

# Amorites

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### I. In the Old Testament

The name Amorite is used in the OT to denote (1) the inhabitants of Palestine generally, (2) the population of the hills as opposed to the plain, and (3) a specific people under a king of their own. Thus (1) we hear of them on the west shore of the Dead Sea (Gen. 14:7), at Hebron (Gen. 14:13), and Shechem (Gen. 48:22), in Gilead and Bashan (Dt. 3:10), and under Hermon (Dt. 3:8; 4:48). They are named instead of the Canaanites as the inhabitants of Palestine whom the Israelites were required to exterminate (Gen. 15:16; Dt. 20:17; Jgs. 6:10; 1 S. 7:14; 1 K. 21:26; 2 K. 21:11); the older population of Judah is called Amorite in Josh. 10:5f, in conformity with which Ezk. 16:3 states that Jerusalem had an Amorite father; and the Gibeonites are said to have been “of the remnant of the Amorites” (2 S. 21:2). On the other hand (2) in Nu. 13:29 the Amorites are described as dwelling in the mountains like the Hittites and Jebusites of Jerusalem, while the Amalekites or bedouin lived in the south and the Canaanites on the seacoast and in the valley of the Jordan. Lastly (3) we hear of Sihon, “king of the Amorites,” who had conquered the northern half of Moab (Nu. 21:21–31; Dt. 2:26–35). While nonbiblical evidence on the subject is lacking and biblical evidence faces notable difficulties, it appears certain that the scriptural use of the word depends on the general Syro-Palestinian pattern of the end of the 2nd millennium.

### II. In Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East

*A. Varying Use of the Name* Amorites appear first in Mesopotamia in a divinatory text of the time of Sargon I (ca 2360–2305). There they are a nomadic people, possibly from the northwestern hill countries, but more likely (so Dossin) from the western deserts (kur-mar-tu=the desert countries). The name (“the Westerners”) is therefore a purely geographical indication of their immediate origins, from the perspective of Mesopotamia, and conveys no information about their ethnic composition or their real name. The highly civilized Sumerians considered them as barbarians. The name is used also for the northwestern countries: Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine; the Mediterranean appears sometimes as the “Sea of Amurru.”

*B. Early Amorite Kingdoms and Nomads in Syria and Mesopotamia* Between the 23rd and 21st cents b.c. the Amorites penetrated into Babylonia, where, after the fall of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (ca 1950), they settled down. Thereafter Northwest Semitic dynasties ruled over Larsa (ca 1961–1699), Isin (ca 1958–1733), Mari (until 1693), and Babylon (ca 1830–1531, the 1st Dynasty of Babylon), further in Syria over Aleppo, Qatna, Alalakh, etc., showing a consistent ethnic and institutional pattern from Mesopotamia to Syria. Evidence comes also from the Egyptian Execration Texts (19th–18th cents see ANET, pp. 328ff) and from a list showing the presence of Amorite slaves in Egypt (18th cent). The end of Amorite rule came after the conquest and sack of Babylon ca 1531 by the Hittites, when its remains were overrun by the

Kassites, who were to hold the region for some four hundred years. The archives of Mari reveal another wave of Amorite nomads, plundering and trying whenever possible to settle down. Their linguistic pattern shows affinities with names and idioms of Biblical Hebrew, on which ground M. Noth has called them “Proto-Arameans.” This has lately been challenged. The title “Northwest Semites” is more pertinent, therefore, although “Amorites” remains as a conventional name.

*C. The God Amurru* The first Amorites had an eponymous god Martu, who was soon included into the Sumerian pantheon as son of *Ninḫursanga* and husband to *Ašratum/Aširtum* (=the Syrian As-tarte). Martu is once identified with the storm-god (H)Adad.

*D. The Amorite Kingdom During the Amarna Age* During the 14th cent Amurru appears as the name for a Syrian kingdom, whose frontiers reach N to Arwad, S to Sidon, and E to Damascus. Any ethnic significance of the name seems here to have been lost and replaced by one merely political. The kingdom Amurru appears in Hittite and Ugaritic treaties, and through the latter one can reconstruct a genealogy of eight kings of Amurru (cf. M. Liverani, *Storia di Ugarit* [1962], ch 2). The name appears also in Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources, respectively from Seti I and Tukulti-Ninurta I onward. In the Annals of Sennacherib (cf. ANET, p. 287 b), “kings of Amurru” are those of Phoenicia, Philistia, Ammon, Edom, and Moab, an evidence

for a much broader use of the word.

*E. Physical Characteristics of the Amorites* Because of the complicated history of the Amorites, great caution is needed when investigating their ethnic and racial background. The ancient statues of Amorite kings are often too damaged in relevant features (e.g., the nose) and too stylized to be of much use (cf. ANEP, nos 429ff), while Mari wall paintings tend not to classify the people there represented into racial types known to us. The Egyptian reliefs of Medinet Habu (12th cent cf. ANEP, nos 7, 9, 346) refer to the inhabitants of the *kingdom* of Amurru, not to the original Amorites. From the language we can, however, safely consider the Amorites of Semitic stock, with probably a few Indo-Aryan elements.

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