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## The Geographic and Political Situation at the Time of Christ's Ministry

Whenever some students see the word *geography*, they cringe, thinking that the subject is boring and impractical. In reality, geography is important for one to understand events of history, especially events in the time of Christ during His earthly ministry. But gaining an understanding of geography can actually be *fun* too!

Consider, for example, the following interesting facts about one geographic feature of Palestine, the Dead Sea.

- “If a canal were cut to the Mediterranean Sea [from the Dead Sea], the ocean would run in, instead of the Dead Sea running out” (Jesse L. Hurlbut, *A Bible Atlas: A Manual of Biblical Geography and History* [New York: Rand McNally, 1944]).
- It receives more than six million tons of water daily from the Jordan River and other smaller rivers.
- After a very rainy season, it will be fifteen feet deeper and a mile longer than usual.





The Dead Sea is one of Israel's most defining physical features. About one-third larger in geographic area than New York City, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on the earth's surface, almost 1,300 feet below sea level. Some factors indicate that the topography around the sea may have changed over the last 2,000 to 4,000 years, and the water level may have been even lower in Abraham's day. It is the saltiest natural body of water on the planet, almost twice as saline as the Great Salt Lake and eight to ten times as saline as the world's oceans.

A rift in the earth's crust makes this region quite unstable. Earthquakes are commonplace. Many Bible scholars believe that God used volcanic activity in this area to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. It is possible that these cities are buried at the bottom of the sea.

The stench of the water is overwhelming due to high concentrations of minerals including magnesium, sulfur, potassium, calcium, and bromide salts that arise from hot springs under the sea. Since the sea has no outlet, the water evaporates, leaving the chemicals behind. Although these minerals have tremendous potential value, it is so expensive to extract them that the resources remain virtually untapped. Drinking the water in any significant quantity can prove fatal, but the taste is so repulsive that the danger is minimal.

- Evaporation is so great that at times it creates dense clouds.
- “The water is nauseous to the taste and oily to the touch, leaving upon the skin, when it dries, a thick crust of salt” (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1967]).
- “It's buoyance is so great that it is difficult to sink the limbs deep enough for swimming” (*ibid.*).

The Gospels are filled with references to other similarly interesting places, all of them connected in some way with the ministry of Christ.

A thorough understanding of the land of Palestine will help one to understand the life and ministry of Christ on earth. Its distinct geographic features and political realities provide the background of His life. Visualizing and tracing His ministry throughout the land enhances our appreciation for what Christ did for us. Refer to each of the maps in the appendix as you progress through this study of the book of John.

## Physical Features

The physical characteristics (terrain and bodies of water) of Israel may be divided into five features running eastward from the Mediterranean Sea. Using the cross-section below, list the five features in the following blanks:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

What river runs north to south through Israel?

What two lakes (called “seas”) are found there?

The Shephelah is the region of gradually rising hills between the coastal region and the Cis-Jordan Hills. Israel has two ranges of hills, the Cis-Jordan Hills and the  Hills.

What land region contains most of the cities that Christ visited during His earthly ministry?

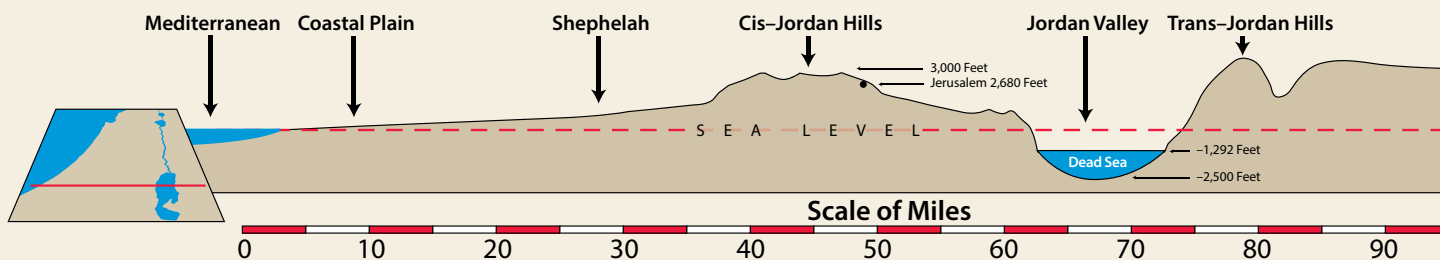
The highest point in Israel is Mount Hermon, which is 9,232 feet in elevation. Jerusalem is  feet above sea level. Just  miles from Jerusalem is the lowest point on earth, the Dead Sea, which is  feet below sea level.



Jordan River North of  
Sea of Galilee



Mount Hermon





## Climate

Israel's climate is best described as variable. Extreme differences in altitude in such a small country guarantee widely varying temperatures. When snow is falling in Jerusalem, tourists might be basking under the sun in 90-degree temperatures at the Dead Sea.

Generally speaking, the country has two seasons—warm, dry summers and mild, wet winters. The rainy season lasts from November through March.

The average temperature in Jerusalem ranges from 50 degrees in January to 85 degrees in August. Galilee is pleasant in the summer, whereas the Dead Sea is a scorching 100–110 degrees during that season.

## Land Divisions

Palestine comprises three major areas: Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Other surrounding areas that Jesus visited during his earthly ministry include Perea, Decapolis, and Bashan (see map on page 271).

### ***Widespread ministry***

The Gospels mention about twenty-one cities that Christ visited or mentioned by name. Study the map to learn the locations of those cities.

### ***Christ's itinerary***

Following is a list of verses that record parts of Christ's itinerary (schedule of activities). Read each verse and then try to visualize

Christ making the trip by donkey or on foot. Record details about the geography of each place and the mileage involved.

- John 4:1–5—
- John 4:43–46—
- John 4:54–5:1—
- Why did the Bible say that Christ went up to Jerusalem when He actually traveled south?
- John 10:40—
- John 10:40–11:1–17—
- John 11:54—

## Political Rulers

During Christ’s life on earth, several different Roman rulers governed various political regions of Palestine. The following table lists those rulers, the territories they governed, and the dates of their rule.

Geo-political Region	Ruler(s)/Dates
Judea and Samaria	Herod the Great (43–4 B.C.) Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6) <b>Procurators</b> Coponius   Pontius Pilate   Ambivius (A.D. 26–36) Rufus   Gratus
Galilee and Perea	Herod Antipas (4 B.C.–A.D. 39) <i>(Killed John the Baptist)</i>
Iturea and Trachonitis (northeast of the Sea of Galilee)	Philip (4 B.C.–A.D. 34)



# Notes from the Teacher's Lesson

## The Geographical and Political Situation at the Time of Christ's Ministry

### ***Size and Location of Israel***

- North to South  miles long; East to West  to  miles wide
- It has been called the  of the world

### ***Physical Features: The Perfect Country***

- Varied
- Varied
- Varied

### ***Political Division of the Land***

- Three major areas:
- Roman provinces
  - Judea and Samaria
  - Galilee and Perea
  - Iturea and Trachonitis
  - Decapolis

### ***Geographical Divisions***

- The Coastal Plain
- The Shephelah
- The Cis-Jordan Hills
- The Jordan Valley
- The Trans-Jordan Hills

### ***Cities***

- Christ visited  cities.
- Most were located in the .

## ***Dead Sea: A Picture of Many Christians***

When fresh water flows in, but nothing flows out . . .

- We lose our  and .
- We become  and .
- We produce no life, and our soul .

## **Digging Deeper**



1. Report on one of the following geographic features of Israel:
  - Dead Sea
  - Jordan River
  - Sea of Galilee
  - Shephelah
2. Using modeling clay or plaster of Paris, build a scale 3-D model of Israel, showing each of the major geographic features discussed in the lesson.
3. Make a chart comparing and contrasting Israel to *your* state in such information categories as area, population, resources, crops, products, climate, etc.
4. Explain how the geographic and political situations in modern Israel still cause that nation to be the focus of world attention. What is at the heart of the Arab (Palestinian)/Israeli conflict? Using Scripture as your source of information, trace that conflict to its historical roots.
5. Draw a color map of Israel, identifying each of the various political divisions of Palestine during the time of Christ and locating each major city of the time.