

What is the significance of the land of Ammon in the Bible?

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The land of Ammon in the Bible boasts a long and complex history with Israel. Ammon was an ancient territory located in the central Transjordan Plateau, northeast of the Dead Sea, between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers (Psalm 83:7). The capital of Ammon was called Rabbah-Ammon (2 Samuel 12:27), which is modern-day Amman, the capital of Jordan. The indigenous people of Ammon were known as the Ammonites, who, according to Scripture, were a Semitic group descended directly from Abraham's nephew Lot.

Genesis 19:36-38 documents the ancestor of the Ammonites as Ben-Ammi, the son of an incestuous union between Lot and his younger daughter. Ben-Ammi's half-brother was Moab, who was the child of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. Moab was the father of the Moabites.

Deuteronomy 2:20-21 tells us that over time the Ammonites grew powerful enough to drive out the ancient and mighty people known as the Rephaim (although the Ammonites called these giants the Zamzummim) and settle in their place. The Bible establishes that the Ammonites had inhabited the central Transjordanian Plateau long before the Israelites arrived on the scene (Numbers 21:24; Deuteronomy 2:19).

Scripture paints a complicated and often negative relationship between the nation of Ammon and Israel. Deuteronomy 2:19 instructed the people of Israel not to harass the Ammonites or provoke them to war and to respect their territory because of their kinship through Lot. The Lord said to Israel, "I will not give you possession of any land belonging to the Ammonites. I have given it as a possession to the descendants of Lot."

Yet, because of their association with the Moabites and their hiring Balaam to curse Israel, the Ammonites were forbidden to enter the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3-7; Nehemiah 13:1-2). Later, the prophet Amos condemned Ammon as a sinful nation for its violent methods in expanding their borders: “For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not relent. Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah that will consume her fortresses amid war cries on the day of battle, amid violent winds on a stormy day. Her king will go into exile, he and his officials together” (Amos 1:13-15).

By the time of the judges, Ammon had strengthened into an aggressive military state and joined forces with the Moabites and Amalekites to take the Transjordanian territory occupied by Israel (Judges 3:12-14). Under the influence of Ammon, Israel abandoned the Lord and fell into pagan worship (Judges 10:6). The Ammonites conquered the territory of Gilead and waged war against Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim before Jephthah finally drove them back (Judges 10:7-11:33).

Later, during King Saul’s reign, Nahash, the king of Ammon, tried to seize Israel’s Transjordanian territory (1 Samuel 11:1-2) but was defeated (1 Samuel 11:5-11; 12:12; 14:47-48). King David managed to maintain friendly relations with Nahash (2 Samuel 10:2) but encountered renewed hostilities when his son Hanun became king of Ammon. Hanun enlisted military aid from Beth Rehob, Zobah, Maakah, and Tob (2 Samuel 10:6; 1 Chronicles 19:6). David’s army under Abishai and Joab overpowered Ammon, besieged the capital city of Rabbah, and subjected the Ammonites to forced labor (2 Samuel 10:9-14; 11:1; 12:26-31).

King Solomon accepted women from Ammon into his harem (1 Kings 11:1) including Naamah,

the mother of his son and successor Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21, 31; 2 Chronicles 12:13). These foreign women contributed to the pagan worship of Molek, the Ammonite god (1 Kings 11:5), among the Israelites (1 Kings 11:7, 33). During Jehoshaphat's reign, Ammon joined with Moab and Edom but was unsuccessful in its attack on Judah (2 Chronicles 20:1-30). The three-nation alliance reunited once again against Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:2).

In general, the prophets cast Ammon in a negative light (Jeremiah 49:1-6; Ezekiel 25:1-5) and continued to connect it with Moab and Edom (Isaiah 11:14; Jeremiah 9:25-26; Daniel 11:41; Zephaniah 2:8-9). Ezra and Nehemiah list Ammonite women among the foreign wives taken by Jews (Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 13:23). The psalmist prays for release from Ammon as well as other enemies (including Moab and Edom) who plot together against God's people (Psalm 83:5-8).

In nearly every period of Israel's history, the territory and people of Ammon play a role. Historians place the dissolution of the Ammonite kingdom soon after the Late Iron Age (which ended in approximately 586 BC); however, the Ammonites as a people group lasted until at least the Hellenistic period (roughly 300 BC to AD 300).