

# INTRODUCTION

“Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us how God revealed Himself to people in the past.



As creator of the universe, God stands outside of time and space. He nevertheless chose to enter a real flesh-and-blood world in order to create, and then redeem, mankind. For hundreds of years God communicated His words and will to an eager, yet usually recalcitrant, people who made their homes in the lands hugging the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Then, in what the Apostle Paul called “the completion of time” (Gal. 4:4), God Himself bent down to enter the human race, choosing to dirty His hands and feet in a small, noisy, and very needy corner of the Roman Empire called Galilee (cp. Phil. 2:5-8).

Unlike sacred books of the world’s other great religions, the Bible is full of stories of real people living in real places. God’s decision to communicate eternal truths through fallible human beings, to wrap His message around mankind’s experiences with rock and soil and water, is both mind-boggling and humbling. It also suggests that a full understanding of God’s revelation cannot be gained without an appreciation of the physical context in which that revelation was given.

## 1 THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

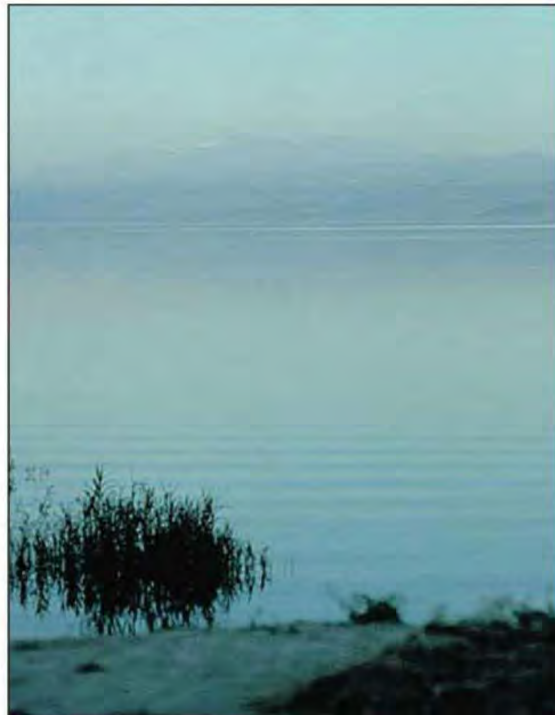


The writers of the Bible knew well the land in which God chose to reveal Himself, for it was their home. They were intimately familiar with the rugged terrain of Judah, with cold winter rain and scorching desert heat, and they had experienced the relief offered by a small spring of water or the shelter of a crevasse in a mighty rock. They knew what it meant for the hills surrounding their city or village to be filled with enemy troops or to lie down at night secure after a bountiful harvest. Time and again the Bible's historians, prophets, and poets used such information to enliven the divine message they had to tell. Geographical information fills the biblical text, and the biblical authors assumed that their readers knew even more. The land of the Bible has rightly been termed the "playing board of biblical history" (James M. Monson, *Regions on the Run*, Rockford, IL: Biblical Backgrounds, 1998, p. 3). It is difficult at best to understand fully the instructions (the Bible) without the board (the land) on which the events of the Bible were played out.



▲ The rugged terrain characteristic of the wilderness of Judah.

Many people journey to the lands of the Bible with the hope of walking where Jesus walked. In spite of the established pilgrimage spots in the Holy Land, however, it is just not possible to say with certainty that Jesus stood on spot X when he healed such-and-such a person or delivered such-and-such a teaching. On the other hand, the location of many biblical cities, hills, valleys, and the like are known, and by carefully studying the geographical settings of the Bible, the serious reader can enter more deeply into its world. It becomes possible to follow Joshua's army into the hill country of Canaan after laying waste to Jericho. One can climb to the crest of the hill on which David's Jerusalem stood and still experience the energy of the Songs of Ascent (Pss. 121–134). Jesus must have often gazed over the Sea of Galilee in the early mornings from the hills above Capernaum (cp. Mark 1:35); doing so today helps the serious Bible reader appreciate Jesus' call to ministry—and one's own place in the kingdom of God.



▲ A calm Sea of Galilee at dusk with snow-capped Mount Hermon in the distance.

There is yet another reason understanding the geography of Bible lands is important for understanding the Bible. God created the features of the lands of the Bible in the way that He did—and then chose to bring His people there (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:12-18)—for a reason. In fact, the lands of the Bible are uniquely suited to teach lessons about the nature and character of God as well as the ways that His people should respond to Him.

The various natural features of the lands of the Bible combine to form a setting in which personal or national security was always in doubt. With limited rainfall, an overabundance of rocks but scarcity of good soil, and a position situated alongside a major international highway on which the armies of the world marched, the lands of the Bible were well acquainted with lifestyles that demanded their inhabitants depend on God to survive. In today's maddening times, the lands of the Bible offer lessons of peace and security that should be heard and heeded.

## 2 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS OF THE NEAR EAST

TERM	APPROXIMATE DATES
Paleolithic (Old Stone Age)	?–18,000 BC
Epipaleolithic (formerly Mesolithic—Middle Stone Age)	18000–8300 BC
Neolithic (New Stone Age)	8300–4500 BC
Chalcolithic (Copper Stone Age)	4500–3300 BC
Early Bronze Age	3300–2000 BC
Middle Bronze Age	2000–1550 BC
Late Bronze Age	1550–1200 BC
Iron Age	1200–586 BC
Babylonian and Persian Periods	586–332 BC
Hellenistic Period	332–63 BC
Roman Period	63 BC–AD 324
Byzantine Period	AD 324–638

# PALESTINE

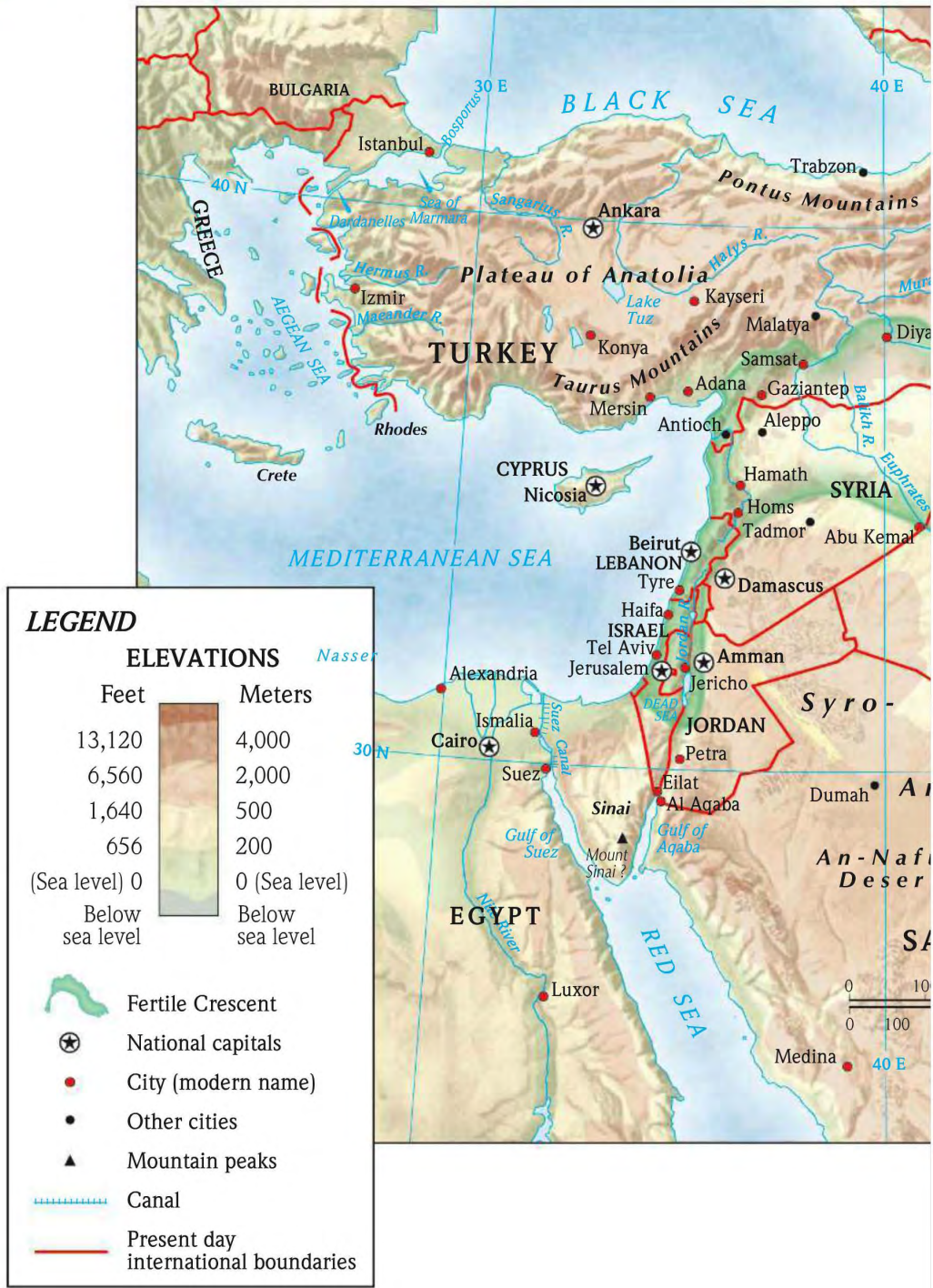
Most of the events described in the Bible took place within the borders of the modern state of Israel plus the West Bank and areas currently under the Palestinian Authority. For many Bible readers this entire region should be called *Israel*, while others prefer the term *Palestine*. Theological or political considerations usually play a decisive role in what this land is called today, just as they have throughout history. Indeed, theological and political positions often claim support from names found on a map. The names Canaan, Israel, and Palestine (or Palestina) have all been used at various times in history to designate the land that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. When speaking geographically, however, Bible atlases and encyclopedias commonly refer to this land as Palestine rather than Israel, without intending to make a religious or political statement. For this reason, the term *Palestine* is used in this volume as well.

### 3 MODERN POLITICAL DIVISIONS OF ANCIENT PALESTINE



Some biblical events took place in lands that lie outside of the modern state of Israel. These lands include Egypt; Mesopotamia (modern Iraq); Persia (modern Iran); Edom Moab and Ammon (all in modern Jordan); Phoenicia (modern Lebanon); Aram (modern Syria); regions such as Galatia, Phrygia, Lydia, and Mysia (all in modern Turkey); Macedonia and Achaia (both in modern Greece); Cyprus;

**4 MODERN STATES AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**



Crete; and Italy. Other lands in North Africa (Libya and Cyrene), or located in the Arabian peninsula or in northeastern Africa (Cush and Sheba), are also mentioned in the Bible. Each of these is properly a "land of the Bible," as well, and should be of interest to serious Bible readers.



## Names for the Bible Lands

### CANAAN

The origin of the word *Canaan* remains uncertain. Some relate it to the Akkadian word for a costly blue-purple dye (*kinahhu*)—or the cloth dyed that color—that was derived from murex shells found along the Phoenician coast. Others find its origins in the Akkadian word designating a class or type of merchants (*kina 'nu*) dealing in this type of dyed cloth. Support for this latter suggestion is found in passages such as Isaiah 23:8 and Zephaniah 1:11.

### ISRAEL

Genesis 32:28 connects the name *Israel* with a Hebrew verb meaning “to struggle or strive”: “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.” It is unclear, however, whether the author of Genesis 32 is providing the actual etymology of the word or simply punning on the name *Israel*.

### PALESTINE

*Palestine* is derived from the word *Philistine*. It was first used by the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC to refer to the geographical area of the southeastern Mediterranean coast. Some English editions of the KJV uses *Palestina* as an alternate name for Philistia in Exodus 15:14 and Isaiah 14:29,31.

### HOLY LAND

The term *holy land*, so familiar to Christians as a synonym of Israel, is in fact a very rare biblical term. Its only true occurrence is Zechariah 2:12, part of a vivid prophecy of the restoration of Israel: “The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.” The HCSB, NIV, NASB, and RSV also mention the “holy land” in Psalm 78:54: “Thus he brought them (i.e., Israel) to the border of his holy land, to the hill country his right hand had taken.” The NKJV, reading the Hebrew text more literally, however, translates this phrase as “His holy border” instead.





▲ At just over 8,000 square miles, Palestine is about the size of New Jersey, but its variations in topography and climate more closely resemble those of California.

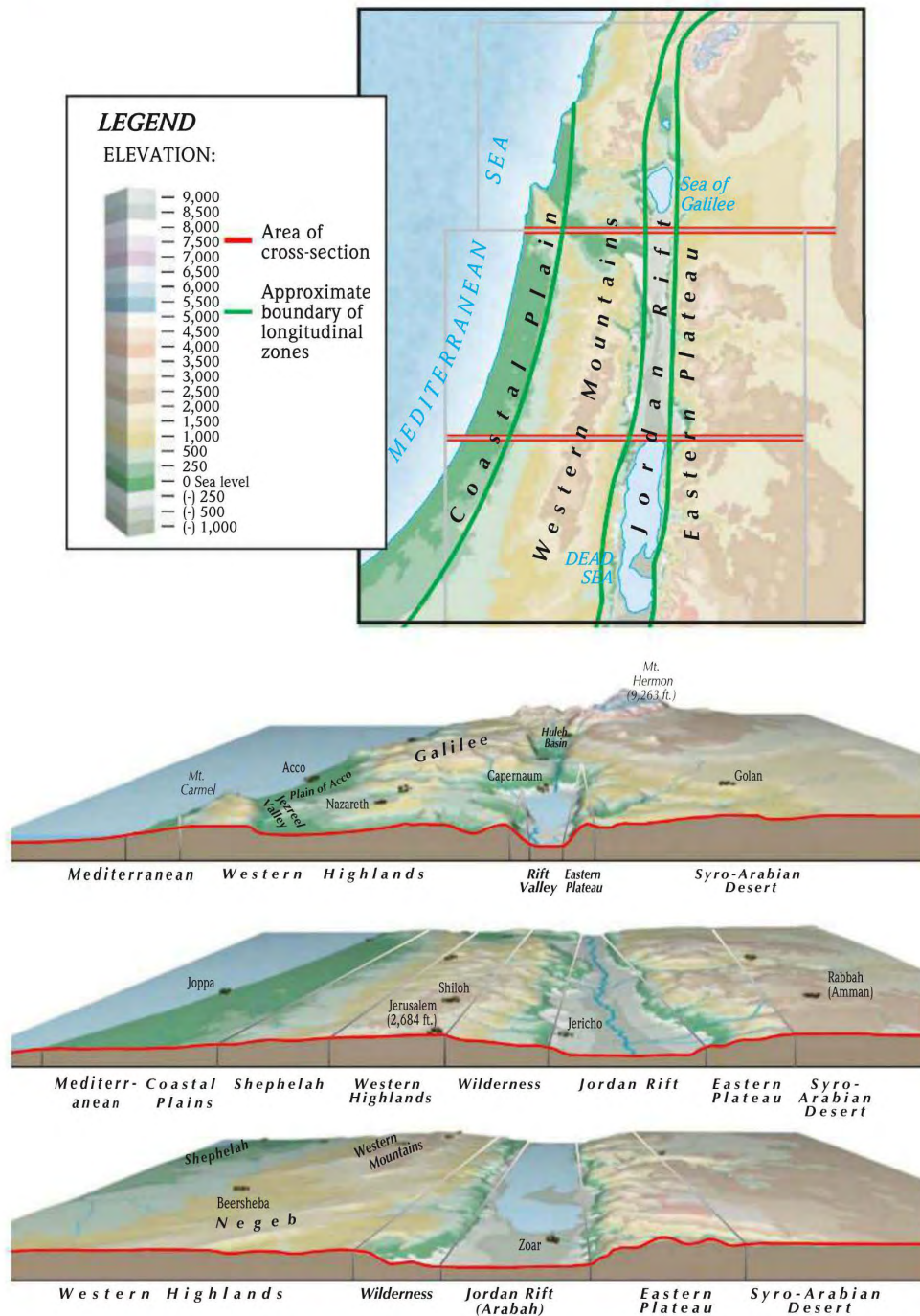
### ***Climate***

The climate of Palestine is largely a product of the land's narrow dimensions between desert and sea. The vast Arabian Desert to the east of the rift valley encroaches to within less than 100 miles of the Mediterranean, pinching Palestine between an extremely hot, dry desert climate and the more temperate climate of the sea. Moreover, in the Sinai Peninsula to the south, the eastern extremity of the Sahara meets the Arabian Desert, and both touch the Mediterranean coast. Because Palestine is narrowly wedged between the desert and the sea, any minor change in global weather patterns will have significant or even drastic effects on its annual climate.

Palestine's climate is also affected by topography. Because of sharp variations in topography, the local climate within Palestine can differ widely in a space of just a few miles. The main ridge forming the backbone of the hill country—the watershed ridge—runs north-northeast to south-southwest, at right angles to the prevailing rains off the Mediterranean. Most of the rain that falls in Palestine falls on the western side of the watershed ridge, leaving the eastern slopes and the rift valley under a dry rain shadow. Rain also falls in a narrow north-south band in the higher hills that rise east of the rift but quickly tapers off further east under the harsh effects of the Arabian Desert.

That is, higher elevations in the northwestern part of the country receive ample amounts of rainfall, while lower elevations to the southeast receive scant rainfall. Mount Carmel, which juts into the Mediterranean Sea in the northern part of the country, receives over 32 inches of rainfall per year. By contrast, the Dead Sea, only 80 miles to the southeast but below sea level, receives less than 2 inches of rainfall per year. Jerusalem receives about 25 inches of rain per year, about the same as London, but unlike London, all the rain of Jerusalem falls over the course of five or six months.

5 CROSS SECTIONAL VIEWS OF LONGITUDINAL ZONES

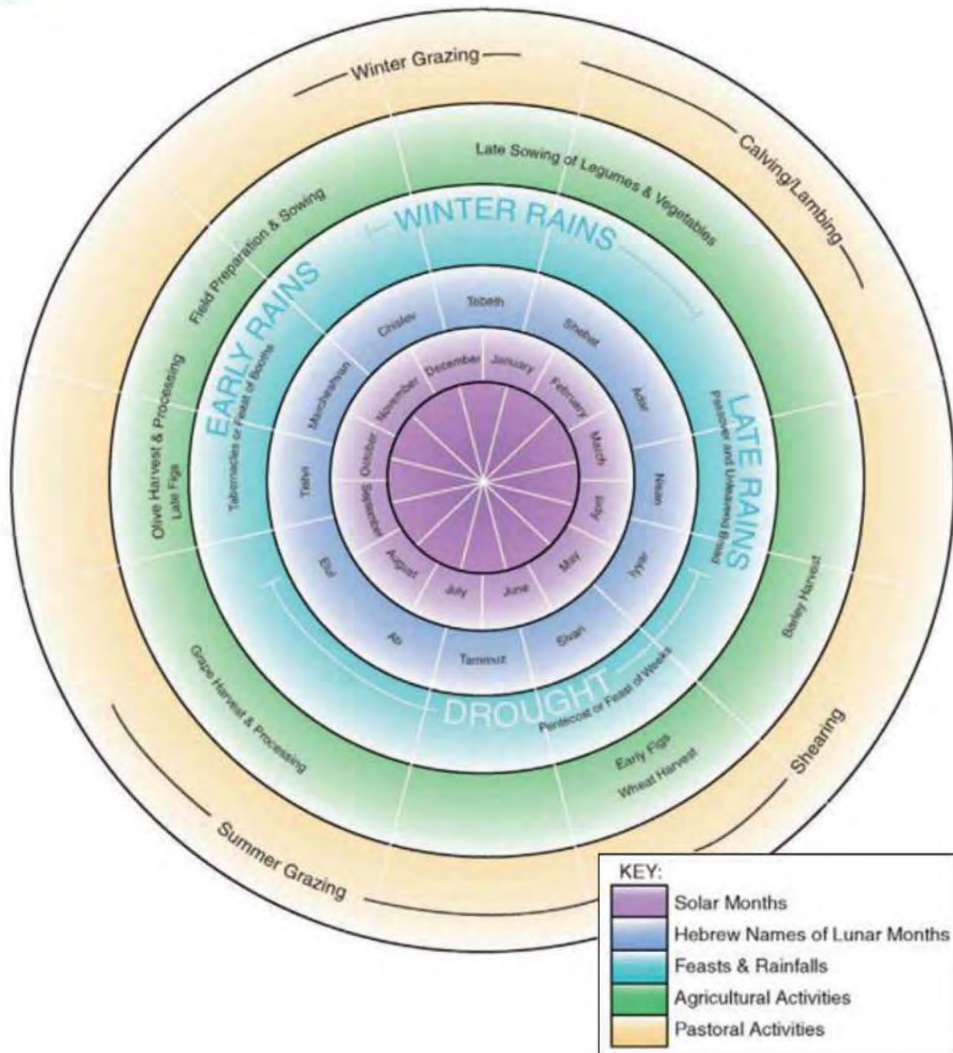


*It is possible to speak in general of three "rules of rainfall" for Palestine:*

1. North is wet; south is dry.
2. West is wet; east is dry.
3. High is wet; low is dry.

There are two primary seasons in Palestine, a rainy season (usually mid-October through mid-April) and a dry season (usually mid-May through September). Short transitional seasons mark the change between the two. Palestine’s agricultural year is determined by these seasons, as were the times of ancient Israel’s major festivals (see below).

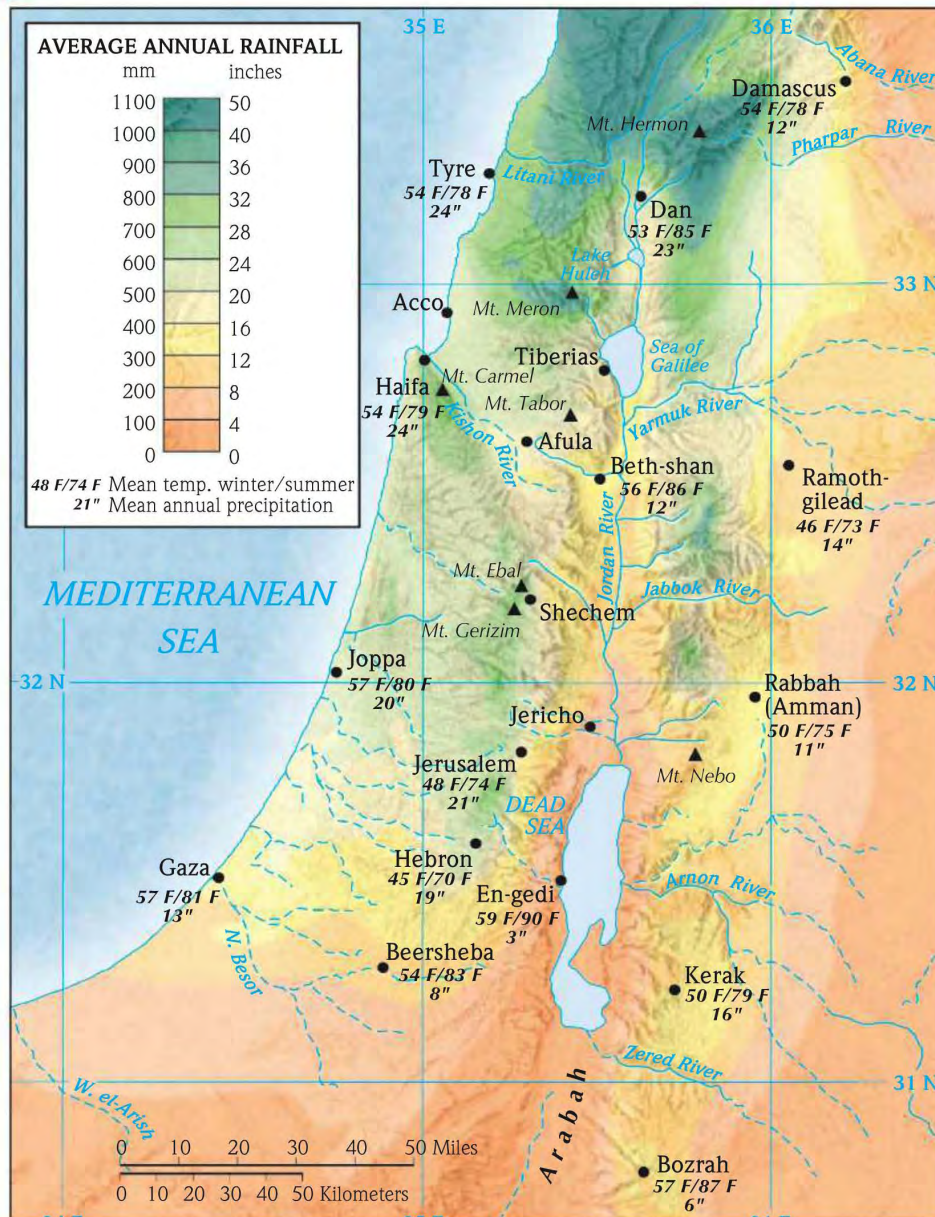
**6 THE AGRICULTURAL YEAR**



The rainy season begins with the early rains of late October and November. These rains clear the air of dust and loosen the soil for planting grain (Deut. 11:14; Ps. 84:5-7; Jer. 5:24; Joel 2:23; cp. Ps. 65:10). If the rains are late, farmers anticipate famine (cp. Prov. 25:14; Amos 4:7). The early rains are followed by heavy winter rains that fall in December, January, and February (Ezra 10:9-13). During the winter months, storms typically roll into Palestine from the northwest, dumping heavy waves of rain for three or four days. Between storms, the land experiences clear, sunny skies and moderate temperatures. The storms lessen in March and early April, as the latter rains give the heads of grain their final growth (cp. Zech. 10:1; Mark 4:28).

Snow falls every year on Mount Hermon but only some winters in other parts of Palestine. Snow typically falls at night (temperatures rarely dip below freezing during the daytime) and in the higher elevations of the hill country (above 1,700 feet); it is wet and heavy, and usually melts the next day (cp. Job 24:19). Snow was rare enough in ancient Israel to receive special notice by the biblical writers (e.g., 1 Chron. 11:22; Job 6:15-16; 38:22-23).

## 7 CLIMATE PATTERNS OF ANCIENT PALESTINE



The average August daytime temperature in Jerusalem, a city located 2,600 feet above sea level, is 86° Fahrenheit; at night, the temperature averages 64°. The highest temperature ever recorded in Palestine was 129° Fahrenheit on June 21, 1945, near Beth Shan in the upper Jordan Valley. On May 24, 1999, Jericho set a record temperature of 124° Fahrenheit. Both Beth Shan and Jericho lie below sea level in the Rift Valley.

**Natural Routes**

What Palestine lacks in natural resources, it makes up for in location. Palestine's geopolitical importance lies in its role as a passageway between three great land masses, Africa, Europe, and Asia, as well as between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea (Indian Ocean). Because the land is bisected by major trade routes, political powers who controlled Palestine during the biblical period become major economic players in the ancient Near East, just as they do in the modern Middle East today. Routes that carry trade, however, also carry armies, and throughout history Palestine has been overrun numerous times as foreign powers have sought to secure the region for themselves. The international routes that cross Palestine also make the land a meeting place of cultures where new ways of life and faith challenge those that have already taken root in its soil.

**8 INTERNATIONAL ROUTES**



*“There is no land which is at once so much a sanctuary and an observatory as Palestine; no land which, till its office was fulfilled, was so swept by the great forces of history, and was yet so capable of preserving one tribe in national continuity and growth; one tribe learning and suffering and rising superior to the successive problems these forces presented to her, till upon the opportunity afforded by the last of them she launched her results upon the world” (George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1931, p. 91).*

It is possible to reconstruct many of the important routes of ancient Palestine by comparing the location of the land’s gravitation points (e.g., population centers, gateway cities, seaports, and the like) with topographical features that act either as channels for traffic or barriers to travel. For instance, in the rugged Cenomanian hill country, most traffic stayed on the tops of ridges, with the primary routes into and out of the hills following the continuous ridges that separate wadi systems (e.g., “the road going up to Beth Horon”—Josh. 10:10 NIV). Routes tended to follow the easiest—but not necessarily the shortest—distance between two points, avoiding where possible rugged mountainous regions, swampy and sandy areas, and deserts. Most of the natural routes of antiquity can still be followed, even though, thanks to modern road-building machinery, many highways in Israel today violate the land’s natural topography.

It is also possible to reconstruct ancient routes in Palestine by looking at the movement of persons through the land in the biblical story. For instance, we read that Abraham entered Canaan from the north, stopped at Shechem and Bethel, then continued south toward the Negev (Gen. 12:4-9). [See **THE MIGRATION OF ABRAHAM**, p. 74.] In doing so he followed a well-worn natural route through the middle of the hill country, a route that in part makes use of the watershed ridge forming the spine of the hill country of Judah. The portion of this “Patriarchal Highway” that goes through the hill country of Ephraim was described in detail by the writer of Judges (Judg. 21:19).

Many local routes crisscrossed Palestine. The Bible provides the names of some of these. Typically a road was named after its destination (e.g., “the road to Shur”—Gen. 16:7; “the road toward Bashan”—Num. 21:33; “the way to the wasteland of Gibeon”—2 Sam. 2:24, etc. [NIV]). “The king’s highway” (Num. 20:17) is the only clear biblical exception to this rule (but cp. Isa. 35:8). [Several important routes are shown on **INTERNATIONAL ROUTES**, p. 16.]

Two major international routes ran the length of Palestine in antiquity, one west of the rift valley and the other to the east (p.16).

The western route is often called the International Coastal Highway or *Via Maris* (“the Way of the Sea”). The biblical name “the road through the Philistine country” (Exod. 13:17) refers to the southern portion of this route as it hugs the Mediterranean coast in the vicinity of Gaza. Historically, the International Coastal Highway was the principal highway carrying international traffic between Egypt and Mesopotamia. North of Damascus, this route followed the arc of the Fertile Crescent, but once in Palestine it worked its way through the hills and valleys of Galilee to the coast. Strategic cities in Palestine along this route in the biblical period (from north to south) were Hazor, Megiddo, Aphek, Gezer, and Gaza.

The eastern international route ran due south out of Damascus through the highlands of northern Transjordan to Rabbath-ammon (modern Amman, Jordan). From here one branch connected the capital cities of the Old Testament nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom (Rabbath-ammon, Kir-hareseth, and Bozrah, respectively) before continuing south to the Red Sea and the great inland spice route of Arabia. The Bible calls this route “the king’s highway” (Num. 20:17; 21:22). An eastern branch, the “desert road of Moab” (Deut. 2:8), skirted Moab and Edom along the edge of the desert. Less a route of armies, the international highway in Transjordan carried the wealth of the Arabian Peninsula (e.g., gold, frankincense, and myrrh) to the empires of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds.

Palestine’s importance on the larger world scene lies in its position as a land bridge. In the bigger picture, however, the biblical writers used Palestine’s natural highways as a tangible illustration of the “ways” in which God’s people should walk (for example, see Jer. 6:16; Deut. 5:33; Isa. 26:7).

### **Roman Roads**

In the late first and early second centuries AD, the Romans built an extensive road system in Palestine, part of a larger road system tying together their far-flung empire. For the most part these roads followed the old natural routes of the biblical period but with sophisticated technological improvements (e.g., grading, curbing, paving, etc). Some of the mileposts marking these roads remain, allowing intrepid hikers to follow their course today. Jesus often walked between Jericho and Jerusalem (Matt. 20:29; cp. Luke 10:30); in His travels He no doubt followed the natural route, which was upgraded to the status of a Roman road about a hundred years later.

Eventually larger powers—the Assyrians (2 Kings 15:29), Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, Ptolemies, and Romans—seized the Huleh Basin to secure their position in the area. By New Testament times, the Huleh sat in the middle of Jewish and Gentile populations. In offering the wealth and opportunities of the world, this region became a true testing ground of faith.