



Session 1

Geography of the Bible

Discovering Middle Eastern culture.



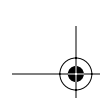
Establishing Base Camp

My first memories of being able to recognize places came from a series of books lying on our coffee table at home. These colorful books depicted the American Civil War. Places I had visited as a child (though I barely remembered some of them) came alive when I saw them from a bird's-eye view, complete with drawings of soldiers on battlefields, roads, barns, rivers and houses. I learned much of what I know about our country from studying these maps and tracing the movement of the Union and Confederate troops.

Nearly two thousand years ago, a man named Ptolemy made a map of the world—as he understood it. He made some guesses and labeled the parts that had not been explored as *Terra Incognita*, “the Unknown Land.” Using maps like this and thinking China and India to be much closer to Europe than they in fact were, a young explorer set out and sailed west to find the east. His name was Christopher Columbus, and the rest, as they say, “is geography” (as told by Kiernan O’Mahoney, *Geographical Literacy*).

Geography, it turns out, is a lot more than looking at a map! The events recorded in the Bible by and large took place in and around the Middle East, a small strip of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea (see map 1). Imagine for a few minutes that all the events in the history of the world had taken place in your own state or county. The very spot on which you are sitting would have been the site of thousands of events, each justifying its own historical marker. The terrain would have remained the same except for any urbanization and industrialization.





The Holy Land could easily fit into the state of Florida—several times over. The distance from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean Sea (roughly thirty-five miles) is slightly longer than the distance across major metropolitan centers such as New York City, Chicago or London. Today such a distance could be covered in less than an hour (apart from rush hour traffic).

The densely inhabited region of Egypt where the Nile River empties into the Mediterranean Sea would occupy an area the size of the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Paul traveled to lands that span from the northern side of the Mediterranean Sea to Italy and Greece, as well as some islands. And the Old Testament story begins not far from the Persian Gulf, near present day Kuwait, Iran and Iraq. Yet from the Persian Gulf to Italy (including North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea and southern Turkey) you have an area little more than two-thirds the size of the United States. Imagine thousands of years of biblical history all taking place in that area!

✓ Without using modern location and travel resources (that is, GPS, maps, mileage markers, major highways) and modern transportation methods (cars, trains, buses or airplanes) describe to others how would you undertake a journey from your church to the nearest large metropolitan area.



Mapping the Trail

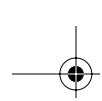
Let's begin with getting a lay of the land in the Bible, particularly during the Old Testament era.

The Old Testament Period

The majority of Old Testament narratives occurred in three regions that are together called the ancient Near East or the Fertile Crescent. Notice if you follow the map from Canaan north to Haran, east to Assyria and south to Ur, it forms a crescent-moon shape. Review three major geographical areas as you look at map 1.

1. *The Holy Land.* This region, also called Israel or Palestine, is the land





Map 1. Old Testament—the ancient Near East

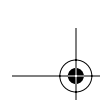
between the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. In the days of Abraham to Joshua it was called Canaan. Many people traveled through this area because it functioned as a land bridge that connected Europe, Africa and Asia.

2. *Egypt*. This long country follows the Nile from the shores of the Mediterranean southward to the mountains of Sudan.

3. *Mesopotamia*. This land, located in the heart of the Tigris and Euphrates River valley, is called the land of the Chaldees. Later it is known as Babylon, now modern-day Iraq.

✓ When you think of the Middle East, Babylon and Jerusalem, what images of the landscape come to mind?





✓ How have news events in the Middle East affected how you picture that area?



Beginning the Ascent

Read through “Basic Geographic Characteristics.” Consult the maps listed as you read and answer the questions. Try to get a feel for the landscape and the environment.

Basic Geographic Characteristics

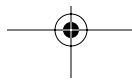
1. Natural features

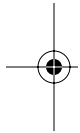
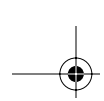
A. *Coastal plains/fertile valleys (see map 1).* While the location of Eden is unknown, it may likely have been in Mesopotamia (“land between the rivers”). For this reason the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is known as the “cradle of civilization.” Except for the first chapters of Genesis, Mesopotamia does not figure significantly in the lives of major Old Testament characters, except as a point of departure for Abraham and as a place of captivity for those who were exiled from their land.

B. *(Once) forested hills and mountains (see map 2).* Great Britain, once heavily wooded, was severely deforested by Viking invaders more than one thousand years ago. Likewise much of Israel is today barren and rocky, but two thousand to three thousand years ago, large areas were forested.

C. *The Jordan Valley, where the Jordan River lies below sea level (map 2).* The Jordan River flows year round from north of the Sea of

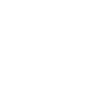
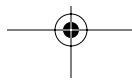
“But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end” (Deuteronomy 11:11-12).

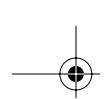




Map 2. The land of Canaan, divided among the twelve tribes

Galilee to the Dead Sea. Spring runoffs force the Jordan to flood stage, keeping the Jordan Valley a lush and green area. The surrounding area includes the regions to the southwest between Israel and Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula) and the regions east of the River Jordan (the kingdom of Jordan today).





D. Rocky, wilderness regions (see maps 1 and 2). Such regions are highly dependent on annual rainfall for vegetation. The repeated famines in Palestine were due to lack of rainfall, forcing Abraham and subsequent generations to seek food elsewhere. These wilderness regions were also places where Jesus met Satan (Matthew 4) or found solitude.

Scriptures describing the biblical landscape include:

- fertile valleys with cultivated fields—**Numbers 13:23-30**
- forested hills—**Joshua 17:15, 18**
- rocky wilderness—**Deuteronomy 1:19**
- village and cities—**Genesis 11:27-31**

2. Humanly Created Features

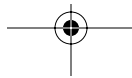
A. Small towns, villages and rural communities.

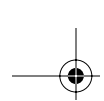
Abraham and his descendants lived a nomadic life. After the Israelites first took possession of the Promised Land (Joshua 3—12), the region was divided among the twelve tribal groups, based on existing towns and the adjacent fields (Joshua 13—21). They conquered the land gradually to prevent it from once again becoming a wilderness of uncultivated places (see Deuteronomy 7:22; 8:6-18). Their calendar of festivals followed the agricultural cycles.

B. Urban centers. Almost all the cities in the Old Testament were situated near mountaintops and high ridges with springs or wells nearby.

✓ Why would these features be important to the Old Testament characters?

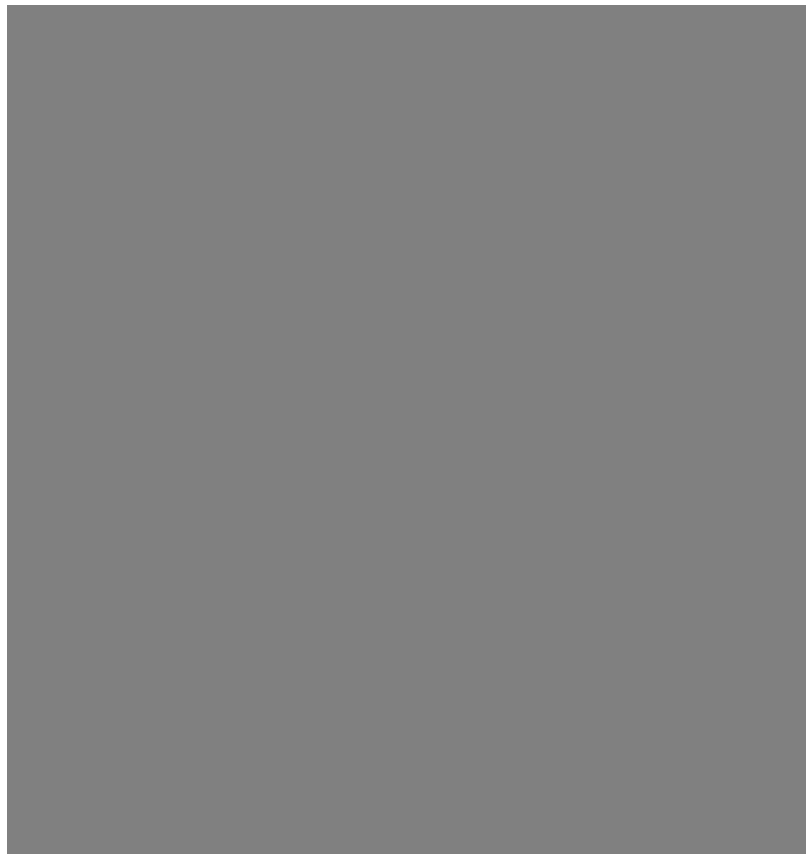
While the ancient cities of the biblical world may not have reached the scale of our modern world-class cities—like Mexico City, London, New York—they furnished an important backdrop for the events that occurred in them. Urban centers would be the seat of the local and national governments as well as the centers of industry, learning and culture.



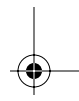
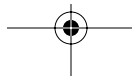
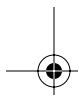


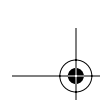
Old Testament Places to Know

Shechem	Sodom and Gomorrah
Ur	Jerusalem
Babylon	Haran
Canaan	Egypt
Assyria	Nineveh
Mediterranean Sea	Jordan River
Dead Sea (Salt Sea)	Persian Gulf (southeast of Ur)
Red Sea	Tigris River
Euphrates River	



Map 3. Kingdoms of Israel and Judah





Let's look at maps 1, 2 and 3 to get familiar with the Old Testament landscape.

On maps 1 and 2 locate the places and bodies of water listed on page 15. You will better understand the Old Testament narratives and journeys if you get a handle on these important locations.

On map 2 notice the territories claimed by the twelve tribes after the conquest of Canaan by Joshua.

On map 3 notice how God's people once united under David became divided after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12). Israel became the people of the north and Judah controlled the south. Trace the boundaries of these kingdoms.

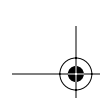
Note: Later, Jerusalem would be destroyed and God's people would be taken into exile (605 B.C., see Jeremiah 25:8-11). It would be seventy years later (about 535 B.C.) that they would be free to return again. It was not until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (458 B.C.), however, that they finally arrive in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The Old Testament story ends about four hundred years before Christ is born, with God's people living all over the Middle East, some fully returning to Palestine, others scattered about the region. As we enter the New Testament period, the Romans, having taken control from the Greeks after Alexander the Great, are in control.

New Testament Period

The condition of the land remained fairly constant through the time of Christ. Some cities were destroyed or changed names over the years, partly as a result of the many battles with invaders from the north and east (Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks). As we look at the New Testament geography, we move from the Promised Land to the west as Christianity spreads throughout the Roman Empire.

The New Testament events occurred during a period of approximately one hundred years, compared to the two thousand-plus years of the Old Testament story from Abraham to Jesus. The Old Testament's drama occupied three primary locations—Babylon, Canaan and Egypt. The New Testament focuses on Jesus' ministry in Israel and then flings the doors wide open to a large number of Mediterranean locations. We will focus on two regions for our maps—Jesus' life and ministry, and the ministry of Paul as the church spread north and west.





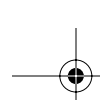
Map 4. The ministry of Jesus

New Testament Places to Know

These are some of the key places in New Testament history. By the time we are done, you should be able to locate them on maps 4 and 5.

Bethlehem	Nazareth
Samaria	Judea
Jerusalem	Asia, Macedonia and Achaia
Rome	Antioch (in Syria)
Sea of Galilee	Jordan River
Mediterranean Sea	Aegean Sea (west of Asia)





Look at map 4. Jesus' public ministry centered in two places, Galilee (the northern rural district), and Judea (mainly Jerusalem, the national capital). His trips to Jerusalem were infrequent in the beginning and coincided with national festivals. Later, his trips were more frequent and culminated with his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection.

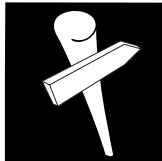
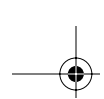
Jesus' followers spread the good news about him in ever widening circles. Jesus made a statement about their activity, recorded in Acts 1:8. Though they did not immediately spread the message, persecution sent Jesus' followers throughout the land (Acts 8:1-4).



Map 5. Paul's Aegean ministry

Paul, after being converted on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), carries the gospel to the far reaches of the world (Acts 13—28). Map 5 outlines one of his missionary journeys. If you have a study Bible or Bible atlas (such as the *New Bible Atlas*) you can review additional, detailed maps showing Paul's journeys.





Trailmarkers

Read Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:8, noticing that the land given to Abram (Abraham) was one of God's promises of his covenant relationship with his people. You should be able to identify this land and see its strategic importance to God's plan for the world.

Read Exodus 3:7-8 and note the description of the land. This land signifies three things: prosperity, blessing and freedom. Throughout the Old Testament, "Egypt" becomes a metaphor for slavery and idolatry (Isaiah 30:1-3), while God's Promised Land, specifically Jerusalem, is a place of redemption, hope and blessing (Psalm 122).

Read Acts 1:8 and identify the regions listed on maps 4 and 5. This passage is a great one to memorize. You could begin now, or commit it to memory as part of your own devotion and growth.



Teamwork

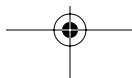
Turn to Acts 7. Stephen, before being stoned to death because of his faith in Christ, defends himself against his accusers. Break into two groups and identify a reader for each group. Read this aloud to your group and together identify places that are mentioned on the maps we studied (maps 1-3). Not all are listed on the maps, but many are. Notice how geography and chronology are used in Stephen's defense.

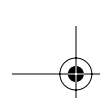
✓ Why does he spend so much time giving this history of Israel?



Reaching the Summit

You have covered a lot of territory in this session (literally!) and should feel a sense of accomplishment. You have not simply looked at maps; you have been tracing the work of God in the life of his people. And you have





become more familiar with the world of the Bible. Take a moment to share any new insights you have discovered as a result of this session.

Next Session

In one or two minutes, how would you summarize your life over the last ten years?

Close in Prayer

Keep in mind the places we studied were home to people whose lives and deeds were recorded for our benefit. Challenges they faced in their culture impacted who they became. Ask God's help with the challenges that you face in this day and time.

