

Genesis 25:12-18

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Abraham's son Ishmael has twelve sons according to God's promise. Nebaioth was the oldest and Kedemah was the youngest. Ishmael dies at age 137 years old. His descendants settle east of Egypt.

There are two more generations listed. First, the *records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son* (vs 12). The passage that follows lists the *generations* of Isaac. But first *Ishmael's sons* are named and numbered, and his death is recorded. His children would go on to form tribes and nations of their own, fulfilling God's promise to *Ishmael*, that He would bless him and make him fruitful (Genesis 17:20).

Ishmael was the son of *Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid* (vs 12). He was conceived at the suggestion of Sarah, in an attempt to fulfill God's promise of having an heir. At the time of *Ishmael's* birth, God had promised a son through Abraham, but did not specify the wife (Genesis 15:4-5). However, afterward, God promised a son through both Abraham as well as Sarah, not through any other woman (Genesis 17:15-19).

Unsurprisingly, Abraham having a son with another woman made Sarah jealous, despite the fact that she had originally thought of the idea. Though multiple conflicts rose up due to this messy family dynamic, God took care of *Ishmael* and *Hagar*. After being sent away from Abraham's household, God guided both mother and son to water. He was "with the lad" as he grew up in the wilderness (Genesis 21:20), meaning He kept him from harm.

The twelve *sons of Ishmael* are named in the *order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah* (v 13-15).

God did as He promised in making a large family come from *Ishmael* (Genesis 21:18). It is interesting to note that both Jacob/Israel as well as *Ishmael* had twelve sons.

Of the names listed in vs. 13-15, *Kedar, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Jetur, Tema, and Naphish* are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. *Ishmael* also had daughters. Esau married *Mahalath* (Genesis 28:9) and *Basemath* (Genesis 36:3), both are

identified as sisters of Nebaioth. Nebaioth and Kedar are mentioned together in Isaiah 60:6-7, while Kedar is also found in Isaiah 21:16-17, 42:11; Jeremiah 2:10, 49:28; and Psalm 120:5. The Kedarites were known as herders of sheep and goats who pursued a semi-nomadic existence over the wide desert region east of the land of Israel. They seemed to enjoy some security and ease when Jeremiah the prophet was alive (Jeremiah 49:31).

Nothing else is known about *Mishma*. *Dumah* is referred to in Isaiah 21:11, regarding a site which was called “Dūmat al-Jundal” (“Dumah of the stones”) by the Arabs. Its modern name is Al-Jawf. It lies in the northern sector of the Arabian Desert due east of the Gulf of Akaba.

This passage in Genesis 25 is the only reference to *Hadad*.

Jetur and *Naphish* are called “Hagrites” in 1 Chronicles because they were descendants of Hagar. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh defeated them (1 Chronicles 5:18-20). The “sons of Naphisim” mentioned in Ezra 2:50 and Nehemiah 7:52 may have been survivors of these peoples.

Tema settled at a famous oasis, northeast of Dedan, beside a caravan route that led from southern Arabia to southern Mesopotamia (Isaiah 21:14). *Kedemah* does not appear elsewhere.

The *sons of Ishmael* and *their names, their villages, and their camps* fulfilled God’s promise of blessing Ishmael to be “the father of twelve princes” (Genesis 17:20). He had twelve sons, *twelve princes according to their tribes* (vs 16). Ishmael may not have received the same blessing as Isaac to have the birthright, but having 12 sons and a long life are signs of being blessed. The “prince” or chieftain was the leader of the tribe (Genesis 23:6; Exodus 16:22, 22:27-28).

The sons of Ishmael ranged far across the Middle East; *they settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria* (vs 18). Ishmael’s descendants made Arabia (east of Egypt) their home and they are currently thought of as Arabs, though they were more specifically a variety of tribes. They lived in a large area including the Arabian Peninsula and the desert land between Canaan and Mesopotamia. They were separate, but in the same region of the world.

The conclusion of this section begins *These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people* (vs 17). Ishmael lived to be *one hundred and thirty-seven* years before he died, falling considerably short of his father Abraham, who lived to the “ripe old age”

of 175. The phrase *was gathered to his people* means Ishmael went the way of those who had gone before him in death.

The translation here says *he settled in defiance of all his relatives* (vs 18). The *he* refers to Ishmael, and his *relatives* refer to his twelve sons and the people groups that sprung from them. The word translated here as *defiance* is literally “face.” Other translations render *defiance* as “presence.” The Hebrew word translated *settled* is literally “fall.” Other translations render *settled* as “died.” What seems more likely from the context is that this references Ishmael dying in the presence of his family, further indicating the great extent of his blessing.

The Hebrew word translated *defiance* in verse 18 also appears in a passage that relates to Ishmael in Genesis 16, where it is translated in the NASB as “the east,” but more likely means “in the presence” there as well:

“He will be a wild donkey of a man,
His hand will be against everyone,
And everyone’s hand will be against him;
And he will live to the east [in the presence] of all his brothers.”
(Genesis 16:12)

Similar to Genesis 25:18, the phrase “he will live to *the east*” in *Genesis 16:12* also has a literal rendering of “he will live before the face of his brethren.” This is consistent with the context of Genesis 25 where the sons of Ishmael joined with the sons of Isaac at the burial of Abraham, in the face or presence of relatives, of each other (Genesis 25:9).

As previously noted, no hostility between Israelites and Ishmaelites is recorded in Genesis. Jacob’s sons sell their brother Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites heading to Egypt (Genesis 37:25). But the episode appears as a commercial transaction, with the only hostility being brother-on-brother. Also, Esau will take a wife from Ishmael’s people (Genesis 28:9). Both instances support the idea that the Ishmaelites would be in the region, but have their own territory.

Biblical Text

¹² Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham; ¹³ and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴ and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵ Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their

camps; twelve princes according to their tribes.¹⁷ These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.