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The Lands of the Bible

The story of salvation began to unfold in a particular part of the world and during a particular period of history. It is impossible to understand it without some knowledge of this historical and geographical setting. God disclosed Himself to people living in a certain place at a certain time—in concrete personal situations that are intelligible to every generation. The Biblical record of His dealings with individuals and with the nation of Israel is intended to instruct us (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

We need to understand God's ways with people of Bible times, and to know where and when it all happened. A study of the land and story of the Bible is both fascinating and indispensable; for this history and geography are the arena in which God chose to speak and to act.

Medieval Christian geographers believed Jerusalem was at the center of the earth, and their maps illustrated this. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, which was built over the traditional site of Jesus' burial and Resurrection, a stone in the floor marks what was believed to be the world's exact center. Geographically, of course, this is nonsense. Theologically, however, for Christians this is "the Holy Land," a place distinct. It is also the center of world history and geography in the sense that it is the land promised by God to Abraham some two thousand years before the time of Christ. Jesus lived and died here; and the Christian church was formed here, outlasting the Roman Empire and changing the course of world history.

It seems no accident that this land was chosen as the site of salvation history. It forms a kind of bridge between three continents: Africa, Europe, and Asia meet at the eastern end of the Mediterranean and their peoples have always encountered each other on its trade routes. During ancient times, this land was invaded and conquered by armies from all three continents—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. God set Jerusalem "in the center of the nations" (Ezekiel 5:5).

THE PROMISED LAND

The wider scene of the arena of Old Testament history is often called the "Fertile Crescent," as it sweeps in a semicircle from Egypt to Mesopotamia, from the Nile valley to the

alluvial plain of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, enclosing the Arabian desert. This wider region features prominently in the early history of the Jews: God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, situated just nine miles from the River Euphrates in southern Iraq, and Moses from Egypt, where as a baby he narrowly escaped drowning in the River Nile.

When God told Moses that He was to bring His people out of Egypt into Canaan, He described it as "a rich and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). Similarly, when Moses sent spies to explore the land, they confirmed this description: "The land we passed through and explored is excellent . . . a land flowing with milk and honey"

The domed roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem.





Part of the Jordan Valley south of Galilee. The Promised Land was often described in the Old Testament as a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

(Numbers 14:7-8). They showed concrete evidence of their claims, bringing back with them a bunch of grapes so heavy that it had to be slung on a pole carried by two men (Numbers 13:23-24).

Snow-capped Mount Hermon is on the northern border of the Holy Land.



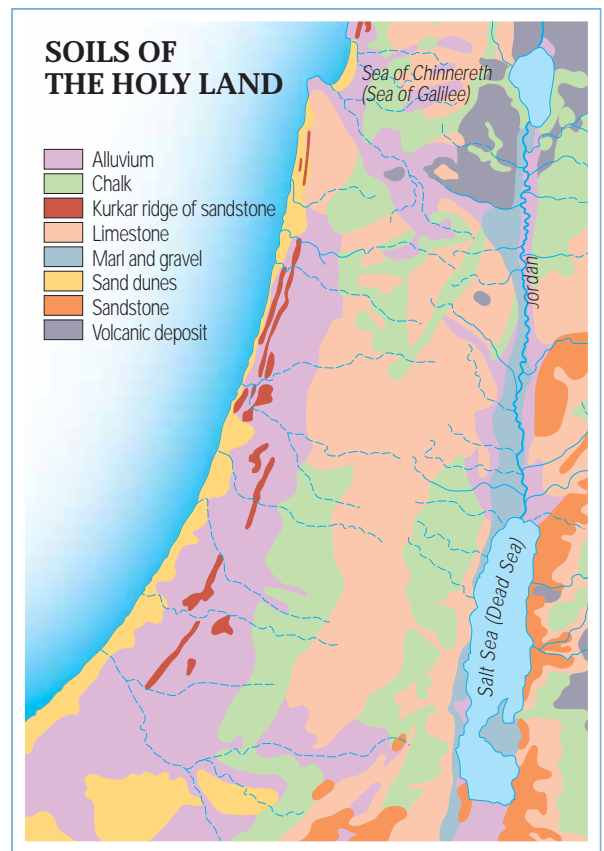
Just before entering the Promised Land, after a delay of forty years brought about by Israel’s disobedience, Moses told the people:

“ . . . the Lord your God is bringing you to a rich land—a land with streams and springs, with waters that flow in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and figs, pomegranates, olives, oil, and honey; a land in which bread will not be scarce and you will want nothing; a land in which the rocks are iron and you can dig copper from the hills” (Deuteronomy 8:7-9).

Although farmers in this region have to work hard, this is still today a fitting description of the country. The Holy Land extends only about

200 miles from north to south and 100 miles west to east, and is hemmed in by natural boundaries. To the north rise the mountains of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon; to the west lies the Mediterranean, known in ancient times as “the Great Sea”; and to the east and south lie the barren deserts of Arabia and Zin (Numbers 34:1-15).

In the Bible, the most common expression for the whole country is “from Dan to Beersheba” (Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 3:10; 1 Kings 4:25)—Dan being Israel’s most northerly city, and Beersheba its most southerly, situated at the edge of the desert of Zin (Negeb), about halfway between the Mediterranean and the southern tip of the Dead Sea.



THE REGIONS OF THE HOLY LAND

The simplest way to remember the map of the Holy Land is to think of four parallel strips of country running from north to south. As we have seen, the most striking of these is the Jordan Valley. The River Jordan cuts deep between two mountain ranges—the central highlands that form the backbone of the Holy Land (sloping in the west to the coastal plain) and the eastern plateau, beyond which lies the desert. Thus the four strips between the sea and the desert consist of the coastland, the central highlands, the Jordan Valley, and the eastern plateau.

The Coastal Strip

The coastal strip varies in width from a few hundred yards where Mount Carmel juts out into the sea and the port of Haifa is today situated to some 30 miles at the southern end. In ancient times this southern section of the coastal strip was the land of the Philistines, where the five main Philistine cities were located: Gaza, the most southerly, on the ancient road that runs north from Egypt, about three miles inland from the coast; Ashkelon on the coast, twelve miles north; Ashdod, eight miles farther north and on the road again; Ekron, farther north and inland; and Gath in the middle of the plain.

The Shephelah, or foothills, lies immediately east of this Plain of Philistia. In Bible times its sycamore trees were proverbial; Solomon was

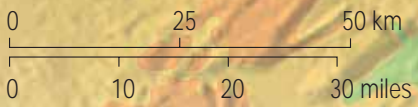
said to have made “cedars plentiful as sycamores in the foothills” (1 Kings 10:27). The slopes of the Shephelah form the foothills of the central plateau, rising from about 500 feet at Gath to 1,300 feet, 10 miles to the east. At that point the mountains begin, while ten miles east lies Hebron, the highest city in the Holy Land, at 3,300 feet.

Immediately north of the Plain of Philistia, still on the coastal strip, is the Plain of Sharon, of which the main town and port was Joppa (modern Jaffa). In Bible times, this area supported flocks of sheep; we read of the pasturelands of Sharon (1 Chronicles 5:16). However, before modern drainage it must have been very marshy.

RELIEF MAP OF THE HOLY LAND



meters	feet
1,000	3,281
500	1,640
200	656
0	0
below sea level	below sea level



JESUS' MINISTRY: THE FINAL YEAR

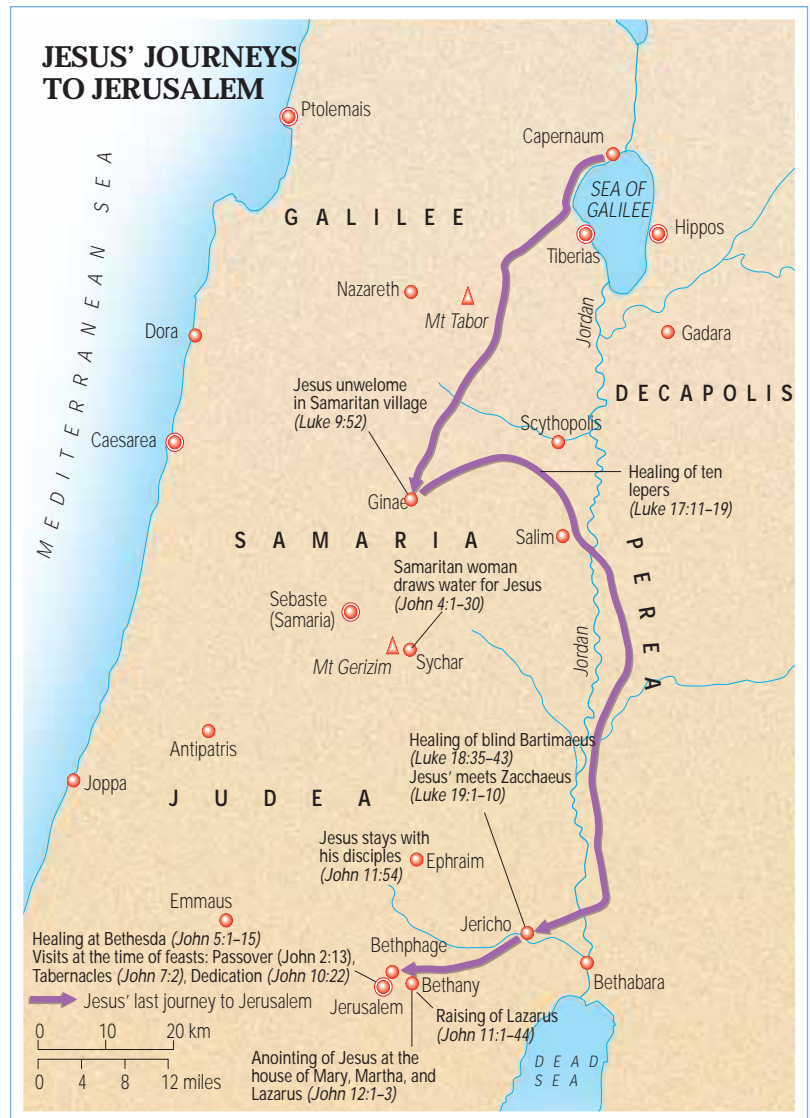
Having returned to Capernaum, Jesus preached a sermon in the synagogue, explaining that He had come not as a political revolutionary, but as the Bread of Life. The bread He would give was His flesh. The Jews were offended: "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" Even His disciples found it a hard saying, and many now stopped following Him (John 6:52, 66).

Jesus withdrew again, journeying beyond Galilee. He went to Tyre and Sidon in the northwest (Mark 7:24), and to the Decapolis, southeast of the lake (Mark 7:31). Later He traveled north again, this time to Caesarea Philippi, in the foothills of Mount Hermon (Mark 8:27). Here Jesus asked the Twelve who people were saying He was. They told Him John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. When He asked who the Twelve thought He was, Peter replied: "You are the Christ." Jesus ordered them to tell no one (Mark 8:29-30), and began to teach that He must suffer, be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31-32).

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him up a high mountain (possibly Mount Tabor) and was transfigured, His face and clothing shining with light.

When Jesus returned to Galilee, it was largely a private visit; He continued to teach the disciples about His coming sufferings and Resurrection (Mark 9:30-31). Soon after, He began to travel south (Mark 10:1), aiming for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), and en route continued to teach them (Mark 10:32-34, 45; Luke 9:51-18:14).

They approached Jerusalem via Jericho, an ancient oasis near where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea. Here Jesus brought sight to blind Bartimaeus and salvation to Zacchaeus the crooked



tax-collector (Luke 18:35-19:10). Then they made the steep climb toward the holy city. John's Gospel records that Jesus spent about six months in Judea, including visits to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles in October and the Feast of Dedication in December (John 7:2, 10, 14; 10:22-23).

When Jesus appeared for the festivals, His claims became bolder. He declared that He was the Giver of living water, the Light of the world, the great "I am," the Good Shepherd, and the Resurrection and the Life (John 7:37-39; 8:12; 9:5; 8:58; 10:11;

11:25-26). Jewish leaders found these claims provocative, and several times tried to arrest and kill Him (John 5:18; 7:30, 32; 8:59; 10:39; 11:53, 57).

Already during His Galilean ministry, although the crowds supported Him loudly, Jesus had attracted criticism from the scribes and Pharisees. He was accused of blasphemy, consorting with sinners, religious laxity, and sabbath-breaking (Mark 2:1-28). Defending Himself, Jesus had made matters worse in His critics' eyes by claiming to be the Son of Man.

