

## Who were the Ammonites?

Throughout the early history of Israel, we find references to the Ammonite people. Who were they, where did they come from, and what happened to them? The Ammonites were a Semitic people, closely related to the Israelites. Despite that relationship, they were more often counted enemies than friends.

Lot, Abraham's nephew, was the progenitor of the Ammonites. After Abraham and Lot separated (Genesis 13), Lot settled in the city of Sodom. When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness, Lot and his daughters fled to the hill country on the southern end of the Dead Sea. Probably thinking they were the only people left on the earth, Lot's daughters got him drunk and had incestuous relations with him to produce children (Genesis 19:37-38). The older daughter had a son named Moab ("from father"), and the younger gave birth to Ben-Ammi ("son of my people"). The Ammonites, descendants of Ben-Ammi, were a nomadic people who lived in the territory of modern-day Jordan, and the name of the capital city, Amman, reflects the name of those ancient inhabitants.

In the time of Moses, the fertile plains of the Jordan River valley were occupied by the Amorites, Ammonites and Moabites. When Israel left Egypt, the Ammonites refused to assist them in any way, and God punished them for their lack of support (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). Later, however, as the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God instructed them, "When you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:19). The Israelite tribes of Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh claimed the Amorite territory bordering that of the Ammonites.

The Ammonites were a pagan people who worshiped the gods Milcom and Molech. God commanded the Israelites not to marry these pagans, because intermarriage would lead the Israelites to worship false gods. Solomon disobeyed and married Naamah the Ammonite (1 Kings 14:21), and, as God had warned, he was drawn into idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-8). Molech was a fire-god with the face of a calf; his images had arms outstretched to receive the babies who were sacrificed to him. Like their god, the Ammonites were cruel. When Nahash the Ammonite was asked for terms of a treaty (1 Samuel 11:2), he proposed gouging out the right eye of each Israelite man. Amos 1:13 says that the Ammonites would rip open pregnant women in the territories they conquered.

Under King Saul's leadership, Israel defeated the Ammonites and made them vassals. David continued that sovereignty over Ammon and later besieged the capital city to solidify his control. After the split of Israel and Judah, the Ammonites began to ally themselves with the enemies of Israel. Ammon regained some sovereignty in the seventh century B.C., until Nebuchadnezzar conquered them about a hundred years later. Tobiah the Ammonite (Nehemiah 2:19) was possibly a governor of the region under Persian rule, but the inhabitants were a mix of Ammonites, Arabs, and others. By New Testament times, Jews had settled in the area, and it was known as Perea. The last mention of Ammonites as a separate people was in the second century by Justin Martyr, who said they were very numerous. Sometime during the Roman period, the Ammonites seem to have been absorbed into Arab society.