

CHAPTER TWO

ISRAEL AND THE AMORITES

The Amorite authority collapsed at the end of the Late Bronze Age. In parts of the Southern Levant, this hegemony became replaced by a confederation of tribes defining themselves as Israel and acknowledging YHWH as their patron deity. This situation introduces three possibilities concerning the relationship between early Israel and the Amorite kingdoms. Israel may have emerged as a continuation of the Amorite culture by gathering the Amorites and the indigenous population into a new national identity. Alternatively, Israel may have been the result of an already existing movement of emancipation from Amorite political authority and religious hegemony. Finally, Israel may have emerged from another horizon, not precisely related to the former geopolitical reality of the Southern Levant. Each of the three eventualities finds some support. The Amorite affinities of the figure of Abraham in the Book of Genesis promote the first option. The survival and surprising vitality of the indigenous traditions and their distance from the Amorite ideology substantiate the second eventuality. The epos of Exodus, the conquest ideology, and the hostility regarding both the Amorites and the Canaanites fit the latter proposition. This complex situation asks for further examination of the question.

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL AMORITES

The term “Amorite” (*‘ēṁōrī’*) is mentioned eighty-seven times in the Bible. Most of these quotations are encountered in the Pentateuch (forty times),

Joshua (twenty times), and Judges (eleven times), and ten times in the other historical books (1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah). The Amorites are practically ignored in prophecy and ancient poetry. Before clarifying the position regarding these people in the Bible, we should first examine the question of the historicity of the biblical Amorites.

The Look for Parallels

The historical background of the biblical Amorites was an accepted fact in the past,¹ but this position has changed after dating the historical books of the Bible to the end of the monarchic period, or even later. Today, most scholars assume that the many centuries between the emergence of Israel and the redaction of the biblical sources undermined their historical value. Consequently, the biblical Amorites became regarded as a literary motif introduced for elaborating the Israelite epos. The mention of Amorites among a list of peoples dispossessed by the Israelites, some of them (e.g. Hivites, Jebusites, Girgashites, Perizzites) mentioned only in the Bible, supported this premise.² Bustenay Oded, for example, concluded that “[t]he stereotyped lists of ‘seven nations’ are a paradigm for the ‘other’ – all of the idolatrous peoples who were practicing contaminated cultural practices.”³

The biblical use of the term “Amorite” for designating the whole country of Canaan, rather than specific territories, strengthens this conclusion.⁴ Scholars noted the same feature in Assyrian documents from the first millennium BC, where the vast territories west of their kingdom, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean shore, are globally designated as “Land of Amurru”.⁵ Therefore, it was tempting to assume that the biblical authors borrowed an Assyrian appellation of the land of Canaan, independent of the Amorites present in the Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age.⁶ Nonetheless, this reference to Canaan as the land of the Amorites in the Bible recognizes another potential explanation. It may reflect the memory of their political hegemony over the whole Southern Levant, prior to the rise of Israel. This possibility calls for further examination of the way the Amorites are portrayed in the Bible.

Whereas the Amorite dominion extends to the whole of the land of Canaan in some biblical sources, it is restricted to the hill country in others. In Numbers, for example, the spies sent by Moses report that the land of the Amorites comprises the central hills east and west of the Jordan Valley: “*The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan*” (Num 13:29). This distribution, also reported in Jos 5:1, broadly corresponds to the pattern of expansion of the Amorites in the Southern Levant throughout the second millennium BC. In the El Amarna correspondence, most rulers from the coast bear West Semitic names, whereas most of their homolog from the Akko

plain, Lebanon hills, Bashan area, Hazor area, Jezreel Valley, and Samaria hills carry names of Amorite, Hurrian, and Indo-European (Mitannian) origin.⁷

The foreign origin of the Amorites living in Canaan is explicit in Jos 24:18: “*And YHWH drove out from before us all the people, and also the Amorites which dwelt in the land (wēet hā’ēmōrī yōšēb hā’āreš). So we also will serve YHWH, for he is our God.*” In Deut 1:27–28, the Amorites are mentioned as a people inhabiting fortified cities, a feature echoing the settlement pattern of the historical Amorites in the Southern Levant. The mention of Amorite kings reigning in the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon (Jos 10:5), and the eastern bank of the Jordan River (Num 21:26; Deut 3:8) echoes the epigraphic data.

The case of the city of Hazor is particularly interesting. Both Joshua and Judges mention Jabin, the king of Hazor, as the leader of the coalition of the cities ruling Canaan before the rise of Israel (Jos 11:1, 11:10; Judg 4:2). This corroborates the discovery, in the site of Hazor, of a Late Bronze Age city of outstanding dimensions. Unique in the Southern Levant, this city, whose thirteenth-century population is estimated to be 30,000 inhabitants, was similar in size and importance to Aleppo, Qatna, and Carchemish.⁸ The architecture of the imposing palace of Hazor, its similarity with its North Syrian homologs, and the commercial relations with Mari all support the integration of this city within the Amorite koiné. Also, the name of the founder of the dynasty, Ibni-Adad, belongs to the Amorite religious universe.⁹ It is thus difficult to dismiss the similarity between Ibni, the founder of the Hazor dynasty of Amorite kings, and Jabin, the name of the king of Hazor in Joshua and Judges.

The parallel extends. Like the Book of Joshua mentioning the early Israelites destroying Hazor by fire, archaeology has shown that a fire ruined the city in the thirteenth to twelfth century BC. The question of whether the Israelites destroyed it is still debated.¹⁰ However, we cannot ignore the violence of the destruction of the palace, where Egyptian cultural markers and the statues of deities and ancient rulers were intentionally mutilated and destroyed.¹¹ We may therefore conclude, with Brendon Benz, that “*Hazor was destroyed by a coalition of Levantine polities and populations who sought to drive Egypt and its influence out of the land.*”¹²

Especially interesting is the fact that the Israelites, once the city had been reconstructed, preserved the ruins of the palace on the hilltop of the city. This feature reflects the importance of the victory against the king of Hazor in the Israelite consciousness.¹³ It reveals that the defeat of the most potent Amorite ruler of Canaan had a highly symbolic significance for the Israelites.¹⁴ Consequently, depictions of genuine historical events relative to the emergence of Israel, and especially the victory over the Amorite kings, are not unlikely in biblical sources composed many centuries later. The history of Hazor reveals that these victories were a part of the cultural memory of the

Israelites, carried generation after generation not only through epic stories but also through the preservation of ruins as material testimonies. Consequently, a link between the historical Amorites and the way they are mentioned in the biblical sources may truly exist.¹⁵

The Amorite Company

Three groups closely related to the Amorites are mentioned in the Bible: the Hittites, Rephaim, and Anakim. Their description reveals further parallels between the biblical and historical Amorites.

Hittites

The Hittites are designated, along with the Amorites, among the peoples of Canaan to be dispossessed by the Israelites.¹⁶ And as with the Amorites, their relationship with the historical Hittites is frequently denied today.¹⁷ In the Bible, nevertheless, the land of Hatti is correctly located in Anatolia, Northern Syria, and the Southern Caucasus (1 Kgs 10:29; 2 Kgs 7:6).¹⁸ Similarly, Egyptian documents attest to the Hittites' presence at the end of the Bronze Age in the Southern Levant, where they apparently belonged to the military elite.¹⁹ The mention of Uriah, a Jerusalemite warrior serving in David's army, belonging to the Hatti people (2 Sam 11:3, 11:6) might therefore echo a memory of Hittite warriors among the Amorites in the Southern Levant (Jos 10:5 specifies that Jerusalem was a city ruled by an Amorite king in the premonarchic period). Accordingly, the reference to Hittites in the Bible may evoke the memory of a military elite originating from Anatolia, which assisted the political elite to exercise its authority over the local population.

Rephaim

The Rephaim are not included in most records of the pre-Israelite peoples to be dispossessed by the Israelites, but the extended list in Gen 15:19–21 mentions them. Here again, denying any historical dimension to this appellation is attractive, in light of biblical mentions of the Rephaim in the Netherworld.²⁰ In Ugarit, however, the dual mention of the *rp³m* as living people and as inhabitants of the Netherworld does not deny their genuine existence. As living beings, they constituted the aristocracy of the city,²¹ a guild of elite warriors and equestrian feudatories ruling their farming domains.²² Some Ugaritic incantations even reveal that the *rp³m* were in charge of the rites promoting the renewal of vegetation, fertility, and crop production.²³ The parallel functions of protecting the city and land fertility ensured by the dead *rp³m* suggest that these latter are none other than divinized rulers.²⁴ The characteristics of the *rp³m*, their high social rank in the Ugaritian society, their warrior activity, and especially their involvement in rites of agricultural fertility all point to

their affiliation with the Amorites.²⁵ This identity is also supported by their affiliation with the congregation of Ditannu (*qbs dtn*), a name identified with Yaqaru, the founder of the Amorite royal dynasties.²⁶ This mythical founder is mentioned in the Amorite dynasties of Northern Syria and of the Upper Euphrates, and even as one of the ancestors of King Hammurabi of Babylon.²⁷

In the Bible, the designation of the Bashan as the land of the Rephaim (Deut 3:13) is echoed in Ugaritic sources mentioning the Bashan as the land of the Rapauma.²⁸ Og, the famous king of Bashan, is designated in the Bible both as an Amorite king (Deut 3:8, 4:47; Jos 2:10) and as the last remnant of the Rephaim (Deut 3:11; Jos 13:12).²⁹ Consequently, it seems that biblical sources have preserved the remembrance of the Amorite elite, called Rephaim, ruling some Canaanite cities and kingdoms in the Late Bronze Age.

Anakim

The Bible evokes the Anakim as people living in Canaan before the Israelite conquest (Deut 1:27–28).³⁰ The spies sent by Moses describe them as giants: “*And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them*” (Num 13:33). Their high stature and semidivine nature (through their affiliation to the Nephilim; see Gen 6:4) might invite us to treat this group as purely mythical. However, it is noteworthy that the biblical Amorites, whose historical background cannot be ignored, are also described as giants “*whose height was like the height of the cedars, and who was as strong as the oaks*” (Amos 2:9). In addition, the description of the giant warriors among the Philistines is probably exaggerated. However, it is noteworthy that these “giants” are associated with the Rephaim and a local military elite ruling before the Israelites.³¹ Their mention in Hebron (Num 13:22; Jos 14:12, 14:15, 15:14; Judg 1:20), a city inhabited by the Amorites in the past (Gen 14:13) and ruled by an Amorite king before the Israelite conquest (Jos 10:5), suggests that they belonged to the same category of foreign warriors and political elite. The presence of tall foreign warriors could be the basis for such a description.³² On the other hand, their gigantism may be an appellation referring to their use of horse-driven chariots for war and rituals.³³

This brief overview suggests that the Amorites and their companion groups mentioned in the Bible are not pure literary fiction. Although their description includes exaggerations, it remains anchored in historical reality: the reference to an aristocracy of foreign origin and/or obedience that ruled over the indigenous population prior to the rise of Israel. This information is by itself of interest. The memory for many centuries of a people disappearing from history underscores their importance for the Israelites. However, the Amorites’ position is ambiguous in the Bible, with some sources expressing virulent hostility, whereas others are considerably more positive.

THE AMORITES: ENEMIES OR FOUNDERS OF ISRAEL?

The Main Enemy

The Amorites are cited in all the records of peoples from Canaan to be dispossessed by the Israelites.³⁴ This characteristic invites us to consider the Amorites as enemies of Israel. However, this pool of enemies also includes the indigenious “Canaanites,” justifying why the reference to the Amorites in these records cannot identify the rise of Israel as a movement of emancipation from their hegemony. But we cannot ignore the fact that including the Canaanites in the lists of dispossessed nations might express the wish for some biblical authors to demarcate Israel from the cults practiced before.

The Israelite conquest narrative does sometimes allot a specific treatment to the Amorites. This is the case, for example, in Joshua 24, where the Exodus process (v. 17) and the conquest (v. 18) are closely related. In this chapter, the whole land of Canaan is designated as the land of the Amorites: “*Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you*” (Jos 24:8). A few verses later, special attention is given to the Amorites in the process of appropriation of the land of Canaan: “*And YHWH drove out before us all the peoples, and the Amorites who inhabited the land. Therefore we also will serve YHWH, for he is our God*” (Jos 24:18). This second claim apparently integrates all the peoples from Canaan into the appellation of Amorites. Nonetheless, the specific reference to “the Amorites inhabiting Canaan” reveals their foreign identity (the Amorites may also live outside of Canaan), suggesting that this criterion distinguishes them from the other inhabitants. Also, in Amos 2:10, we read that the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan from the Amorites: “*Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt; and led you forty years in the wilderness, to inherit the land of the Amorite.*” Both claims identify the Israelite “conquest” as a military conflict with the Amorites.

A special reference to the Amorite hegemony is also visible in Judg 6:8–10, three verses recounting the emergence of Israel:

8YHWH sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. 9And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10And I said to you, ‘I am YHWH your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.’ But you have not obeyed my voice.”

In this narrative, Israel arises from two realities. The first one is the migration of a group coming to Canaan from Egypt (v. 8). The second is the

deliverance from the Egyptians and their vassals that YHWH expelled from the land of Canaan (v. 9). The subsequent verse (v. 10) calls the Israelites to expel even the Amorite deities, those sponsoring the Amorite rulers of Canaan. The claim of the dual origin of the Israelites will be examined in the next chapters. Here, it will suffice to note the special enmity against the Amorites, which extends to their companion groups, the Anakim and the Rephaim.³⁵ Once gathered, these observations identify early Israel as a movement of emancipation from the authority of Egypt in Canaan and of their local vassals, the Amorite kings.

Amorite Forefathers

The Book of Genesis advocates a foreign origin of the Israelites. It localizes Abraham's homeland in the Northern Euphrates, and more specifically in the region of Harran (Gen 11:31).³⁶ Further details confirm the importance of Harran in this epos of origin: the death of Abraham's father in this area (Gen 11:32), the reference to Harran as the point of departure for Abraham's migration (Gen 12:5), and Jacob fleeing to his family in Harran once threatened by Esau (Gen 27:43, 28:10). The parallels between Abraham's ancestors or family members (Terah, Sarug, Nahor, Harran) and ancient toponyms from Upper Mesopotamia confirm this northern affinity.³⁷ The region of Harran being close to Jebel Bishri, the Book of Genesis promotes the claim that Abraham originated from the homeland of the Amorites.³⁸ Then, many parallels emerge between the story of Abraham and the Amorite migration into the Southern Levant and Egypt in the second millennium BC. Moreover, this tradition argues for an Amorite origin of the forefathers of Israel.

Many scholars maintain that the postexilic composition of the Book of Genesis renders unreliable the descriptions of the events dated from the Middle Bronze Age.³⁹ Rather, they suggest that the description of Abraham's migration to Canaan was conceived as anchoring the return from the Babylonian exile into the prestigious time of origins.⁴⁰ For scholars defending this opinion, the Abraham epos is not necessarily a postexilic invention, but rather an adaptation of ancient traditions to the returnees' specific needs.⁴¹

This explanation is not entirely satisfying, however, because some details concerning an Amorite origin of Abraham do not fit into this scheme. Nahor and Harran have no importance in the Bible, outside the story of the patriarchs. These cities were devoid of particular interest for the exilic communities, and no leader among the returnees inhabited them.⁴² Additionally, the Aramean identity of Abraham's family (Gen 25:20, 28:5, 31:20, 31:24) is not easy to justify in this portrayal. But this appellation makes sense if the author of Genesis was interested in promoting an Amorite origin and identity of

Abraham, because the nation of Aram was foremost extending the Amorite dominion of the Late Bronze Age.⁴³ Thus, instead of retrojecting a present situation into a fictional past, the author of Genesis uses the appellation “Aramean” to locate his story in the contemporaneous political reality with most of the Amorite dominion at its center.⁴⁴

Assyriologists noted that some features attributed to the patriarchs (such as worship, social organization, covenant-making) recall traditions related to Amorite documents from the Middle Bronze Age, so that they should not be considered as pure literary fictions.⁴⁵ These findings do not rehabilitate the idea of historicity of the figure of Abraham depicted in Genesis. Nevertheless, they reveal a durable memory of events, habits, beliefs, and lifestyle attached to the Amorites.⁴⁶ Elements of this memory apparently survived up to the time of the redaction of the Book of Genesis, where they are skillfully organized to advance the idea of an Amorite identity of Abraham, the forefather of Israel.

The portrait of Abraham confirms this view. The patriarch’s lifestyle combines an ideal of agropastoralism (Gen 13:1–2) with the wish to create a new realm for himself and his descendants (Gen 12:1–5). This project implies his migration from the Amorite homeland (the region of Harran) to the Southern Levant, the land inhabited by the Canaanites (Gen 12:6, 13:7). Like the Amorite newcomers, Abraham determines the size of his dominion with his peers, not with the indigenous people (Gen 13:6–12). Once settled in the region of Hebron, Abraham allies with the Amorite rulers in this region (Gen 13:7), and even becomes one of them. Abraham is portrayed as a war leader (Gen 14:14, 14:24) and a judge resolving local conflicts (Gen 13:7, 21:25). In Genesis, he has the power to conclude treaties (Gen 20:15) and to collect taxes and tithes (Gen 14:22–24).⁴⁷ Finally, the marriage of Isaac and Jacob with women from his clan of origin, and inhabiting the Amorite homeland, is especially instructive. In Genesis, this requirement is not motivated by any claim of moral depravity or idolatry of the Canaanites that might prohibit their intermarriage. Rather, it fulfills the desire to perpetuate the kin relationships enabling the scattered Amorites to preserve their identity and social status.⁴⁸

Out of Genesis, the claim of a Mesopotamian origin of Abraham remains rare in the Bible (e.g. Jos 24:2–4; Neh 9:7), and the mention of Abraham as an autochthonous figure (Ezek 33:23–29; Isa 51:1–2; 2 Chr 20:8) challenges it.⁴⁹

Two contrasting views coexist in the Bible concerning the Amorites. The books relating the emergence of Israel account for emancipation from their hegemony. A resentful disdain of these ancient rulers emanates frequently from these opuses. Alternately, the Book of Genesis portrays Israel’s fathers through the archetype of the Amorite newcomers appointing themselves the lords of Canaan.

THE CONTRASTING SYMBOLISM OF THE SERPENT

The early character of YHWH may clarify the circumstances of the emergence of this nation. Following the Genesis tradition, the god of Israel prompting Abraham to move from Harran to Canaan is expected to be a local variant of Baal-Haddu or Dagan, the head of the Amorite pantheon. Alternatively, if Israel emerged from a movement of emancipation, as related in the historical books of the Bible, we would expect the cult of YHWH to belong to the pre-Amorite layer of Southern Levantine traditions.⁵⁰

Baal-Haddu was not the only storm-god acknowledged in the Southern Levant in the Late Bronze Age. The survival of the indigenous storm deity, Athtar, underlines why identifying storm attributes in the figure of YHWH is unhelpful for clarifying the relationship between Israel and the Amorites. Even the much-debated origin of YHWH, either from the south or the north of the Levant, is irrelevant because Athtar was known in both areas. However, the previous chapter has revealed a discriminant factor relative to the Amorite/Israelite relationship: the serpent symbol. A sudden inversion of values accompanies the spread of the Amorite koiné, from the expression of general holiness and vitality to an icon of the destruction and chaos of the organized world. Chapter 1 also mentioned the survival, in the Southern Levant, of the original meaning of the serpent symbol, as well as its obliteration by the Amorite ideology. Consequently, examining the relationship between YHWH and the serpent, in the Bible, enables us to determine whether the patron god of Israel issued from foreign Amorite or local pre-Amorite traditions.

This is not an easy task, however. Here again, two contrasting views coexist in the Bible concerning the serpent and its symbolism. This creature is sometimes a metaphor for evil (Deut 32:33; Pss 58:5, 140:4; Job 20:16) and divine curse (Gen 3:14; Isa 59:5). It is even an enemy that YHWH vanquished in the mythical past (Isa 51:9; Ps 74:13–14) or will defeat in an eschatological future (Isa 27:1). A considerably more positive view, however, is enunciated in Ps 148:7, where the poet explicitly invites the serpents and other sea monsters to praise YHWH: “Praise YHWH from the earth, dragons (*tannînim*) and all deeps (*tēhōmōt*).” Both approaches are examined here.

The Guardian of the Holy Domain

Among the positive views about the serpent, the most detailed one is probably YHWH’s discourse in Job, which is entirely devoted to a fantastic snake-like creature called *Leviathan* (Job 40:25, 41:26). This appellation denotes affinities with *litan*, the serpentine sea monster defeated by Baal-Haddu in the Ugaritic mythology. In Job, YHWH’s discourse bears no trace of such a conflict, even in the mythical time. Rather, YHWH praises its wondrous nature, and congratulates

himself as its creator. This position is echoed in Ps 104:26, claiming that YHWH created the Leviathan for his own distraction (*liwytān zeh yāṣartā lēšaḥeq bō*). Even in Genesis, the book advancing a pro-Amorite origin of Israel, we find no conflict with the serpent at the time of creation (Gen 1:21, 1:25).

Two biblical sources even integrate the serpent symbol in the worship of YHWH. The first is the production of a copper serpent by Moses in Num 21:8, after being instructed by YHWH to make it. The second one is the mention of a copper serpent set in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple, up until Hezekiah's reform, and the mention of the Israelites' devotion to it: "*He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the copper serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it – it was called Nehushtan*" (2 Kgs 18:4). The concurrent mention, in this verse, of the destruction of high places (*habāmōt*), pillars (*hamaṣṣēbōt*), and figurations of the Asherah goddess, is classically interpreted as the elimination of an idolatrous cult incompatible with the worship of YHWH.⁵¹ This approach is challenged, however, by the specification that Moses crafted the copper serpent. It seems, therefore, that the copper serpent attained the holy sphere in early Israel.⁵²

Further indications support this conclusion. Genesis 3 indicates that the serpent was closely related to the holy trees of the Garden of Eden. Since the access to this tree was forbidden to humanity, it is likely that the serpent was the animal normally guarding it. A similar function of the serpent as the guardian of secret knowledge exists in other cultures from Antiquity.⁵³ Therefore, the invitation to Eve to access the tree should be regarded as an infraction of its function as guardian of the holy tree.

This incident is generally approached as an expression of the serpent's evil nature, although scholars already noticed that such a vile dimension is not explicit in this myth.⁵⁴ The issue of the 'sin' confirms this reservation. Unlike Adam and Eve, the serpent is expelled neither from the Garden of Eden nor from the vicinity of the holy tree. The only two modifications that the serpent undergoes are a change in its 'nutrition' and the perpetual enmity of Eve's progeny (Gen 3:14–15). However, no such enmity between the serpent and YHWH is announced. In the Genesis myth of Eden, the serpent remains the guardian of YHWH's secret knowledge even after the transgression.

The reference to serpents in Isa 6:1–8 corroborates this conclusion. Isaiah 6:1–8 is a section relating how the prophet accesses the divine council, and how he becomes instructed in divine plans and decisions. Once transported to the threshold of the divine assembly, Isaiah describes a cohort of seraphim (winged serpentine creatures)⁵⁵ surrounding the celestial throne and performing songs of praise to YHWH (vv. 2–3). The subsequent verse speaks of how the gates of the divine council are influenced by this choral singing, suggesting that the serpents control its access. This feature is confirmed in verses 6–8, where the seraphim purify Isaiah before introducing him into the divine council. This

description corroborates the function of guardians of both the celestial domain and the sanctuaries heretofore devoted to serpents in the Near East.⁵⁶

The sanctuaries are not the only terrestrial domains whose access was controlled by serpents. In Numbers 21, the production of the copper serpent follows an attack on the Israelites by “burning serpents.” Calling them “seraphim” in this story echoes the mention of the winged creatures described in Isaiah 6 that surround YHWH’s throne. And as in Isaiah, these burning serpents are here identified as YHWH’s emissaries protecting an area whose access is forbidden to the Israelites.⁵⁷

Although the location of this event remains elusive in Numbers 21, cross-referencing the descriptions of the Israelites’ itinerary (Num 21:4, 21:10; Num 33:41–43) suggests that it occurred in the region of Punon, the main Arabah area of mining and copper production.⁵⁸ This transforms the burning serpents into guardians of the mining area, a feature well established in mythologies from antiquity.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in mentioning YHWH sending these burning serpents, the author of Num 21:6 promotes their status to that of emissaries of YHWH whose duty is to protect his forbidden/holy domain.

A similar function appears in Amos 9:3. There, a fabulous creature dwelling in the abyss, called “the serpent,” attacks people looking for a refuge in forbidden areas: “*And if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent (’āšawweh ’et hanāḥāš), and it shall bite them.*” The use of the verb *šwh* (=to command, to give an order) here designates the marine monster as YHWH’s faithful emissary.

This protective function of the serpent extended to individuals, peoples, and nations in antiquity. In Egypt, for example, the uraeus protects the king and, by extension, the entire kingdom.⁶⁰ This protection concerns the nation of Israel too. It is revealed by identifying Dan as a serpent-guardian who prevents invading armies from entering into Israel from the north: “*Dan shall be a serpent (nāḥāš) in the way, a viper (šēpīpōn) by the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that his rider falls backward*” (Gen 49:17).⁶¹ This ascription of Dan as a serpent is immediately followed by a call for divine protection (“*For your salvation I wait, YHWH*” [Gen 49:18]), confirming both the divine involvement in the serpent’s protective function and the homology of the land of Israel with the holy domains protected by this animal. Further cases of a similar positive connotation confirm that many of the biblical authors approached the serpent as a holy animal of YHWH.⁶²

The Divine Conflict with the Serpent

Contrasting this positive approach, some biblical sources recount a mythical struggle between YHWH and a serpent monster, a pattern typically affixed to the Amorite storm-god. Three psalms (Psalms 74, 77, and 89) refer explicitly to this mythical deed.

Psalm 74

Psalm 74 is a complaint following the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple of YHWH. In this song, the psalmist stresses the contrast between YHWH's passivity during the destruction of the city (vv. 2–8) and his famous deeds from the past (vv. 9–15). The first one is the divine involvement in Exodus and the birth of Israel (vv. 9–11). The second one is none other than the mythical victory against serpentine sea monsters (vv. 12–15):

- 12 Yet God my King is from of old,
Working salvation in the midst of the earth.*
*13 You divided (pōrartā) the sea by your might;
You broke (šibbartā) the heads of the sea monsters (rā'šē tannīnīm) on the waters.*
*14 You crushed (riṣṣaštā) the heads of Leviathan (rā'šē liwēyātān);
You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.*
*15 You split open (bāqā'īā) springs and brooks;
You dried up (hōbaštā) ever-flowing streams.*

Here, YHWH's kingship emanates from a violent combat leading to the death, mutilation, or complete submission of his enemies. Their mention as the multiheaded sea monster (vv. 13–14) and the river (v. 15) recalls Ugaritic mythology, where the reign of Baal over the pantheon is the consequence of his victory over Yammu/Naharu (=Sea/River) and over the seven-headed marine monster called *tnn* or *lwtn*.⁶³

The subsequent reference to the creation event (vv. 16–17) strengthens the belief that the organized world emanates from YHWH's victory over the sea monsters.⁶⁴ But this link does not fit the victory of Baal over Yam, whose mythology is devoid of any demiurgic dimension. Instead, it recalls the victory of Marduk over Tiamat related in the *Enuma Elish* (iv 123–40; v 1–66).

Psalm 77

Psalm 77 is a lament expressing the distress of the nation after the fall of Jerusalem. As in Psalm 74, the first verses (2–11) identify YHWH's passivity (“*Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time?*” v. 8) as being the source of this deplorable situation. After expounding on the majesty of YHWH (vv. 12–14), the psalmist goes on to contrast this current situation and the divine intervention in Exodus, again, the famous deeds from the past (vv. 15–21). In this instance, YHWH demonstrates his storm attributes in order to frighten the waters and cause them to flee.

- 17 When the waters saw you, O God,
When the waters saw you, they were afraid;
Indeed, the deep trembled.*

*¹⁸The clouds poured out water;
The skies gave forth thunder;
Your arrows flashed on every side.
¹⁹The crash of your thunder was in the dome of the heaven (bagalgal)⁶⁵;
Your lightnings lighted up the world;
The earth trembled and shook.*

The *modus operandi* combining the aspects of storming and instilling fear reflects a parallel with the Amorite storm-god defeating the sea in mythical times.⁶⁶ The reference to thunder, rainfall, and lightning recalls the weapons used by Baal for vanquishing Yam in Ugaritic mythology.⁶⁷ YHWH unambiguously integrates the Amorite storm-god's family in Psalm 77.⁶⁸

Psalm 89

Like Psalms 74 and 77, Psalm 89 is a lament comparing the prestigious status of Israel and its king in the past with the contemporary downfall of the Judah kingdom and the demise of the Davidic dynasty. To stress this contrast and the divine passivity accompanying it, the poem opens by presenting YHWH as the supreme deity (vv. 2, 6–9) and speaks of his deeds (vv. 10–11) that justify this august status (vv. 12–15). Here again, this epic wonder is none other than the mythical victory over the sea and the reptilian monster personifying it:

*⁹YHWH, God of hosts,
Who is mighty as you are, YHWH,
With your faithfulness all around you?
¹⁰You rule the raging of the sea (gē'ūt hayām);
When its waves rise, you still them.
¹¹You crushed (diki'tā) Rahab like a carcass;
You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
¹²The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours;
The world and all that is in it, you have founded them.
¹³The north and the south, you have created them;
Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.*

In this psalm, the praise of YHWH's greatness (v. 9) is immediately followed by the deed promoting it: the subduing of the primeval ocean (v. 10) following the mythical struggle against Rahab, the sea monster (v. 11).⁶⁹ The subsequent reference to YHWH's supremacy (v. 12) even suggests that this ultimate position is the result of this mythical combat, as it is in the Baal and Marduk mythologies.⁷⁰

The divine combat against the serpent is also visible outside of the Psalter. In the call to YHWH to intervene on the earth, in Isa 51:9–10, verse 9 recalls Baal's victory against a mythical creature identified there as Yam, Nahar, Tanin, and *bṭn 'qltn* (twisting serpent) (KTU 1.3 iii 38–46).⁷¹ As in Psalms 74

and 77, the reference to this mythical deed is immediately followed by a reference to the exodus and the miracle of the sea.

*9*Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of YHWH; Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago. Was it not you who hewed (hamaḥṣēbēt) Rahab in
pieces, who pierced the dragon (mēḥōlēlēt tannīn)? *10*Was it not you who dried
up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for
the redeemed to pass over?

Both events are gathered in the concluding claim: “I am YHWH your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – YHWH-Sebaoth is his name” (Isa 51:15). Like in Psalm 74, the author of these verses interprets the aperture of the sea as a reiteration of the mythical victory against the sea monster, a feature granting the birth of Israel the status of a new creation event.

A victory against the mythical serpent identified with the sea is also related in Job 26:8–13:

*8*He binds up the waters in his thick clouds,
And the cloud is not split open under them.
*9*He hides the face of his throne
And spreads over it his cloud.
*10*He has set a circle on the surface of the waters
At the boundary between light and darkness.
*11*The pillars of heaven tremble
And are astounded by his rebuke.
*12*By his power he stilled (rāga^s) the sea;
By his wisdom he shattered (māḥaṣ) Rahab.
*13*By his wind the heavens became serene (šipērā)
His hand pierced (hōlēlā) the twisting serpent (nāḥāš bāriah).

Here, verses 12–13 unambiguously mention YHWH’s victory over a serpentine marine monster.⁷² The parallel with Baal-Haddu mythology is confirmed by the reference, in the previous verses, to the power of YHWH to initiate a storm (v. 8) and to stop it (v. 12). The mention of the strength of his thunder (v. 11) provides additional support.

YHWH AND THE CHAOSKAMPF MOTIF

The problem of the coexistence of two contrasting views concerning the YHWH–serpent relationship is generally resolved in modern research by identifying in the conflict with the serpent an original trait of YHWH’s former identity. In this perspective, the positive views about the serpent become a marker of the Canaanite influence on the Israelite religion. This interpretation transforms YHWH into a local version of the Amorite storm-god, which was later influenced by the indigenous rites of fertility. However, the

anti-Amorite position expressed in many biblical sources calls for a closer examination of this premise, through the relationship between YHWH and the forces of chaos.

The Chaoskampf as Fundament

In 1895, Gunkel first identified the theme of a mythical struggle with a serpent symbolizing the forces of chaos (Chaoskampf motif) in the early Israelite literature.⁷³ This assumption emanated mainly from the affinities identified between some biblical sources, especially the myth of creation in Genesis 1, and the struggle between Marduk and Tiamat in the Babylonian myth of creation (*Enuma Elish*). The discovery of the Ugarit archives, three decades later, strengthened this premise and displaced the origin of this biblical motif from Babylonia to the Northern Levant.⁷⁴

By extension, scholars assumed the existence, in ancient Israel, of a festival celebrating YHWH's famous victory over the serpent and its consequences: the stability of the universe, the provision of rain, and the fertility of the earth. Out of the three psalms of lament mentioned above (Psalms 74, 79, and 89), Mowinckel identified in the Psalter many songs praising this mythical victory and the subsequent enthronement of YHWH as the supreme deity.⁷⁵ The Chaoskampf became the crucial event that ascribed supremacy to YHWH, and an autumnal festival celebrating it was then regarded as the original New Year festival of the early Israelite calendar.⁷⁶

Theoretical Objections

Until the present, neither archaeological nor epigraphic evidence has clearly supported the idea of an early Israelite autumnal New Year festival celebrating YHWH's victory over the evil forces of chaos. This lacuna is usually compensated for by general considerations about the Israelite religion. Carola Kloos summarizes this argument as follows: "Now, in my opinion, it cannot be doubted that the Canaanite conception of the battle of the deity with the Sea exercised a direct influence upon Israelite belief; or, to put it better: that the Israelites shared this belief with the non-Hebrew population of Canaan."⁷⁷ The previous chapter has revealed the coexistence of two contrasting religious traditions in the Southern Levant prior to the rise of Israel, one promoting the hegemony of the Amorite storm-god over the local traditions, and the other challenging it. Consequently, the relevant question is not whether or not the Canaanite culture influenced the Israelites, but rather which one of these trends the Israelites followed.

The Book of Genesis, and especially the myth of creation in Genesis 1, is of central importance in the Chaoskampf theory because of the parallel advocated between *Tiamat*, the monster sea-goddess representing the (chaotic) precreated

universe in the Babylonian myth, and *tehom*, an expression of the emptiness of the precreated universe mentioned with the primeval ocean in Gen 1:2. However, the Hebrew *tehom* does not originate from the Akkadian *Tiamat*, but both terms derived from **thm*, an early Semitic appellation of the sea. Consequently, the parallel between *Tiamat* and *tehom* cannot reflect any Israelite borrowing of the Babylonian mythology, or even their derivation from an archaic creation myth.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the serpent is not necessarily the symbol of the destroying forces of chaos in the ancient Near East. The previous chapter identified the political dimension of the struggle with the mythical serpent, in which the storm-god victory reflects the hegemony of the Amorites' value system vis-à-vis the indigenous beliefs.⁷⁹ A similar, political, dimension apparently underlies the struggle in the *Enuma Elish*, so the concept of chaos might be absent from Mesopotamian mythology.⁸⁰ Egyptologists concur, assuming that the concept of chaos, as formulated in the ancient Egyptian cosmologies, expresses emptiness rather than any enmity.⁸¹

Revisiting Some Chaoskampf Psalms

Considered as a ubiquitous theme of the Israelite early religion, the Chaoskampf motif influences the interpretation of many pieces of poetry and oracles in the Bible. For Eric Ortlund,⁸²

[T]he binding of theophany and the divine defeat of chaos is so widespread in Hebrew poetry that any occurrence of a theophany in a poetic context without such conflict leaps out by contrast [...] In light of these considerations, one could legitimately describe theophany in the Psalms and Prophets as the visible appearance of YHWH as he defeats the powers of chaos.

While this view is not shared by all scholars, a general consensus exists today for interpreting many psalms in this Chaoskampf context.⁸³ Here, we intend to examine the relevancy of this approach in poems and oracles frequently recruited for supporting the Chaoskampf theory.

Psalm 18 (=2 Samuel 22)

Psalm 18 is traditionally grouped with Psalms 74, 77, and 89 in the category of songs expressing the Chaoskampf motif.⁸⁴ Unlike them, Psalm 18 is not a lament about the collapse of the kingdom of Judah and YHWH's lack of intervention. Instead, this hymn praises YHWH protecting the psalmist, here identified with King David, against his enemies (vv. 2–7). A divine intervention follows this preamble. It begins with an impressive theophany involving the natural elements (vv. 8–16), followed by the description of the psalmist begging for divine protection from his enemies (vv. 17–19). Psalm 18 is approached as a case-study advocating an early identity of YHWH as a storm-god for two reasons.⁸⁵ First, the warrior-like attributes

of YHWH and his special protection of the king are both characteristics of the Amorite storm-god.⁸⁶ Second, the voice of YHWH thundering in the sky (v. 14), the dark storm clouds surrounding the deity (vv. 10, 12) and the combination of arrows and lightning (v. 15), recall the representation of Baal's theophany in Ugarit.⁸⁷ Also the image of YHWH 'riding' on a cherub (v. 11) likens the representation of Baal as a *cloud-rider* (*rkb 'rpt*) in Ugaritic literature.⁸⁸

The Chaokampf motif is here deduced from the vocabulary and from the image of moving waters laying bare the earth's foundations (verse 16), interpreted as an allusion to creating the dry land after vanquishing a sea monster.⁸⁹ However, no reference to such a mythical animal or any conflicting natural element is visible in the preceding verses.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the enemies fighting the psalmist also worship YHWH in Psalm 18, as revealed in verse 42: "They cried for help, but there was none to save; they cried to YHWH, but he did not answer them." Unlike the Baal or storm-god mythology, Psalm 18 refers to a religious conflict between two brother groups. While it is true that verse 9 describes a being producing volcanic smoke and fire ("Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; Glowing coals flamed forth from him"⁹¹), this dragon-like creature is none other than YHWH, thus negating the idea of Chaokampf in Psalm 18.⁹²

Psalm 29

Psalm 29 lacks any explicit reference to a divine fight against a serpent or any other trace of conflict. It is nonetheless generally interpreted as a Chaokampf psalm after assuming that the mighty waters (*mayîm rabbîm*) (v. 3) refer to the chaotic, primeval ocean.⁹³ By extension, scholars interpreted the image of the voice of YHWH upon mighty waters (v.3) as the expression of the divine victory over the forces of chaos.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the association of *mayîm rabbîm* with the primeval ocean of chaotic nature is absent not only from the Bible but also from the Ugaritic literature.⁹⁵ It is why the Chaokampf interpretation of Psalm 29 cannot be based on the interpretation of *mayîm rabbîm* as the chaotic primeval ocean.⁹⁶

The other possible indication comes from the reference to *mabbûl* (v. 10). Interpreted as *flood*, this term evokes the regression of the organized universe to a chaotic, predifferentiated state filled by the primeval ocean.⁹⁷ By extension, the image of YHWH "sitting" upon the *mabbûl* (v. 10) is interpreted as a reference to YHWH vanquishing the "forces of chaos" and protecting the stabilized universe.⁹⁸ It also argues for a parallel with the Babylonian representation of Marduk standing upon the body of Tiamat, the defeated patroness of the primeval ocean.⁹⁹

However, the image of a god enthroned on the despised and defeated "forces of chaos" is absent from the Near Eastern mythologies of the

storm-god. Even Marduk does not set his throne on Tiamat's body. The only Mesopotamian god enthroned upon the deep water (Apsu) is Ea/Enki, who is not a storm-god, and his sitting there does not result from any struggle or Chaostkampf event. Furthermore, Ea/Enki displays substantial affinities with El, the supreme deity of the Canaanite pantheon, rather than Baal.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, it is not surprising that even scholars arguing a Chaostkampf motif in Psalm 29 exclude the idea of its expression in verse 10.¹⁰¹ If Psalm 29 refers nonetheless to the Chaostkampf motif, it may be only in a very elliptical way.¹⁰²

Psalm 46

Psalm 46 is generally approached as a song of Zion articulated around the Chaostkampf motif.¹⁰³ This claim is justified by the mention of mountains collapsing into the sea (“*and in the slipping of mountains into the depth of the seas,*” v. 3) and other cataclysmic events (vv. 4, 7, 9), all interpreted as expressions of a cosmic fight between YHWH and the primeval forces of chaos threatening the organized universe.¹⁰⁴ The theme of YHWH as the refuge and ‘help in adversity’ (v. 2) even transforms Psalm 46 into a hymn praising Zion's stability in a universe still threatened by the destructive power of chaos.¹⁰⁵

However, the expression “[*He*] *Will shake mountains by his power*” (v. 4) refers to YHWH, transforming the god of Israel into the source of the cataclysm, not the protector of the world against chaotic powers of destruction. The parallel between the fall of mountains (v. 4) and the fall of kingdoms (v. 7) even extends this divine power of destruction.¹⁰⁶ A volcanic dimension appears in Psalm 46, where the voice of YHWH stimulates the melting process: “*He uttered his voice, let be melted (tāmûg) the earth*” (v.7).¹⁰⁷ Further, the destructions (*šamôti*) evoked in verse 9 fit the vast desolation provoked by volcanic activity.

It is noteworthy that the cataclysms and disorders are not deplored in this song. Rather, they actually seem to be a source of joy for the psalmist.¹⁰⁸ These observations signify that Psalm 46 is not a hymn of Zion praising the storm-god for vanquishing the forces of chaos, as is generally assumed.¹⁰⁹ Rather, such praise of the all-destructive powers of YHWH challenges the reading of Psalm 46 through the lens of Amorite storm-god mythology.

PRO- AND ANTI-AMORITE VIEWS IN THE BIBLE

Two contrasting approaches of the serpent symbol coexist in the Bible. One of them refers to the pre-Amorite religious background, and the other integrates the Amorite storm-god koiné. These two approaches being anchored in Bronze Age traditions, the simplest interpretation would be to assume that

both coexisted in Israel from the rise of this nation. Two observations invite us to revisit this premise, however. The first is the rarity of the Chaokampf motif in Psalms, which challenges the Gunkel hypothesis. The second is the post-monarchic dating of the sources referring to the Chaokampf motif. Psalms 74, 77, and 89 are three laments on the collapse of the kingdom of Judah. Isaiah 51 and Job are late compositions as well. This characteristic weakens the presumption of the extension, in early Israel, of the Chaokampf motif inherited from the Amorite koiné.¹¹⁰

Once the Chaokampf interpretation in psalms of possibly preexilic composition (e.g., Psalms 18, 29, 46) is challenged, the Chaokampf motif becomes mainly expressed in the postmonarchic period. It is mostly related to the Book of Isaiah, the Chaokampf being even considered by scholars as an essential element of the theology developed in the second part of this book (Isaiah 40–55).¹¹¹ Furthermore, Psalms 74, 77, and 89 interrelate with the Book of Isaiah in their language, motifs, and theology.¹¹² In all of them, the Chaokampf motif is introduced in order to demonstrate YHWH's capacity to intervene and fight the enemies of Israel.

The cosmogonic dimension of the Chaokampf motif, explicit in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51, displays more affinities with the *Enuma Elish* than with Ugaritic Baal mythology, where the victory over the serpent is devoid of such characteristics. These observations suggest a Babylonian influence on the exilic or postexilic Israelite theology rather than the sudden resurgence of an archaic theme.¹¹³ It is why the use of the Chaokampf motif in the Bible probably denotes an exilic Babylonian influence integrated in the Israelite theological context, rather than an Amorite background to the god of Israel.¹¹⁴ If it already existed in the preexilic period, the Chaokampf motif apparently remained a marginal theological element in early Israel.

Few indications support this conclusion. First, the importance of the Chaokampf motif in Isaiah contrasts with its absence in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, suggesting that this motif was meaningless for many prophets and theologians from the end of the monarchic period and the beginning of the exile.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, no explicit reference to the Chaokampf motif is present in Genesis, despite the pan-Amorite bias in portraying Abraham. Rather, the serpent remains the holy guardian in the Garden of Eden. Finally, most references to the parting of the Sea, including Exodus 14 and the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:1–21), ignore the Chaokampf imagery, a feature confirming the late integration of this motif, probably under Babylonian influence.

Until now, the main question concerning the emergence of the early Israelite religion was to evaluate the relative weight of its “Canaanite” background. A northern origin of YHWH and his representation as a Baal-like deity was interpreted as evidence of a high level of continuity with the indigenous

religion organized around agrarian cults of fertility. Alternatively, a low “Canaanite” influence contributed to identifying the early Israelites as nomad peoples originating in the arid areas of Sinai, the Negev, and Northwestern Arabia. The previous chapter has revealed how oversimplified this dichotomy is, due to the coexistence in the Southern Levant of two different systems of religious values, Amorite and pre-Amorite.

In light of these findings, the problem becomes determining whether early Israel displays affinities with the Amorite or the pre-Amorite culture. This task is facilitated by the contrasting status of the serpent symbol in these two religious systems. But the conclusion of this investigation is not as simple as expected. Two opposite views coexist in the Bible concerning the relationship between the early Israelites and the Amorite elite previously ruling in Canaan. Further research is needed to determine which position prevailed in early Israel and spurred the birth of this nation.

NOTES

- 1 A linkage between the biblical and historical Amorites was well accepted few decades ago. See, for example, Ishida 1979: 467; Mazar 1981: 79; Luke 1983: 224; Hess 1993: 127; Nakhai 2001: 7.
- 2 See Gen 15:19–21; Ex 3:8, 3:17, 13:5, 23:23, 33:2, 34:11; Deut 7:1, 20:17; Jos 3:10, 9:1. Nadav Na’aman (2005a: 338) concluded: “*Only two of the seven pre-Israelite nations represent the autochthonous population of the country: Canaanites and Amorites (though the latter is an archaic non-historical name). The rest bear names of splinter groups that migrated to Canaan in the twelfth century and settled there side by side with the settlements of local and migrating West-Semitic groups (the so-called ‘Israelites’).*”
- 3 Oded 2015: 399. The seven nations are mentioned in Deut 7:1: “*When YHWH your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you.*”
- 4 For example, Gen 15:16–17, 15:19–21; Ex 3:8, 3:17, 13:5; Deut 7:1; Jos 3:10, 7:7; 24:8; Amos 2:10.
- 5 ANET: 287; Van Seters 1972.
- 6 John Van Seters (1972: 78) deduced that “[the term] ‘Amorite’ in the Old Testament does not correspond to any political or ethnic entity known from historical documents of the second millennium BC. Instead, the Old Testament writers probably learned of the term from Assyrian and Babylonian sources of the first millennium and construed it as an archaic term for the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine.”
- 7 Nadav Na’aman (1994a: 178) noticed that “*The name of most of the inland Southern Syrian and Northern Palestinian rulers are of ‘northern’ origin, with relatively few exceptions [...] On the coast of Lebanon and in southern Palestine on the other hand there is a great majority of West Semitic names, with only few exceptions.*”
- 8 Malamat 2006; Benz 2019: 264.
- 9 Malamat 2006: 352; Bonfil and Zarzercki-Peleg 2007.
- 10 Ben-Tor and Rubiato (1999) assume that the early Israelites destroyed the city. Other scholars challenge this conclusion, integrating the fall of the city in the battle of Qadesh, or attributing it to internal conflicts within Canaan. See Whitelam 1994; Schäfer-Lichtenberger 2001.

- 11 Ben-Tor 2006.
- 12 Benz 2019: 278.
- 13 Ben-Ami 2013; Sandhaus 2013.
- 14 Zuckerman 2011; Na'aman 2016: 140; Benz 2019: 274.
- 15 For William Dever (2003: 68), “*this suggests strongly that the writers of the Book of Joshua did not entirely ‘invent’ the story of the fall of Hazor. They had reliable historical sources, oral and/or written. They also knew correctly that Hazor had indeed formerly been ‘the head of all those kingdoms’ or city-states in the north, as the current excavations have made abundantly clear.*”
- 16 For example, Ex 3:8, 3:17, 13:15, 23:23, 3:28; Deut 7:1, 20:17; Jos 3:10, 9:1.
- 17 For Itamar Singer (2006: 756), “*the biblical Hittites have nothing to do with the Anatolian Hittites. Rather, the term ‘Hittite’ serves as a synonym for ‘Canaan’ and ‘Amorite’, generally denoting the inhabitants of Syria-Palestine, in accordance with the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian usage of the term from the late century on.*”
- 18 Collins 2006: 842–3.
- 19 The Hittites (*hatti*) are mentioned in Egyptian sources from the Late Bronze Age as people from Anatolia. See van Seters 1972: 65.
- 20 Isa 14:9, 26:14; Ps 88:11; Job 26:5; Prov 2:18, 9:18, 21:16. See Schnell 1962.
- 21 Gray 1952; Caquot 1960: 79.
- 22 Gray 1952: 40; L’Heureux 1974: 271–2.
- 23 Caquot 1960: 79.
- 24 Caquot 1976: 296. Continuity between the living *rp’m* and their dead counterparts is ensured through the succession of kings. The divinized status is apparent in the king list (KTU 1.113), where the name of each dead king is preceded by *el*. The ritual offerings to the temple of *ditānu* (e.g., KTU 1.102, 1.104, 1.124) confirm this deified status.
- 25 The royal liturgy (KTU 1.161) performed in ceremonies for the dead king’s succession confirms it. The refrain of this royal liturgy specifies that the dead king joins the assembly of dead *rp’m* (*rp’i arš*), transforming him into the protector of his successor. In counterpart, the new king performs the *kispu* rituals (in which food and drink were offered to the dead), which enable his successful deification. See Gray 1952; Caquot 1976; Pitard 1978; Levine and de Tarragon 1984; Wyatt 1998a: 314–24.
- 26 KTU 1.161 R 1–3. A document from Ugarit dated from about the thirteenth century BC (KTU 1.113 = RS 14.257) mentions about thirty successive kings, a feature dating the beginning of the dynasty to the early second millennium BC. See Levine and de Tarragon 1984: 655; Wyatt 1998a: 399–403. See also Vidal (2006: 170–1 and ref therein) for the early history of the Ugaritian dynasty.
- 27 Kitchen 1977; Lipiński 1978; Wyatt 1998a: 433; Whiting 1995: 1232; Vidal 2006: 168.
- 28 The opening verses of KTU 1.108 address the “father” of the *rp’m* who reigns from Athtarat and Edrei.
- 29 Wyatt 2010: 589. See also Smith (1992: 675–6) for the parallel between the Biblical *Rephaim* and their Ugaritian homologs.
- 30 Num 13:28, 13:33; Deut 1:28, 9:2.
- 31 For Shemaryahu Talmon (1983: 239–40), “*it could be surmised that the *yelidê hārāpā’/h* by origin were not Philistines, but rather survivors of a component of the autochthonous population of Canaan who had been conquered by the invading Philistines (cp. Josh 11:22) and either were pressed into military service or had joined their army as mercenaries...*”
- 32 Talmon (1983: 240) assumes that the mention in the Bible of populations of abnormal height “*may well be an ‘epic’ aggrandizement (Deut 2:11; 3:11 et al.) of basic actual facts.*”
- 33 L’Heureux 1974: 273; Wyatt 2010: 591.
- 34 Gen 10:15, 15:21; Ex 3:8, 3:17, 13:15, 23:23, 23:28; Deut 7:1, 20:17; Jos 3:10, 9:1; Neh 9:8.
- 35 See Num 13:22; Deut 9:2–3; Jos 11:21–11, 15:14 for the Anakim; Deut 9:13 for the Rephaim.
- 36 See, for example, de Vaux 1971a: 250–2; Wiseman 1977a.

- 37 *Teraḥi*, *Naḥor* and *Seruḡ* correspond to the old Babylonian toponyms *Turaḥi*, *Nihriya* and *Saruḡi*, respectively. See Hendel 2005: 52 and ref therein.
- 38 Bailey 1968: 436; Wiseman 1977a: 127–8; Hendel 2005: 53.
- 39 Thompson 1974; van Seters 1975; de Pury 2002.
- 40 Blenkinsopp 2009: 233; Na’aman 2015: 158–60; Ska 2001: 174.
- 41 Ska 2001: 177.
- 42 Daniel Fleming (1998: 68) noticed that “Neither location [*Harran* or *Nahor*] has any personal interest to Israel outside of Genesis, nor do they offer any persuasive connection to exilic or post-exilic communities that would explain either the region or the particular towns as the ultimate point of reference for Israelite ancestry.”
- 43 Hendel 2005: 52–3; Bodi 2014.
- 44 This artifice is also visible in Deut 26:5, a verse asserting an Aramean (=Amorite) origin of the fathers of Israel: “And you shall make response before YHWH your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.”
- 45 Durand 1998.
- 46 Fleming 1998: 78; Hendel 2005: 53–5; Finkelstein and Römer 2014: 4.
- 47 Wiseman 1977b; Berner 2015: 42–3.
- 48 Though the Amorite portrayal of Abraham, as exposed in Genesis, is probably a postexilic composition, the precision concerning the description of his Amorite character is surprising. This portrait might be inspired by Amorite incomers’ traditions that survived for a long time in Israel. Daniel Fleming (1998) already suggested in the past the Amorite origin of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin, the Yaminites being the southern clan of Amorites organized around the region of Harran. He concluded (1998: 71): “It is this identification of Harran with the Yaminites, the most plausible ancestry of Benjamin, that suggests a more specific historical link between the players known from Mari and Genesis.”
- 49 Ego 2005: 178; Römer 2001 and 2012a: 163–5. Finkelstein and Römer (2014: 10–12) challenge the assumption of an exilic origin of the Abraham tradition. They rather argue its indigenous origin in the Southern Levant, at the Iron Age. From the reference to Abraham in Ezek 33:23–29 and its echo in Isaiah, Finkelstein and Römer (2014: 12) concluded that “the oldest Abraham traditions originated in the Iron Age and that they contained an autochthonous hero story.”
- 50 This latter eventuality fits the biblical appellation of YHWH as El, but never as Dagan.
- 51 Fabry (1999: 378–9) reports various opinions identifying the Nehushtan either as a former Mosaic fetish, a Syro-Phoenician emblem, a foreign military emblem captured by David that became a trophy, an Egyptian symbol of royal sovereignty, an apotropaic Babylonian talisman, a Phoenician serpent staff of Eshmun, or even a relic of local Canaanite fertility rites. See also Sweeney 2007: 403. For Maciej Münnich (2005: 49*), “The bronze serpent was primarily a symbol of a deity in competition with the cult of YHWH as it moved towards monotheism.” Westermann (1984: 384), however, rules out the possibility that the serpent merely denotes Canaanite fertility cults independent of the worship of YHWH.
- 52 Ron Hendel (1999: 616) concludes that “The bronze snake probably belonged to the traditional repertoire of Yahwistic symbols.” Savignac (1972: 332) even interpreted the serpent as a figuration of YHWH (or his powers) in the popular religion of ancient Israel.
- 53 In Mesopotamia, for example, the serpent-god Ningizzida is acknowledged as the guardian of the tree of knowledge (van Buren 1934: 67). Also in Greece, a serpent-dragon Ladon prevents the access to a mysterious tree producing golden apples, whose harvest is forbidden. Alike in Genesis 3:22, the fruit of this fabulous tree is expected to provide eternal life. See Canby 1995: 18.
- 54 Arnold (2009: 62) noticed that nothing in Genesis 3 promotes the association of the serpent with the evil. The connotations are rather of wisdom, protection, and knowledge. Such a positive association is also acknowledged by von Rad (1961: 85) and Westermann (1984: 237).

- 55 Day 1979: 150; Ornan 2012. Keel and Uehlinger (1998: 273) interpret this winged serpent as representing the *seraph*, a divine creature belonging to the yahwistic sphere. About the affinities between the seraphim and the uraeus, see de Savignac 1972; Mettinger 1999: 743; Amzallag 2015d.
- 56 Mundkur 1983: 102. Concerning the figuration of serpents in Mesopotamian temples, see Frayne 1982. According to van Buren (1934: 63, 66–7) and Dalley (1989: 186), the Mesopotamian serpent-god, Ningizzida, was the guardian of the gate accessing the palace of the sky-god Anu.
- 57 The serpent attack immediately follows the decision not to circumvent the land of Edom from the south (Num 21:4).
- 58 More than a century ago, Lagrange (1900: 284–5) located the event in Punon. See Sawyer (1986: 156), Tebes (2009: 108), and Amzallag (2015d: 114–16) for recent scholars defending this opinion.
- 59 McCulloch 1930: 216; Suhr 1967: 218; Grottanelli 2005: 433–4. Already in the nineteenth century, A. W. Buckland (1875: 60–1) concluded that “*A large number of the old-serpent myths represent this reptile as associated in some way with precious metals and precious stones; the serpent constantly appears as the guardian of hidden treasures and the revealing of precious knowledge; whilst the deities, kings and heroes who are either symbolized by the serpent, or supposed to partake its nature, are commonly described as the pioneers of civilization and the instructors of mankind in the arts of agriculture and mining.*”
- 60 Watterson 1999: 129–31.
- 61 James Charlesworth (2010: 231) concludes that “*Dan is clearly portrayed as the serpent that guards the tribes of Israel.*” The aptness of the metaphor is confirmed in Jer 8:16 by the mention of invading northern enemies that enter Israel from Dan with horses and cavalry.
- 62 See Amzallag 2016a. The biblical parallel between the *seraphim* and the *kerubim* (griffins) confirms their belonging to the holy universe. See Wyatt 2009.
- 63 KTU 1.2 iv 27–34; 1.3 iii–iv; 1.5 i 1–3. See, for example, Day 1985: 23–4; Goulder 1996: 71; Tsumura 2015: 552; Scoggins–Ballantine 2015: 84–5.
- 64 McKenzie 1950: 282; Mettinger 1997: 145; Sylva 2011: 246; Scoggins–Ballantine 2015: 84–5; Stahl 2020: 7.
- 65 Dahood (1968: 232) does not translate *ggl* as ‘whirlwind’ (as generally assumed) but as ‘firmament’ because *ggl* (formerly *skull*) designates something domed or vaulted. The parallel reference to *tbl* (created universe) in this verse strengthens this interpretation.
- 66 Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 279; Kselman 1983: 51–3; Kraus 1993: 116.
- 67 Day 1985: 511; Weber 2007: 116; Sylva 2011: 263.
- 68 Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 279; Sylva 2011: 255; Müller 2017: 215; Goulder 1996: 105.
- 69 Dahood 1968: 314; Tate 1990: 421; Kraus 1993: 206; Clifford 2003: 92.
- 70 See Bang (2020: 91–2) concerning the parallels between Ps 89:10–13 and the *Enuma Elish*. Hutton (2007: 284) notices striking parallels between these verses and Baal’s mythology, especially in KTU 1.3 iii 38–46. These features denote a preservation of old traditions in the ancient Near East, including among biblical authors.
- 71 See Hutton (2007) for a comparison between Isa 51:9–11 and the Baal mythology.
- 72 Day 1985: 39.
- 73 Gunkel (1895), *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (English translation: *Creation and Chaos in the primeval Era and the Eschaton: Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*).
- 74 See Scurlock (2013) and Bang (2017) for an overview of the Chaoskampf theory.
- 75 Mowinckel 1967 1: 106–35, 143–5.
- 76 Scholars (e.g., Day 1985: 19) identified allusions to an autumnal New Year festival in Early Israel in Ex 23:16 and Ex 34:22, whereas others (e.g., Clines 1974) denied it. Among the many books organized around this paradigm, we may quote Wakeman 1973; Day 1985; Kloos 1986; Batto 1992; Scoggins–Ballantine 2015.
- 77 Kloos 1986: 69. John Day (1985: 21) deduces from the biblical sources the existence of a “Canaanite New Year festival,” which is expected, in return, to have influenced the

- Israelite festival: “Since both the Feast of Tabernacles (cf Judg 9:27) and the festal theme of the king-god in conflict with the chaos waters were appropriated from the Canaanites, it is reasonable to suppose that this motif was also a feature of the Canaanite Autumn Festival.”
- 78 Day 1985: 7, 50–1; Tsumura 2005: 9–35; Watson 2005: 16–17; Sonik 2013: 2–3; Lambert 2013: 44.
- 79 This view is detailed in Oldenburg (1969), Benz (2013: 138), and Tugendhaft (2013: 195–6).
- 80 Lambert 2013: 44; Lemos 2020: 166.
- 81 For Jan Assmann (2003: 189), the idea of *chaos* as evil threatening of the organized world “should not be confused with cosmogonic chaos, the primal state of the fore-world from which sprang the order of creation. Cosmogonic chaos is the amorphous primal matter devoid of any connotation of evil or imperfection.” According to Sonik (2013: 5, 13), a similar perception of cosmogonic chaos existed in ancient Greece.
- 82 Ortlund 2010: 2–3.
- 83 For example, Sylva (2011: 244) assumes that only five poems from the Psalter (Psalms 18, 65, 74, 77, and 89) carry the Chaoskampf motif.
- 84 Cole 2000: 59; Sylva 2011: 244.
- 85 Crouch 2011: 263; Stahl 2020: 7.
- 86 Craigie 2004: 173–4; Smith 2002: 56; Maré 2010: 106–8; Green 2003: 269–71; Gray 2014: 83. For Shnider (2006: 394), the king–god relationship extends considerably, here, through the parallel stressed between the divine theophany (vv. 8–16) and the king fighting his enemies (vv. 30–43). From such a divine protection to the king, Leonard Maré (2010: 102) deduced that “the psalm was probably utilized by a succession of Davidic kings in various liturgical settings, including the great festivals.”
- 87 Stahl 2020: 7.
- 88 Maré 2010: 107; Strine and Crouch 2013: 885; Gray 2014: 88. However, this supporting indication is valid only if YHWH is truly depicted as a storm-god in this song, but not as evidence demonstrating it. See Keel 1997: 214.
- 89 Kraus 1988: 260; Maré 2010: 106; Crouch 2011: 264; Strine and Crouch 2013: 885.
- 90 Craigie 2004: 173–4; Smith 2002: 56.
- 91 G. H. Wilson 2014: 341; Maré 2010: 107; Cartledge 2001: 653; Kim and Trimm 2014: 169–72.
- 92 The storm-god and Chaoskampf readings of Psalm 18 remain generally unaffected by these considerations. For John Day (1985: 125), “the theophany is simply in the storm, involving lightning and thunder, and that we should not also see here allusions to volcanic phenomena. That we do not have volcanic allusions here is supported by the fact that so far as we know, nowhere else in the ancient near east are volcanic features attested in theophanies, the manifestations rather being in the storm and earthquake.” Here again, the storm-god interpretation is fed by the assumption that early Israelite religion necessarily likens its neighbors’.
- 93 May 1955: 10.
- 94 Dahood 1966: 176; Beaucamp 1976: 136; Craigie 2004: 247; Kennedy 2009: 15; Sommer 2013: 135; Barbiero 2016: 386. The possible interpretation of the preposition ‘l as “against” instead of “upon,” in 3c, further supports the combative dimension in this verse. See Kloos 1986: 52.
- 95 Pardee 2005: 176. Indeed, *mayîm rabbîm* may refer to flooding and destruction (e.g., Ps 18:17, 32:6, 144:7), but without any reference to a primeval ocean of chaotic nature. Even in Isa 17:13, which mentions the nations roaring “like the roaring of many waters (*mayîm rabbîm*),” this expression probably does not refer to chaotic forces of creation rebuked by YHWH in the past. The metaphor of chaff chased by wind introduced in this verse refers to another reality.
- 96 For example, Dennis Sylva (2011: 245) disbelieves that the mention of the waters (*mayîm rabbîm*, *mabbûl*) in Psalm 29 refers to the Chaoskampf mythological motif: “There is no specific action taken against the water, as there is against the cedars, Lebanon, the wilderness, and the

- oaks* (vv. 5–9), suggesting that v. 3 describes a sea storm. The statement ‘YHWH sits enthroned over the flood’ (v. 10a) may refer to a torrential downpour, the chaotic waters, or to both. But that YHWH is so enthroned does not necessarily suggest a *Chaoskampf*.”
- 97 Dahood 1966: 176; Seybold 1996: 121; Clifford 1979: 241; Luyster 1981; Scoggins-Ballantine 2015: 81–2.
- 98 Fensham 1963: 87; Day 1979: 143–4; Müller 2017: 222–3.
- 99 Mettinger 1982: 69–70. The representation of the storm-god standing upon the deep water/flood (*mdb*) therefore creates a bridge with the Baal mythology: “*Baal sits like a mountain stands; Haddu [lies down] like deep waters (mdb)*” (KTU 1.101.1, translated by Pardee 1998: 124–5). The term *mdb* is assimilated with Yam by Fisher and Knutson (1969: 158, n. 7) based on their interpretation of the Baal deeds. Tsumura (2005: 154–5) rejects this extrapolation, however.
- 100 Tsumura 1988: 352–3; Tsumura 1989: 145–54.
- 101 For example, Kloos 1986: 62, 66–8.
- 102 An alternative interpretation of Psalm 29 is proposed in Amzallag (2021c), arguing that this hymn was not originally devoted to a storm-god deity but was a hymn of Qenite origin praising the former, pre-Israelite identity of YHWH.
- 103 Gunkel 1998 (1926): 22, 55–7; Ollenburger 1987: 16. This genre is also supposed to include Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122.
- 104 See, for example, Schökel 1981: 418; Anderson 1972 1: 356; Gerstenberger 1988: 192; Kelly 1970: 306; Maillot and Lelièvre 1962: 291; Schäder 2010: 145–7. This psalm has been paralleled with Ps 74:13–16, where YHWH shatters the sea monster’s head.
- 105 Kelly 1970: 308; van der Lugt 2010: 45; Watson 2005: 135. By extension, Jerusalem becomes the nucleus of stability from which peace and order expand to the whole earth. See Gunkel 1903; Gunkel 1926 (1998): 57; Kraus 1988: 496–9.
- 106 Tsumura 1980.
- 107 Amzallag 2015b: 30–2. This point was already stressed by Dahood (1966: 281) and Hakham (1990 1: 266).
- 108 Erhard Gerstenberger (1988: 192) noticed this singularity: “*Strangely enough for our way of reasoning, vv. 5–6, flanked as they are by battle and victory, express joy and trust.*” See also Raabe 1990: 55. This joy and trust are visible in verse 5 and especially in verse 9, where the parallelism of members identifies the destructive action of YHWH (*šamôṭ*) as the great work of YHWH (*mip’āḏōt*).
- 109 Amzallag 2015b.
- 110 This problem is noted by scholars defending the Gunkel hypothesis, such as John Day (1985: 187): “*Although the [Chaoskampf] imagery was already known in pre-exilic Israel, when it was especially associated with the Autumn Festival, it did become particularly prominent in the exilic period [...] Why should the imagery gain prominence at this time?*”
- 111 Crouch 2011: 265–71; Ortlund 2010: 2–3. Eric Ortlund identified expressions of the Chaoskampf motif in the whole Book of Isaiah (Isa 2:10–21, 13:1–3, 24:21–23, 26:20–27:1, 29:1–8, 30:23–33, 35:1–10, 40:1–11, 42:14–17, 51:7–10, 59:15–19, 66:15–17, and allusions to it in Isa 17:12–14, 31:4–9, 33:1–16, 50:1–3, 63: 1–6, 63:19–64:2). For Tryggve Mettinger (1997: 150), “*The idea of Divine Warrior, who vindicates his kingship in a new victory over the forces of chaos, is something that gives a profound unity to the whole book of Isaiah 40–55. From the point of view of contents 51:9–52:12 with the proclamation of YHWH as king in 52:7 constitutes the summit.*”
- 112 Day 1985: 22, 28; Nurmela 2006: 70; Willey 1997: 146; Hutton 2007: 278, 282, 284.
- 113 Clifford 1985: 513; Willey 1997: 147.
- 114 Scholars assume that the third part of Isaiah (Chapters 56–66) is issued from a small circle of theologians originating from the Babylonian diaspora or influenced by it. See Blenkinsopp 1990: 7, 17–19; Schramm 1995: 179–81. Theodor Gaster (1977 [1950]: 142) has already suggested that the Chaoskampf motif might have been introduced into the Israelite religion

through the Babylonian exile: “*Without exception, the passages in question are of exilic or post-exilic date – the product of a general archaeological revival which swept the whole of the Near East in the sixth-fifth centuries B.C. and, more specifically, of an attempt to recapture the allegiance of the returning and assimilated Jewish exiles by representing their ancestral religion in terms of the ‘heathen’ mythologies with which they had become acquainted.*”

- 115 The Chaoskampf motif already appears in Isa 27:1. Instead of referring to a deed from the past, it here conditions the future redemption of the whole earth: “*In that day YHWH with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.*” This diversity of uses pleads for the relative novelty of this theme in the Israelite theology.