

WHO WERE THE Ishmaelites?

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THOUGH BRIEFLY MENTIONED in the Old Testament, the Ishmaelite people made a noteworthy impact in Israelite history. In only eight verses¹ ranging from the Books of Genesis to Psalms, these concise accounts, along with additional external evidence, enable us to capture a glimpse into the life and culture of the Ishmaelites.

The Ishmaelites (or “Ishmeelites,” Gen. 37:25-28, KJV) trace their lineage through Abraham’s first son, Ishmael. In the Hebrew the name means “God hears.” The name *Ishmael* was a popular name and has been found in extrabiblical texts at Mari and in early Assyrian writings. We cannot be certain, however, if the Ishmael mentioned in these documents is the same as the biblical Ishmael. The biblical account identifies Ishmael’s mother as Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian handmaiden. Thus the Ishmaelites have a connection with the Egyptian lineage (Gen. 21:21). In one obscure account, Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian who wrote widely about biblical history and current political events, also mentioned Ishmael’s wife was an Egyptian.²



LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Genesis 37



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The biblical account of the origin of the Ishmaelite people is in the Book of Genesis. Both Genesis 16 and 21 provide the narrative of the angel revealing to Hagar the interesting destiny and purpose of her son: “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” and “I will make him into a great nation.”³ Also, God gave Abraham assurance that Ishmael would be a great nation and his sons would be rulers (Gen. 17:20; 21:13). Genesis 25:12-17 records the beginning fulfillment of the latter destiny as it lists the 12 sons of Ishmael by name and describes them as 12 princes over their tribes. Even though the Bible seldom mentions them, the Ishmaelites became renowned, dominant, and populous Arab tribes in the territory.

The Ishmaelites were a nomadic group who dwelt in the desert regions of North Arabia, ranging from Lower Egypt to the Euphrates River. Their existence dates from the early second millennium to the seventh century B.C. In their formative years, they were a pastoral group, wandering at will in search of lush grasses for their cattle, flocks, and camels. They engaged in caravan trade that probably carried them throughout the Middle East region and definitely down into Egypt. Spices, balm, and myrrh were common trade commodities for the Ishmaelites. The spice was perhaps tragacanth, a gum material that comes from a bush and is often mixed with water.⁴ The balm was a resin collected from the bark of mastic tree. Myrrh was an aromatic gum made from extractions of certain indigenous leaves. This ingredient was common in perfumes, incenses, and

external healing compounds. The Egyptians used all of these trade items for embalming.⁵

Interestingly, the account of Joseph’s brothers selling him reflects the Ishmaelites’ trade in these spices. Genesis 37:25-27 says, “As they [the brothers] sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, ‘What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.’ His brothers agreed” (NIV).

Some ancient texts refer to the Ishmaelites’ prowess as archers and warriors in later years. One text briefly mentions their being present with other Arab tribes at the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. In this account the Ishmaelites were present with a herd of 1,000 camels as animals of war. However, the camels proved to be disadvantageous in battle. To engage the enemy, the soldier could not fight from camel back. He had to dismount to use his spear or sword, thus placing himself at an extreme disadvantage.

Later Ishmaelite development during the Assyrian Empire reveals a somewhat sedentary existence including the existence of small oasis towns, craftsmanship techniques, and a tribal confederacy form of government. This latter period marked the pinnacle of their long-distance trade endeavors with other people groups.⁶

Other than what we know about the typical nomadic lifestyle of ancient societies, we do not know much of the day-to-day ritual of the Ishmaelite people. Perhaps the closest glimpse into a unique cultural behavior is offered in the Book of Judges. Upon Gideon’s heroic defeat of the Midianites, the people of Israel, in an expression of gratitude, requested that Gideon rule over them. Gideon responded by saying God would be the one to rule over them. Then he made an intriguing request, “give me an earring from your share of the plunder” (Judg. 8:24, NIV). Victors commonly took spoils from the defeated enemy. Yet Gideon asked for a specific item the Israelites had taken from the enemy, namely gold earrings. In the last phrase of verse 24, the Holman Christian Standard Bible states that the defeated foes had gold earrings “because they were Ishmaelites.” Judges 8:26 indicates that 1,700 shekels of gold were collected. This would be between 40 to 70 pounds, depending on which type of shekel weight the people used. Apparently the golden earrings were some type of distinguishing mark for the Ishmaelite people. In addition to the gold earrings, the victors also took camel neck ornaments and gave them to Gideon (v. 26). No other mention of these items is in the biblical text.



The Wadi Rum in southern Jordan, in what would have been the northern part of ancient Midian, which would have been home to the Midianites. At times people spoke of the Ishmaelites and the Midianites almost interchangeably.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: SCOTT HUMMEL (32/245)

Left: Spice market in central Turkey.

Right: The earrings that distinguished the Ishmaelites were likely similar to this golden earring from Ur.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BRITISH MUSEUM (31774)

Equally as intriguing in this passage as the mention of the golden earrings is the association of the Ishmaelites with the Midianites. Both this passage and Genesis 37 mention the Ishmaelites in close connection with the Midianites. At times the terms seem to be used interchangeably. Understanding the connection and separating the two is difficult.

According to the biblical text, the Midianite lineage began with Keturah, a wife of Abraham (Gen. 25:1-2). But the Ishmaelite lineage began with Hagar (16:15). Some have argued that the two nomadic tribes were often confused with one another because of their mode of life and their constant movement in pursuit of suitable pastureland. Others have even suggested that the term *Ishmaelite* may have come to be used loosely to describe any nomadic group involved in the enterprise of traveling trade.⁷ This conclusion seems inconsistent with both biblical and extrabiblical references to the Ishmaelites as an actual people group distinct from fellow nomadic groups. One example is in 1 Chronicles 27:30, which lists Obil the Ishmaelite as the one in charge of the camels in David's administrative organization. Also 1 Chronicles 2:17 states that David's sister, Abigail, married Jether the Ishmaelite. Admittedly, neither instance makes reference to the Midianites.

Perhaps the best biblical substantiation for seeing the Ishmaelites as a separate and distinct group from the Midianites is in the prayer for judgment against the foes of Israel in Psalm 83:6-9. The text mentions the Ishmaelites (v. 6) as an enemy group dissimilar from the Midianites (v. 9) who had already been defeated. Why would the psalmist call for the destruction of an enemy that had already been defeated? This reference especially reinforces the interpretation that the biblical writers viewed the Ishmaelites and the Midianites as being separate groups.

Though vaguely mentioned in the Old Testament, the Ishmaelite influence on Israelite history was important. They were descendants of Abraham. They lived in the ancient Near East along with the Midianites, the Israelites, and other people groups. Their historical influence was most strongly realized, though, as they carried Joseph into Egypt and thus knocked over the first domino that led to the exodus. **B**

1. The general references for the Ishmaelite people include Genesis 37:25,27,28; 39:1; Judges 8:24; 1 Chronicles 2:17; 27:30; and Psalm 83:6.

2. *The Works of Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), I.XII.2.

3. The aforementioned New International Version Scripture quotations are taken from Genesis 16:12 and 21:18 respectively.

4. Brown, E., Driver, S., and Briggs, C., "יִשְׂמָאֵלִים" in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), 644.

5. J. C. Trever, "Myrrh" in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (IDB), dict. ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:478-79.

6. See Ernst Axel Knaut, "Ishmaelites" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:514-17.

7. G. M. Landes, "Ishmaelites" in IDB, 2:748-49.

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