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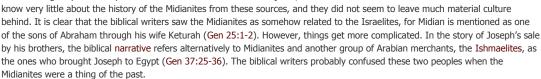
Midian

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





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 the 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

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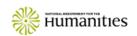


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