

# BIBLE ODYSSEY

Home

People

Places

Passages

Bibles

Tools

## Places

HOME MIDIAN

### Midian

by Juan Manuel Tebes

The name Midian instantly brings to mind images of barren desert landscapes, camel caravans crossing vast arid wastelands, and, above all, the land of Moses's **exile** where he received for the first time Yahweh's revelation.

#### What does the Bible say about Midian?

Midian is the name of a region mentioned in the **Hebrew Bible** that is located in the northwestern Hejaz, nowadays Saudi Arabia. Though memories of the Midianites figure prominently in the Hebrew Bible and later in the Quran, we know very little about the history of the Midianites from these sources, and they did not seem to leave much material culture behind. It is clear that the biblical writers saw the Midianites as somehow related to the Israelites, for Midian is mentioned as one of the sons of Abraham through his wife Keturah (**Gen 25:1-2**). However, things get more complicated. In the story of Joseph's sale by his brothers, the biblical **narrative** refers alternatively to Midianites and another group of Arabian merchants, the **Ishmaelites**, as the ones who brought Joseph to Egypt (**Gen 37:25-36**). The biblical writers probably confused these two peoples when the Midianites were a thing of the past.

#### Did the worship of Yahweh originate in Midian?

Yet it is not until we reach the account of the **exodus** and the wilderness wanderings that we see Midianites playing important roles. It was to Midian that Moses fled after slaying an Egyptian and where he married Zipporah the daughter of Jethro—also known as Reuel (**Exod 2:11-22**). Some speculate that worship of Yahweh originated in Midian, based on the fact that Jethro is called "the priest of Midian" and that the "**mountain of God**," the place where Yahweh first appeared to Moses, is located in or close to Midian (**Exod 3:1**). These passages are thematically similar to other biblical texts that refer to Yahweh as coming from areas south of **Palestine**—not quite Midian but locations close to it, such as Edom, **Seir**, Sinai, and Teman. Is there any historical reality behind these **allusions**? Egyptian sources mentioning the name Yahweh as a place or **tribal** name of a people situated south of Canaan at the end of the second millennium BCE lend some credibility to these biblical references. The theory of the southern origins of Yahwism is thus known as the "Midianite hypothesis."

Memories of Midian, however, were not altogether positive. The Bible recollects Moses's slaying of the Midianite women (**Num 31:17**) and Israel's oppression by Midian during the time of the Judges (**Judg 6:1-6**). These biblical narratives were composed or put in writing probably after the **Babylonian exile** and therefore may not depict historical facts. Rather, they tell us what later biblical writers thought about the complex history of the relationship between Israelites and Midianites.

To complicate things further, some scholars associate Midian with archaeological sites and objects—such as "Midianite" pottery—found in southern Israel/Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia that date to the second millennium BCE, the date traditionally attributed to the exodus. They connect particularly a small shrine discovered at Timna Valley in Israel to Midianite religious practices or refer to the site of Qurayyah in Saudi Arabia as the "capital" of Midian. But the relationship between ancient peoples and material remains is a complex issue, and since so far there are no local **inscriptions** linking the archaeological evidence with biblical Midian, it is better to keep the issue of the Midianite culture open.

Whether historically true or not, ancient memories of Midian were significant enough to shape Israel's own perception of the past.

Juan Manuel Tebes, "Midian", n.p. [cited 30 Jul 2019]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/places/related-articles/midian>

#### Contributors



#### Juan Manuel Tebes

researcher, National Research Council of Argentina

Juan Manuel Tebes is a Near Eastern historian with areas of specialization in the history and archaeology of the southern Levant and northwestern Arabia. He is researcher at the National Research Council of Argentina and teaches at the Catholic University of Argentina. Publications include *Nomads at the Crossroads* (Archaeopress) and *Unearthing the Wilderness* (Peeters).



#### RELATED ARTICLES (5)



#### Moses

The Bible depicts Moses as the prophetic leader who delivered the Israelites from Egypt and who mediated the divine laws in the wilderness to them.



#### Exodus Tradition in the Bible

The exodus tradition provides a model of deliverance that extends from the book of Exodus to

#### HarperCollins Dictionary

**Abraham**  
**Keturah**  
**Yahweh**

**Joseph**  
**Moses**

#### Related Publications

Roads to Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Invention of God

The Southern Home of Yahweh and Pre-Priestly Patriarchal/Exodus Traditions from a Southern Perspective

#### Related Links

Recent Debates on the History of the Negev and Edom

Ancient Israel's Southern Neighbors

Hovav the Midianite

Yhwh a God of the Wilderness



**Browse by subject** - click on a letter below.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Home  
People  
Places  
Passages  
Bibles

Contributors  
Video Gallery  
Image Gallery  
Bible Basics

About-Us  
Browse-A-Z  
Contact-Us  
Partners

PRESENTED BY:



©Copyright 2019, Society of Biblical Literature | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Technical Support](#) | [Donate](#)



*Bible Odyssey has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor*

*Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this website, do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.*