

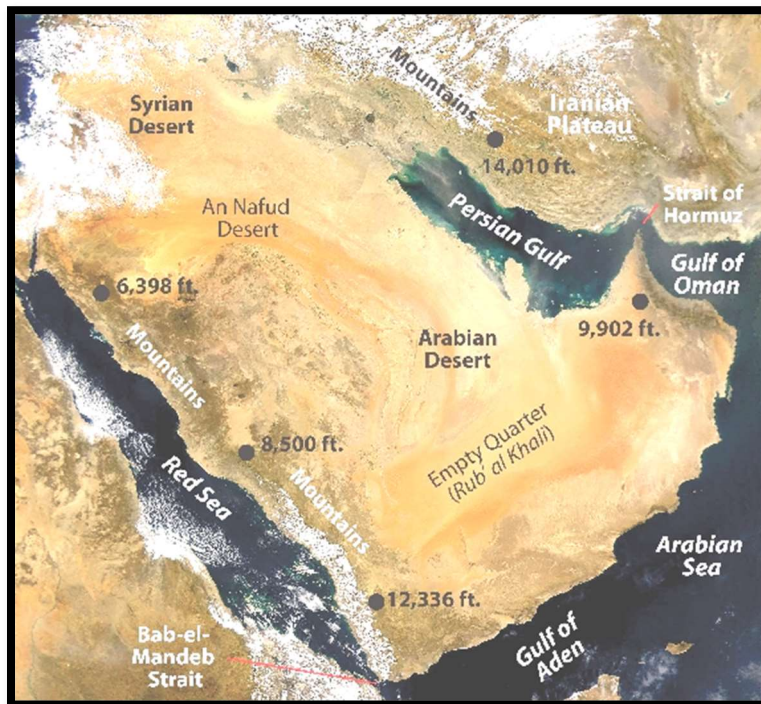
## 1. Introduction

The Bible, and especially the book of Isaiah, contains many prophecies about the desert that will blossom. In the last century, when the Jews turned wasteland in the Negeb desert into green oases, Christians began to see this as the fulfillment of God's promise. But is that really the message of Isaiah? What exactly is God's promise in the Bible?

## 2. Deserts in the Middle East

First of all we look at the question: which desert did Isaiah speak about? Is that the Judean desert where John the Baptist commenced his ministry? Or the Negeb where Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac spent a large part of their lives? Or perhaps the Sinai desert, of which it is assumed that the Israelites wandered around for forty years before entering the promised land? <sup>1</sup>

Looking at a map of the deserts in the Middle East, one immediately notes that the two largest ones are Syrian Desert and Arabian Desert. The latter is actually the name of a collection of deserts on the Arabian Peninsula, of which the largest are the Empty Quarter in the south and An-Nafud<sup>2</sup> in the north.

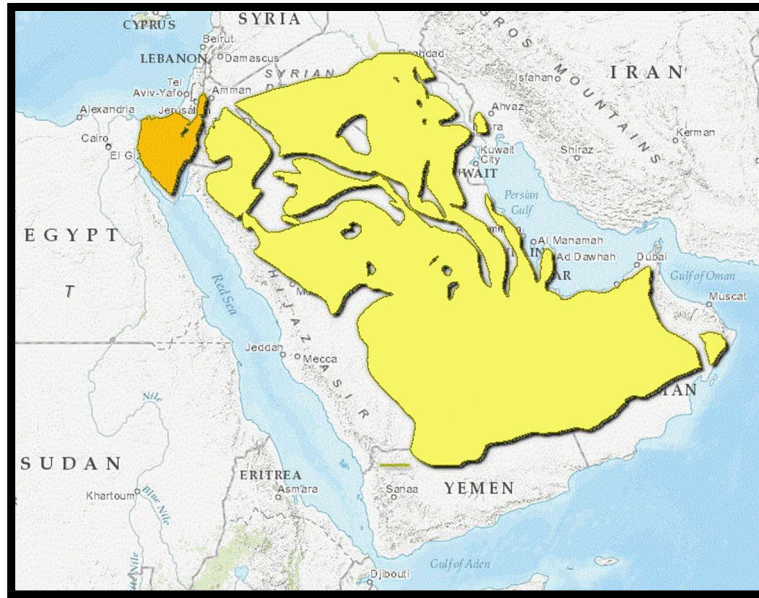


The main deserts in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>

In relation to these areas, the Judean desert, the Negeb and Sinai form just a small part of all the desert lands. See the illustration, where these have been colored orange. This leads to the question: which desert did God speak about through the prophet Isaiah?

## The Desert Will Blossom

*God loves  
Yshmael*



desert areas in the Middle East

Isaiah 42 provides specific information about the desert dwellers. Verse 11 speaks about the villages of Kedar and of the inhabitants of the rock.

### a) Kedar

Kedar is a son of Ishmael. His descendants, the Kedarites, dwelled in the eastern part of An-Nafud desert. This is clear from other passages in Isaiah. For instance, chapter 13:19-20 speaks about a time when the city of Babel will be so deserted that even the Arabs will not pitch their tents there and Isaiah 19:13-17 speaks about the Arabs being Kedarites. Thus the territory of the Kedarites bordered Babel.<sup>4</sup>



### b) The inhabitants of the rock

In the Jordanian archeological city of Petra and in Meda'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia many rock dwellings can be found.<sup>5</sup> At one point Petra was the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom, situated at the western end of Al-Nafud and the Syrian desert.



Petra



Meda'in Saleh

This means that Isaiah spoke primarily about the Syrian and its neighboring An-Nafud desert.

### 3. A twofold promise

Those who point to the green oases in Israel, emphasize the promise about the physical desert that will blossom. But the prophecies contain another promise, which is equally important if not more.

Isaiah 32:15-17 says, "Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." <sup>6</sup>

God promised that one day He will pour out His Holy Spirit, resulting in fruitful land. Not only that, there will be justice and righteousness in the desert. This will bring about peace and quietness and trust forever. Justice and peace have very little to do with grass and trees but a lot with spiritual and emotional blessing. That means the promise of God is twofold: physical and spiritual.

#### a) Physical and spiritual blessing

In the following passages with promises about the desert, the physical blessings have been underlined and the spiritual blessings made bold.



## The Desert Will Blossom

*God loves  
Yshmael*

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. **They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God**" (Isaiah 35:1-2).

"For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. **And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray**" (Isaiah 35:6b-8).

"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it" (Isaiah 41:17-20).

"Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, **the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the habitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains**" (Isaiah 42:11).

"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise" (Isaiah 43:19-21).

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; **I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and name himself by the name of Israel.**" (Isaiah 44:3-5).

"Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it" (Isaiah 45:8).

### b) The relationship between literal and figurative interpretation

Instead of the literal interpretation of the promises about the blossoming desert, one could argue that they are all meant figuratively, in a spiritual sense.

The specific references to certain animals and plants and trees, however, point to promises about a literal desert as well.

In reality both go hand in hand. Human behavior has a large impact on the deserts and in the Arab world the deserts grow because of overgrazing and depletion of ground water through irrigation. Thus the new vulnerable plants disappear before they've grown strong and the

remaining plants die because of the sinking ground water level. If one stops that and gives the land proper rest and space, then the deserts disappear and nature returns to fruitfulness.<sup>7</sup>

So, God promised that the desert will become fruitful and there will be justice. As we have seen, the promise refers in particular to the Syrian and An-Nafud desert. For many centuries, injustices have taken place in this area in the name of Islam, coming to a climax in recent years with the Islamic State. We may be assured that one day God is going to pour out His Spirit (Isaiah 32:15 and 44:3) and that many people there will change. They will repent and act justly.

### 4. A way in the wilderness

A returning theme in the passages about the desert is that God makes a way for His people (Isaiah 35:8, 40:3 en 43:19-20).<sup>8</sup> Of course one can only travel through arid regions if there is enough water. For that reason the Babylonians in the days of Jeremiah didn't take the shortest route to Israel through the Syrian desert. Instead, they first traveled through the fruitful valley of the Euphrates in north-western direction and then turned south. The Jews did the same when they returned from exile in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.



Route of the Babylonians and the returning exiles

Isaiah, however, speaks of a highway in the wilderness. Who or what is this meant for?

Isaiah 40:3 speaks about someone crying, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

This was fulfilled in John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah by calling people to repent from their sins.<sup>9</sup> It seems to point to yet another fulfillment because there is a wonderful parallel with the Arabs in the desert who shall come to faith. Thus they can prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah to His people Israel.

The following considerations support this interpretation.

a) The Jews will become jealous of a nation that is not a nation.

Romans 10:19 says, "I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry." According to Romans 11:25-26, all Israel will come to salvation when the fulness of the Gentiles has come in. So, God will use a people group that is not a nation, and at the same time a nation, to cause the Jews to envy them and want to have what they have.

As we have seen earlier, the descendants of Ishmael's son Kedar dwelled in the desert. The Nabataeans were descendants of Nebaioth, Ishmael's firstborn son. That means that the promise in Isaiah 42 deals with the Ishmaelites. This blessing needs not surprise us, in view of the blessings God gave their forefather Ishmael. See c) below.

The Ishmaelites not only bore the name of their ancestor but also were named Arabs, which means 'steppe dwellers.' Thus they fit the description in Romans 10:19 of *a nation* that at the same time is *not a nation*. One could read the verse as follows. "I will make you jealous of the Arabs, with the Ishmaelites I will make you angry."

Surely, when the Ishmaelites turn to Christ, the Israelites will become jealous and angry with the them. When the Israelites see that the descendants of their half-brother Ishmael have peace with God and that the hatred toward them turns into love and acceptance, will they not desire the same?

b) The Arabs as predecessors of the Israelites

Another argument in support of the view that the Israelites will come to faith after the Arabs have put their trust in Jesus the Messiah as Savior is the following remarkable fact.

Throughout the history of mankind, God named only four people before they were born – Ishmael, Isaac, John and Jesus.

For a long time Abraham and Sarah thought that Ishmael was the son of promise.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, many people thought of John the Baptist that he was the promised savior.<sup>11</sup> But Ishmael became the predecessor of Isaac and John the predecessor of Jesus. This points to a pattern where many Arabs are going to be the predecessors of the Israelites in becoming followers of Jesus the Messiah.

	Predecessor of the promise	Son/nation of the promise
1	Ishmael	Isaac
2	John (the Baptist)	Jesus
3	Arabs	Jews

## c) God's unique blessings for Ishmael

The Ishmaelites form a unique people in history. God promised both Abraham and Hagar that they would become a great nation (Genesis 16:10 en 17:20). Apart from them only the Israelites specifically received that promise.

Besides that, both the Ishmaelites and the Israelites were twelve tribes and both received the circumcision through God's command to Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14, 23).

Also, God blessed the Israelites so that they would pass it on to the world (Isaiah 49:6, 56:7). It fits God's character to believe that the blessings given to the Ishmaelites were not just for themselves either, but in order to pass them on to others.

In times of disobedience to God and serving idols, the Israelites were not the blessing God had intended. Likewise may Ishmaelites have left the way of their ancestor Abraham and followed an Arab prophet, whose call often wasn't toward life but toward death.<sup>12</sup> They became slaves and are now stuck in a system of laws. God, however, destined them to be free.<sup>13</sup> This fits the promise that one day there will be justice and peace in the desert.

Finally, Abraham prayed for his son, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!"<sup>14</sup> Not only did Abraham ask God to let his son Ishmael live, he desired intensely for him and his descendants that they might live with God. God replied, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you."<sup>15</sup> So God promised Abraham that that would happen indeed!

## d) The relationship between the Arabs and the desert

There is an undeniable link between the desert and its inhabitants. In the book of Isaiah three words are used to for the desert or wilderness. One of them is the word עֲרָבָה 'Arabah' (Strong's H6160, TWOT 1688d), which means steppe.

Sometimes this word indicates a specific desert in Israel, named the Arabah. In Isaiah 35 and 41 it refers to the wilderness in general. The word is related to Arab, which means steppe dweller. Of course when the desert begins to blossom, it will have a huge impact on its inhabitants and touch the Arabs in a very personal way.

1688	עֲרָבָה ('rb)	IV. Assumed root of the following.
1688a	עֲרָבָה ('ārab)	desert plateau, steppe (Isa 21:13).
1688b	עֲרָבִי ('ārābi)	steppe-dweller (Isa 13:20; Jer 3:2).
1688c	עֲרָבִים ('ārāb)	steppe-dwellers (collective noun).
1688d	עֲרָבָה ('ārābā)	desert plain, steppe.

TWOT, entry 1688<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

God promised through Isaiah that the desert will blossom. The Bible passages point to a physical and spiritual transformation.

One day God is going to pour out His Spirit over the arid regions in the Middle East and cause a physical blossoming, with streams of water and lush green of plants and trees, as well as a spiritual blossoming, with abundant justice, righteousness and peace. The sand dunes will become forests and injustice and violence will make place for safety.

Several references speak about the desert regions that are inhabited by the Arabs today. That is not to say that this is true for all references, but it does mean that Isaiah spoke about more than just the Judean desert or the Negeb.

God promised He will do something new. At the time of Moses He made a way through the water (the Red Sea) and one day He will make a way in the desert (Isaiah 43:19) to bless His people (43:21). This highway points to a revival among the desert dwellers, today's Arabs.

Just as the way for the first coming of Jesus the Messiah was prepared by many conversions through the preaching of John the Baptist, so the conversion of many Arabs will prepare the way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah to His people. God will use the Arabs to make the Jews jealous, so that they in turn will seek Jesus and find Him as well. <sup>17</sup>

Again, all this is going to take place when God's Spirit is poured out. We may pray for that to happen.

---

<sup>1</sup> There are good reasons to believe that this was the desert of the Arabian Peninsula. The apostle Paul wrote about Mount Sinai in Arabia (Galatians 4:25). At the time of Moses, the area which today bears the name Sinai actually belonged to Egypt. See also for instance <http://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-exodus-route-kadesh-barnea-jordan.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Other ways of writing are Nefud and Nafud

<sup>3</sup> Source: Satellite image courtesy of NASA's Sea-viewing Wide Field-of-view Sensor project and John Nevard, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arabian\\_Peninsula\\_dust\\_SeaWiFS-2.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arabian_Peninsula_dust_SeaWiFS-2.jpg).

<sup>4</sup> See also the study Origin of the Arabs

<sup>5</sup> See <http://nabataea.net/medain.html> and <http://nabataea.net/medainsaleh.html>

<sup>6</sup> This and all other verses are taken from the *English Standard Version*, © 2001, 2007, 2011 by Crossway Bibles, accessed in *e-Sword*, version 10.1.0, Rick Myers

<sup>7</sup> A clear example of this can be found at [www.godlovesishmael.com/desert](http://www.godlovesishmael.com/desert)

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 57:14 doesn't deal with the desert, but fits the picture as well.

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 3:1-6 and John 1:23

<sup>10</sup> Only when Ishmael was thirteen years old, Abraham heard for the first time that he was going to have a son with Sarah. See Genesis 17:16, 25

<sup>11</sup> See for instance John 1:19-20

<sup>12</sup> See the study *Is Islam a religion of peace or not?* at [www.godlovesishmael.com](http://www.godlovesishmael.com)

<sup>13</sup> See the studies *The Wild donkey* and *Genesis 16:12* at [www.godlovesishmael.com](http://www.godlovesishmael.com)

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 17:18

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 17:20

<sup>16</sup> Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1980. entry 1688

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 49:6 and other passages speak about the Jews being the instrument through which the nations of the world will come to repentance. My personal conviction is that that will mark the beginning of the 1000-year kingdom of peace. The conversion of the Jews will be preceded by a mass conversion of Arabs