

Historical Amraphel

about 500 years before the Exodus



The Torah tells us about the coalition of four Mesopotamian kings who invaded Canaan in the lifetime of our forefather Abraham, a short while after he settled there: “And it happened in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar; Arioch, king of Ellasar; Chedorlaomer, king of Elam; and Tidal, king of Goiim ...” (Bereishit 14:1). That Shinar is identical to Babylonia is already evident from the Tanach, Targum Onkelos, as well as from Hittite, Syrian and Egyptian sources in the later second millennium BCE.

In our search for historical Amraphel, we are going to determine the time in the history of Mesopotamia when such a coalition could take place and who those kings were. After the Akkadian Empire of Sargon and Naram-Sin, and an interval of Gutian interference, Mesopotamia was then dominated by the Third Dynasty of Ur. After its fall, circa 2000 BCE, Mesopotamia was divided between a series of kingdoms: Isin, Larsa, Babylonia, Eshnunna, Assyria, Mari, etc. This situation lasted until the end of 18th century BCE, when Hammurabi of Babylon eliminated most of his rivals, founding the First Babylonian Empire.

After the fall of the First Babylonian Empire in the 16th century BCE, Assyria and Babylon dominated Mesopotamia, sharing with none except briefly Mittani. Thus from circa 2000 to 1700 BCE, we have one and only period during which extensive power alliances were common in Mesopotamia and with its neighbors. Alliances of four or five kings were commonplace and modest then. What is more, it is only in this particular period that Elam intervened extensively in the politics of Mesopotamia - with its armies.

The most famous reference to these alliances is given us by one Mari letter: "There is no king stronger by himself - 10 or 15 kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, and so for Rim-Sin of Larsa, and so for Ibal-pi-el of Eshnunna, and so for Amutpiel of Qatna; but 20 kings follow Yarim-lim of Yamhad (Aleppo)." Based on this information we can narrow down our search to the Amorite Kingdoms period of Mesopotamia and the rise of the First Babylonian Empire.

Amorite Kingdoms (2000-1730 BCE)

Around 2000 BCE, when the power of Ur waned, the West Semitic Amorites came to occupy much of Mesopotamia, although it was Sumer's long-standing rivals to the east, the Elamites, who finally overthrew Ur. In the north, Assyria remained free of Amorite control until the very end of the 19th century BCE. This marked the end of city-states ruling empires, and the end of Sumerian dominance.

This period saw successively the emergence of two great powers in Lower Mesopotamia: the kingdom of Isin, which attempted to seek the succession of the kingdom of Ur after its fall and established the Dynasty of Isin, and the kingdom of Larsa, whose fall marks the end of the period.

Neither of these two kingdoms exercised an undeniable hegemony in Lower Mesopotamia, and they had to coexist with other less powerful kingdoms, while further north their influence was non-existent and gave way to other powerful political entities. The dynasties of this period have in common to be of Amorite origin, even if they quickly acculturated to the Mesopotamian traditions.

Babylonia was founded as an independent state by an Amorite chieftain named Sumuabum in the 19th century BCE. For over a century after its founding, it was a minor and relatively weak state, overshadowed by older and more powerful states. However, Hammurabi, the Amorite ruler of Babylon, turned Babylon into a major power and eventually conquered Mesopotamia and beyond. He is famous for his law code and conquests. He is also famous due to the large number of records that exist from the period of his reign.



The Amorite Kingdoms period of Mesopotamia, 18th century BCE

Hammurabi ascended to the throne in the 18th century BCE during a complex geopolitical situation. The powerful kingdom of Eshnunna controlled the upper Tigris River while Larsa controlled the river delta. To the east of Mesopotamia lay the powerful kingdom of Elam, which regularly invaded and forced tribute upon the small states of southern Mesopotamia.

In northern Mesopotamia, the Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad I, who had already inherited centuries old Assyrian colonies in Asia Minor, had expanded his territory into the Levant and central Mesopotamia. He seized the opportunity and occupied Mari, which controlled the caravan route between Anatolia and Mesopotamia. King Yahdun-Lim of Mari was assassinated by his own servants (possibly on Shamshi-Adad I's orders.)

The heir to the throne of Mari, Zimri-Lim, was forced to flee to Yamhad. With the annexation of Mari, Shamshi-Adad I had carved out a large empire encompassing much of Syria, Anatolia, and the whole of Upper Mesopotamia. Shortly after the death of Shamshi-Adad I (in the 16th regnal year of Hammurabi), Zimri-Lim returned from exile and was able to oust Yasmah-Adad from power with the help of Yarim-Lim, the king of Yamhad.

First Babylonian Empire (1730-1550 BCE)

In the 27th year of Hammurabi, the powerful kingdom of Elam, which straddled important trade routes across the Zagros Mountains, invaded the Mesopotamian plain. With allies among the plain states, Elam attacked the kingdom of Eshnunna, destroying several cities and imposing its rule on portions of the plain for the first time.

In order to consolidate its position, Elam tried to start a war between Hammurabi's Babylonian kingdom and the kingdom of Larsa. Hammurabi and the king of Larsa made an alliance when they discovered this duplicity and were able to crush the Elamites, although Larsa did not contribute greatly to the military effort. Angered by Larsa's failure to come to his aid, Hammurabi turned on that southern power, thus gaining control of the entirety of the Lower Mesopotamian plain by his 29th year.

As Hammurabi was assisted during the war in the south by his allies from the north such as Yamhad and Mari, the absence of soldiers in the north led to unrest. Continuing his expansion, Hammurabi turned his attention northward, quelling the unrest soon after crushing Eshnunna. Next the Babylonian armies conquered the remaining northern states, including Babylon's former ally Mari, although it is possible that the conquest of Mari was a surrender without any actual conflict.

Hammurabi entered a protracted war with Ishme-Dagan I of Assyria for control of Mesopotamia, with both kings making alliances with minor states in order to gain the upper hand. Eventually Hammurabi prevailed, ousting Ishme-Dagan I just before his own death. Mut-Ashkur, the new king of Assyria, was forced to pay tribute to Hammurabi.

In just a few years, Hammurabi succeeded in uniting all of Mesopotamia under his rule, founding the First Babylonian Empire. The Assyrian kingdom survived but was forced to pay tribute during his reign, and of the major city-states in the region, only Aleppo (Yamhad) and Qatna to the west in the Levant maintained their independence. Hammurabi died after 42 years in power and passed the reins of the empire on to his son Samsu-iluna, under whose rule the Babylonian empire quickly began to unravel.

Historical Amraphel

Zimri-Lim of Mari plays a significant role for the historians of today by which this figure contributed immense amounts of historical documents that help to understand the history of Hammurabi and the diplomacy of the First Babylonian Dynasty during his reign. His palace in Mari held an archive, known as Ebla, which included letters and other texts that provide insight into the alliance between the king and Hammurabi, as well as other leaders in the Syrian and Mesopotamian region. These documents survived because of Hammurabi who had burned the palace down thus burying the material and preserving it.

These historical records show that prior to his conquest of Mesopotamia, Hammurabi of Babylon had formed powerful alliances with Rim-Sin I of Larsa, Yarim-Lim I of Yamhad, Amud-pi-el of Qatanum, Ibal-pi-el II of Eshnunna, Zimri-Lim of Mari and most importantly Siwe-Palar-Khuppak of Elam (and his brother and successor Kuduzulush I) to oppose the rise of Assyria which had own alliances with Charchemish, Hassum, Urshu and Qatna. The allied kings were able to control much of Mesopotamia and Levant, exacting tribute from the subordinate kings and other vassals.



The First Babylonian Empire, 17th century BCE

Let us see how this historical information can be linked to the biblical account:

- Hammu-rabi is the East Semitic Akkadian name. His native West Semitic Amorite equivalent was Ammu-rapi ("the kinsman is a healer"), itself from Ammu ("paternal kinsman") and Rapi ("healer"). The Hebrew version of this name is Am-Raphe or the biblical Amraphel.
Hammurabi of Babylon is the biblical Amraphel, king of Shinar.
- Rim-Sin is the Akkadian name, meaning Servant of [the moon god] Sin. He was also known under his Sumerian name Eri-Aku. The Hebrew variant of this name is Eri-Ach or the biblical Arioch.
Rim-Sin I of Larsa is the biblical Arioch, king of Ellasar.
- Kudu[r]-zulush is the Elamite name, meaning Servant of Zulush. Most likely it was transliterated into Hebrew as Chedor-laomer (Servant of Omer). **This would make Kuduzulush I of Elam into the biblical Chedorlaomer, king of Elam.**
- The identity of Tidal, king of Goiim, is less clear. But it could be Ibal-pi-el II of Eshnunna, or some other ally of Hammurabi assigned over soldiers of other nations taking part in the coalition. Let's leave this question open.

Abraham in Canaan

We can now historically define the family of Abraham as the native Akkadians (Kasdim), descendants of biblical Arpachshad, fleeing away from the harsh political and religious realities of the idol worship soaked Mesopotamia, ruled by the powerful Amorite kings. At first they moved to Harran (just north of the Amorite kingdom of Yamhad) and then to Canaan where they could start a new life without fear of persecution. Shortly after arriving in Canaan, they were forced to descend to Egypt due to the famine.



Statue of Neferhotep I from his first naos found in Karnak, now in the Egyptian Museum.

During Egypt's Second Intermediate period (Dynasties 13-17), c. 1760-1550 BCE, central authority broke down, allowing Semitic-speaking pastorals to infiltrate Egypt. Ample evidence of Levantine peoples was discovered in the northeastern delta sites, demonstrating that the delta during 14th-17th Dynasties was dominated by foreigners of Syro-Canaanite ethnicity.

One of the last pharaohs, who still controlled Egypt in those times, was the pharaoh of the 13th Dynasty, **Neferhotep I**, who ruled for 11 years from Memphis and Rowaty, near Avaris, some time between 1747 and 1694 BCE, depending on a scholarly opinion. A stela bearing Neferhotep I's name is of great importance to archeologists and historians alike as it enables a concordance between the Egyptian and Near Eastern chronologies.

This stela depicts the "Governor of Byblos, Yantinu ... who was begotten by Governor Yakin" seated upon a throne, in front of which are the nomen and prenomen of Neferhotep I. This is

significant because a "King of Byblos Yantin-Ammu" is known from the archives of Mari who is most likely the same person as the Governor of Byblos Yantinu of the stela.

Byblos was a semi-autonomous Egyptian governorate at the time and "the king of Byblos" must be the Semitic king of the city ruling it in the name of the pharaoh. The archives of Mari predominantly date to the reign of the last king of the city, Zimri-Lim, a contemporary of Hammurabi who ultimately sacked Mari. This provides the synchronism: **Neferhotep I – Yantinu – Zimri-Lim – Hammurabi**.

If this historical synchronism is accurate, then Neferhotep I could be the pharaoh who had a memorable encounter with Abraham and Sarah during their stay in Egypt and Abraham's sojourn in Canaan likely began in the second half of the 18th century BCE. Remarkably, rabbinic chronology, based on the 2nd century c.e. Seder Olam Rabbah, also gives us a similar date, 1736 BCE.

Code of Hammurabi



The Code of Hammurabi is a Babylonian legal text composed in the 18th century BCE. It is the longest, best organized, and best-preserved legal text from the ancient Near East. It is written in the Old Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. The primary copy of the text is inscribed on a basalt or diorite stele 2.25 m (7.4 ft) tall. The text itself was copied and studied by Mesopotamian scribes for over a millennium. The stele now resides in the Louvre Museum.

The top of the stele features an image in relief of Hammurabi with Shamash, the Babylonian god of sun and god of justice. Below the relief are about 4,130 lines of cuneiform text: one fifth contains a prologue and epilogue in poetic style, while the remaining four fifths contain what are generally called the laws, 282 in total. In the prologue, Hammurabi claims to have been granted his rule by the gods "to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak". The laws are casuistic, expressed as "if ... then" conditional sentences. Their scope is broad, including, for example, criminal law, family law, property and commercial laws.

This code is a shining light on the laws and traditions of the ancient Near East about 500 years before the Exodus. It illuminates and explains many details from the lives of our forefathers and creates a framework for a comparative analysis of the laws of the Torah.

For example, we know that Abraham was told he would have a son of his own. But, after a long wait, Sarah tried to move things along, and persuaded him to have a child by her maidservant Hagar. Two generations later we find the same phenomenon in Jacob's family. Unable to bear sons to Jacob, Rachel gave him her maidservant Bilhah to bear him sons on her account. Then, ceasing from bearing, Leah did likewise through her maidservant Zilpah.

These were not arbitrary acts. This was normal and normative in the first half of the second millennium BCE, when a wife might come with her own maidservant, precisely to serve as an insurance policy against possible inability to have children. This reality was reflected in the Code of Hammurabi:

§§146-147. If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants. If she has not borne him children, then her mistress may sell her for money.

§170. If his wife bear sons to a man, and his maid-servant have borne sons, and the father while still living says to the children whom his maid-servant has borne: "My sons", and he count them with the sons of his wife; if then the father die, then the sons of the wife and of the maid-servant shall divide the paternal property in common. The son of the wife is to partition and choose.

Topics in Biblical History and Archeology

Below are some other selected laws from the Code of Hammurabi:

- §3. False charges - If any one brings an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death (presumption of innocence).
- §8. Theft - If any one steal cattle or sheep, or a donkey, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold therefor; if they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death.
- §21. Breaking into the house - If any one breaks into a house to steal, he shall be put to death before that hole and be buried.
- §132. Infidelity - If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about another man, but she is not caught with the other man, she shall jump into the river for her husband (trial by ordeal: the accused is presumed to be innocent, if he/she can pass the ordeal unhurt).
- §§137-138. Divorce - If a man wishes to separate from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. If his wife has borne him no children, he shall give her the amount of her purchase money and the dowry which she brought from her father's house.
- §§196-200. Assault - If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. If he breaks another man's bone, his bone shall be broken. If a man knocks out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.
- §244, 251. Damages - If any one hires an ox or a donkey, and a lion kills it in the field, the loss is upon its owner. If an ox is a goring ox, and it is shown that he is a gorer, and he does not bind his horns, or fasten the ox up, and the ox gore a free-born man and kill him, the owner shall pay one-half a mina in money.
- §282. Slaves - If a slave say to his master: "You are not my master," if they convict him, his master shall cut off his ear.

Hammurabi is best remembered today as a lawgiver whose code served as a standard for later laws but, in his time, he was known as the ruler who united Mesopotamia under a single governing body in the same way Sargon of Akkad had done centuries before. He linked himself with great imperialists like Sargon by proclaiming himself "the mighty king, king of Babylon, king of the Four Regions of the World, king of Sumer and Akkad"; and claiming that his legitimate rule was ordained by the will of the gods.

Unlike Sargon the Great, however, whose multi-ethnic empire was continually torn by internecine strife, Hammurabi ruled over a kingdom whose people enjoyed relative peace following his conquest. It is a testimony to his rule that, unlike Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin from earlier times, Hammurabi did not have to re-conquer cities and regions repeatedly but, having brought them under Babylonian rule, was, for the most part, interested in improving them and the standard of living of the inhabitants.

Sources

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