

A CHOSEN LAND FOR A CHOSEN PEOPLE

Exploring the Promised Land Jesus Called Home

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INTRODUCTION

“The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’” (Genesis 12:7).

“I will give you *Ha’Aretz*,” the Lord said to Abram in Hebrew. *Ha’Aretz*. The Land. “I will give to you and your descendants a part of the globe unlike any other. I will give to you and your descendants a section of the earth whose topography will assist in telling the story—in creating the story—of my love for a sinful world. The Land. *Ha’Aretz*.”

This small book is intended to begin to answer these questions: Why did God give Abraham and his family the land of the Canaanites? Why did he bring Moses and the children of Israel there? Why did he allow David and Solomon to rise to prominence with Jerusalem as their capital? Why did he bring Jesus into the world in this backwoods part of the planet?

In many ways The Land itself is an important part of the message the Holy Spirit inspired from Moses through John. This book will provide the reader with more than measurements of mountain heights and river lengths. The impact of Israel’s topography must be tied to the stories; Bible accounts were influenced by The Land’s regions of heights and holes, by the areas that were fertile or fallow, by the sections that were welcomingly wet or witheringly warm.

Note that several terms will be used to describe this land. *Ha’Aretz* was already introduced. *Israel* is the name the land takes after the period of the judges (“land of Israel” is first used in I Samuel 13:19). *Canaan* is sometimes used to describe the land (a term first found in Genesis 12). *Canaan* had no exact boundaries, but at its broadest the term maps the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River and between the upper boundaries of Lebanon and the lower levels of the Negev. The term *Palestine* will also be used.

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There is no reference to present-day Palestine intended by this term. Rather, the word will be used as it was in antiquity, dating back to first-century historian Josephus and Roman Emperor Vespasian. It is a synonym for the land of Israel. On occasion, the term *Levant* will be used to describe the Holy Land. *Levant* depicts the region that includes the countries bordering the shores of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Although it is not a precise term, *Levant* can encompass today's countries of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, Turkey's Hatay Province, and sometimes Iraq and the Sinai Peninsula. The term came to be used for this area around A.D. 1500. It comes from a French word that means "to rise." It refers to the rising of the sun in the east.

HA'ARETZ

I was up before dawn. Jet lag confuses my sleep patterns. It was the second morning of my first trip to Israel. My tour group had spent the night at a kibbutz (a community settlement) on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee. We had arrived after dark, so when I stepped out of my cottage, I had my initial daylight look at the sea. The sun's first rays created a halo at the rim of the Golan Heights to the east. Streetlights of cities and towns defined the sea's sides and peppered the bowl-like hillside holding the sea. Gentle waves blown by an equally gentle and warm November breeze quietly lapped at the beach.

The sea was significantly smaller than I had imagined it. From where I stood to its northern reaches was only 13 miles. It was only half that wide. Perhaps because of Sunday school pictures, I had thought it would be larger. Over the years I had consciously shrunk its size in my head. As a child I imagined the Sea of Galilee the size of Lake Michigan, the largest body of water I knew. Over time I reduced it to the size of Wisconsin's Lake Winnebago (a lake 28 miles long and 11 miles wide). But even though my Bible map work taught me the Savior's lake was much smaller, I wasn't quite prepared for what my eyes measured.

I spent much of my initial trip to Israel readjusting my imagination's assumptions about the sizes of Israel's hills and valleys, the apparent shortness of its miles, and the tightly walled perimeters of

its ancient cities. Each day I realized how mistaken I had been to assume that the topography of the Holy Land was similar to the expansive Upper Midwest where I grew up. It was a rookie world traveler's error.

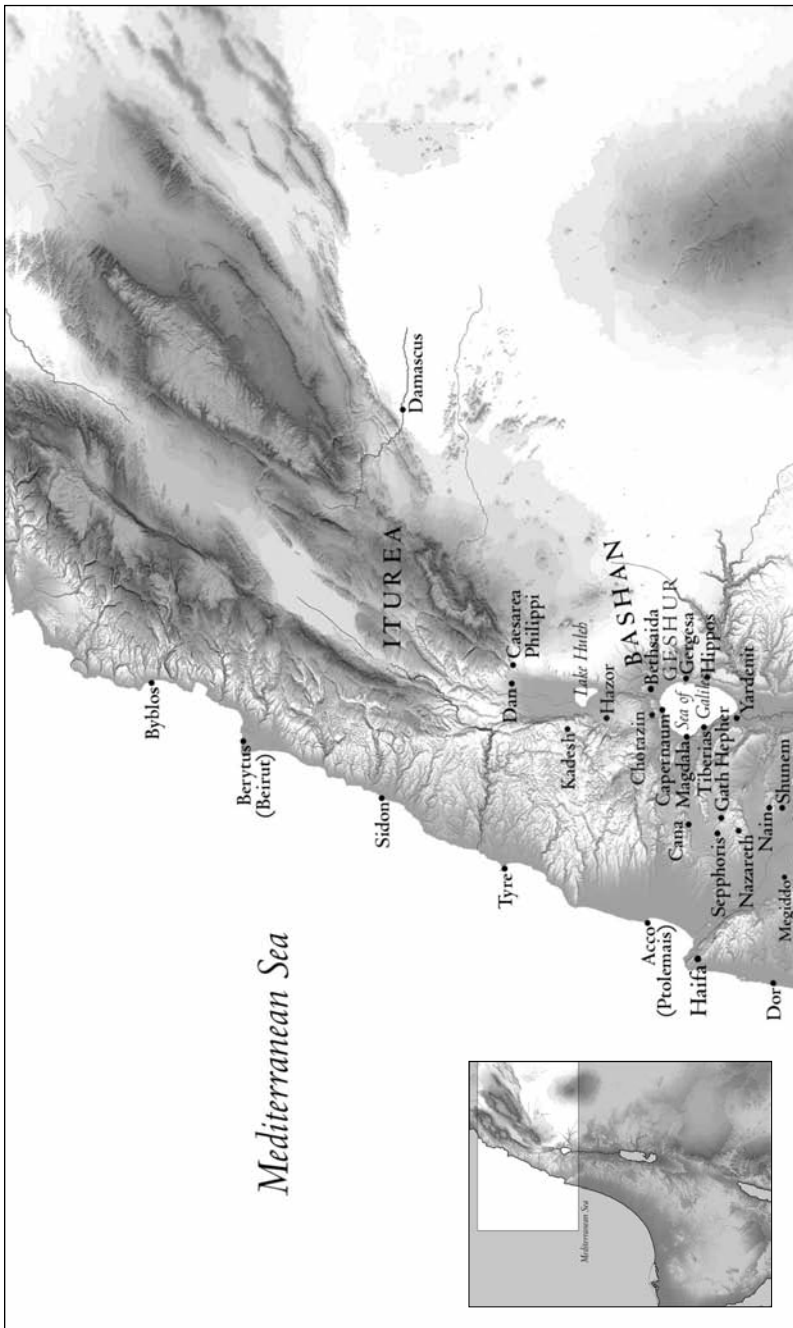
Israel doesn't have the immense rolling fields of Wisconsin or the endless, flat, corn-filled lands of Iowa. Israel is a small fraction of the Wisconsin-sized place I imagined as a child. The abundant rivers, creeks, and lakes that refresh most of the United States are absent in Palestine. The enormous forests of the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains have never existed in the Holy Land, although there were small forests on some of the mountains and on the sea plain.

But as different as the topography of Israel is from that of America, it lacks nothing in beauty. Its seacoasts of bluff and beach kiss the warm Mediterranean Sea. Its mountains and hills reach for the heavens in silent, reverent prayer. Its rough-hewn valleys, terraced by ancient farmers, testify to a hardscrabble life for most ancients. Its land-scarring wadis, though now usually dry canyons, hint at the roaring torrents they once contained. Its two seas, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, nestle in the stunning, deep-cupped hands of the sheltering earth. Its stark, brown, dusty deserts are simultaneously dangerous and delightful. Its mountaintop vistas scan sites of dramatic biblical history.

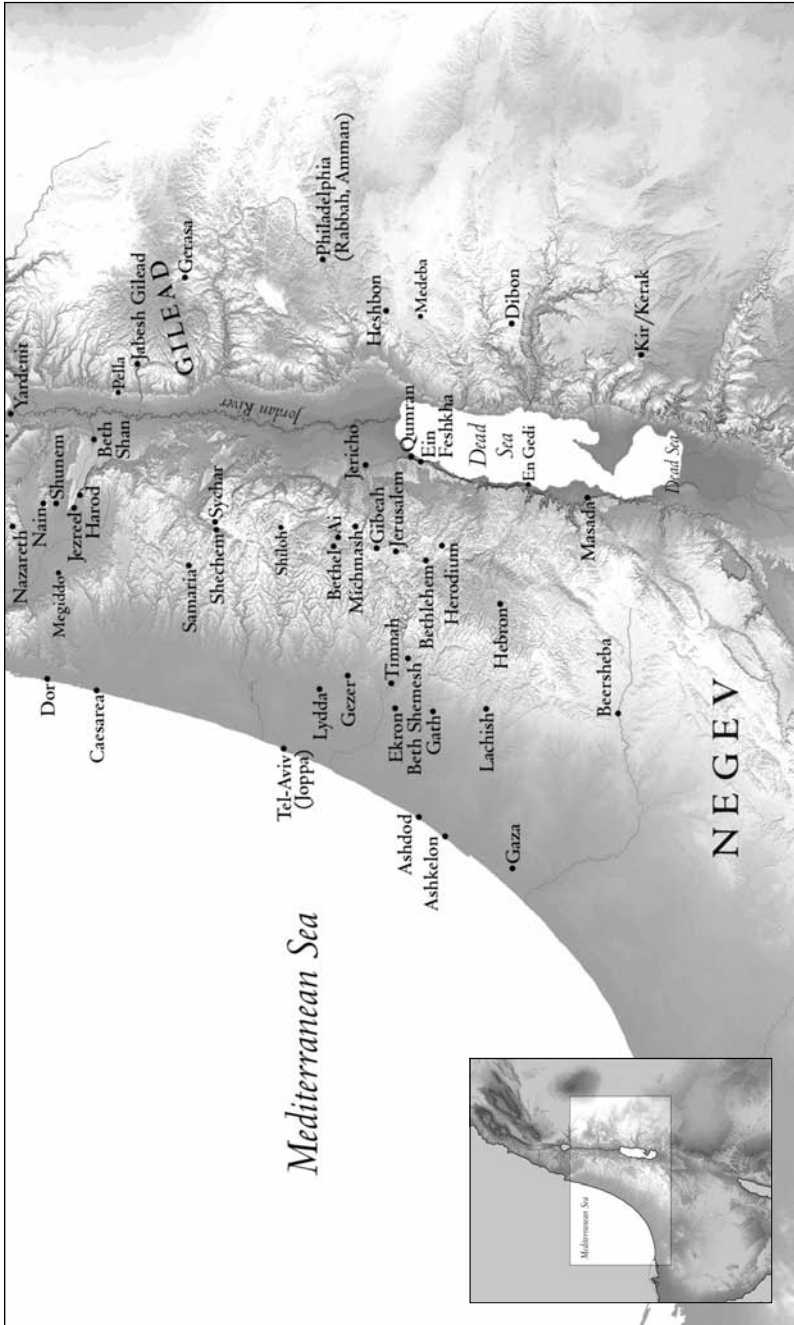
That wondrous history is everywhere in Israel. Stoop down to pick up a stone; it is there. Wet your feet in a river; it is there. Climb a hill; it is there.

This biblical history sets Israel apart from any other place on the globe. The script of the drama of God's grace played out there over the centuries. On this stage the Son of God lived and died and rose again. More than that. There the Spirit continues to placard the wondrous news of unflinching love for creatures who hate him. He uses this Holy Land to spotlight the truths of his Holy Word. This is *Ha'Aretz*. The Land.

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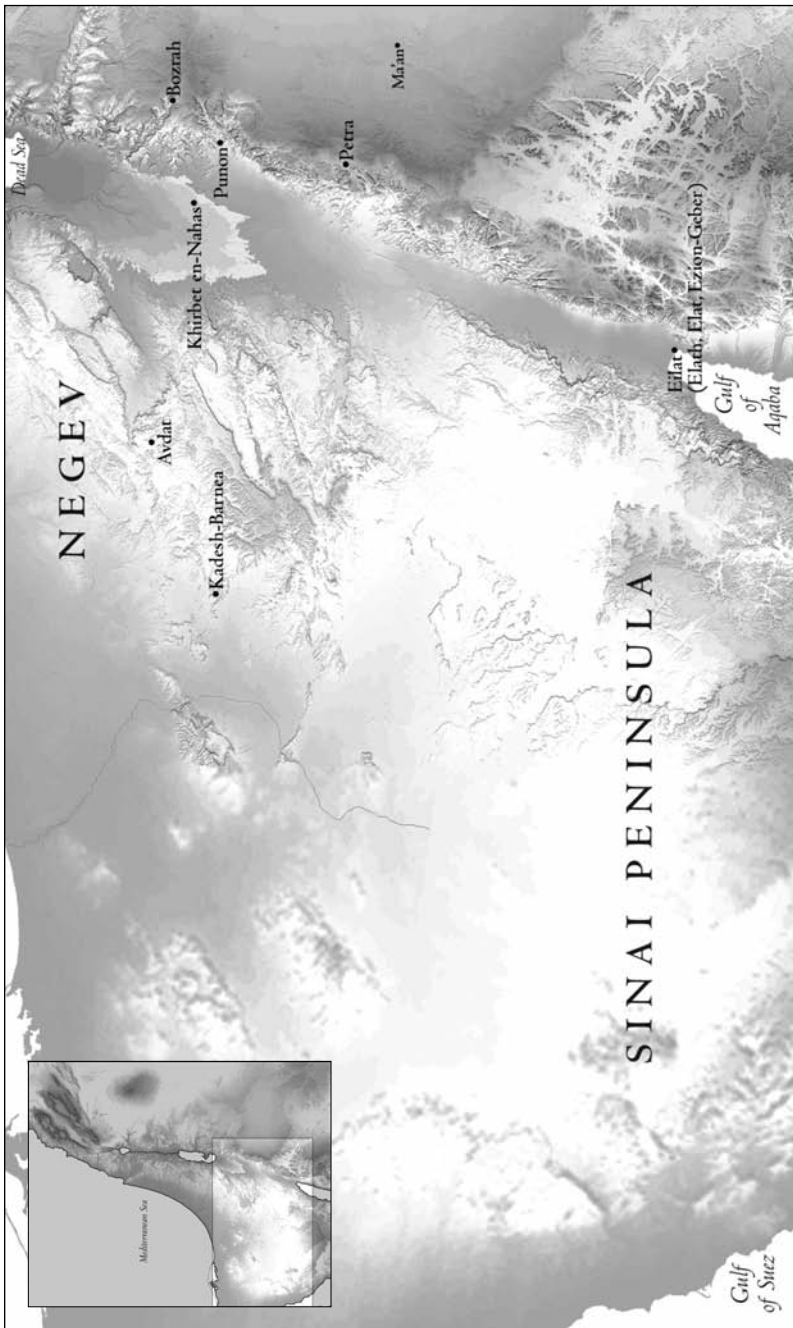


Topography of Palestine (North)



Topography of Palestine (South)

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Topography of Palestine (Southwest)

Genesis 12:4-9—*So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.*

Shortly after arriving in Canaan, Abram pitched his tent in the hills near Bethel. From that vantage, much of the land God had promised him and his family spread in panorama. The Lord had told Abram that in this sliver of ground between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2,3).

There, between Bethel and Ai, the patriarch surveyed the land where God's gracious promise would become history and blessing. The mountain ridge east of Bethel rose above the surrounding countryside. Abram peered over the mountaintops that stretched around on three sides. To the north was the route that brought Abram's household into Palestine. It crossed the Jordan River south of the Sea of Galilee and brought them into the Esdraelon Valley. On the west, less than 30 miles beyond, lay the Great Sea, called the Mediterranean today. About 30 miles to the south was the mountaintop settlement of Hebron, and 25 miles beyond that was the

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desert oasis of Beersheba. Abram would call these places home later on in his life. On the east at Ai was the cliff-like descent into the Jordan River Valley. Three thousand feet below, the river stretched like an emerald snake on a dusty road.

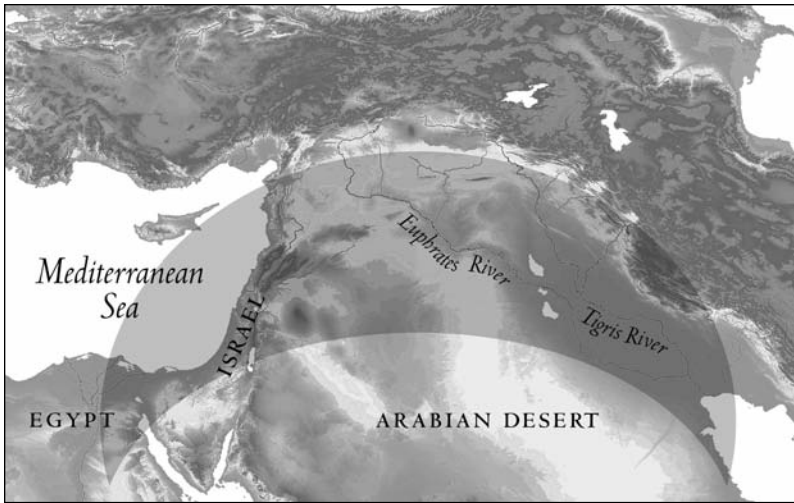
This was *Ha'Aretz, The Land* in which God would nurture Abram's family until the time came for the Son of God to arrive as Savior of the world. It was a land much different from the Mesopotamian world Abram had lived in for the first 75 years of his life. It was much smaller and more mountainous. Yet it was a land of abundant crops, fertile pastures, and comfortable living—a land that flowed with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8,17). And, more important, its location on the globe was ideally suited to the Lord's determination to shower his grace on a sinful world.

What made it essential for God's people to call this place home? God could have directed Abram and his family to any place on the globe. Why choose this land as the place to raise up the nation that would bring humankind the One who would crush Satan's head? What made this point on the planet *Ha'Aretz*?

A Travel Bottleneck

A quick look at a map of the Middle East seems to indicate a huge swath of territory waiting to be settled by humans. From the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the north to the Indian Ocean at the end of the Arabian Peninsula in the south is about 2,500 miles. From the Persian Gulf on the east to the Mediterranean Sea on the west is about 1,500 miles. But only a small percentage of this land escapes the uninhabitable Arabian or Sahara Deserts. The land is further hemmed in by the mountains that effectively block the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

Across the northern edge of the Middle East, a sickle-shaped band of life stretches from the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates on the Persian Gulf to the Nile River in Egypt. Though this territory is frequently called the Fertile Crescent, it is only judged fertile by comparison to the surrounding mountains and deserts. Nonetheless, early civilizations coalesced and prospered there. The Bible's



The Fertile Crescent

account of the Tower of Babel took place in the Fertile Crescent. It was along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that Sumer and Akkad thrived in the third millennium before Christ. And it was from Ur, at that time a teeming coastal city near the mouth of the Euphrates, that Abram began the journey which eventually ended in Israel (Genesis 11:28-31; 15:7).

Meanwhile, in northeastern Africa the Egyptian empire took root. Around 3150 B.C. the first pharaoh united the kingdoms in the north and south. (The Old Kingdom flourished between 2686 and 2181 B.C.) By 2500 B.C., Egypt was demonstrating its extraordinary wealth and technology in the building of its pyramids and the Great Sphinx.

Mediterranean Europe developed later and more slowly. However, by the time of Abram, the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete already exerted great influence along the seacoasts of present-day Greece and Turkey. The Minoans enjoyed regular trade with Egypt, as well as with other major powers in the Mediterranean.

Any trade or traffic that moved west from ancient Babylon, Persia, or India moved along routes that followed the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers up the Fertile Crescent. From there travel could continue west toward Europe, north into Asia, or south along the

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Mediterranean Sea and through Palestine to Africa. Overland transportation from northeastern Africa, particularly Egypt, routed through Israel before angling toward Europe and Asia. From the opposite direction, European goods traced that same Mediterranean road south into Egypt and then beyond. Goods from countries bordering the Indian Ocean (notably, southeastern Africa and India) made their way into Europe and western Asia through the Red Sea, along Israel's south flank. The cargo would be transported across land or carried by ship across the Mediterranean Sea.

The empire builders in Egypt called *Ha'Aretz* the Midland. It was the middle ground between them and their superpower rivals in Mesopotamia. For the people of Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, *Ha'Aretz* was the Westland, a place that offered a more agreeable climate both for weather and commerce. Israel was Alexander the Great's route to the conquest of the Nile. Three centuries later, future Roman Emperor Augustus (30 B.C.) conquered his way through Palestine. It was a "land lying between two continents, Asia and Africa; between two primeval homes of humans—the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile; between two great centers of empire—Western Asia and Egypt; between all these, representing the Eastern and ancient world, and the Mediterranean, which is the gateway to the Western and modern world."¹

The land in which God chose to settle his people as they awaited the arrival of the Messiah was a transportation bottleneck. Travel here was limited to a 60-mile-wide swath of land with less than a handful of viable caravan routes. This funnel effect brought every merchant moving between Asia and Africa into close contact with the children of Abraham. What a blessing to the world. The children of Abraham were the only people on earth who were intimately acquainted with God's plan for saving our sin-destroyed planet.

It wasn't only trade that brought people through The Land, however. Israel's position in the Middle East made it "debatable ground." The political powers that neighbored Israel debated about this ground often—not with the gentle words of diplomats but with

¹G.A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), p. 6.

the might of swords and soldiers. The control of the trade routes that crossed Israel meant the ability to tax the goods that traveled over those roads. Huge revenues came to the country that leveraged those tolls. Larger nations on either side of Israel spent massive amounts of money and military might to dominate the area. The Egyptians, Assyrians, Philistines, Syrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, along with others, frequently clashed over this scrap of ground. Some estimate more human blood has been shed on Israel's soil than on any similarly sized section of the planet.

But whether the invaders were salespeople or soldiers, the Lord's plan called for exposing them to his grace. In today's marketing terms, God chose a storefront model to bring his grace to souls in dire need of it. Prior to the Internet, manufacturers had two marketing choices for their products: either they could bring the product to potential buyers (door-to-door or business-to-business sales) or they could encourage buyers to come to them (brick-and-mortar stores). In New Testament times, the Spirit's approach is to send Christians out with his message of forgiveness. In Old Testament times, the Spirit shared the gospel by bringing people to Israel. The Holy Land's placement on the planet ideally suited this purpose.

No other culture worshiped a god who freely forgives and willingly adopts sinful humans as his own. The Lord's plan was to invite all nations to know and trust in him. He positioned his people as a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6) in this uniquely situated land so they would be liaisons between himself and the people of the planet. God expected his people to be "a holy nation," a people purified by his grace who gratefully lived by higher spiritual standards than all others. In The Land of Promise, the Lord intended to give the Gentiles a model to observe, investigate, and embrace.

Calls to share God's grace beyond the borders of Israel appear throughout the Old Testament. Even sullen Jeremiah, who mourned the destruction of Israel by Babylon (587 B.C.), looked forward to the day when "to you [LORD] the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, 'Our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good. Do people make their own gods? Yes, but they are not gods!'" "Therefore I will teach them," the

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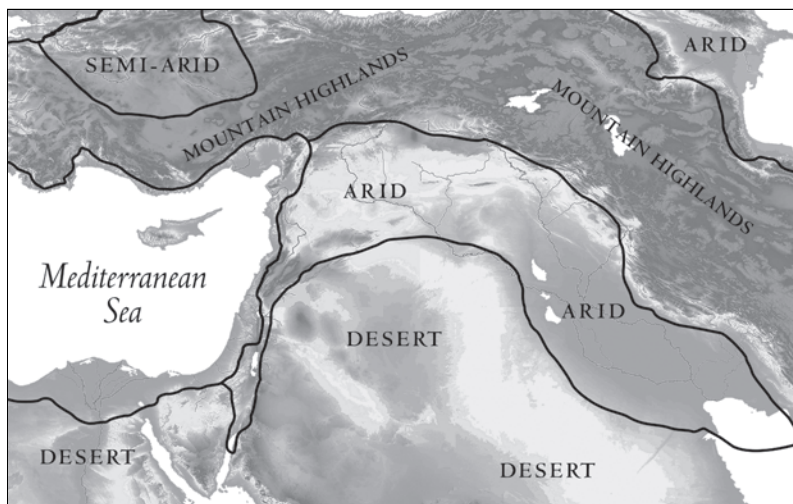
Lord added, “this time I will teach them my power and might. Then they will know that my name is the LORD” (Jeremiah 16:19-21).

Climate in the Middle East

The Middle East spans several climate types. These climates range from the subtropical Mediterranean with its moderate temperatures to the vast tracks of uninhabitable desert regions.

Along the coast of the Mediterranean, temperatures are moderate. Seasons condense into a cool, wet winter (October through May) and a dry, hot summer (peaking from June to August). High-pressure systems tend to dominate over the Mediterranean during the summer. Cloudless days are the norm. Sea breezes make the hot summer air palatable, especially along the coast or on the adjoining higher elevations.

During the winter, storms form over the Mediterranean, bringing rain along the coast. The amount of precipitation is variable and never plentiful. Rain can come in torrential downpours, causing landslides and flooding, but at other times little precipitation falls, leaving crops to wilt and, especially in ancient times, people to starve.



Climate Zones in the Middle East

The climate in present-day Iraq (central Mesopotamia) remains very similar to the climate as it was in ancient times. The weather there is substantially hotter and drier than along the Mediterranean coast. From June to September, temperatures in this semi-arid land can soar to 120°F. During eight months of the year, almost no rain comes to Mesopotamia. By the end of each summer, most of the rivers that feed the Tigris and Euphrates are dry. Rainfall-dependent agriculture is barely, if at all, possible. For that reason, the ancients learned to use irrigation to grow their crops.

Winter comes to Mesopotamia between December and March, but it never brings cold temperatures. It does bring, however, massive dust storms that can last 24 to 36 hours. Winter is also a time of gloomy cloud cover, especially when compared with the clear skies of summer. Winter brings rain, usually enough to cause the tributaries of the Tigris River to flood.

The mighty Egyptian culture of Bible times grew next to the Sahara, one of the largest deserts on the planet. Egypt's life force, however, came from the Nile River. Today Egypt is 96 percent desert, with the remaining 4 percent being usable land on either side of the Nile. Ninety-nine percent of Egyptians live on that narrow strip of earth.

The Nile provides all of the country's water needs; almost no rain falls on Egypt. Along the Nile, remarkable humidity oppresses; but just a few miles away, the arid desert sucks away all precipitation. The Nile has provided inhabited Egypt with a predictable, uniform climate that the rest of the Middle East has never enjoyed. In biblical times, each year the river would flood, bringing a fresh layer of silt from deep within Africa and renewing the croplands. This annual flooding cycle came to an end when the Aswan High Dam was built in 1970. From December to March, days are cooler and nights are often cold. During the rest of the year, Egypt generally swelters. From April through June, hot desert winds blow across the land. During the remaining hot months, however, the winds tend to cool the air. For most of the year, the sizzling Egyptian sun demands people drink plenty of water and wear lightweight clothing for protection from its rays.

Dependence on God

Ha'Aretz served more than a gospel outreach purpose. It helped nurture the relationship between God's people and God.

The Land of Israel occupied a narrow inhabitable isthmus between the sea and the desert. From Beersheba in the southern desert to Mount Hermon in the northern highlands, Israel stretches only about 150 miles. From the western edge of Mount Carmel to the eastern edge of the Sea of Galilee is only 40 miles. From present-day Tel Aviv to the Jordan River is 50 miles.

The land-limited country God gave Israel kept his people in close proximity to one another. At the same time, the mountains and valleys that furrowed the land worked to divide God's people—tribe from tribe, north from south, and east from west. Nonetheless, the land's tight borders ensured no one lived far from the center of worship. Communication of news or threats could spread relatively quickly. And, like life in a small town, it was hard for one tribe or one part of the country to keep its business to itself. From central Israel, Dan in the north and Beersheba in the south were each only a little longer than a two-day walk. God intended for his people to benefit from the positive peer pressure this arrangement offered. Unfortunately, there seem to be more examples of negative peer pressure triumphing.

Israel's climate was also a blessing for God's people. In one sense, the blessing is obvious. Much of the land enjoys a Mediterranean climate similar to the weather Southern California offers. It is subtropical with moderate temperatures. Like the rest of the Mediterranean coast, this weather made Israel inviting for settlement, dating back to earliest recorded history and before.

In another sense, God's blessing in locating his people in this climate is not as obvious. Israel's climate, though moderate on average, is remarkable because it varies broadly. Its highest mountain (Mount Hermon is 9,230 feet high) sparkles with snow throughout most of the year. Its lowest lake (the Dead Sea is about 1,300 feet below sea level) swelters year-round. They are only about 115 miles apart. Wilderness and desert threaten to encroach into the fertile areas of Israel on the east and south. For example, lying just

beyond the eastern edge of Jerusalem's Mount of Olives, the desolation of the Wilderness of Judah spreads out toward the Jordan River Valley. Surviving off the fruits of the land was not easy. A rise in the temperature or a drop in the amount of rain resulted in famine, disease, and death. Over those forces ancients had no control. But this was a blessing, because harvest after harvest reminded the Israelites how dependent they were on the grace of the God, who controlled the rain and the temperature.²

The Lord used his sovereignty over the climate to encourage his people: "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands," he promised, "I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land" (Leviticus 26:3-5). The Lord's threat was that if the Israelites refused to be faithful to him, they would face a hostile climate with resulting famine. The three-year drought during the reign of King Ahab and the ministry of Elijah is perhaps the best known of such chastisement and call to repentance (I Kings 17,18).

God also threatened that brushing his grace aside would result in hostile invasions: "If you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: . . . You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you" (Leviticus 26:14-17).

But that threat veiled another blessing. Repeatedly the Lord used the harassment of empire-building nations to bring his people to repentance. He taught his people to depend on his power and his love rather than their own force of arms or the promised protection of a neighboring superpower. Consider the repeated invasions of Israel during the *everyone-did-as-he-saw-fit* period of the judges (Judges 21:25, also 3:12; 6:1; 10:6; and 13:1) and the murderous rampages

²More on this facet of the Holy Land is in chapter 6.

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of Assyria and Babylon four hundred and six hundred years later because of Israel's impenitence (2 Kings 17:22,23; Jeremiah 1:14-16). But also recall the impossible victories God gave to his people when they despaired of their power in favor of clinging to God's promises (1 Samuel 17:50-53; 2 Kings 19:35,36).

Why this land? Why choose this small piece of earth when the Creator of the earth could have settled his people anywhere? From our human perspective, it seems that no other place on the globe was so ideally situated for his sin-forgiving purposes. It seems that no other place would have both sheltered his people from the world and given them the opportunity to share the message of his love with the world. And it seems that no other place existed where the Lord could bless his people by teaching them dependence on him or where he could show his people the abundance of his love.