

# ISHMAEL AND THE ARABS

By J. Simms

*“He will be a wild man; his hand (will be) against every man and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.” – (Genesis 16:12)*

TURNING to an Encyclopaedia, we read that “Arab” is a name loosely applied to all the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Near and Middle East, but restricted by ethnologists to the basic Semitic stock of the Arabian peninsula, where many of the nomadic tribes have preserved their identity after thousands of years of internecine war and migration into Iraq, Syria and Africa. It is also used both inside and outside the Islamic world as synonymous with Bedouin, the Nomadic Arab as distinct from the town dweller.

Arabians are of two stocks: those of the uplands of the south-west corner of the Arabian peninsula, and the group located in northern and central Arabia “and often alleged to be descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham. To this day almost every Arab tribe claims to be descended from one or other of these two stocks” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1967).

As rainfall is scanty and precarious, the desert cities can only be near springs, wells or along the coast. The settled population lives by agriculture, chiefly gardens of date palms, or they are go-betweens buying camels, sheep, wool or animal oil from the tribes and exporting to neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Syria or Iraq.

In the south-west mountainous regions spices are the principal exports, and it is known that wealthy Arab kingdoms there were settled at least a thousand years before Christ.

## SONS OF HAGAR AND KETURAH

Dr. William Smith, in his Dictionary of the Bible, puts forward evidence to show that Joktanites settled in the south-west of the Arabian peninsula. As Jokshan was a son of Keturah this would make the stock Abrahamic, but not through Ishmael, son of Hagar. Sheba and Dedan, both ancient kingdoms in south-west Arabia, were also the names of the sons of Jokshan.

The Bedouin has to be constantly on the move to find pasture for their livestock and the black goatskin tents are a feature of the life of wandering. Set up against a hillock for protection from wind and sand, the tents look tiny against the immensity of space and the undulations of hill and valley seen as far as the eye can reach. Through the centuries the nomadic Arabs have spent their time raiding, hunting and fighting. They have endured severe physical hardship and, even until after World War I, terrorised Central Arabia and surrounding territories.

## DESCENT THROUGH ISHMAEL

There can be little doubt that the Palestinian Arab is descended from Abraham through Ishmael, as pilgrims to the Holy Land will agree. They are proud of their ancestry and delight to tell visitors that they are descended from Abraham, the friend of God.

The mosque that now stands at Hebron was first built by Herod the Great, before our Lord was born, as a mausoleum for the bodies of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. The building is over the cave of Machpelah, the cave which was in the field of Ephron, the Hittite, when Abraham sought for a place to bury his wife Sarah (Genesis 23). The Arabs know this and, in spite of the passage of centuries, and invading armies entering, settling and disappearing from the land, the knowledge remains and, what is more important, the actual place remains to be seen by all.

When Abraham himself died, the record in the Book of Genesis states that Ishmael was present with his half- brother, Isaac, at the service of burial.

“Then Abraham gave up the ghost and died in a good old age, an old man, and full (of years); and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron” – (Genesis 25:8-9).

When Isaac came to die, Esau was with Jacob at the burial. Jacob died in Egypt but his body was embalmed and returned to his own land escorted by a very great company of his own people and Egyptians. Thus the burial-place was known to all surrounding nations.

#### **“A WILD MAN”**

Certain aspects of Ishmael’s character were described to his mother before he was born. It will be remembered that when Hagar found that she was pregnant she scorned her mistress, Sarai, for her barrenness. Sarai, in her turn, afflicted her maid until Hagar fled from her presence towards her own country of Egypt. Then, while resting in the wilderness of Shur, by a well of water, the angel of the Lord found her. She was alone and desperately unhappy but the Lord heard her affliction and sent His messenger to strengthen and inform her of what he intended to do for her child:

“I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. ... Behold, thou (art) with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael (God shall hear); because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand (will be) against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” – (Genesis 16:10-12).

In the strength of the Lord’s promise, Hagar returned to her mistress and gave birth to her son.

“And Abram called his son’s name, which Hagar bore, Ishmael” – (Genesis 16:15).

“A wild man” does not mean in the sense of a wild beast but rather in the way a free animal runs wild. In Ferrar Fenton’s translation it is “a free man” and James Moffatt makes it “a wild-ass of a man,” which is the literal translation. His very freedom and independence have put the Arab in the position of opposing those with a more settled way of life. Abraham, too, is given information about his first-born:

“And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac” – (Genesis 17:20-21).

At the time of this revelation Ishmael was thirteen years of age and Isaac not yet born. It is worth noting that Abraham’s new name was only given him when he was ninety-nine years of age and that with it came the promise of a son by Sarah. When Ishmael was born of Hagar, the bond-woman, his name was still Abram (High Father).

### **ISHMAEL’S TWELVE SONS**

Undoubtedly there was an urge in Ishmael to seek the wild, free, desert places. When he and his mother were sent away from Abraham and Sarah, after the birth of the child of promise, Isaac, he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran, married an Egyptian and begat the twelve sons as predicted. A daughter’s name is also given who married her cousin, Esau. In the wilderness Ishmael became an archer.

The names of his twelve sons are recorded in Genesis 25 and, also, that his people dwelt from “Havilah unto Shur,” that is, from the wilderness near Egypt right across to the centre of the Arabian peninsular. Three at least of the princes gave their names to a place or district, Kedar, Dumah and Tema. Kedar, the second son, seems particularly well known and the name of a great tribe of the Arabs (see Win. Smith’s Bible Dictionary and Scripture maps). The name is used by some as a universal name for the Bedouin Arabs.

Isaiah, the prophet, refers to “the glory of Kedar” (Isaiah 21:13-17) and describes them as archers and mighty men. The Psalmist implies that Kedar is one of those that hates peace and is for war and strife (Psalm 120). Ezekiel includes Arabia and all the princes of Kedar amongst the merchants of Dedan, Sheba and Raamah (Ezekiel 27:2 1). Jeremiah, when denouncing Israel for immorality, uses the illustration of an Arabian sitting in the wilderness as though it were a common sight in his day:

“In the ways hast thou sat for them (thy lovers), as the Arabian in the wilderness” – (Jeremiah 3:2).

### **THE MIDIANITES**

Perhaps it would be true to say that our earliest memory of Ishmaelites is in the story of Joseph and his brothers when the boy was drawn up from the pit and sold to the caravan of merchantmen on their way to Egypt. The Authorised Version states:

*“Behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry (it) down to Egypt” – (Genesis 37:25).*

Through Reuben, who wanted to save his young brother’s life, and Judah, who saw he could make a profit out of the transaction, the sons of Jacob agreed to sell Joseph to the merchants for twenty pieces of silver. In verse 36 comes the statement:

*“The Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh’s, (and) captain of the guard.”*

### **Why Midianites?**

The name is used as though it is an alternative name for Ishmaelite. **But Midian was a son of Keturah** (not Hagar, as was Ishmael), which makes the tribe from Abraham, not, strictly speaking, of Ishmael.

The same mixture occurs in the Book of Judges, when Midianites were defeated by Gideon and it is explained that they had golden earrings *“because they were Ishmaelites”* (8:24). It would seem that, because Ishmael and Midian were half-brothers, Midian as the younger took on the name of Ishmael on occasions, perhaps using it as a family name.

The enemy of Israel at that time against Gideon and his three hundred men were *“Midianites ... Amalekites, and the children of the east, ... they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; (for) both they and their camels were without number: and they entered Into the land to destroy it”* – (Judges 6:3-5).

### **NOMADIC TRIBES**

The description is of nomadic tribes and makes it clear that the desert dwellers to the east and south of Canaan, who opposed Israel at the time of the Judges, were Abrahamic tribes, descendants of Hagar, Keturah and Esau-Edom. (Abraham had sent the sons of the concubines away to the east.)

The list of plunder taken in the war of Gideon, together with that taken by Moses when fighting Midianites two centuries earlier, is remarkable: gold, silver, brass, iron, tin and lead, jewels of gold, chains and bracelets, rings, earrings and tablets, ornaments and collars, purple raiment, chains that were about the camels’ necks. “We have here a wealthy Arab nation living by plunder, delighting in finery, and, where forays were impossible, carrying on the traffic southwards into Arabia, the land of gold – if not naturally, by trade – and across to Chaldea, or into the rich plains of Egypt” (Win. Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible.)

Neither should the camels be overlooked. In war they must have been a frightening sight. A camel may plod along slowly when loaded with merchandise but racing camels can cover the ground at great speed and, undoubtedly, their riders were able to make surprise attacks, gather their booty quickly, and be away before the terrified defenders had gathered their wits.

When Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh made war against the Hagarites, Jetur, Nephish (all of Ishmael) and Nodab in the days of Saul, they captured fifty thousand camels and a hundred thousand men, as well as two hundred and fifty thousand sheep and two thousand asses (I Chronicles 5:18-22).

Enough has been written to show that desert or Bedawee tribes have much in common, whether living in Old Testament days or the twentieth century AD. There is not, perhaps, the tribal warfare now and travellers tell much of the hospitality and generosity of the desert, and an obvious desire to be friendly. But, still, there is a love of liberty and a fierce independence, which will brook no interference with their chosen way of life.

Finally, the Lord said that Ishmael should “dwell in the presence of all his brethren,” and here it must be remembered that Keturah’s sons were as much his half-brothers as Isaac. Ishmael did just that and “died in the presence of all his brethren” – (Genesis 25:18). Promise of possession of the land which was made to Abraham by covenant, was not passed to Ishmael. His descendants, together with their brethren, have dwelt on the face of the land, and still do, according to the prediction of God.

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