

What is the role of the Arabs in the Bible?

God called Abraham to leave his homeland and follow the Lord in faith. God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). Many years would pass before that promise was fulfilled. During the long wait, Abraham's wife, Sarah, remained childless. She suggested that Abraham take her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to conceive an heir (Genesis 16:1-3). The son born of this union was Ishmael, from whom the Arab peoples are descended.

When Hagar became pregnant, she regarded Sarah with contempt, which caused Sarah to treat the young mother so harshly that she ran away with Ishmael into the wilderness. While Hagar sat beside a desert spring, an angel of the Lord approached her and said, "You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael (which means 'God hears'), for the Lord has heard your cry of distress. This son of yours will be a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey! He will raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live in open hostility against all his relatives" (Genesis 16:11-12, NLT). Hagar then returned to Abraham and bore him a son, Ishmael.

God told Abraham, "As for Ishmael, I will bless him also, just as you have asked. I will make him extremely fruitful and multiply his descendants. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 17:20, NLT). Later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the promised son who would inherit the blessings promised to Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 21:1-3).

As the boys grew up together, Sarah became upset when Ishmael made fun of Isaac. She demanded that Abraham send Ishmael and Hagar away (Genesis 21:10). Abraham was

reluctant, but God reassured him, “Do not be upset over the boy and your servant. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar’s son because he is your son, too” (Genesis 21:12-13, NLT).

Abraham sent them away, and Hagar and Ishmael wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba until they were about to die of thirst. God heard their cries, commissioned another angel to lead them to water, and renewed His promise to make a great nation of Ishmael’s descendants. The boy grew up, became a skillful archer, and settled in the wilderness of Paran in the eastern Sinai Peninsula. He married an Egyptian woman (see Genesis 21:14-20) and fathered twelve sons and a daughter, who grew up to marry Esau (Genesis 28:9). From this family proceeded the Arabs, or Arabian nations who now inhabit the region of Arabia.

Arabia is a vast territory, encompassing more than a million square miles, dominated by harsh desert. The term Arab may have derived from a Semitic word meaning “desert” or perhaps “nomad.” Alternatively, it may have come from a Hebrew word meaning “mixed people.” Arabs of the Bible were “the nomadic tribes of the desert” (see Jeremiah 25:24), living primarily in the northwestern part of Arabia. They dwelt in tents (Psalm 83:6; 120:5; Jeremiah 49:29) and traveled on camels in great merchant caravans carrying spices, gold, and precious jewels (Genesis 37:25; 1 Kings 10:2). They traded expensive saddle blankets, lambs, and goats (Ezekiel 27:20-22) and were also slave traders (Joel 3:8). The Bible sometimes refers to Arabs as “the people of the east” (Judges 6:3, NLT). As descendants of Shem, they spoke Semitic languages (Genesis 10:25-30).

The Bible lists the following tribes of Arabs: Amalekites, Buzites, Dedanites, Hagrites,

Ishmaelites, Kadmonites, Kedarites, Kenites, Meunites, Midianites, Naamathites, Sabeans, and Shuhites. The names of Arabs first appear in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:7 among the sons of Cush (Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Sheba, and Dedan). More Arab descendants have been identified among the sons of Joktan (Hazarmaveth, Uzal, Sheba, Ophir, and Havilah, see Genesis 10:26) and Nahor (Uz, Buz, Kesed, and Hazo, see Genesis 22:21-22).

The earliest biblical account of Israelites interacting with Arabs tells of Joseph being sold by his brothers to a “caravan of Ishmaelites” or “Midianite merchants” (see Genesis 37:25-28; 39:1). Ishmaelite is the general term for Arab, whereas Midianite refers to the tribe.

Moses lived among the Midianite Arabs after killing a man and fleeing from Egypt (Exodus 2:11-25). Later, Jethro (Moses’ father-in-law, a Midianite) counseled Moses about ruling over the multitudes of Israelites. He told him to appoint judges and under-shepherds (Exodus 18:13-27). Thus, Israel’s leadership and administrative structure followed an Arab model.

The Midianites appear to be the first Arabs to patently oppose the Israelites when they joined forces with the Moabites to block their Transjordan passage (Numbers 22). By Gideon’s day, the Midianite oppression of the Israelites had greatly intensified (Judges 6:1-6).

“Geshem the Arab” figured prominently as an adversary in the account of Nehemiah’s rebuilding of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:19-20; 6:1-2). Isaiah prophesied against Arabia, urging the residents to bring water and bread to the fugitives of the Babylonian invasion of northern Arabia. He warned that Kedar would be obliterated within a year

(Isaiah 21:13-16). Jeremiah prophesied destruction against “the mixed tribes” of Arabs as among those to be destroyed by Babylon through God’s “cup of the wine of wrath” (Jeremiah 25:15-29).

It’s no surprise that Arabs adopted an adversarial role against God’s people in the Bible, especially in light of the prophetic utterance of Genesis 16:12—that Ishmael would “raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him” and that he would “live in hostility toward all his brothers.”