

Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel

herausgegeben von

Prof. Dr. Manfred Oeming
und
Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. mult. Gerd Theißen
(Heidelberg)

Band 28

LIT

A King like All the Nations?

Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Bible and History

edited by

Manfred Oeming and Petr Sláma

LIT

Cover illustration: King David (ŽMP 63.162), artist unknown, end of 19th century, oil on wood, 40 × 31.5 cm, by courtesy of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Acknowledgments:

The editors of this volume have appreciated lively and helpful communication with the authors of the individual chapters. We owe special thanks to Verena Hug in Heidelberg and Jáchym Šenkyřík in Prague for their manifold assistance with editing the book. Besides, Jáchym Šenkyřík and Frank Zeidler helped with the indices and the bibliography. Ridgley Beckett in Atlanta, GA, and Professor Graeme Auld in Edinburgh, Scotland, kindly read the English chapters written by non-native speakers. Available until the last moment for changes, Petr Kadlec attended to the typesetting.

The respective chapters of this volume have been peer-reviewed by the editors of this volume and by Professors Dr. Axel Graupner and Dr. Konrad Schmid.

This volume as a whole is a result of the research and editorial activity funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR P401/12/G168 'History and Interpretation of the Bible'.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-643-90674-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

© **LIT VERLAG** GmbH & Co. KG Wien,
Zweigniederlassung Zürich 2015
Klosbachstr. 107
CH-8032 Zürich
Tel. +41 (0) 44-251 75 05 Fax +41 (0) 44-251 75 06
E-Mail: zuerich@lit-verlag.ch <http://www.lit-verlag.ch>

Distribution:

In the UK: Global Book Marketing, e-mail: mo@centralbooks.com
In North America: International Specialized Book Services, e-mail: orders@isbs.com
In Germany: LIT Verlag Fresenstr. 2, D-48159 Münster
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 32 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99, E-mail: vertrieb@lit-verlag.de
In Austria: Medienlogistik Pichler-ÖBZ, e-mail: mlo@medien-logistik.at
e-books are available at www.litwebshop.de

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9. Abraham: The Blessed One among the Kings of the Nations

Observations on the Role of the Kings in Genesis 14

– Martin Prudký –

This volume deals with the topic of monarchy as a phenomenon in ancient Israel's history and poses the question of what this phenomenon is by looking at specific aspects of the portrayal of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah that are picked up and used by the biblical authors.

This chapter is devoted to biblical narratives that speak of the 'pre-monarchical period' – namely, the stories of the patriarchs and of Abraham, in particular. In materials in the book of Genesis in which Israel itself is represented by the individual figures of the forefathers, the principal conceptions of the basic institutions and offices that are constitutive for Israel's historical journey are doubtless reflected or even directly articulated. Although the stories of the forefathers are 'at the beginning' in the chronology of biblical narratives and significantly pre-date the 'time of the kings', they undoubtedly were set forth and molded on the basis of experiences from the monarchical period. Their authors, redactors, and editors worked at the end of this historical era or even later and wrote from a perspective radically transformed by the Babylonian Exile.¹ Although the materials about the patriarchs – and the materials of the entire Torah – do not recount historical narratives about the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, they contain a number of passages that clearly mirror and reflect phenomena in these kingdoms.²

It is significant that the *prototypical figures* who dominate the primary foundational stories in the traditions of Israel are *not kings*. Neither Abraham nor Jacob, his sons, nor Moses are kings, and they do not found ruling dynasties.³ This fact differentiates biblical materials from legendary tales about the origin

¹ For the literary history of these materials and the history of research into their development, see, for example, Gertz (Hrsg.) 2006, 208–210 u. 262–267; Römer – Macchi – Nihan (Hrsg.) 2013, 200–214; Brueggemann 2013, 47; Schmid 1999. The narrative of Genesis 14 as a whole is judged to be late post-exilic. See Westermann 1981, 226–227: 'Die Zusammenfügung von V. 1–11 mit 12–24 ist »Schreibtischarbeit« aus der spätnachexilischen Zeit, anderen spätjüdischen Schriften vergleichbar.' (227).

² Topographic data constitute one of a number of domains in which these phenomena manifest themselves. See Deurloo 1990, 48–62; Deurloo 1993, 95–112; Jericke 2013.

³ A noteworthy passage in this respect is Genesis 23:6, where – according to the Masoretic text – the Chittites say to Abraham: נָשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה בְּתוֹכֵנוּ ('you are a mighty prince among us', NRSV; 'the elect of God among us,' JPS). However, the Septuagint has a variant form: βασιλεὺς παρὰ θεοῦ εἶ σὺ ἐν ἡμῖν ('you are the king of God among us'; Septuaginta Deutsch 'Du bist König von Gott her bei uns'). Yet, in the Septuagint, when the Hebrew term נָשִׂיא is used in this sense, it is usually translated ἄρχων ('ruler'. See Gen 25:16, 34:2, Exod 16:22, 22:27, 34:31, 35:27, e.g.).

and legitimation of other civilizations in the Ancient Near Eastern context.⁴ Here, we may detect a basic emphasis of Israel's constitutive traditions: the 'sons of Abraham' – the Israelites – can live as a community of 'people of YHWH' *without a king*, unsupported by the institution of their own monarchy; for example, when under foreign rule or in diaspora. According to the Torah, the institution of the monarchy is not necessary for them to be 'the Lord's people'.⁵

Of course, at the same time, it is true that both the patriarchs of Israel and Moses (as well as other formative figures in the primary stories of Israel) *meet up with kings* and are confronted by them on their journeys. In the course of their mission, the figures of Israel's forefathers occasionally contend with foreign kings as enemies (and in some cases, Israel's enemies are represented by their kings). However, the patriarchs sometimes treat the kings as allies or 'teammates'.

9.1 Choice of Text, Approach, and Method

Abram's intervention into a monumental battle of kings in Genesis 14 is one of the most notable stories of this type. With respect to the number of the kingly figures who appear in this story, this biblical passage is quite extraordinary, not only among the patriarchal narratives. A total of ten figures are addressed as 'kings' and the range of their kingdoms is given here.

In the history of modern biblical research, the text of Genesis 14 has been explored using a variety of approaches and methods and still remains controversial material.⁶ This is due to the fact that this text is singular among the rest of the materials in the Abraham cycle. For instance, it contains a number of personal and geographical names, which gives historical-critical research an opportunity to identify possible connections to external realities in various spheres of the historical context. This text also provides useful material for analysis from a literary and literary-historical point of view; it includes inconsistencies, changing genres and perspectives, elements of repetition, and other phenomena that may be judged to be evidence of different literary sources, gradual shifts in tradition, and enhancement of the text and its form. This especially pertains to the

⁴ This differentiation is closely connected to a specific conception of the kingdom and its method of legitimation in Israel and is especially related to the religious symbolic plane and the process of forming and transforming materials about 'divine Kingship'. See Lambert 1988, 124–143.

⁵ YHWH himself, not the king, is the giver and guarantor of the entire set of laws – of the legislative traditions (the Torah) – and of their grounding in the institution of the 'covenant'. See. Exod 19:5–6: 'Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

⁶ Ina Willi-Plein sums this up succinctly in this statement: 'Gen 14 ist ein sonderbares Intermezzo innerhalb der Abrahamsgeschichte. Es war und ist in der Forschung heftig umstritten.' Willi-Plein 2011, 44. The history of existing research is documented and discussed in detail in Granerød 2010.

episode in verses 18–20 in which Melchizedek appears. Yet, particularly in recent decades, this text has also been reevaluated in its final form as an integral unit. Likewise, the intertextual cohesion of its individual parts and of its literary compositional structure within the Abraham cycle has been studied.⁷

In the following paragraphs, I will concentrate on *the motif of kings*, as it is spoken of in Genesis 14, and will especially focus on *the function* that this motif has in the given narrative. It is obvious that the term מֶלֶךְ ('king') is an important motif in this text. It is not only used here as an attribute of specific figures; it also designates the actors in an absolute sense and even co-produces a personal name for one of the key figures in the final scene. In this story, this term has the role of a *Leitwort*, in the sense of Martin Buber's definition.⁸ In the process of tracing this motif in the given text, I will comment on its literary-compositional role and its intertextual links within the broader literary context of the Abraham cycle of narratives (Genesis 11:27–25:11). Consequently, a synchronous perspective will be implemented to a pronounced degree.

9.2 Genesis 14 as a whole

From the standpoint of literary genres, the textual unit of Genesis 14 is a standard *narrative*. If we ask about the function of a specific motif – in our case, the motif of 'king/kingdoms' – in such a textual unit, it first is necessary to orient ourselves in the given material as a whole.

9.2.1 Outer demarcations

The literary unit of this narrative is clearly demarcated by the context. The first verse clearly creates a new paragraph with its form וַיְהִי ('and it happened') and the temporal adverbial phrase בַּיָּמִי ('in the days of...'). That introduces *a new episode* into series of Abram narratives, which is separated from the preceding story by a change of scene – a change of time and of the characters involved.

The end of the chapter is separated from the following section in a similar way. The next story does not directly pick up on Genesis 14 at all; rather, it starts a new narrative unit. The first verse of Genesis 15 expresses this fact with the formula אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה ('after these things') and by introducing a new scene.⁹

⁷ So Willi-Plein 2011: 'Die in Gen 14 verwendeten literarischen Formen ... und der durchaus in sich einleuchtend strukturierte und plausible Handlungsverlauf sprechen für die Einheitlichkeit der Erzählung' (50).

⁸ Buber 1936, 211–261: 'Unter Leitwort ist ein Wort oder ein Wortstamm zu verstehen, der sich innerhalb eines Textes, einer Textfolge, eines Textzusammenhangs sinnreich wiederholt: wer diesen Wiederholungen folgt, dem erschliesst oder verdeutlicht sich ein Sinn des Textes oder wird auch nur eindringlicher offenbar.' (211).

⁹ There is no disagreement among commentators on this demarcation of literary units. For a comprehensive discussion, see Wenham 1998, 304–305.

9.2.2 Inner subdivisions

Inwardly, this unit is obviously organized into several particular sequences (*scenes*). First, we may divide the whole chapter into two parts, verses 1–16 (three short battle reports) and verses 17–24 (the meeting of Abram with the king of Sodom and the king of Salem). These two main parts are further subdivided internally.

9.3 Verses 1–16

The first part is pure *narrative*; it does not contain any direct speech. Everything is presented entirely from the narrator's perspective in the form of a distanced description of events (in the sense of *Er-Erzählung*).¹⁰

Verses 1–3 are *an exposition* of the story. They introduce the scene and the main participants in the narrative. At the very beginning, the *Leitwort* מֶלֶךְ ('king') is heard nine times, always in relation to the city or area under the control of specific figures: Amraphel, 'the king of Shinar'; Arioch, 'the king of Ellasar'; Chedorlaomer, 'the king of Elam'; Bera, 'the king of Sodom'; Birsha, 'the king of Gomorrah'; and so forth. Here, the rulers of kingdoms or cities, of political bodies, or, as the case may be, of territorial and population centres are identified as *kings*. In this context, 'king' is an attribute of a person who rules a particular city or region in a sovereign way: 'the lord of the city or land'.¹¹

For the moment, we may leave aside the question of whether this passage deals with entities that are identifiable in the external world or with figures from the 'world of the narrative'. The specific names of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that primarily are symbols of evil and sin in the biblical tradition, are telling from this viewpoint: *Bera* means '[the one who is] in evil' or '[the one who acts] through evil', and *Birsha* signifies '[the one who is] in wickedness' or '[the one who acts] through sinfulness/wickedness'. Likewise, some of the geographical names in this narrative serve as terms that participate in the semantic level of the text: that is, as *motifs*.¹²

A massive confrontation of two coalitions of kings is included in the exposition of the story: four kings of great kingdoms to the East have affiliated themselves against four – or as the case may be, five – kings from the region of the Jordan

¹⁰ Graphic chart of the text-composition (outline and translation) is available at the author's web: <http://www.etf.cuni.cz/~prudky/tbltxt/Gen14-Kings.pdf> [May 1, 2014].

¹¹ The last of the coalitions of great kings appears to be an exception. *Tidal*, who is identified as מֶלֶךְ גּוֹיִם 'king of nations' (so KJV). However, most English translations also incorporate this name as a *nomen proprium geographicum*: 'and King Tidal of Goiim' (so RSV, NRSV, ASV, NAB, and JST, among others).

¹² The ingenious interplay of the archaic setting of the 'narrated world' that is associated with fictional elements (personal names in the role of the story's motifs) and intertextual connections with the whole corpus of the Abraham stories is one of the literary devices of this narrative. See Willi-Plein 2011, 50.

Valley, which is cryptically given the enigmatic name *Siddim* and identified as ‘the Salt Sea’ (יַם הַמֶּלַח).¹³ In addition to external connotations connected with the unusual natural givens of the area – whose rarities the story makes use of (see the role of the asphalt well in verse 10) – we should not miss hearing its assonance with the fully exposed (or even overexposed) motif of ‘king’ (phonetically, *melech* and *melach*).

The name of the second scene in this story (which is introduced in verse 17) indicates that an effect which is purposeful rather than accidental is at stake here. This scene is not only named factually, but also formally, in an analogical way. Again, it has to do with a ‘valley’, which is first designated by an ambiguous name (*Shaveh*) and then identified by its relation to the key motif.¹⁴ In the second case (verse 17), it is not enough to make an allusion or another type of indirect reference; the location of the story is named directly by the key motif using the *Leitwort* ‘the King’s Valley’ (עֵמֶק הַמֶּלֶךְ).

What is actually said about the kings in verses 1–3? These sentences contain little mention of the kings except for proper names, the refrain-like term מֶלֶךְ (‘the king’), and a few verbs that describe their behaviour. The verbs used in Genesis 14 imply that at least in this narrative, the primary activity of the kings is to ‘be in league with one other’ (חָבַר) and ‘to make war’ (עָשָׂה מִלְחָמָה).

Verse 3 could smoothly link up with verse 8, which, in the story about the war in the Valley of Siddim, introduces the main verbs in the narrative and describes the preparations for battle, saying that the coalition of the five local kings went out and lined up for battle.

Before these sentences ring out in the narrative, we hear verses 4–7 like a *parenthesis*. The narrator shares *retrospective information* with us regarding the fact that in the past, local kings from the Jordanian Pentapolis had served for twelve years as vassals for designated great kings, but they rebelled in the thirteenth year.¹⁵ Thus, the next year, Chedorlaomer and ‘the kings who were with him’ set out on a vindictive campaign. However, before we hear about the battle with the king of Sodom and his allies that we expect, the retrospective insertion continues in a short embedded narrative that is presented in four brief sentences (the main sentences with verbs in *wayyiqtol* forms – the so called *narratives*).¹⁶ We get to hear that Chedorlaomer’s coalition of kings ‘slaughtered’ a tetrad of

¹³ Jericke 2013, Art. 3.25 Siddimtal, 117–118.

¹⁴ Jericke 2013, Art. 3.40 Schawetal, 140–141.

¹⁵ The sentences in verses 4a and 4b are formulated as ‘compound nominal sentences’ with a fronted temporal phrase followed by a verb in the *qatal*-form. For a classification of types of sentences and the corresponding function of their verbal forms, see Schneider 1989, § 44.4; Talstra 1982, 26–38.

¹⁶ Tetrad-structures are characteristic in this narrative, not only for listing figures or other elements, but also for the composition of the main sentences of several parts in the form of 2 plus 2. (See verses 5b-7c and 11a-12b.)

powerful enemies in the land of Canaan: first, the mythical monster warriors, the Rephaim, and then, the whole territory of the Amalekites and Amorites. In short, Chedorlaomer's coalition of kings moved through the region 'slaughtering and slaughtering', not only 'common peoples', but even legendary enemies who are conceived of as types in the biblical tradition and are tinted with an aura of invincible power.¹⁷

From the viewpoint of the narrative's chronology, the whole insertion in verses 4–7 is a *flashback*. At the beginning, the narrator 'jumps back in time' in the chronology of his narration. He shares what he needs to say about the past, and at the end of his excursus, he again returns to the moment when he deviated from the course of the story (in verse 3, which verse 8a picks up on again).

What is the function of this *retrospective excursus* at precisely this point in the narrative? What the listener can expect from the kings resounds unambiguously in the main sentences of this insertion because this excursus is addressed to the hearer, not to the king of Sodom nor to any of the characters in the story. The verbs express this: 'Chedorlaomer came, and the kings, who were with them', and 'they slaughtered'; 'and they turned back and came again' and 'slaughtering'. Even in places like En-Mishpat (which is 'the source of law' or 'the spring of fair and righteous decisions'), they 'slaughtering the whole territory of the Amalekites' (verse 7c).¹⁸ The narrator's insertion evokes *this image* even before the start of the battle, but it is fully corroborated in the course of the campaign against the coalition of the 'king of Sodom' in the next story. The great kings will *slaughter* their enemies and *plunder* their property. However, in the end, they will be *slaughtered* and *robbed* themselves. In the world of this narrative, nothing else belongs to kings' image.

At this point, it is already possible to gloss the fact that in other stories in the Abraham cycle, kings are also described as 'powerful rulers' who use their might to appropriate what belongs to other people, both property and personal freedom. Their 'royal power' threatens the freedom and life of others. That dynamic is well represented in the ambiguous story of the 'threatened mother' Sarai (at the hands of the pharaoh in Genesis 12:10–20 and in Abimelech's company at Gerar in Genesis 21:22–34). It is part of the logic of the king's role that the kings in these stories function repressively, in an usurping way, and, as it were, unintentionally, involuntarily, indirectly, and without personal effort – simply owing to their office. That is just the way *kings* are.

¹⁷ The Septuagint translates the proper name of *Rephaim* using the descriptive term γίγαντες ('the mighty ones', 'the giants').

¹⁸ In his recent monograph, Detlef Jericke translates this name as 'Wasserquelle der Rechtsprechung' ('water well of the proclamation of justice'), and in addition to a critical appraisal of the possible identification with the locality of Kadesh(-Barnea?), he shows that Genesis 14:7 establishes as connection with sections of Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 1. Jericke 2013, 125–126.

Regarding the course of the conflict involving the five local kings who rose up against the four-king coalition led by Chedorlaomer, only the preparation for battle is recounted in Genesis 14 (in two sentences in verse 8a,b): ‘he set out ... and lined up for battle’. Thereafter, the narrator only refers to a ‘flight from battle’ and the ‘fall’ of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah into asphalt wells. It did not need to be explicitly said that the coalition of the four great kings ‘slaughtered’ the local kings (וַיִּכּוּ; see verses 5b and 7c). It was sufficient to only briefly mention the results: ‘and they took all of the goods ... and went’ (verse 11a, b).

The end of this sequence could be *the conclusion* of the whole story. If the narrative were to end here, it would be a story about a successful vindictory expedition by four powerful kings against five rebellious vassals. Perhaps the narrator could even have ended his exposé with a general warning about the fact that it is actually better to serve powerful kings loyally and to not oppose them, or with the observation that the fame and power of King Chedorlaomer and his coalition partners continued to increase and flourish.

However, the narrative does not end this way. From a formal perspective, the narrative continues after verse 11 without making further changes in the main phrases (articulated in narrative sentences that are interrupted by informative glosses in nominal clauses in only a few places).¹⁹ Of course, verse 12 is not just a continuation of the narrative. Using a verbatim repetition of the main verbs ‘and they took ... and went’ (verse 11a, b), it creates *an effective reiteration*, an explicit cultivation of connections, and an explicatory apposition. Thus, the meaning of the statement that ‘they took the goods and left’ is made clear by the subsequent report that ‘they took Lot ... because he was living in Sodom’ (verse 12a, b, c).

This incident moves Abram into the story. So far, the kings’ battle had not concerned him. However, at his quarters by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron (v. 13c), Abram heard about the capture of his brother’s son Lot and immediately rushed forth to liberate him. Here, the context preceding the narrative is important for understanding the chain of events. In chapter 13, Abram and Lot’s journey together diverged, and according to his choice, Lot went to live *in Sodom* (Genesis 13:10–11), while Abraham settled *in Hebron* (Genesis 13:18). Hebron is *Judah’s old royal city*. (According to 2 Samuel 2:1–4, David was anointed king there.) Nevertheless in this narrative, Lot – who, in a number of stories, accompanies Abram as a descendent of the ‘house of Terah’, which Abram ‘came out’ of – should still be seen as the representative of the other peoples. This signifies that through Abraham, all the tribes of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

¹⁹ The sentences in verses 12c, 13c, and 13d all have the same form: i.e. a fronted nominal subject which consists of ‘And he/they’ plus a nominal clause.

Although Abram also creates a brotherhood of four allies that seems to be structurally analogous to the coalition of kings, his military capacity has a Gideon-like nature (Judges 7:2–3). At the very end of the narrative, Abram retrospectively reports that from the very beginning, his intervention was under an oath that he made to YHWH, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth (verse 22b). Thus, this undertaking represented a ‘sacred conflict’ a ‘war of YHWH’. Although the narrator does not speak of God’s direct intervention in the battle in verses 14–15, the sovereignty and unequivocal nature of Abram’s victory over the surreal superiority of the great kings suggests that the narrative uses elements of the ‘*holy war*’ genre here.²⁰

Abram’s involvement in Lot’s welfare ends with his ‘slaughtering’ the four great kings (וַיִּכָּם). He pursued them all the way to a place north of Damascus. He cleared them from ‘the land’, and then, he returned everything – explicitly also Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people (verse 16). The formulation of the last verse is chiasmic in structure. This has the effect of bringing about a *concluding retardation* that emphasizes the outcome: ‘Abram *returned* all the goods; yes, Lot and his goods he also *returned*.’

9.4 Verses 17–24

The second part of this narrative (verses 17–24) is dissimilar in a number of features. Except for the first sentence and an insertion about Abram’s meeting with Melchizedek, it consists only of *dialogue* between the king of Sodom and Abram. After returning from battle, the king of Sodom proposes a way to divide the spoils to Abram, and Abram rejects his proposal. With this, the whole narrative ends abruptly, or as it were, in silence.

Rather surprisingly, however, an episode with Melchizedek is inserted into this final scene (verses 18–20). In addition to its introduction and a direct speech (a two-sentence monologue in verses 19c–20a), this section also includes two narrative sentences (verses 19a and 20b). Since the beginning of critical biblical research, the striking insertion of the episode with Melchizedek has often been described as being illogical, unoriginal, and secondary. We will return to this matter below.

9.4.1 Abram’s encounter with the king of Sodom and the king of Salem

After his return from intervening against the coalition of the great kings – after he has cut them down in a Gideon-like way and has brought back all of the captive people and plundered goods – Abram meets up with *two kings* (verse 16). Both of these men are explicitly identified as ‘kings’ by the standard formula that associates the title of king with a specific domain (‘King [of] plus a city name’). Notably, both of these kings are somewhat strange or even mysterious.

²⁰ Kang 1989.

9.4.2 The King of Sodom

The first figure is the ‘king of Sodom’ (verse 17). He is mentioned only by his title; he remains anonymous in this part of the story. The sentence that brings this king onto the scene (again?) is formulated in a way that is similar to verse 8a, where the king of Sodom ‘went out’ to battle at the head of his coalition. Here, however, he ‘goes out’ to greet the victorious Abram.

Someone listening to this story may be left in doubt about whether this is a figure who is already known from the previous story – hence, the king *Bera* (verse 2) who led the battle in the Valley of Siddim (verses 3, 8, 10) – or if his anonymous successor is involved here. Although it was said that Bera fell into an asphalt well in the Valley of Siddim (verse 10), it is not explicitly said that he perished.

It is not suitable to the nature of the text to speculate – quasi-historically and quasi-rationally – that Bera and Birsha only hid in the asphalt cistern and thereby, saved their lives from Chedorlaomer, while the rest of the people fled to the mountains. The story does not need rationalistic elucidation at this point. On the contrary, a certain mysteriousness, an elusive nature, and even an epiphanic dimension characterizes Abram’s encounter with the two kings in the ‘Kings’ Valley’. Therefore, in some sense, these figures are *surreal*.

In this part of the narrative, the listener may easily perceive the king of Sodom to be *an enigmatic figure*, perhaps coming from ‘the world beyond the grave’. We will return to the profile and role of this figure below. However, before his dialogue with Abram is heard, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, is introduced onto the scene.

9.4.3 Melchizedek, the King of Salem

A number of commentators from the modern era suggest that verses 18–20 are *a forced insertion* into the existing context of Abram’s encounter with the king of Sodom.²¹ The problem is that these verses do not follow up on the preceding sequence of main sentences that have *wayyiqtol*-forms (narrative forms). Moreover, they bring a totally new figure; the short sequence deals with him onto the scene without any preparation. This interrupts the flow of action between the scenes in verses 17 and 21–24, which otherwise constitute an integral whole. This description of the problem is valid, but our assessment may be different, especially if we consider the syntax and composition of the text.

First of all, the first clause of verse 18 and the main sentence of verse 17 constitute a *chiasmus*:

²¹ e.g. von Rad 1949, 150 [English edition: 179]; Westermann 1981, 223: ‘Innerhalb von 12–24 ist 18–20 ein ursprünglich selbstständiger Bestandteil, der den Zusammenhang zwischen V. 17 und 21–24 unterbricht. A summary and evaluation of existing research is provided by Granerød 2010, 156–175.

וַיֵּצֵא מֶלֶךְ-סֹדִם לִקְרֹאתוֹ 17a And he went out,
[namely] the King of Sodom,
to meet him...

וּמֶלֶךְ-צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיֵּין 18a But Melchizedek, the King of Salem,
brought out bread and wine...

The use of this literary figure means that verse 18a must begin with a nominal construction (with a fronted subject) and not with a verb in the *wayyiqtol*-form.²² These sentences' relationship to one another is *disjunctive*, presumably in a contrastive sense ('but Melchizedek ...').²³ That is conveyed here by the use of different forms/meanings of the verb **צא** (*qal* 'to go out' versus *hiphil* 'to bring out').²⁴ In this way – through the formulation of a type of word play – the appearances of the two kings in the final paragraph of this narrative are linked and *synchronized* with one another.²⁵

Other elements of cohesion are provided by the direct speeches that are heard here. Abram's speech in verse 22b about how he swore an oath to 'YHWH, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth' picks up on the formula that Melchizedek introduced in verse 19c. The fact that Abram re-labeled that formula with the name of YHWH is perceptible only in relation to Melchizedek's speech. In any case, from the perspective of the final form of the text, it is quite plausible to perceive the specified section to be a scripted scene in the narrative where, after his return from war, Abram is confronted by two kings who represent two antithetical types. Through their words, both of these kings explicitly react to Abram's victory over his enemies and draw certain conclusions from that. However, each of them says something entirely different, and Abram also responds to each of them in a totally dissimilar way.

²² See Schneider 1989, § 44.2; Lambdin 1971, 162–165; Walsh 2001.

²³ Other possible meanings, such as circumstantial ('While Melchizedek...'), explanatory/parenthetical ('Now Melchizedek...'), and terminative/initial, are critically evaluated by Granerød 2010, 156.

²⁴ In the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the double-faceted use of a verbal root with forms of a different stem – and consequently, of a dissimilar meaning – most frequently is a word play in which a person has to hear a connection between two parts of a statement. See, for example, Genesis 22:14 (*qal* and *niphal* from the verb **ראה** 'So Abraham called that place 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD, it shall be provided."') Also see Isaiah 7:9 (*hiphil* and *niphal* from the verb **אמן** 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.')

²⁵ Here, we will not try to resolve questions about the extent to which this link was crafted by 'the final hand' of the text's author or redactor or what kind of model the author or redactor worked with. For a summary and assessment of diachronic examinations of the text. See Granerød 2010, 156–171.

9.4.4 Abram is blessed (verses 18–20)

Melchizedek is a rather strange figure in this narrative. He is presented as being *a king* – the ‘King of Salem’ – and his name also bears this *Leitwort* (מלכי־צדק, verse 18a). However, everything that is said about him after that points to a cultic context and to *a priestly role*. (These emphases are explicit in verse 18b.) Even the first sentence, which recounts that ‘he brought out bread and wine’, does not refer to a feast for warriors following battle in the sense of profane consumption, as some present-day commentators state.²⁶ Rather, it alludes to a cultic banquet.²⁷ Therefore, the next sentence, which elucidates the actions of the king of Salem by means of an explicatory apposition, says ‘he was[, that is to say,] priest of God Most High’ (verse 18b).

Although at the narrative level, this meeting is presented as an encounter between Abram and an unusual priestly figure, it symbolically represents a meeting with the God in whose service the priest is engaged.²⁸ The king of Salem, priest of God Most High, offers Abram bread and wine after his return from the battle against the kings of the nations; he extends unmediated fellowship. A communal meal or merely a gesture – an offering of sacramental bread and wine – expresses a high level of welcome for a privileged guest on the part of the royal or divine subject.²⁹

Of course, the purpose of this meeting is not just ‘piousness’ in the sense of a divine service of thanksgiving or a triumphal liturgy celebrating victory at the end of a military campaign. Rather, it involves a gesture, *a symbolic act*, a going out from the sanctuary to meet Abram. This encounter does not take place in Salem’s temple, in a sanctuary. The king-priest Melchizedek has brought the bread and wine out to a location that is special for the *kings*: the ‘King’s Valley’ (עמק המלך).

The *blessing* that Abram receives at this place is expressed in two ways here – by narrative and by direct speech. Whenever ויברכהו (‘and he blessed him’) is heard in the Abrahamic stories, the Lord’s programmatic promise, ‘and I will bless you’, invariably comes to mind (Genesis 12:2–3). This motif – another of

²⁶ e.g. Hamilton 1990, 409: ‘the bread and wine presumably represented physical provisions for the exhausted warriors.’

²⁷ Hartenstein 2003, 107–127.

²⁸ In this feature, this scene is similar to Abraham’s encounter with three men in the midday heat by the oaks of Mamre as this is recounted in Genesis 18. There, the whole narrative is given a superscription in the first verse: ‘And YHWH appeared to him’ (Gen 18:1). However, at the level of story, Abraham initially meets up with a collective figure of three men (אנשים, Gen 18:2.16.22). Of course, during the story, the three men turn into the figure of God himself, identified by his own name (יהוה, Gen 18:13, 17, 20, 22). With this transformation of the figures – or, as the case may be, with the change in the various representations of the participants in the story, the narrator conveys the elusive character of an epiphany.

²⁹ See Hartenstein 2003, 114–115.

the key *Leitwörter* of the Abraham cycle – is heard in Genesis 14 for the first time since the moment of its initial proclamation in Genesis 12. Consequently, it concludes the entire first section of Abraham stories that are related to *the promise of the land*.

Exercising his role as a priest, Melchizedek – who was the only *king* in this story who did not participate in the battle of kings – proclaims Abram's 'blessedness' by 'God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth' (verse 19c). The attributes used here to represent the deity profess the divine actor's paramount degree of supremacy and his absolute sovereignty over creation and history. Abram is blessed in the name of this authority because this supreme one has delivered Abram's enemies into his hand. The strange priest-king with the name *Melchizedek* proclaims that publically in the 'Kings' Valley'.

Even before the narrator's attention turns to the way the kings themselves – represented here by 'the king of Sodom' – handle the events in 'the Kings' Valley', he very briefly says that Abram *responded* by giving the priest Melchizedek *a tithe*. In anticipation of the subsequent demand from the king of Sodom, this act clearly indicates that Abram is not a skinflint. On the contrary, by virtue of his success and profit – and thanks to his *blessing* – he is able to give, as it were, matter-of-factly and gratefully, but first and foremost, symbolically (cultically) to the one from whose hands he has received everything.

9.4.5 Abram is tempted to be like a king (verses 17:21–24)

Abram's encounter with the other kingly figure, the anonymous 'king of Sodom', has not attracted nearly as much attention within the tradition or among contemporary interpreters as the episode with Melchizedek has. His role and the motifs of this episode that are quite significant for the theme of 'kingship' are neglected in analyses, commentaries, and interpretations of this scene.

The figure called the 'king of Sodom' has already appeared in verse 17 in a scene that is strongly defined by the motif of *kingship*. Following Abram's return from the battle with the *kings*, the *king* of Sodom goes out to greet him in the *Kings' Valley*. What does this king offer Abram – who himself is *not a king* – after his victory over the *kings* in the valley of the *kings*?

After the strange king-priest Melchizedek has burst onto the scene with his blessing, *the king of Sodom* addresses Abram and brings about '*royal communication*', so to speak. He talks with Abram like an equal with an equal. However, in his manner of speaking, he – quite *imperially* – employs only the command mode and uses only *imperatives*: 'give me that! ..., and take this!' (verse 21b.c). Here, Abram is invited to act '*like a king*', like one of the kings. Usually, following battle, the spoils are divided among the kings in the victorious coalition or the payment of bounty is settled between the rescued and their rescuers, that is, between the vassals and their protectors.

Yet, the king of Sodom was not among Abram's allies; therefore, he cannot play the role of the coalition victor now (see verse 24). Thus, in verses 21–24, it cannot be a matter of 'dividing the spoils', although the king of Sodom may have wished for that.³⁰ The king of Sodom is among the defeated, so it is possible to include him among the ones whom Abram rescued, although the reference to his fall into the asphalt well complicates that in this case (verse 10). Indeed, in this story, 'the king of Sodom' is a very strange figure by virtue of the way he conducts himself and what he says.

The speech of 'the king of Sodom' in verse 21 is multisided. In a beautifully composed *chiasmus* with two symmetrical imperatives (תִּתְּנֵנִי // קַח־לָךְ – 'give me'! // 'take you'!), the king of Sodom asks for a certain deal having a double aim:³¹

תִּתְּנֵנִי הַנָּפֶשׁ	21b	Give me the persons (the people; the living)
וְהָרֶכֶשׁ קַח־לָךְ	21c	and the goods take for yourself!

Most scholars who analyze and interpret this passage focus only on the *second* sentence where the king of Sodom offers Abram property. Undoubtedly, that is because Abram responds to this offer with a refusal (verses 22–24). However, we should not miss the fact that the king of Sodom asks for 'the people' in the first sentence (הַנָּפֶשׁ). Might this request, as it is formulated here, mean that Abram's 'brother' Lot and his family should also be given to the king of Sodom (verse 16)?

What exactly does the 'king of Sodom' represent in this story? He seems to be a very *unique figure*. As one of the characters, he ambles through the whole story from beginning to end. He is identified by name at the beginning of the narrative. However, this name has a fictive nature; it expresses a *motif* and belongs more to the inner world of the narrative than to outer reality: *Bera* (בֶּרַע) '[the one who is] in evil' or '[the one who acts] by [doing] evil'.³² Later, this figure even goes through his own death; Bera disappears into the earth (verse 10). However, at the end of the narrative, he again comes onto the scene; he 'goes out' to meet Abram (verse 17). Here, he asks Abram: תִּתְּנֵנִי הַנָּפֶשׁ. This sen-

³⁰ So e.g. Hamilton 1990, 413.

³¹ There is a noteworthy variant in the Septuagint, which distinguishes war material according to the type of troops (the kind of arms), as these were known during the Hellenistic period: δός μοι τοὺς ἀνδρας τήν δὲ ἵππον λαβὲ σεαυτῷ 'Give me the men (the infantry); the horses (the cavalry) take for yourself!' It is obvious that the Greek version of the text has preserved the original structure of this statement (*chiasmus*) in this terminological variation.

³² Among other things, a prepositional phrase using כ has an instrumental function: 'the one who acts by evil'. In this context, it is fitting to consider Sodom's typological role. In biblical texts, Sodom and Gomorrah are already a *figure* (a type), an expression for a 'place of violence and wickedness' (Gen 18:20; Is 1:9; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:46–50). Genesis 13:13 already expresses this perspective.

tence may even be understood in this sense: ‘give me (your) soul, and take (all of the) goods!’ A modern or postmodern person hearing such words can hardly avoid thinking of Mefistofele, a type of a satanic tempter who offers property and power, but asks for the ‘soul’ (נַפֶּשׁ).

Here, it would be possible to give rein to fantasy and – on the basis of a contrastive symmetry with the figure of *Melchi-zedek* in this context – to link the name ‘King of Sodom’ with the term *Melchi-reša*’, as one of the fragmentary texts from Qumran – ‘visions of Amram’ – does.³³ Yet, this apocalyptic text belongs to the variegated spectrum of the Melchizedekian typology, as that has been documented in the traditions of early Judaism and early Christianity and does not represent a direct receipt or interpretation of the text in Genesis 14. This non-biblical text develops its own typology for the role of the two figures in question and cannot serve as a retroactive elucidation of the givens of the biblical narrative.³⁴

Let us now turn to the way *Abram reacts* to the appeal from the ‘king of Sodom’ (verses 22–24). Whereas Abram responded to Melchizedek’s words in silence, with a gracious act (‘he gave him a tithe’, verse 20b), it is just the opposite with the request from ‘the king of Sodom’: Abram does not respond to the king’s appeal with any action, and, in fact, he explicitly rejects it.

In the first part of his final speech, Abram retrospectively refers to the ‘vow’ that he made before entering into the conflict. Here, we learn that prior to going into battle, Abram swore an oath; he ‘consecrated himself’. Of course, it is a standard element in stories of ‘holy war’ that the spoils of battle belong to the deity.³⁵ That is why it is so important to mention this motif here. *All of the property* that is accumulated during battle is *taboo* for consecrated warriors (see Judges 7:11–12). If the expedition against the kings has the nature of a *holy war* (of a battle conducted under an oath and under the leadership of the deity himself), Abram is not permitted to accept any gifts from the king of Sodom for his part in the struggle! Indeed, Abram’s riches are the fruit of the Lord’s blessing, and that must be clearly expressed in this narrative. Of course, Abram’s allies can receive compensation for the cost of their participation in the battle, but not

³³ The fragmentary Aramaic text 4Q544 was published in *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* XXXI, Oxford 2001, 326–327. (The term *Melki-reša*’ occurs in frag. 2, line 13). For analysis and commentary, see Duke 2010. The name *Melki-reša*’ also occurs in a list of curses in the texts from Qumran. See 4Q280 (frag. 2, line 2), which states אָרֹר אַתָּה מַלְכִי רִשָּׁע (‘Cursed be you, Melki-reša’). Published in *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* XXIX, Oxford 1999, 5–7 (plate 1).

³⁴ In this apocalyptic vision, *Melchizedek* and *Melchireša*’ are superhuman beings, two supreme spirits created by God, which represent ‘the spirit (ruler) of light’ and ‘the spirit (ruler) of darkness’. See Milik 1972, 95–144.

³⁵ Kang 1989, 221: ‘The last conduct of war is to treat the spoils and to celebrate the victory after the battles. In the ancient Near Eastern context it is customary that the spoils were dedicated to the divine warriors who gave the victory.’

Abram (verse 23).³⁶ Therefore, Abram did not accept anything from the king of Sodom, and he explicitly stated the reason for that.

We should not overlook the fact that in the end, Abram did not give anything to the king of Sodom; thus, he did not grant the request in the first sentence of the king's demand (verse 21b: 'Give me the soul [the people]!'). In fact, Abram does not comment at all on this aspect of the king of Sodom's entreaty; nor does the narrator devote attention to it. A pause (a 'gap') in the narrative occurs here. This is significant because it is precisely this aspect of the king's speech – 'give me the people!' – that relates to Abram's 'brother' Lot, who is the one on whose account Abram went among the kings (verse 14).

In short, the story ends with Abram in the valley of the *kings* after a victorious battle over the great *kings* of the nations; by Melchizedek, the *king-priest* of Salem, he is proclaimed to be the 'blessed' one by the God Most High; and the story's concluding statement, expressed by the gap, means that he did not give his 'brother' to the king of Sodom.

9.5 Conclusion

Key features of the image of *Abram among the kings* that this story generates will now be summarized in a few main points.

- *The role of the kings* is envisaged and conveyed by verbs expressing their deeds and actions. The kings 'are in league with one another'; 'they lead battles'; they 'slaughter' and 'plunder' (take goods and enslave people). After battle, they divide the spoils.
- *Abram's role* is different. At first, the 'story of the kings' does not concern him. He first enters into it when it is necessary *to intervene* on behalf of his 'brother' and *to rescue* him from the might of the 'kings' (verse 14a.)
- Nevertheless, Abram's actions are not autonomous; they are 'by the authority of the Lord'. The story of Abram's 'warfare' is conceived of as *a mission by one who is consecrated*; therefore, it has 'miraculous' features and ends with an absolute victory. Of course, that victory is *the work of YHWH*; he is the powerful hidden actor who sets the captives free again.
- Therefore, returned goods and people are *not spoils* (verse 16); they cannot be the payoff for the victorious warriors – at least not for Abram (verse 23–24a). They represent the fruits of Abram's *blessing*.
- In this regard, Abram *expresses gratitude* for his fortune – for fact that the enemies were delivered into his hands – by giving *a tithe* to the priest of the Most High God from Salem.

³⁶ The phrase 'I have made rich' constitutes another of the inner terminological links in this text. In the given context, there is an assonant allusion to the term 'tithe' in verse 20b. See Willi-Plein 2011, 50–52.

Genesis 14 concludes the first of the two parts that compose the total Abraham cycle by developing these motifs. This section consists of several units that are related to ‘the gift of the land’ in its capacity as the first facet of the Lord’s promise to Abram (Genesis 12:7; 13:17). After Abram has arrived in ‘the land of Canaan’, it comes to light that *famine* reigns in the land (Genesis 12:10–11). In addition, great foreign *kings* are waging *devastating wars* in it (Genesis 14:1–2). The motif of giving this land to Abram and his descendants (Genesis 12:7, 13:14–17) is substantively linked to the promise that Abram ‘will be a blessing’ to it (12:2b) and that in him ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (12:3b). It surely is significant that at the end of the first part of the Abraham cyclus, the narrative in Genesis 14 demonstrates that this is actually taking place.

The story describes *Abram among the kings*. The land that the Lord has given to Abram and his descendants is very familiar with the way kings negotiate, and this story expresses that fact ‘surrealistically’. Here, Abram walks among the great kings, but he does not negotiate with them as one of them, as a *king*; rather, he negotiates between or among them like a man who has been *blessed by YHWH* and *bestows blessing*. It is said of Abram that here, he acts in accordance with the mission that was given to him in Genesis 12:2–3.