

History of The Midianites

This evening's lesson is on Jethro, the Father In-Law of Moses. He is described as "the priest of Midian" in a number of passages. This made me think about the origin, location, and history of the Midianites in the Bible.

After the death of Sarah, Abraham married Keturah and had six children. "Abraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. (Genesis 25:1-2). Then the lineage of Midian is given, "And the sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abidah, and Eldaah." (Genesis 25:4sa). Isaac remains in Canaan but the children of Keturah go east of the Jordan River. "But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had; and while he was still living, he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east." (Genesis 25:6).

Continuing in Genesis, we read that Midian was defeated by the Moabites in a battle. (Genesis 36:35). Later on in Genesis we read of Joseph's brother's throwing him into a pit and debating the idea of killing him. Instead, they sold him to a group of Midianites on their way to Egypt, where they sold Joseph into slavery. (Genesis 37). Often in the Bible we see individuals with their lineage becoming tribes and nations. We also see how they interacted and, in some way, played a part in God's plan of salvation. After all, the Midianites delivered Joseph to an Egyptian master which eventually led to Joseph becoming second in charge in Egypt and Jacob's children coming to Egypt. God used various nations to punish Israel and Judah in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the Roman Empire provided ease of travel and roads which enabled the spread of the Gospel.

Four hundred years later we pick up the story in Exodus and Moses killing a slave master. "When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well." (Exodus 2:15). To truly appreciate the distance Moses covered, Midian is over four hundred miles from Egypt. If one covered 8 miles a day on foot, it would take over 50 days to make this trip. This is part of modern-day Western Saudi Arabia and mostly barren land. Midian did not have a distinct border as much of its territory was desert and wilderness.

Not much is known about the religious practices of the Midianites. Some sources say the gods Asherah, Baal-Peor, and Yahweh were the dominant religions. One would suppose their lineage going back to Abraham would give them knowledge of

the true God of Heaven. Hence, Jethro is described as “the priest of Midian.” “Now the *priest of Midian had* seven daughters. And they came and drew water, and they filled the troughs to water their father's flock.” (Exodus 2:16, emphasis mine D.T.). During the Patriarchal Dispensation, God spoke directly to the heads of the families, it is entirely possible Jethro was a priest of Jehovah. One can definitely say he was a priest of God in Exodus 18 as he offered sacrifices to Jehovah. Which gets to another point, even in nations generally considered “idolatrous” there were individuals who recognized and served the one true God. Ruth was a Moabite, Uriah, a member of David’s army and husband of Bathsheba, was a Hittite. Jethro was a Midianite but one who knew and served Jehovah. While Jethro and his family joined themselves to Israel, the Midianites became their enemy.

In Numbers we read of another encounter between Israel and Midian in conjunction with Moab. The story to Balaam and Balak involved both groups. “So, the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak.” (Numbers 22:7). We see Balaam’s counsel of defeating Israel by allowing the daughters of Moab and Midian to marry Israelite men and thus enticing Israel to worship the idols come to fruition. “And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” (Numbers 25:6). In Numbers 31 we read of Israel being told to take vengeance on Midian. In doing so, Balaam was killed, Numbers 31:8. The men and women were killed but the young virgins were spared, verses 16-18.

In Judges we read of them fighting against God’s people. “Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So, the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains.” (Judges 6:1-2). In the next chapter of Judges, Gideon was chosen by God to defeat the Midianites. “Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.” Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan. And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.” (Judges 7:24-25).

Midian is mentioned a few more times in the Bible but mostly as an example of God's punishment. Yet out of this country came Jethro, a man who took in Moses when he entered Midian, gave his daughter in marriage to Moses, and gave Moses wise counsel in Exodus 18. – Dennis Tucker