

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 000. 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.

Much of the Middle East 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, the Ruba al-Khali, Negev, Sinai, and Egypt. The seas and gulfs that help outline the Middle East have influenced life in the area. The most important of these is the Mediterranean

Sea, which offers life-giving rains to most of the region. Much of what has occurred in the Middle East can be summed up as a struggle between the influences of the desert and the Mediterranean Sea over against the people who have lived there.

The first section of this book outlines briefly some of the significant challenges of this part of the world — geography, climate, roads, trade routes, food supply, and the like. It is easy to determine where the majority of people have lived in the Near East by highlighting on a map (see p. 000) the areas watered by the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates, as well as those regions that receive over twelve inches of rainfall annually. This area is roughly the shape of a crescent, with one point in the Nile River and the other in the Persian Gulf. It is aptly named the “Fertile Crescent.”

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY



THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST



THE GEOGRAPHY OF ISRAEL AND JORDAN

Terrain

Regarding the geographical terrain of the Middle East, we can distinguish five major longitudinal zones as one moves from west to east: the coastal plain, the central mountain range, the Rift Valley, the Transjordanian mountains, and the eastern desert.

(1) The **coastal plain** stretches approximately 120 miles along the Mediterranean coast from Upper Galilee to south of Gaza. It receives 16 to 25 inches of rain per year, the northern sections receiving more rain than the southern. Powerful springs provided water, but more commonly the inhabitants

▼ *Jezreel Valley from Megiddo looking east at Mount Tabor*



used wells to tap the water table. The coastal plain consists mainly of low, rolling hills covered with fertile alluvial soils. Grain crops flourished in the winter and spring months while flocks grazed there during the remainder of the year.

While travel was easy in this area, travelers did have to be careful to avoid sand dunes, large rivers such as the Yarkon River, and low-lying areas that became swampy during the winter months. Also, they had to choose the most appropriate track through Mount Carmel. There were no good places in this coastal area for a seaport.

(2) **The central mountain range** runs from Galilee in the north to the Negev Highlands in the south. It rises in places to more than 3,000 feet and is severed in an east – west direction by the Jezreel Valley in the north and the Negev Basin in the south, where east – west traffic can flow with relative ease.

Cutting through the limestone hills are deep V-shaped valleys, usually called wadis. They are dry during the summer months but sometimes flow with water during the winter. They drain either into the Rift Valley or the Mediterranean Sea. Travel along the bottoms of these deep wadis is difficult because of boulders and occasional cliffs, and north – south travel across the wadis is almost impossible. Thus roads tended to be located on the mountain ridges.

The western slopes of the mountains receive considerable rainfall (20 to 40 in.); this, along with the fertile soil, ensures the fertility of the area. Here — largely on hillside terraces partially formed by the natural bedding of the limestone — small fields of wheat, groves of olive trees, and vineyards flourish (Deut 8:8; Ps 147:14; Hab 3:17 – 19).

THE FIVE MAJOR LONGITUDINAL ZONES



Winter rainwater seeps into the limestone until it reaches an impermeable layer, where it begins to flow laterally until it emerges as a spring. Settlements often developed close to these freshwater springs, but being on the slopes of the hills they were difficult to defend. By about 1400 BC, the construction of cisterns, lined with plaster to prevent leakage, began to solve the problem of complete dependency on natural water sources.

The Israelites first settled in the central mountain range. Because international powers were primarily interested in controlling the coastal plain, the mountains provided the Israelites with security. Only during periods when they considered their power to be great did the Israelites attempt to gain control of the coastal plain, but this almost always resulted in conflict with one or more of the great powers.

(3) The next zone, part of **the Rift Valley system** that continues into Africa, stretches 150 miles from Dan to Elath at the northern tip of the Red Sea. A considerable amount of rain falls in the northern section of this zone (24 in. at Dan), whereas in the south rainfall is negligible (2 in. at the south end of the Dead Sea).

The northernmost section of the Rift Valley, called the Huleh Basin (see p. 000), receives about 24 inches of rain each year. Springs at the foot of Mount Hermon form the headwaters of the Jordan River and flow through a marshy lake known in antiquity as Lake Semechonitis. The Jordan then enters the north end of the Sea of Galilee, which lies 690 feet below sea level and measures 13 by 7.5 miles. The temperate Mediterranean climate makes this region a desirable place to live. The