

Who were the Midianites?

Abraham had more sons than just Isaac (by Sarah) and Ishmael (by Hagar). He also had six sons by Keturah, his wife after the death of Sarah: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (Genesis 25:2). The Midianites were the descendants of Midian and therefore children of Abraham. They settled in “the land of the east” (Genesis 25:6). Most scholars believe the land of Midian was officially on both sides of the Gulf of Aqaba, although the Midianites showed nomadic tendencies later in their history (see Habakkuk 3:7, ESV).

When Moses fled the wrath of Pharaoh, he traveled to Midian (Exodus 2:15). There, Moses met and married his wife, Zipporah, and served his father-in-law, Jethro, as a shepherd for forty years. The fact that Jethro was “a priest of Midian” (Exodus 2:16) indicates that the Midianites, at least during Moses’ time, still retained the knowledge of the God of their father Abraham (cf. Jethro’s words and actions in Exodus 18). At the end of Moses’ time in Midian, God appeared to Moses—still in Midian—and commissioned him to lead the Israelites out of slavery (Exodus 3–4).

As the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness, they employed the services of a guide familiar with the desert—Moses’ Midianite brother-in-law, Hobab (Numbers 10:29). However, the relations between the Israelites and the Midianites began to sour when the Midianites joined forces with the Moabites in order to hire Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22). Later, when Israel fell into idolatry and sexual sin with the Moabite women (Numbers 25), we find that a prominent Midianite woman was also involved (Numbers 25:6). The Lord then told Moses to wage war against the Midianites: “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them. They treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident involving their sister Kozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader”

(Numbers 25:17-19). The Israelites did eventually attack the Midianites, meting out divine retribution against their enemies (Numbers 31). Five kings of the Midianites were killed, as was Balaam (Numbers 31:8). This battle was one of the last things Moses accomplished as leader of the Israelites.

During the time of the judges, “the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country” and plundered the land (Judges 6:3). For seven years, “Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help” (verse 6). God answered their cries and raised up Gideon as a deliverer. With just 300 men, Gideon defeated the armies of the Midianites, although the foe was “thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore” (Judges 7:12). Of course, God was involved, and He was the One who granted the victory over the Midianites (verse 22).

Later references to the Midianites include allusions to God’s victory over them (Psalm 83:9; Isaiah 10:26). And, in a prophecy of Israel’s future glory in the Messianic kingdom, Isaiah writes, “Herds of camels will cover your land, / young camels of Midian and Ephah. / And all from Sheba will come, / bearing gold and incense / and proclaiming the praise of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:6).