

The Kenites

Introduction: There are only a few things that we can probably state about the Kenites: they were a loose group of nomadic peoples who probably worked with metals and were originally associated with and possibly related to the Midianites. Although they first settled in Midian (insofar as we know), some of them moved into Judah and then later into the Galilee area. Their relations with Israel appear to have always been peaceful and congenial. Even though they are said to be given into the hands of Abram back in Gen. 15:18–19, their subjugation to Israel appears to be voluntary and not in the sense of being enslaved to the Israelites.

1. When studying groups of ancient peoples, it would be nice to state a few principles about them, and then move on. Unfortunately, exactly who the Kenites were is not all that simple.
2. In the Hebrew, Kenite in the Adjective-gentis is qêynîy (קֵינִי) [pronounced *kay-NEE*] (Strong's #7017 BDB #884) and, as a proper noun is qayin (קַיִן) [pronounced *KAH-yin*] (Strong's #7014 BDB #884), which you may or may not recognize as being the Hebrew for *Cain*. The latter word is transliterated *Cain* in Gen. 4, *Kain* in Joshua 15:57 (referring to a city), and Kenite in Num. 24:22 and Judges 4:11. The adjective-gentis is found everywhere else (Gen. 15:19 Num. 24:21 Judges 1:16 4:11, 14 5:24 1Sam. 15:6 27:10 30:29 1Chron. 2:55). Whereas, we could probably separate the *Cain* from the *Kenites* in Num. 24:22 and Joshua 15:57, Judges 4:11 seems to tie these words together (in other words, the proper noun and the adjective gentis cannot be legitimately separated linguistically or Scripturally). This does not mean that we are speaking of the descendants of the *Cain* of Gen. 4, as he was pre-deluvian and we are dealing with post-deluvian times.¹
3. The root of this word, qyn (קַיִן), is related to metal and metal work in the Aramaic and the Arabic, implying that this group of people were metal workers. In the Hebrew, the word *lance* has the root קַיִן. Since the Philistines seemed to have cornered the metal market with regards to iron (1Sam. 13:19–23), the Kenites probably worked in bronze and copper.
4. Keil and Delitzsch spend quite a bit of time explaining why the Kenites are not connected to Kinah, a city named in Joshua 15:22.²
5. The Kenites are mentioned only once in the book of Genesis as one of the ten nations which God would give into the hand of the descendants of Abram (Gen. 15:18–19). In the land of Palestine, there were actually seven nations (Gen. 15:20–21 Joshua 24:11 Acts 13:19), which did not include the Kenites, Kenizzites and the Kadmonites, meaning that they resided outside of the land. Gen. 15:19 also serves to distinguish them from one another). Since Moses' father-in-law was a priest living in the land of Midian (Ex. 2:16–21) and since he was a Kenite (Judges 1:16), it would follow that some or most of the Kenites originally lived in Midian. Although they do not have to be of Midianite extraction, they possibly are. This would make them descendants of Abraham through Keturah, the wife he took following the death of Sarah (Gen. 25:1–2). This gives us four options here:
 - a. they were strictly descendants of Abraham through Midian, meaning the Kenites mentioned in Gen. 15:19 are a different people.
 - b. They simply lived among the Midianites for a time, so that they would not be related to Abraham.
 - c. They were a separate family of people from the Midianites who intermingled somewhat with the Midianites, which is the likely scenario, given that they also appear to intermingle with the Jews as well.
 - d. Barnes offers a fourth possibility here, which you have to follow carefully: *Rather, it is probably that the Kenites of Gen. xv. 19 were a Canaanitish people, who derived their name from the city Kain, which fell eventually within the borders of the tribes of Judah (Josh. xv. 22); and that the descendants of Hobab [i.e., Moses' brother-in-law or father-in-law—see Num. 10:29 Judges 4:11], who appear in Judg. i. 16 as making war in this very district, possessed themselves of this city, and with it of the name Kenite also. This they would seem to have already done when Balaam uttered his prediction; and in the next verse it is, as the margin correctly indicates, not of the Kenite, but of Kain the city, that he speaks.*³

¹ That is, Cain lived quite a bit before the great flood; his lineage was not carried on past the flood; only the line of Seth through Noah.

² Keil & Delitzsch's *Commentary on the Old Testament*; ©1966 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; Vol. II, p. 115.

³ *Barnes' Notes, Volume 2*, reprinted 1996 by Baker Books; p. 240.

6. Other than the connection of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, we never see the Kenites and the Midianites associated together. My hypothesis is that the Kenites lived in Midian, but, for the most part, moved to Palestine when it was taken by the Jews. There are not a shortage of theories when it comes to the Kenites.⁴
 - a. ZPEB suggests that these people occupied an area south of Hebron, quickly pointing out that they are not a tightly, well-defined people.⁵
 - b. Douglas states simply that they were a Midianite tribe that worked with metals, and cite the heavy concentration of copper in the gulf of Aqaba area, where the Kenites and Midianites lived.
 - c. Josephus refers to them as Kenetides and refers to them as a race of the Shechemites.⁶
7. The warm relationship between Moses and Jethro, as witnessed in Ex. 2–3, 18, implies either that (1) Moses and Jethro worshipped the same God, Jehovah of the Israelites; or, that (2) Jethro was an easy convert, a man who was searching for the One and True God (Ex. 18:10–11). That the Kenites in part migrated to Palestine once the Israelites had captured the land also supports this hypothesis.⁷
8. W. F. Albright has suggested that a group of people found in a Beni Hassan mural in Egypt from the 19th century B.C. were a wandering group of nomads with expertise in metal working, not unlike the Kenites. It is 36 people in Semitic clothing, leading along various animals and donkeys laden with musical instruments and weapons. Probably several groups of peoples could be so targeted.⁸
9. The next place we should look is 1Chron. 2:55: *And the families of scribes who lived at Jabez were the Tirathites, the Shemeathites, and the Sucathites. Those are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.* Although the name is quite close, this is not Rahab, the prostitute's father. So, what we get from this is that Hammath was the father of several clans which are all properly Kenites. Also, that some of the Kenites changed their occupation to the very honorable one of being a scribe. Furthermore, this passage, in context, comes under the heading of the sons of Caleb. This does not mean that these were related to Caleb, but that they were found mixed in with the tribe of Judah (David also mentions the Kenites and Judah in the same breath in 1Sam. 15:6).
 - a. Hammath is found only in 1Chron. 2:55; Hamath is mentioned in Num. 13:21 34:8 Joshua 13:5 Judges 3:3 2Sam. 8:9 1Chron. 18:3 etc. The difference between the two, besides in pronunciation, is a small dot found in the middle of the *m* (mem).
10. Because of where they are located, we should not expect to hear much about the Kenites until we get into the book of Numbers, where the Israelites are traveling in that general area. We hear about them in the oracle of Balaam, who says, *And he looked at the Kenite, and he took up his discourse and said, "Your dwelling place is enduring, and your nest is set in the cliff; nevertheless, Qayin will be consumed. How long will Asshur keep you captive?"* (Num. 24:21–22). The implication is that Assyria would take the Kenites captive. We do not have a clearly documented fulfillment of this—only one by implication. Since some of the Kenites moved up into the Galilee area, *they would probably have been carried off with the Galilean Israelites by Tiglath-pileser III in 733 B.C.* as per 1Kings 15:29.⁹
11. And, then again, we don't hear from the Kenites for some time. In Judges 1:16 and 4:11, Moses' father-in-law is called a Kenite. The mention in Judges 1:16 is quite important, as it establishes their living side-by-side with the Israelites, so that their mention in subsequent portions of Scripture is not a complete mystery to us.
12. Interestingly enough, the Kenites, even having a good relationship with Israel, also appear to live side-by-side the Amalekites, the earliest enemies of Israel (Judges 1:16 1Sam. 15:6).
13. At some point in time, some Kenites moved into the land with Israel (Judges 1:16 4:11). Again, ZPEB disagrees with this notion, noting that in the Hebrew and in the alpha manuscript of the Septuagint, the Kenites are said to live with the *people*; in the beta manuscript of the Septuagint, they are said to live with the Amalekites (which is not far-fetched, as this would agree with 1Sam. 15:6). My theory is that the manuscript was possibly changed to better fit with 1Sam. 15:6. As we have noted, the Kenites do not appear to be

⁴ See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782, under the heading "Relations with Moses."

⁵ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782.

⁶ Josephus in *Antiquities*, IV, vii, 3.

⁷ ZPEB takes the opposite view here. *Despite the fact that many scholars espoused such a position at one time or another, no evidence within Scripture or without can be adduced to show that the Kenites were Yahwists before Moses.* This is taken from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782.

⁸ See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782.

⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*; J. Barton Payne; ©1973; Baker Books; p. 204.

- carefully confined to any particular area. This is born out by Judges 4:11, where one family migrates northward to Galilee.
14. Several times throughout Scripture, the only reference we find made to Kenite is that so-and-so is a Kenite (Judges 4:11 5:24).
 15. The Kenites appeared to have a generally good relationship with Israel. When Saul was about to set an ambush for an Amalekite city, he told the Kenites to depart from the Amalekites, so that they were not destroyed in the ambush. Doing so potentially compromised the ambush, but their bond with Israel was apparently more important. Recall that later, some of the Kenites became scribes (1Chron. 2:55).
 16. In 1Sam. 27:10, it sounds as though David had gathered spoil from his attacks against his own people in Judah, including the Jerahmeelites and the Kenites; however, he is lying to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, to make himself appear as though he had become an enemy of his own people. In fact, David will send some of his spoil to the cities of the Kenites (1Sam. 30:26–31).
 17. In conclusion, the Kenites were a loose group of nomadic peoples who probably worked with metals and were originally associated with and possibly related to the Midianites. Although they first settled in Midian (insofar as we know), some of them moved into Judah and then later into the Galilee area. Their relations with Israel appear to have always been peaceful and congenial.

A Summary of the Doctrine of the Kenites

1. When studying groups of ancient peoples, it would be nice to state a few principles about them, and then move on. Unfortunately, exactly who the Kenites were is not all that simple.
2. In the Hebrew, Kenite in the Adjective-gentilic is qêynîy (קֵינִי) [pronounced *kay-NEE*] (Strong's #7017 BDB #884) and, as a proper noun is qayin (קַיִן) [pronounced *KAH-yin*] (Strong's #7014 BDB #884), which you may or may not recognize as being the Hebrew for *Cain*. The latter word is transliterated *Cain* in Gen. 4, *Kain* in Joshua 15:57 (referring to a city), and Kenite in Num. 24:22 and Judges 4:11. The gentilic adjective is found everywhere else (Gen. 15:19 Num. 24:21 Judges 1:16 4:11, 14 5:24 1Sam. 15:6 27:10 30:29 1Chron. 2:55). Whereas, we could probably separate the *Cain* from the *Kenites* in Num. 24:22 and Joshua 15:57, Judges 4:11 seems to tie these words together (in other words, the proper noun and the gentilic adjective cannot be legitimately separated linguistically or Scripturally). This does not mean that we are speaking of the descendants of the *Cain* of Gen. 4, as he was pre-deluvian and we are dealing with post-deluvian times. That is, Cain lived quite a long time before the great flood; however, his lineage was not carried on past the flood; only the line of Seth through Noah. Therefore, there is no relationship between pre-deluvian Cain and the post-deluvian Kenite.
3. The root of this word, qyn (קִינ), is related to metal and metal work in the Aramaic and the Arabic, implying that this group of people were metal workers. In the Hebrew, the word *lance* has the root קִינ. Since the Philistines seemed to have cornered the metal market with regards to iron (1Sam. 13:19–23), the Kenites probably worked in bronze and copper.
4. The Kenites are mentioned only once in the book of Genesis as one of the ten nations which God would give into the hand of the descendants of Abram (Gen. 15:18–19). In the land of Palestine, there were actually seven nations (Gen. 15:20–21 Joshua 24:11 Acts 13:19), which did not include the Kenites, Kenizzites and the Kadmonites, meaning possibly that they resided outside of the land. Gen. 15:19 also serves to distinguish the Kenites, Kenizzites and Kadmonites from one another.
5. Since Moses' father-in-law was a priest living in the land of Midian (Ex. 2:16–21) and since he was a Kenite (Judges 1:16), it would follow that some or most of the Kenites lived in Midian. Although they do not have to be of Midianite extraction, they possibly are. This would make them descendants of Abraham through Keturah, who is the wife he took following the death of Sarah (Gen. 25:1–2—Midian is descended from Abraham and Keturah). These are our options:
 - a. The Kenites were strictly descendants of Abraham through Midian, meaning the Kenites mentioned in Gen. 15:19 are a different people.
 - b. The Kenites simply lived among the Midianites for a time, but are not be related to Abraham.
 - c. The Kenites were a separate family of people from the Midianites who intermingled somewhat with the Midianites, which is the likely scenario, given that they also appear to intermingle with the Jews as well.
6. Other than the connection of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, we never see the Kenites and the Midianites associated together. My hypothesis is that the Kenites lived in Midian, but, for the most part, moved to

- Palestine when it was taken by the Jews. There is not a shortage of theories when it comes to the Kenites.¹⁰ ZPEB suggests that these people occupied an area south of Hebron, quickly pointing out that they are not a tightly, well-defined people.¹¹ Douglas states simply that they were a Midianite tribe that worked with metals, and cite the heavy concentration of copper in the gulf of Aqaba area, where the Kenites and Midianites lived. Josephus refers to them as Kenetides and refers to them as a race of the Shechemites.¹²
7. The warm relationship between Moses and Jethro, as witnessed in Ex. 2–3, 18, implies either that (1) Moses and Jethro worshipped the same God, Jehovah of the Israelites; or, that (2) Jethro was an easy convert, a man who was searching for the One and True God (Ex. 18:10–11). That the Kenites in part migrated to Palestine once the Israelites had captured the land also supports this hypothesis.¹³
 8. The next place we should look is 1Chron. 2:55: **And the families of scribes who lived at Jabez were the Tirathites, the Shemeathites, and the Sucathites. Those are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.** So, what we get from this is that Hammath was the father of several clans which are all properly Kenites. Also, that some of the Kenites changed their occupation to the very honorable one of being a scribe. Furthermore, this passage, in context, comes under the heading of the sons of Caleb. This does not mean that these were related to Caleb, but that they were found mixed in with the tribe of Judah (David also mentions the Kenites and Judah in the same breath in 1Sam. 15:6).
 - a. Hammath is found only in 1Chron. 2:55; Hamath is mentioned in Num. 13:21 34:8 Joshua 13:5 Judges 3:3 2Sam. 8:9 1Chron. 18:3 etc. The difference between the two, besides in pronunciation, is a small dot found in the middle of the *m* (mem).
 9. And, then again, we don't hear from the Kenites for some time. In Judges 1:16 and 4:11, Moses' father-in-law is called a Kenite. The mention in Judges 1:16 is quite important, as it establishes their living side-by-side with the Israelites, so that their mention in subsequent portions of Scripture is not a complete mystery to us.
 10. Interestingly enough, the Kenites, even having a good relationship with Israel, also appear to live side-by-side the Amalekites, the earliest enemies of Israel (Judges 1:16 1Sam. 15:6).
 11. At some point in time, some Kenites moved into the land with Israel (Judges 1:16 4:11). However, as we have noted, the Kenites do not appear to be carefully confined to any particular area. This is born out by Judges 4:11, where one family migrates northward to Galilee.
 12. The Kenites appeared to have a generally good relationship with Israel. When Saul was about to set an ambush for an Amalekite city, he told the Kenites to depart from the Amalekites, so that they were not destroyed in the ambush. Doing so potentially compromised the ambush, but their bond with Israel was apparently more important. Recall that at some point in time, some of the Kenites became scribes (1Chron. 2:55).
 13. In 1Sam. 27:10, it sounds as though David had gathered spoil from his attacks against his own people in Judah, including the Jerahmeelites and the Kenites; however, he is lying to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, to make himself appear as though he had become an enemy of his own people. In fact, David will send some of his spoil to the cities of the Kenites (1Sam. 30:26–31).
 14. In conclusion, the Kenites were a loose group of nomadic peoples who probably worked with metals and were originally associated with and possibly related to the Midianites. Although they first settled in Midian (insofar as we know), some of them moved into Judah and then later into the Galilee area; and many of them became scribes. Their relations with Israel appear to have always been peaceful and congenial. Therefore, when God gives the Kenites into the hands of the descendants of Abraham, we should understand that Abraham's descendants would become predominant, but not necessarily that they militarily conquer the Kenites, as we have no indication of that in Scripture.

[Return to Chapter Outline](#)

[Return to Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines](#)

¹⁰ See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782, under the heading "Relations with Moses."

¹¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782.

¹² Josephus in *Antiquities*, IV, vii, 3.

¹³ ZPEB takes the opposite view here. *Despite the fact that many scholars espoused such a position at one time or another, no evidence within Scripture or without can be adduced to show that the Kenites were Yahwists before Moses.* This is taken from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 782.