

MIDIAN, MIDIANITES

Judges

The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary

Midian was one of the sons of Abraham by his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2). Just before dying, Abraham leaves everything to Isaac and sends Midian and his brothers away "to the land of the east" (25:5-6). The biblical narrative regards him as the progenitor of the Midianites, who inhabited what is now southern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia. The relations between the Israelites and the Midianites over the next centuries are generally adversarial. Moses' experience is the exception: After fleeing Egypt, Moses arrives in Midian, marries a Midianite woman, and has an amicable relationship with Jethro, her father (also named Reuel), who was a priest (Exod.2-3). Jethro even accompanies the Israelites during part of their wilderness wanderings and gives Moses advice on leading the people (Exod. 18).

The remaining references to the Midianites in the OT are largely antagonistic. In Genesis, the merchants who buy Joseph from his brothers and take him down to Egypt are Midianite (37:25-36). (The merchants are also referred to as Ishmaelites in the same narrative, and it may well be that the term "Ishmaelite" could both refer to Ishmaelites proper and serve to denote Arabic nomadic peoples in general; see also Judg. 8:22-24.) In Numbers, the Midianites join the Moabites in attempting to stop the Israelite advance through their territory, hiring Balaam to curse them (Num. 22-24). Although this attempt fails, because God will not allow Balaam to curse the Israelites, idolatrous sexual relations between the Israelites and the Midianites prompts God to put a plague on his own people (Num.25). One of God's last instructions to Moses before his death is to make war against the Midianites to exact revenge for their causing the Israelites to sin (Num. 31). On the other hand, when the Israelites continue their cycle of sin in the promised land, God delivers them to other nations, including the Midianites (Judg. 6-9). Israelite victories over Midian, given to them by God, are celebrated in various later passages in the OT (Ps. 83:9; Isa. 9:4; 10:26; Hab. 3:7).

