

Who were the Sabeans?

The Sabeans were an ancient people group mentioned in the Bible as coming from a nation far away from Israel (Joel 3:8). They were a people of stature (Isaiah 45:14) and a rival nation to Israel (Job 1:15). The Sabeans lived in the land of Sheba, which archeology suggests was a Semitic trading state that existed for 1,000 years in the area that is now Yemen. The capital of Sheba was called Marib (or Ma'rib), and the kingdom existed from 1200 BC to AD 275, trading primarily in spices. The land of the Sabeans was eventually destroyed as a result of civil war.

The Sabeans feature in three biblical passages. The first of which, chronologically speaking, is in the book of Job. Job the man was subject to a long list of successive tragedies, of which one was an attack by the Sabeans. These raiders stole Job's oxen and donkeys and struck down his servants with the sword, leaving only one man alive to run back and report the incident to Job (Job 1:13-15).

The next two biblical events involving the Sabeans are prophecies by Isaiah and Joel. Isaiah prophesies about Israel's eventual victory over three cultures: the Egyptians, the Cushites, and the Sabeans. The men of Sheba are called "those tall Sabeans" in Isaiah 45:14, meaning they were apparently men of stature and strength. Isaiah prophesies that all three of these groups will eventually be humbled before Israel and admit that Israel's God is the true God: "They will bow down before you / and plead with you, saying, / 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; / there is no other god'" (Isaiah 45:14). In Joel's prophecy, the Sabeans are mentioned as a distant nation to whom the men of Judah will sell their enemies as slaves, as a sign of God's punishment on Tyre and Sidon, nations who dared to come against God's people (Joel 3:4-8).

The Queen of Sheba, or the Queen of the South, who traveled a long way to hear Solomon's wisdom, was likely a Sabean, and the elaborate riches she gave to Solomon show that the Sabeans were a wealthy people. Centuries after her visit to Jerusalem, two warring clans fought for control of Sheba and eventually weakened the empire, and it was overtaken by the Himyarite Kingdom. At that point the mighty Sabeans ceased to exist as a distinct people.