

What is the significance of Midian in the Bible?

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After his wife Sarah died, Abraham married a woman named Keturah, who bore him six sons: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah (Genesis 25:1-2). The fourth son, Midian, had five sons: Ephah, Ephher, Hanok, Abida, and Eldaah (Genesis 25:4; 1 Chronicles 1:33). Their nomadic descendants came to be known as the Midianites, distant relatives of the Israelites who often oppressed Israel (Judges 6:2).

One reason the land of Midian is significant is that it was the destination to which Moses fled after killing an Egyptian (Exodus 2:15), fearing that Pharaoh would have him killed. At that time, Midian was probably located in the Sinai Peninsula, as well as holding territory to the east of the Gulf of Aqaba. Later, the Midianites may have inhabited the land between Edom and Paran, on the way to Egypt (1 Kings 11:18). By the time of the judges, the Midianites seem to have located further north, to the east of Gilead. In Midian, Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of a priest of Midian (Exodus 2:15-21; 18:1). Moses stayed in Midian, tending sheep until God appeared to him in a burning bush and instructed him to lead Israel out of their bondage in Egypt (Exodus 3:1-10).

After Moses became the leader of the Israelites, his Midianite father-in-law, Jethro, was a source of wisdom and guidance to Moses (Exodus 18:17-24). He visited Moses in the wilderness, saw that he was carrying too great a burden, and gave him some good suggestions. While visiting Moses and hearing all God had done for the children of Israel, Jethro said, "Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had

treated Israel arrogantly” (Exodus 18:10-11). Then Jethro offered a burnt offering and other sacrifices to the Lord (verse 12). This may imply that, before this event, Jethro was a priest of a Midianite god, but, having seen the miracles God did for Israel, he converted to the worship of Yahweh and took that faith back with him to Midian.

Later, during the time of the exodus, Midian partnered with neighboring Moab in attacking Israel. Numbers 22 recounts the story of Balak, king of Moab, conspiring with the elders of Midian to hire a wicked prophet, Balaam, to put a curse on Israel for them. Although greedy for the money Balak offered, Balaam could only prophesy the truth God spoke to him.

During the time of the judges, Midian is also associated with other enemies of God who tried to overthrow Israel (Judges 6:33). Because of Israel’s refusal to obey God, He handed them over to the Midianites for seven years (Judges 6:1). Then the Lord raised up a leader named Gideon who conquered the Midianites with an army of only 300 men (Judges 7). The Ephraimites brought the heads of Midian’s leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, to Gideon. That victory over Midian reminded the people of Israel that the Lord was their defender (Judges 7:2, 25)

One of the Lord’s final instructions to Moses was “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites” (Numbers 31:1). Even though the Lord used the wickedness of pagan nations to punish disobedient Israel, He did not leave the pagans unpunished. God works so closely in the affairs of men that He uses their own wickedness against them. God used the stubbornness of Pharaoh to bring judgment on Egypt because of their cruelty to the Hebrews (Exodus 7:3-5). He used the wicked Babylonians to punish His people because of the Israelites’ idolatry, but God later destroyed Babylon because of their own

wickedness (Jeremiah 25:7-11; Isaiah 13:19). In the same way, God used Midian as He wished: He first used Midian to protect Moses, then to punish His disobedient people, and then He finally decimated them for their evil ways. Midian is another reminder that the sovereign Lord is Ruler over all His creation, even using evildoers to fulfill His plans (Isaiah 46:9-11).