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GEOGRAPHICAL SECTION
INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST AS A WHOLE

The stage on which the major events of Old Testament history took place includes all the major countries shown on page 17, as well as some of the smaller Arab states that are situated in the southern and eastern portions of the Arabian Peninsula. This large land mass is bounded on the west by the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea, on the north by the Amanus and Ararat Mountains, and on the east by the Zagros Mountains and the Persian Gulf. To the south, the Nafud Desert and the southern tip of Sinai form a rather amorphous boundary. By the time of the New Testament apostles the western horizon of the biblical world had expanded to include Greece, Italy, and even Spain.

Much of the Middle East, in its more limited Old Testament sense, is desert. Large portions of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia include desert wastes such as the Syrian Desert, the Nafud, the Arabian Desert, and the Ruba al-Khali. These huge deserts cover some 487,000 square miles, or about half of the total area of these countries, and this figure does not even include the desert wastelands of the Negev, Sinai, and Egypt.

Besides the huge deserts in the region, the seas and gulfs that help outline the Middle East on the south, east, and west have greatly influenced life in the area. The most important of these bodies of water is the Mediterranean Sea, for it is from it, from the west, that life-giving rains come to the Middle East (except for the monsoon rains in southern Saudi Arabia, which are produced by a different cycle). Much of what has occurred in the Middle East can be summed up as a struggle between the influences of the desert and of the Mediterranean Sea. This is true of its geology, climate, flora, fauna, farming, herding, and the movements of ethnic groups.

For example, during certain periods the dominant ethnic influences have been from the sea — note the arrival and the historical significance of the Philistines, Greeks, and Romans — while during other periods the major ethnic influences have been from the tribes located in or on the fringes of the desert, such as the Amalekites, Moabites, Edomites, Israelites, and Ammonites. The interaction of these diverse groups was sometimes peaceful but often violent. In either case, this interaction was played out on many different levels and can be pictured as a struggle between the desert and the sea, or the desert and the sown.

Climatically, the year in the Middle East can be divided into two major periods: the dry season (the summer months) and the wet season (the winter months). The amount of rainfall the various regions of the Middle East receive during the winter months varies widely, but generally speaking the northern areas receive more rainfall than the southern ones, higher elevations receive more rain than areas of low elevation, and the regions closer to the Mediterranean receive more rain than those distant from the sea. These winter rains nourish the grain crops that grow throughout the area in places where the total rainfall is more than 12 inches annually. In addition, flocks of sheep and goats feed on the winter grasses that cover regions that generally receive more than 8 inches of rain.

Normally, springs, wells, and cisterns supply many of the inhabitants of the Middle East with drinking water throughout the year. The other significant sources for fresh water, apart from rainwater, are the great rivers of the Middle East — the Nile of Egypt and the Tigris and

▲ Hill Country of Manasseh during spring
**Geographic Section:**

**Introduction to the Middle East as a Whole**

The Middle East is a diverse region rich in history, culture, and geography. It is located between Europe, Africa, and Asia and is known for its significant role in the development of human civilization.

**The Middle East Today**

- **Countries:** Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Turkey, and others.
- **Major Cities:** Cairo, Damascus, Tehran, Ankara, and many more.
- **Markets:** Oil, agriculture, and tourism.
- **Problems:** Conflicts, political instability, and environmental issues.

**The Ancient Near East**

This map highlights the Fertile Crescent, a region rich in ancient civilizations. Key sites include:

- **Cultural Spheres:** Amorite, Hittite-Hurrian, and Egyptian-Minoan.
- **Important Cities:** Babylon, Nineveh, Jerusalem, and many others.
- **Sea Routes:** Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and Euphrates River.
- **Land Routes:** Trade routes connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

**Cultural Spheres**

- Amorite
- Hittite-Hurrian
- Egyptian-Minoan

**Sea Routes**

- Mediterranean Sea
- Red Sea
- Euphrates River

**Land Routes**

- Trade routes connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia

This map provides a comprehensive view of the Middle East, both ancient and modern, highlighting its geographical and cultural significance.
Euphrates of modern-day Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Some of the earliest civilizations developed along the banks of these rivers, where the people could irrigate their crops with river water. Of these great civilizations, the Bible mentions the mighty powers of Assyria and Babylonia, whose heartlands were along the Tigris and Euphrates, and, of course, the perennially powerful Egypt.

One can find the region where the majority of people have lived in the Near East since earliest historical times (ca. 3000 BC) by highlighting on a map the areas watered by the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates, as well as those regions that receive over 12 inches of rainfall annually. This area, in which adequate water supplies make the growing of agricultural products possible, is roughly the shape of a crescent with one point in the Nile River, the other in the Persian Gulf. Its arc passes through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, hovering over the desolate Syrian Desert to the south. In this area, aptly named the “Fertile Crescent,” civilizations have risen and fallen throughout the millennia.

Generally, enough wheat and barley were grown in each of the populated areas of the Fertile Crescent to supply the local population, and some countries (e.g., Egypt) were able to export grain to neighboring as well as distant lands during certain periods. Although most of the countries produced sufficient food supplies, many of them lacked other raw materials necessary for daily life. For example, the Mesopotamian region needed timber, building stones, copper, iron, tin, gold, and silver. Egypt, too, lacked local supplies of timber, copper, and iron. Some of these raw materials were available from countries within the Fertile Crescent (e.g., timber from Lebanon and Syria), but other products, including gold, silver, copper, tin, and iron, were often imported from outside the region. Thus, as these raw materials entered the Fertile Crescent and foodstuffs and finished products such as textiles left it, a network of routes developed that connected the various countries with one another. Although there were many ways to travel from one city to another, travelers tended to follow well-established routes in order to avoid areas that would impede their progress. These areas included swamps, rivers, flooded or muddy terrain, regions that were too sandy or too rocky, places inhabited by hostile tribes or governments, forested regions, and routes that included long, difficult climbs up and down mountains and hills. In addition, long-distance travel over great desert expanses was normally avoided because of the lack of water and the hostility of dangerous tribes.

One of the major international routes ran approximately 1,770 miles from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Thebes in southern Egypt. Along the way it passed through great urban centers such as Babylon, Mari, Tadmor, Aleppo, Ebla, Damascus, Hazor, and Gaza. It does not appear that this route as a whole had a name, but it was made up of shorter segments that ran from city to city, and in all probability these shorter stretches had special names. For example, the portion of this road that ran eastward from Egypt across northern Sinai into southern Canaan/Philistia was known as the “way of the land of the Philistines” (Exod 13:17 RSV). This name is a typical example of the ancient custom...
Geographic Section:
Introduction to the Middle East as a Whole

Nicosia
Cairo
Tehran
Athens
Baghdad
Jerusalem
Amman
Beirut
Damascus
Riyadh
Ankara

COMPARATIVE SIZES OF MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

EGYPT

Cyprus

Greece

Iraq

Iran

Israel

Jordon

Lebanon

Saudi Arabia

Syria

Turkey

Three major localities:
Nicosia
Cairo
Tehran

3,572 sq. mi.
387,048 sq. mi.
50,944 sq. mi.
636,372 sq. mi.
169,234 sq. mi.
8,522 sq. mi.
45,495 sq. mi.
4,015 sq. mi.
830,000 sq. mi.
71,479 sq. mi.
302,535 sq. mi.

Half the size of NEW JERSEY
Half the size of MASSACHUSETTS
Over quarter the size of CONTINENTAL U.S.A.

0 500 miles
0 500 km.
of labeling roads as “the way to/of X” (where X = a geographical place name). Other portions of this major international route certainly also had names, but they are rarely preserved in the historical sources.

Although an “international route” may bring to mind images of concrete and asphalt highways crisscrossing a continent or country, it should be remembered that “roads” in the ancient world were, until late in the Roman period (ca. AD 200), usually unpaved dirt paths. These dirt roads were cleared of stones and kept relatively free of weeds and fallen trees, and in some cases they were graded. In the earliest times the most common mode of transportation was walking, with donkeys used as pack animals. Under these conditions, a caravan normally moved at the rate of 2 or 3 miles per hour. Sometime during the second millennium BC, camels began to be used on the desert paths. These animals, which on average could carry 400 pounds of cargo, eventually began to be used on other routes as well. During early times ox-drawn carts were also used for transporting bulky items, but due to the poor condition of the roads the use of carts and carriages for transporting goods and people over long distances did not come into general use until the roads were upgraded during the Roman period.

An international route brought mixed blessings to the inhabitants of the population centers that lay along it. On the one hand, those centers had immediate access to the goods that the traveling merchants were carrying, and the powerful elite could gain added revenue by imposing tolls and by providing services (food, shelter, protection, etc.) to the caravans. On the other hand, the people traveling in these caravans exposed those centers to new external influences — religious, political, economic, etc. — that were not always welcome. In addition, some of the mighty armies of the great powers of antiquity — the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans — passed along these same international routes, bringing with them death, destruction, and deportation.

A glance at the map on page 17 shows that the major routes that connected the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa passed through the regions of Israel and Syria. It was in this area that God placed the descendants of Abraham, that they might live in obedience to his covenant. There they were tested to see if they would keep themselves free from pagan influences, if they would be a light to the nations around them, and if they would trust in God rather than chariots for their ultimate security. They were told that obedience to God’s commands would bring blessing and prosperity, while disobedience would bring punishment. Thus the drama of the biblical story develops: How would Israel respond to God’s gracious acts and attendant commands?
THE GEOGRAPHY OF ISRAEL AND JORDAN

The Five Major Longitudinal Zones
Introduction to the Five Zones

The land of Israel is situated at the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean at approximately the same latitude as southern Georgia, Dallas, and San Diego. The proximity of Israel to the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert has greatly influenced her topography, climate, flora, fauna, and human history. Throughout the ages, the desert and the sea have vied with one another for control of the land.

The stability of Israel’s permanent western boundary, the Mediterranean Sea, stands in contrast to the fluctuations of her eastern border. At times the edge of the eastern desert served as the boundary, while during other periods Israel’s territory ended at the Jordan River. This variability is reflected in the fact that, although the Jordan River formed the traditional eastern boundary of the land of Canaan (e.g., Num 34:12; map p. 106), the Israelite tribes settling east of the Jordan in Gilead considered themselves part of Israel in spite of the fact that the “land of Gilead” was outside the “land of Canaan” (Josh 22; map p. 106).

The classical boundary description of the heartland of Israel was summed up in the phrase “from Dan to Beersheba” (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20). However, to the south, Judah was allotted territory as far as the Kadesh Barnea/Desert of Zin area, and during periods of strength she extended her rule even farther south, down to Elath on the Red Sea (1 Kings 9:26; 2 Kings 14:22; 2 Chron 26:2). Only on rare occasions was Israel able to extend her rule as far north as Damascus, even though that region was included in the traditional descriptions of the “land of Canaan” (Num 34:7–11; Josh 13:4–5; map p. 106). It seems that Israel was not able to control the Phoenician coast to the northwest, except possibly during the days of David (2 Sam 24:7).

This geographical section will deal with the territory from Mount Hermon in the north to Elath in the south and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabian Desert, since most events of biblical history took place within this area. Five major longitudinal zones can be distinguished as one moves from west to east: the coastal plain, the central mountain range, the Rift Valley, the Transjordanian mountains, and the eastern desert. A grasp of this physical stage on which the events of redemptive history occurred can bring those events to life and make it easier to understand and interpret both the records of the events and the message of the prophets and the psalmists who lived there and ministered to God’s people.

Coastal Plain

The coastal plain is the westernmost zone that stretches from Rosh HaNiqra in the north to the Nahal Besor, south of Gaza, a distance of approximately 120 miles. Because it is close to the Mediterranean Sea, this zone receives 16 to 25 inches of rain per year; the northern sections receive considerably more rain than the southern. Powerful springs, such as the one at Aphek, provided water, but more commonly the people of the region used wells to tap the water table, which lies just below the surface.

The coastal plain can be divided into four subregions. The Plain of Acco is located in the north, extending from Rosh HaNiqra to Mount Carmel. From the tip of Mount Carmel, the Coast of Dor runs south to the Nahal Tanninim. From there the plain widens and the Sharon Plain extends south to the Nahal Yarkon. And in the south, the Philistine Plain stretches from the Nahal Yarkon to the Nahal Besor. In many of these coastal areas elevations rise from sea level in the west to some 600 feet in the east, before reaching the more pronounced rise in elevation to the central mountain range. The coastal plain consists mainly of low, rolling hills covered with fertile alluvial soils. In the northern sections of the plain several low, narrow kurkar (fossilized dune sandstone) ridges run parallel with the coast close to the shoreline. In the south, narrow strips of sand dunes are more prominent.

Because of the absence of major topographical obstacles, the coastal plain became the most natural route for north–south travel between Babylonia/Assyria/Syria and Egypt. Even so, travelers had to be careful to avoid the sand dunes, large rivers such as the Nahal Yarkon, and the low-lying areas that became swampy during the winter months. They also had to be sure that their route passed near adequate supplies of drinking water and that they chose the most appropriate track through Mount Carmel.
One of the most noticeable features of the coastline of Israel is that it is relatively unbroken by any major promontories that could provide natural harbors, except in the Mount Carmel–Acco region. Because it lacked natural harbors, Israel never developed into a seafaring nation as did Phoenicia, its neighbor to the north. Acco, slightly sheltered by a small promontory, was Israel’s major port throughout antiquity, while Joppa, which had little natural protection, was of less significance. Eventually some coastal cities also served as harbors, but only Caesarea ever rivaled the Phoenician cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos.

In portions of the coastal plain, grain crops flourished in the winter and spring months while flocks grazed there during the remainder of the year. But to the international powers of antiquity, such as Egypt and Babylonia, the road that passed through the coastal plain was of prime importance for their commercial and military activities. For the local inhabitants this was a mixed blessing; in times of peace they gained income by servicing the caravans, but during times of war the populace suffered as armies swept through the territory, consuming their recently harvested crops and taking their wives and children captive.