



The Sinai Peninsula

3. The inhabitants

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IN THIS ARTICLE we look at some of the people who have lived in the Sinai Peninsula, the Negev and the Arabah.¹

The Ishmaelites

Ishmael settled in the wilderness of Paran after being sent away by Abraham (Gen. 21:21). His descendants dwelt “from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt” (25:18, NKJV). From this passage we see that the original territory of the Ishmaelites was in northwest Arabia and the Sinai Peninsula.

A later possible connection of Ishmael’s descendants with Sinai concerns the **Nabateans**, who may have been descendants of Nebajoth, the firstborn son of Ishmael (v. 13). Originally they were nomadic Arabs, who, in the second and third centuries B.C., commenced a more settled existence. They brought intensive cultivation to barren desert areas, constructing irrigation systems to make the best use of the meagre rainfall (often as little as four inches per annum), and built villages and towns, together with a series of forts for protection against marauding Arabs. They settled the northern Negev and the Arabah as well as other areas, and by means of their forts they also controlled the trade routes of the Middle East, including those across Sinai. The city of Petra was their capital during the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., and a line of forts stretched from there through the city of Oboda (Avdat) in the Negev and on to Gaza near the Mediterranean coast.

It is concluded that the Nabateans also had a definite presence in southern Sinai, as large numbers of Nabatean inscriptions have been discovered in the Wadi Mukateb, ‘the Wadi of Inscriptions’. The Nabateans’ period of greatest power and wealth was during the period 8 B.C.–A.D. 40. The following comment has been made

concerning the Nabatean presence in the Arabah: “The Nabateans, those experts in irrigation, were the only people who have attempted agriculture, and in their day almost every waterhole was marked by a fort and carefully tended fields, but now only clumps of date palms mark the occasional oasis and relieve the dusty passage to the gulf [of ‘Aqaba]”.²

The use of the term **Saracens** for Ishmaelites appears to have gained currency in the early centuries A.D., and it is interesting to note that Eusebius (early fourth century) called the nomads of Sinai ‘Sarakenoi’, and that Ptolemy (early second century) referred to part of Sinai as ‘Sarakene’. Also, Jerome (A.D. 347-420) commented that the Ishmaelites in his day were called Saraceni, that is, Saracens.

The Amalekites

The Amalekites were the descendants of Amalek, a grandson of Esau (Gen. 36:12). Some inhabited Sinai at the time of the Exodus and fought the Israelites at Rephidim, the last stopping place before reaching the Wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 17:8; Num. 33:14,15). Presumably this was to gain control of the newly provided water supply (Ex. 17:1-8). Then they “laid wait . . . in the way” (1 Sam. 15:2), attacking the “rear ranks” and “stragglers” of the Israelites as they travelled through the wilderness (Deut. 25:17, 18, NKJV). Later the Amalekites and Canaanites who dwelt in “the valleys” of “the high hill country” smote (“beat . . . down”) the Israelites as far as Horeb in the Negev, since God was no longer with

1. The Arabah is the southern section of the Palestinian Rift Valley, about 100 miles long, lying between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the Gulf of ‘Aqaba.
2. p. 210, *The Geography of the Bible*, Baly, Lutterworth Press, 1957.



Reconstructed Nabatean dam across a wadi bed at Mamshit in the Negev. Such dams were part of a sophisticated irrigation system that enabled the Nabateans to practise agriculture in desert conditions.

them because of their faithlessness (Num. 14:25, 43-45, NIV).

Balaam was able to look on Amalek from “the top of Peor, that looketh toward Jeshimon [the wasteland, NKJV]” (23:28; 24:20). Peor was a mountain on the border of Moab somewhere near the north end of the Dead Sea, and from that height Balaam would be able to see part of the Negev by looking in a southwest direction. This is in agreement with the statement in Numbers 13:29 that “The Amalekites live in the Negev” (NIV).

In the days of the Judges and of Saul, the Amalekites were among the enemies that plundered the Israelites (1 Sam. 14:48). Like the Ishmaelites in earlier times, they dwelt in the region “from Havilah all the way to Shur” (15:7, NKJV), probably as nomads. However, they did have at least one city (v. 5), which was probably in the Negev.³

Saul mustered his troops for his attack on the Amalekites at Telaim (v. 4), probably the same as Telem in the extreme south of Judah “towards the border of Edom” (Josh. 15:21,24, NKJV).⁴ Jo-

sephus, recounting this episode, describes the country of the Amalekites as reaching “from Pelusium of Egypt to the Red Sea”.⁵ David also raided the Amalekites in the same area, “as you go to Shur, even as far as the land of Egypt” (1 Sam. 27:8, NKJV).

The Midianites

The Midianites were descendants of one of the sons which Abraham had by his concubine Keturah (Gen. 25:1,2). These sons were sent away by Abraham to “the country of the east” (v. 6, NKJV). We later find the Midianites living in “towns” and “camps” (Num. 31:10, NIV). The fact that some of them lived in encampments, and that they kept large flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle, as can be seen from the figures

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3. Josephus and the Septuagint have the plural ‘cities’.
 4. Both the Septuagint and Josephus give Gilgal as Saul’s mustering place.
 5. *Antiquities of the Jews*, VI. vii. 3.

given in Numbers 31:32-34, suggests a semi-nomadic existence.⁶

Moses fled from Pharaoh to the land of Midian (Ex. 2:15), where he shepherded Jethro's flocks and led them "to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (3:1, NKJV). Then, after Moses brought Israel out of Egypt, Jethro visited him at Horeb, bringing Moses' wife and two sons with him, and then returned to his own land (18:1-5,27).

The normally accepted view is that Mount Sinai (Horeb) is in the Sinai Peninsula and west of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, while the land of Midian is to the east of that gulf and as far north as the border of Moab. If Jethro's encampment was not situated within the Sinai Peninsula when Moses led Jethro's flocks to the area of Horeb, Moses must have taken them a considerable distance, at least ninety miles. For this reason some maps show the land of Midian extending into Sinai.

In Genesis 37, the Ishmaelites who took Joseph down into Egypt are also called Midianites (v. 28) and the Medanim (v. 36, RV mg.). Medan was brother to Midian (25:2). A similar connection between Midianites and Ishmaelites is made in Judges 8:22-26. Perhaps some Ishmaelites were called Midianites because they lived in the land of Midian and were closely associated with the Midianites and Medanites in enterprises involving commerce and war.

The Kenites

It would appear that the Kenites were a branch of the Midianites, since Moses' father-in-law is described as a Kenite (Judg. 1:16; 4:11). Perhaps this family connection was the reason why the Kenites "shewed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt" (1 Sam. 15:6).

The land of the Kenites was included in the area promised as a possession to Abraham's descendants (Gen. 15:19), and a number of Scripture passages show that this territory was situated in the Negev. When Balaam looked out across the Dead Sea towards the Negev, he directed his attention to the Kenites immediately after speak-

ing of the Amalekites. He described their city, Kain, as being "strong" and as easily protected as a "nest . . . set in the rock" (Num. 24:21,22, AV and NKJV).⁷ In the days of Saul they dwelt in the same area as the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:6), and some years later David favoured them with presents of spoil from his raids (1 Sam. 30:26,29). Presumably it would have been from among these Kenites that the small group of the descendants of Moses' father-in-law accompanied the tribe of Judah into the wilderness of Judah after a short stay in the area of Jericho, the city of palm trees (Judg. 1:16).

Present-day nomads

The present-day nomads of the Sinai Peninsula are the Bedouin, a word meaning 'desert dwellers', from *bedu*, the Arabic word for 'desert'. The term is used to distinguish from Fellahin, 'village dwellers', or, more correctly, 'tillers of the soil'. In the early nineteenth century there were an estimated 6,000 of these nomads in Sinai. They feed their flocks on the thin clothing of vegetation that exists in the area, especially the aromatic shrubs on the high hillsides. Their black tents characterise the Bedouin encampments.

Whether or not any live a truly nomadic existence in Sinai nowadays is not known, but the opening up of the area with roads, making it easily accessible to fairly large numbers of tourists and pilgrims, has no doubt provided alternative means of making a living. However, to this day Bedouin women can be seen taking their flocks up and down the mountainsides in the vicinity of Jebel Musa and the Monastery of St. Catherine.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

6. The AV does not mention goats in this passage, but the Hebrew word translated "sheep" in the AV is a collective term for flocks of sheep or goats.
7. There is a play here on the name Kenite (Heb. *qayin* or *qeyniy*). Compare the Hebrew word *qen*, meaning 'a nest', especially one in a high rock (Job 39:27; Jer. 49:16), from the root *qanan*, 'to make a nest'. See *The Proper Names of the OT Expounded*, A. Jones, Baxter, 1856.

To most of us there will come times when what we have sought to accomplish for ourselves is frustrated, when steps taken to achieve what we want come to naught. It is faith that enables us to accept, without rancour or resentment, without indignation or impatience, God's response to our scheme, and move on "in full assurance of [that] faith" (Heb. 10:22).

The conclusion of the late Brother Jim Wood's final article, published August 2003