

Who were the Ishmaelites?

Simply put, the Ishmaelites were the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abram by his wife's handmaiden, Hagar (Genesis 16:1-12). From small beginnings, the Ishmaelites became a numerous and mighty people.

The origin of the Ishmaelites was fraught with difficulty. When Sarai was unable to produce a child with Abram, she followed the common cultural practice and gave Hagar to him, and Hagar conceived his child. But Sarai later became jealous and mistreated Hagar, who fled from her mistress into the wilderness. There Hagar met the Angel of the Lord who pronounced the first of three prophecies concerning the child she was bearing. She would give birth to a son, and his descendants would multiply greatly. It was at this time that God told Hagar to name him Ishmael, which means "God hears" (Genesis 16:10-11).

In the wilderness the Angel of the Lord also predicted that Ishmael—and therefore the Ishmaelites—would be stubborn, untamable, and warlike: "He will be a wild donkey of a man; / his hand will be against everyone / and everyone's hand against him, / and he will live in hostility / toward all his brothers" (Genesis 16:12). After hearing the angel's words, Hagar returned to her mistress and eventually gave birth to Ishmael.

Later, God changed the names of Sarai and Abram to Sarah and Abraham and established a covenant with Abraham's son Isaac. But Ishmael also had a promise from God: he would be blessed, too, and he would be the father of a great nation, beginning with twelve sons, the first of the Ishmaelites (Genesis 17:20). The names of the twelve are listed in Genesis 25:12-16; it is from the Ishmaelites that the Arab nations descended.

Ishmael was about fourteen years old when Isaac was born. A year or a few later, when Isaac was weaned, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking her son. Sarah asked Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, and God told Abraham to comply. The Angel of God met Hagar and her son once again and predicted for the third time that Ishmael would father a great nation (Genesis 21:18).

Later in Israel's history, the Ishmaelites were also called Midianites (although not all Midianites were descendants of Ishmael), and they engaged in the buying and selling of slaves (Genesis 37:28; 39:1). Judges 8:24 tells us that it was a custom for the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.

During the reign of King David, the Ishmaelites joined a confederacy against God and against His people, Israel (Psalm 83:5-6). Their goal was to "destroy them as a nation, / so that Israel's name is remembered no more" (verse 4). Considering the current turmoil in the Middle East and the hatred often directed against Israel by her neighbors, the prophecies concerning the descendants of Ishmael continue to prove true.