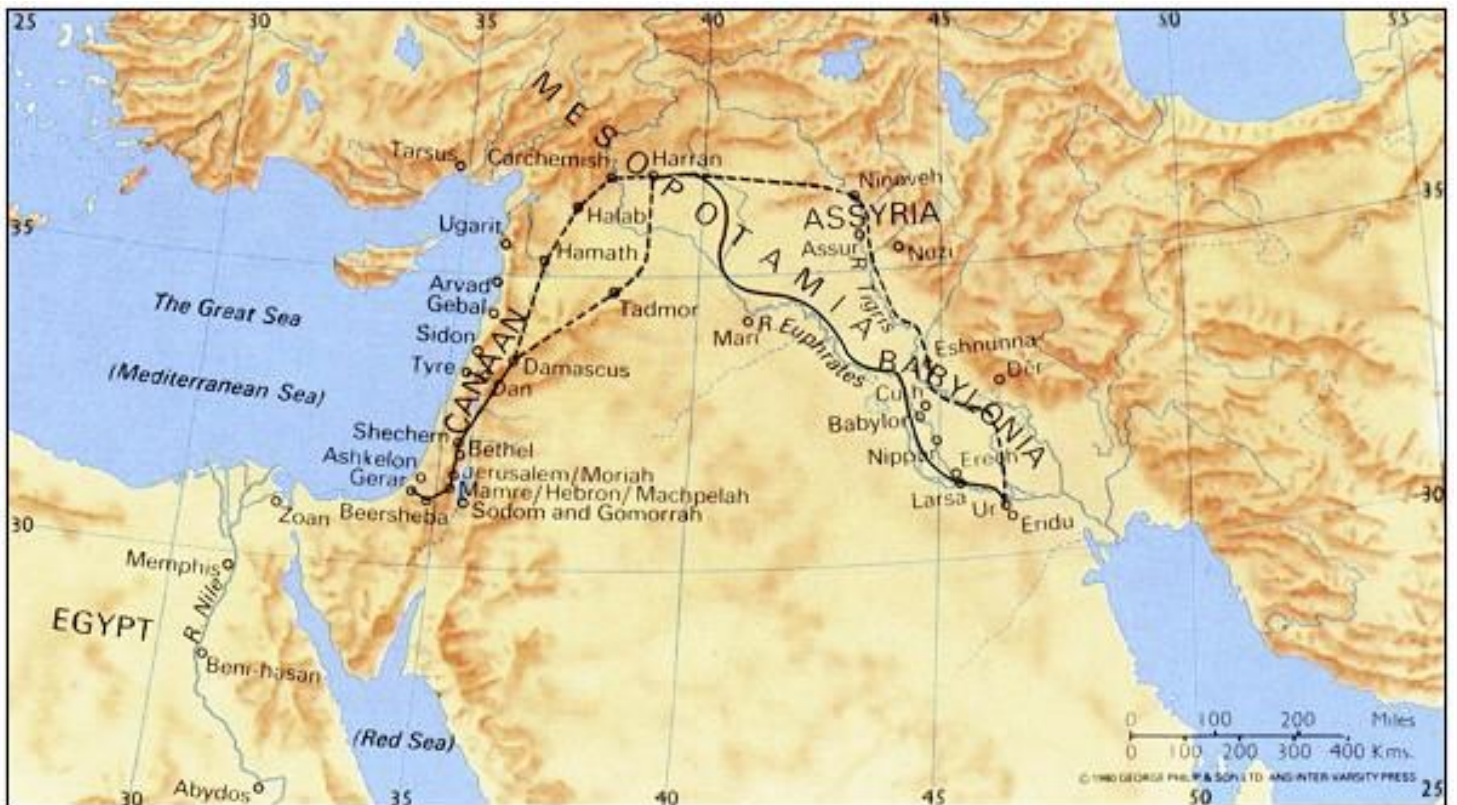
PEOPLE AND LAND

Abraham is promised that he will be fruitful and multiply—God will give him a brood of descendants. And he is promised a land for them to call their own, a land that would later be called a land of “milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8), shorthand for a paradise-like piece of property—like Eden. People and land. This promise to Abraham is not random. God is on the move to create a people and place for them in Canaan—just as God had placed Adam in Eden.

In Genesis 15:13-16 God told Abram about the Egyptian slavery that was to come upon the children of Israel and last for four hundred years. Upon leaving the land of oppression, Israel would receive great wealth as reparation for their slavery. Abram was assured that he would not see this suffering in his lifetime, but that he would live a long and rewarding life. Possession of the land was still far into the future and would only happen in the fourth generation of the sons of Abraham. God could not simply remove the people already living in the Promised Land, for their iniquity had not yet reached its full measure before Him. Abram was put into a deep asleep, and a smoking pot and fiery torch appeared and walked in-between the two sides of the torn apart animals.

The implication of the words in Genesis 15:18-19 makes it clear that it was God alone who passed between the pieces. The covenant was therefore unilateral, because Abram did not take part in the ceremony.

Abram is then assigned his territorial domain – it was a land that was large; indeed, it covered all the territory between a river in the center of Egypt (Nile) and the river Euphrates (touching the area of Haran from where the second leg of Abram's journey to the Promised Land originated).



THE BORDERS OF VERSE 18

In Genesis 15:18, God promises to Abraham that his descendants will one day possess the land of Canaan and its borders would extend from something called the River of Egypt in the South (that's not the Nile by the way; It's like a little brook or something) all the way up to the Euphrates River in the north. Now, those very precise borders are not mentioned again until, when? The reign of Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:21 below).

²¹ *Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.*

Why is this significant? It's significant because there is evidence that the bulk of Genesis was written during the monarchical period (concerned with the reign of Saul, David, and Solomon) and reflects a commentary on that time period.

Is Genesis a prediction of the time of Solomon or are Solomon's borders written into the story of Abraham by a writer living during the monarchy as a way of, let's say, accenting God's blessing on Solomon. In other words, is the description of the borders of the land in Genesis 15 really a description of a later geopolitical reality?

Scholars routinely think that this description of Israel's borders, you know, going from all the way south the River of Egypt all the way up to the Euphrates is just way too big. This never happened. It's what's called an idealized geography. It's what the Israelites saw as ideally the boundaries, even if historically Israel's boundaries were never quite this big. Regardless, the point is that if Genesis was written primarily during the monarchic period (Solomon's time) and reflects that geopolitical ideal, then it makes sense that these descriptions match up.

AMORITES – The first biblical reference to the Amorites is found in the Table of Nations in Gen 10. The Amorites are associated with various people groups belonging to the place and the person Canaan, who was the son of Ham, the son of Noah (Gen 10:15–18). This is the first of several lists in which the Amorites are associated with the people groups of Canaan. Early on in the patriarchal narratives the Amorites had a congenial relationship with the forefathers; Abraham was allied with Mamre the Amorite (Gen 14:13).

The hills east of the Jordan are ascribed to the Amorites, although their territory extended further—the men of Ai called Amorites (Josh 7:7), and the five kings of the Amorites located in Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon were conquered by the Israelites (Josh 10:1–27). Moses refers to the prowess of Sihon and the Amorites by referring to a poem written describing their defeat of the Moabites (Num 21:27–30). Hundreds of years after they had defeated the Amorites, the Israelites still remembered the land east of the Jordan as the land of “Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan” (1 Kgs 4:19).

The biblical writers portray the Amorites as a major hindrance for the Israelites in their effort to occupy Canaan in the time of both Moses and Joshua. The two prominent Amorite Kings, Sihon and Og, ruled the Transjordan. After refusing passage to the Israelites, Moses and the Israelites were forced to fight them. After conquering Hesbon (east of the north end of the Dead Sea), the Israelites conquered King Og further north at Bashan (Num 21:21–35). The Israelites celebrated these victories by speaking of them in the same way as they did the exodus (Psa 135:9–12; 136:10–22). Later, the prophet Amos reminds the Israelites of Yahweh's role in this same victory (Amos 2:9–10).

Joshua and the Israelites fought the Amorites on the CIS Jordan side, and the previously mentioned five kings of the Amorites were defeated. When the Israelites settled the land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were allotted the Transjordanian territory that once belonged to the Amorites (Josh 13:15–31). While, the Israelites were unable to expel the Amorites completely, they were able to subjugate them (Judg 1:34–35). Later on in their history, the Amorites had peace with the Israelites under the leadership of Samuel (1 Sam 7:14). They appear to have been mostly dissolved after the monarchy had been established (2 Sam 21:2). Solomon pressed them into forced labor when he ruled (1 Kgs 9:20–21).

Throughout the biblical account, the writers cast the Amorites as an immoral people group that were a potential snare to Israel. Before they entered the land, God warned the Israelites not to make covenants with them, intermarry with them, or engage in their religious practices (Exod 34:11–16). In his speech after the conquest, Joshua forced the Israelites to choose between the gods of the Amorites and Yahweh (Josh 24:15). The idolatry of the Amorites was used to vilify Ahab and Manasseh (1 Kgs 21:26; 2 Kgs 21:11). Finally in the exilic period, the Israelites were condemned by Ezra for intermarrying with Amorites (Ezra 9:1–15). Thus, the Amorites (usually coupled with their Canaanite counterparts) symbolized abomination in the sight of God.