

Who were the Nabateans?

The Nabateans were an ancient Semitic people whose presence and influence are indirectly mentioned in Scripture. Renowned for their control over critical trade routes and their impressive architectural designs, particularly in Petra, their history and interactions with neighboring nations offer valuable insights into the biblio-historical context of their time.

The Nabateans were an Arabian tribe who, by the fourth century BC, had established themselves in the region of southeast Israel, where they had frequent encounters with the Edomites. In Malachi 1:1-5, the prophet references the Edomites, hinting at the Nabatean presence in the area previously occupied by Edom. Josephus, a Roman-Jewish historian, noted that the Nabateans had become so numerous that the territory between the Red Sea and the Euphrates was simply referred to as Nabatene (Antiquities, I, xii, 4).

Early Nabatene history is somewhat obscure, but the Nabateans are believed to have joined forces with the Assyrians in their invasion of Edom, as inferred from Malachi 1:1. Later, the Nabateans were conquered by the Assyrian king Sennacherib but eventually regained their independence by resisting Ashurbanipal. According to Alexander Polyhistor, a Greek scholar who was enslaved by the Romans, the Nabateans were included among the nomadic tribes subdued by King David.

The Nabateans are not prominent in historical records until around 312 BC, when Antigonos I sent his general, Athenaeus, to Petra. Although Athenaeus was initially successful, his army was eventually annihilated. A few years later, Demetrius, the son of Antigonos, arranged a friendship with them after a failed campaign.

Aretas I was one of the earliest Nabatean rulers, providing refuge to the Jewish high priest, Jason, in 169 BC. The Nabateans even supported the early Maccabees in their struggle against Antiochus IV, aligning with Judas Maccabeus in 164 BC and Jonathan Maccabeus in 160 BC. The alliance between the Nabateans and Maccabees highlights their political significance during this period.

By the end of the second century BC, the Nabateans had established a powerful kingdom under King Erotimus, extending their influence east of the Jordan River. Their capital, Petra, became a key center for trade, culture, and politics. The Nabateans controlled critical trade routes, facilitating the transport of spices, incense, and other goods from Arabia to the Mediterranean.

The commercial skills of the Nabateans are indirectly acknowledged in the Bible, where references to the trade of spices and incense hint at broader trade networks. For instance, the caravan of Ishmaelites in Genesis 37:25, which carried spices, balm, and myrrh, traveled the trade routes that the Nabateans would later control.

The Nabatean pantheon included deities like Dushara, their chief god. The religious practices of the Nabateans included rituals and offerings, influencing and being influenced by neighboring cultures. Although the Bible does not detail the Nabateans' religious practices, its general warnings against idolatry reflect the polytheism of cultures surrounding Israel.

The Nabateans are best known for their stunning architectural designs in Petra, which are carved into rose-red cliffs. The city boasts elaborate tombs, temples, and an

advanced water management system. Petra, often identified as Sela, is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:7, which says, “He was the one who defeated ten thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt and captured Sela in battle, calling it Joktheel, the name it has to this day.”

During the New Testament period, the Nabatean kingdom had reached its zenith. Paul, in Galatians 1:17, mentions going to Arabia, likely referring to Nabatean territory. This suggests interactions between Paul and the Nabateans. Additionally, 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 recounts Paul’s escape from Damascus, where the governor under King Aretas IV tried to arrest him, indicating the political reach of the Nabateans.

The Nabatean kingdom saw its decline in the first century AD. Aretas IV was recognized by Augustus and aligned with the Romans against the Jews, gaining a victory over Herod Antipas. However, the power of the Nabateans waned under Roman pressure. In AD 106, the Nabatean kingdom was annexed by the Roman Empire under Trajan, and Arabia Petraea became a Roman province, marking the end of the Nabatean kingdom.

While the Nabateans are not frequently mentioned in Scripture, they played a critical role in the historical, religious, and cultural development of the Near East. Their interactions with biblical figures and their control over significant territories and trade routes further support their importance.