

## EXERCISES



**#1** ... Fill in the names of the 8 BODIES OF WATER (1.-8.) and the 7 main LOCATIONS (A-G) from memory. Learn these, and you will have mastered a vital section.

**#2** ... Fill in the names of the 7 main NATURAL DIVISIONS of the land of Israel (1)-(7) ... a difficult exercise!!



REMEMBER! A knowledge of the geography of the Old Testament will enable you to understand and picture the history that unfolds in it.

# BASIC BIBLE STUDY

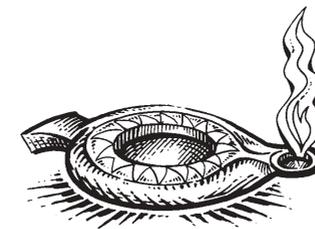
## An Introductory Guide To Understanding The Scriptures

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### PART TWO

### The Geography Of The Old Testament

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"Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,  
and a light unto my path"  
PSALM 119:105

**A knowledge of geography can give us tremendous help in visualizing and understanding the events which we read of in the Bible.**

It is most helpful to know the names, locations, and distances between important geographical locations. Otherwise, we skim over information without visualizing it or understanding it, with the result that the Bible is less interesting and less easily understood.

If we are ignorant of geography, we cannot really receive full value from history. As the Bible is largely history, if we are to master it, it makes sense to **start with the geography of the Bible.**

ENTIRE OLD TESTAMENT REGION FITS INTO ONE U.S. STATE!

It helps us get some idea of perspective about the area involved in Old Testament history when we note that **the entire region featured in the Old Testament story could almost fit into the state of Texas (695,622 sq km).** Clearly, we are not talking about a massive region!

### BODIES OF WATER

The primary anchor points for mastering the geography of the Bible are the bodies of water.

#### 1. The Mediterranean Sea

Also called "The Great Sea," the land of the Old Testament lies east of this beautiful blue body of water.

#### 2. The Sea of Galilee

To call this body a "sea" is an overstatement. It is a large fresh-water lake in northern Israel; 7 miles wide x 14 miles long. It lies almost 700ft/215m below sea level - the reason why it is liable to sudden fierce storms as the wind is funnelled through the hills that surround it. While the lake is a focal point in the Gospels, it is only the region of Galilee that is given an occasional mention in the OT (cf. **Joshua 20:7, 21:32; 1 Kings 9:11; 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chronicles 6:76; Isaiah 9:1**).

#### 3. The Jordan River

The main river of Israel, constantly referred to in the Bible. The Jordan flows from Mt Hermon in the far north, through Lake Huleh (now largely drained), and through the Sea of Galilee, to empty into the Dead Sea. It is 75 miles (as the crow flies) from Lake Huleh to the Dead Sea (65 miles from the Sea of Galilee to Dead Sea) - but the river Jordan winds about so much that it is more than twice that length. The name Jordan means "descender." It descends through the

King Ahaz of Judah became the vassal of Assyria (under Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC); **2 Kings 16:7-20**). Ahaz kept the treaty he was placed under, but his son, Hezekiah, joined up with Merodach-Baladan of Babylon and rebelled against Assyria. Led by Sennacherib, the Assyrian army overran Judah (cf. **Isaiah 7:17-25; 2 Kings 18-20**), but never captured Jerusalem.

#### F. Babylonia

Another gigantic historical world power, this fabulous, though short-lived, nation conquered Assyria. It also conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah 150 years after Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (**2 Kings 24:1; 25:7-13**).

It is found in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates. (Mesopotamia means "in the middle of" [meso] "rivers" [potamus]). The city of Babylon was founded by Nimrod 'the mighty hunter' (**Genesis 10:10**). It later became the capital of Babylonia and the Babylonian Empire, first rising to power around 1850 BC for a few generations, then again under Nebuchadnezzar. After the defeat of Assyria in 612 BC, Babylon became the seat of a powerful empire extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. In 597 and 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar conquered rebellious Jerusalem. On each occasion, many of the people of Judah were taken into exile to Babylon - among them the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel.

The city covered a huge area on both banks of the Euphrates. Both inner and outer city were protected by double brick walls 11-25ft/3-7m thick. Eight great gates led to the inner city, and there were fifty temples. The 'hanging gardens' of Babylon was one of the wonders of the ancient world - terraces on different levels laid out with palms and many other trees and plants, providing shade and colour in a flat land.

In 539 BC the Persians, under Cyrus, took the city. Herodotus, the Greek historian, says they diverted the River Euphrates and marched along the dried-up river bed to enter the city (cf. **Isaiah 45; 14:1-23; Daniel 1-6**). From that time on, Babylon declined.

#### G. Persia

The final historical superpower of the Old Testament is located at the north bank of the Persian Gulf. Persia comes into play by conquering Babylonia and by allowing the Hebrews to return from captivity in Babylonia to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and reinstate temple worship.

**D. Egypt**

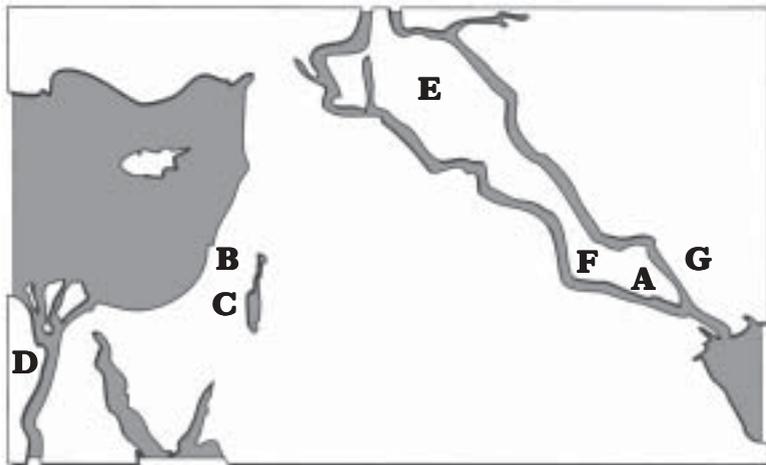
Centre of ancient civilization, Egypt plays a central role in the history of the Old Testament. Egypt enjoyed three periods of greatness:

**(1) The Pyramid Age** ~ 2600-2200 BC.

**(2) The Middle Kingdom** ~ 2060-1786 BC.

Probably about this time Abraham visited Egypt due to the famine in Canaan. Many like him fled from Canaan to Egypt; some stayed, and were promoted to important posts in the government of Egypt - others were less fortunate and became slaves. (It is likely that Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt just after this 'Middle Kingdom' era).

**(3) The Empire** ~ 1500-1070 BC. A new royal city was built, called Pi-Ramesses (cf. **Exodus 12:37; Numbers 33:3&5**). This was the climax of the 'oppression' of the Hebrews - and the time when Moses was sent to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.



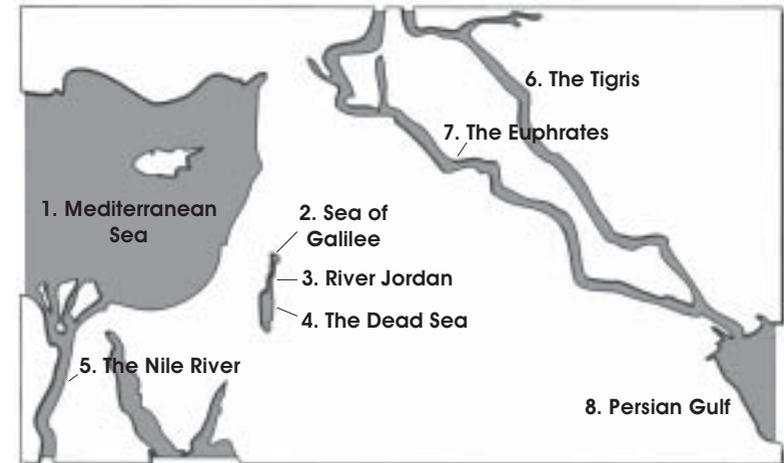
**E. Assyria**

Located at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates, this great world power is notable in the Old Testament for conquering the Northern Kingdom of Israel and dispersing her people to the four winds. Chief cities were Ashur (capital) and Nineveh (now Mosul, Iraq ... cf. Nahum and Jonah).

The Assyrians come into the Bible story at the time of the last kings of Israel, when the prophets Amos and Hosea were at work in the north, and Isaiah was coming into prominence in Judah. They were the major world power, and the people of less powerful countries lived under constant threat of invasion. The kingdom of Israel was captured by the Assyrians (**2 Kings 17:5-41**).

deepest rift valley on earth. (Lake Huleh is 230ft/71m above sea level; Lake Galilee is almost 700ft/215m below sea level - and the northern end of the Dead Sea is 1,290ft/397m below sea level).

**It is surprising how much history has revolved around such a comparatively small river.** Consult: **Joshua 3; 2 Samuel 17:20-22; 2 Kings 2:6-8, 13&14; 2 Kings 5** for some prominent examples.



**4. The Dead Sea**

The Dead Sea lies at the 'bottom of the world.' It is **the lowest point on earth** - almost 3000 feet below sea level at its lowest point (1,290 feet at northern end). Water flows into it, but none flows out. 30% of the water is magnesium, sodium, calcium, potassium chloride and other salts ... the highest mineral content of any body of water in the world. Sodom lies at the southern tip of the Dead Sea (**Genesis 19:24**). "Mounds of crystallized salt formations dot the shoreline looming out of the water like eerie sentinels. Nothing grows in the immediate area. Animal life, as we know it, is impossible; hence its name, the Dead Sea."

**5. Nile River**

Perhaps the most famous river in the world, the Nile flows through the heart of Egypt, spreads out like so many fingers, and empties into the Mediterranean. The fertile valley of the Nile (never more than 12m/19km wide in Upper Egypt) is flanked on either side by desert. Every year the river flooded its banks in spring, leaving behind a layer of fertile mud. Crops would grow wherever the water reached. Too high a flood meant destruction; too low a flood, starvation.

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Although never mentioned by name, the Nile is referred to in **Genesis 41:1-36; Exodus 1:22; 2:3-10; 7:17-25; 8:1-15; Isaiah 18:2**, etc. It is usually referred to as "the river of Egypt" (cf. **Genesis 15:18; Numbers 34:5; Joshua 15:4&47; 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Kings 24:7; 2 Chronicles 7:8**). It was highly significant that the first plague targeted the Nile river itself, since it was the very lifeline of Egypt and the centre of many of its idolatrous ideas (cf. **Exodus 7:17-25**).

### 6. Tigris and (7.) Euphrates Rivers

These twin rivers flow for almost a thousand miles each before they join together 40 miles/64km from where they deposit themselves into the Persian Gulf.

• **Euphrates**. In the OT, this great river is simply referred to as "the river" (**Genesis 2:14; 15:18; Revelation 9:14; 16:12**). Euphrates is 1,200 miles/1931 km long, rising in eastern Turkey and flowing south-east to the Persian Gulf.

• **The Tigris** is the second great river of Mesopotamia, rising in the mountains of Turkey and flowing for more than 1,400 miles/2250km. The famous Assyrian cities of Nineveh, Calah and Assur were all built on the banks of the Tigris. The Bible mentions it as one of the four rivers of Eden under the name Hiddekel (**Genesis 2:14; Daniel 10:4**).

### 8. The Persian Gulf

The Tigris, the Euphrates and the Persian Gulf form the most easterly boundary for the lands of the Old Testament. The Tigris and Euphrates flow through present-day Iraq, while the Persian Gulf separates Iran from Saudi Arabia.

## LOCATIONS

With the geographical framework/boundaries provided by the bodies of water, we are now able to pinpoint key locations relevant to the Old Testament history (cf. map on p10 in these notes).

### A. The Garden of Eden

The exact location of the Garden of Eden, where everything began, is impossible to pinpoint. However, we do know that it was near the convergence of four rivers, two of which were the Tigris (Hiddekel) and Euphrates (**Genesis 2:8-14**) – an area occupied by modern Iraq.

### B. Canaan/Israel/Palestine

This 'smallish' piece of land, which lies between the Mediterranean

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the Old Testament that it must be singled out and identified. It was the capital of Israel's early kings (later of the southern kingdom of Judah). Jerusalem has an elevated site, some 2,500ft/770m up in the Judean hills. The ground drops steeply away on all sides except the north (cf. **Psalms 48:2; 122:3; 125:2**). It is surrounded by valleys: the Kidron Valley lies to the east (between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives); the Valley of Hinnom curves around the south and west of the city; a third, central valley, cuts right into the city, dividing temple area and city of David from the "upper," western section.

### **JERUSALEM 'TIMELINE'**

- Jerusalem is probably the "Salem" Melchizedek reigned over in Abraham's day (**Genesis 14:18**).
  - It was a Jebusite stronghold (called Jebus) when David captured it and made it his capital (**2 Samuel 5**). He bought the temple site and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 24:18-25; 1 Chronicles 21:18-30; 22:1**).
  - Solomon built the temple here (**1 Kings 6**).
- The city declined to some extent after Solomon, when the kingdom became divided. In the reign of King Hezekiah, Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians. The king had the Siloam tunnel built, to ensure a water supply into the city (**2 Kings 18:13-19:36; 20:20**).
- The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem in 597 BC and in 586 they captured and destroyed both the city and the temple (**2 Kings 25**). The people were taken into exile in Babylon.
  - It was 538 BC before the people were allowed to return. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the temple was rebuilt (**Ezra 5**). When Nehemiah took charge, they rebuilt the walls (**Nehemiah 3-6**).
  - In 198 BC, Jerusalem came under the control of the Greek Empire. One of their kings, Antiochus IV Epiphanes plundered and desecrated the temple. Judas Maccabaeus led a Jewish revolt and the temple was re-dedicated (164 BC).
  - For a time Jerusalem was free. Then, in the middle of the first century BC, the Romans took control. Herod the Great (made king by the Romans), repaired Jerusalem and started new building projects, including a magnificent new temple. It was to this temple that Jesus was brought as an infant (**Luke 2**).
  - AD 70 ... Romans regain city, crushing a Jewish rebellion. They destroyed its defences - and the temple.
  - C4th ... many churches built in the city during the reign of Constantine.
  - AD 637 ... Muslims took control of Jerusalem.
  - Jerusalem remained under Muslim control until 1948, when the modern state of Israel came into being. Jerusalem was divided between the Jews and the Arabs. In 1967 the Jews won control of the entire city.

### (5) The 'Shephelah' or Piedmont

Between the coastlands and the upland is an area of low foothills formerly covered by forests of sycamores and oaks. When the Philistines fought the Israelites, these hills formed a kind of 'no-man's-land', where there were constant skirmishes (e.g. David v. Goliath in the Valley of Elah – one of the four main east-west valleys through the Shephelah). Several cities lay along the length of this well-travelled valley, including Goliath's city, Gath, plus Azekah, Socoh and Adullam). For either side to attack the other, it was necessary to pass through the Shephelah. Most of the routes through it were therefore fortified or guarded.

### (6) The Jordan Valley

The Jordan valley is a geological rift. The sides follow parallel faults in the earth's crust (the reason why the valley is so deep). These faults carry on the line of the valley down to the Dead Sea and beyond it, through the depression known as the Arabah, which eventually leads to the Gulf of Aqaba. The shore of the Dead Sea is 1,290ft/397m below sea level. The distance from the mountain rim on one side of the valley to that on the other is 9-12 miles/15-20kms.

### (7) The land east of the Jordan (Transjordan)

Uplands like those to the west, but higher. They are well-watered and provide good pasture for the huge flocks of sheep and herds of cattle formerly raised in Moab. At one time the king of Moab paid 100,000 lambs and the wool from 100,000 sheep every year to Israel as tribute (**2 Kings 3:4**). The mountains here rise from 1,900-2,300ft/600-700m east of Galilee to almost 6,560ft/2,000m south and east of the Dead Sea. They attract a rainfall which increases with their height and makes them a fertile belt between the dry valley on one side and the Arabian Desert on the other.

The fertility of parts of the region, such as Bashan and Gilead (Joshua 17:1&5), the prosperity of the sheep raisers of Moab, and the success of the traders of Edom made all these areas powerful rivals of the Israelites west of the Jordan. It was, perhaps, just as well for Israel that the Jordan made it so difficult for these people to move into their land from the east. It almost completely separated two similar regions which lay within sight of each other across the valley.

### C. Jerusalem

Located just off the north-western shoulder of the Dead Sea, this city, nestled in the central mountains of Israel, is so central to the story of

coast and the Sea of Galilee - Jordan River - Dead Sea, changes names throughout the Old Testament.

- In Genesis it is called 'Canaan.'
- After the Hebrew people establish themselves in the land in the book of Joshua, it becomes known as 'Israel.'
- 800 years later, at the beginning of the NT, it is called 'Palestine.'

### SIZE OF THE COUNTRY

The land of Israel is very small. **Length:** from north to south ("from Dan to Beersheba" as the Bible puts it - **Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 1 Kings 4:25**), it is less than 150 miles/230 kms long. **Width:** the northern end of the Dead Sea is only 50 miles/80 kms from the coast (though about 1,300ft/400 metres below sea level). **Comparison:** slighter larger than New Jersey - but not quite twice the size of Northern Ireland!

### SHAPE OF THE COUNTRY

**The land is shaped like the roof of a house.** It rises gently **from** the Mediterranean **to** about 3,200ft/1,000m above sea level, and then plunges steeply **down** to the great gash of the Jordan rift valley. There the earth's surface has cracked and dropped to form a trench which we can trace south all the way down into East Africa.

East of the Jordan and north of Galilee the mountains rise to greater heights – to almost 6,500ft/2,000m in Edom on the eastern desert fringe, and over 9,800ft/3,000m in Lebanon and Mt Hermon to the north. With such a proliferation of hills and mountains on their territory, it is little wonder that the people of Israel seemed like hill tribes to the nations which surrounded them. "Their gods are gods of the hills", scoffed King Benhadad's officers (**1 Kings 20:23**). In these mountains they could ward off attacks from the coastal Philistines.

### GEOLOGY OF ISRAEL

**Limestones or chalk occupy a large part of the surface** (an important fact to keep in mind as we read through Scripture). There are certain landscape features associated with limestone. Water sinks through them (they are permeable), and there is little surface drainage. But they usually develop underground streams and the water can be tapped by sinking wells. Limestones contain many caves. On the surface they often develop a kind of stony pavement which makes cultivation difficult and yields only a patchy soil. All these features are found in the hills of Palestine and all of them leave their impress on the Bible story (A besieged or harrassed people were often grateful for the water available through the wells and underground reservoirs

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- and for the natural 'networks' of caves, etc. ... (cf. **Genesis 49:27-32; Joshua 10:32; 1 Samuel 22:1; 24:3-8; 1 Kings 18&19**).

**The desert climate also has its effects on the landscape and its structures.** In the desert, regardless of rock type, there is usually a surface covering of sand, flintstone or salt. Much of the southern part of the land is covered by these infertile deposits. Wind and water are the forces which shape the desert rock: the wind scours the desert rocks into fantastic shapes; the force of water, (made all the more powerful and dramatic because it is so rare), gouges out steep-sided valleys and overhanging crags.

### SEVEN MAJOR NATURAL DIVISIONS IN ISRAEL

#### (1) The central highlands

The core area of the Jewish kingdoms (cf. page 5) lay in the 'hill country' along the watershed, with the land sloping away to the coast on one side, and away to the Jordan Valley on the other. This region rises to just over 3,280ft/1,000m near Hebron. The western slope is gentle, the eastern abrupt. The fortified towns of this hill country made good defence points. **The capitals of the southern and northern kingdoms (Jerusalem in Judah, and Samaria in Israel) were both in this area.** The hill country continues north-westwards to the coast in the jutting promontory of Mt Carmel. The 1,970ft/600m-high ridge cuts the coastal plain in two, breaking the general north-south pattern of the regions.

#### (2) The Plain of Esdraelon (The Valley Of Jezreel / Armageddon)

Inland from the Mediterranean coast, mountain ranges run in a continuous line from Lebanon (north) to Sinai (south). But there is one important break where a fault in the underlying rock has caused a section of mountain to drop to a height of 300ft/100m or less. This break divides the central highlands from Galilee and the northern mountains. It extends from Haifa Bay, north of Mt Carmel, to the valley of the Harod, a tributary of the Jordan. The watershed itself is cut through by the Valley of Jezreel (Armageddon).

This central plain forms a rough triangle, with each side about 15 miles/24kms long. This plain, although it was infertile - and marshy (Sisera lost his chariots here and had to escape on foot; **Judges 4:15**) - has always had great strategic importance (Today, after extensive drainage, it is the most fertile agricultural area in Israel). The principal north-south route of the ancient world (called by Romans Via Maris, "the way of the sea") cut through it on the way from Egypt

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to Damascus and Mesopotamia. It was an obvious route for trade - or for invasion. This may account for the long list of battles which have been fought in the plain: Gideon (**Judges 6:33-7:23**), Solomon (**1 Kings 9:15**), Jehu (**2 Kings 9**), Josiah (**2 Kings 23:29**) - right up to the Israeli War of Independence (1948). This Armageddon is the rallying point for armies engaged in the final great battle (**Revelation 16:16**).

#### (3) Galilee

North of the Plain of Esdraelon, the upland ranges begin again. They stretch away northwards, gradually rising as they come nearer to the high mountains of Lebanon. This whole area forms the region of Galilee, sometimes divided into Lower and Upper Galilee. The southern and eastern edges of the region are clearly drawn, but to the north, it merges into the mountains. In the past this northern boundary area was always the part of 'the land' where foreign influences were strongest (the great trade routes which passed across it brought in many strangers, put it in touch with the outside world and made it aware of non-Jewish ideas). The Israelites seldom had it under complete control.



#### (4) The coastal plain

When Israel occupied the Promised Land, they captured the central highlands and then made sporadic attempts to spread their control down to the Mediterranean coast. But this region was occupied by the powerful nation of the Philistines. Although, under David, Israel was able to gain control for a while, more often in Israel's history the Philistines exerted pressure from their 5 cities on the coastlands up into the hills. The coastlands were not, at this time, a particularly attractive area; they consisted of a belt of coastal sand dunes backed by forest, lagoons and swamp.

There were no large natural harbours south of Carmel. The Philistines (unlike the Phoenicians) were not seafarers; the first major port on this coast was the artificial harbour at Caesarea, built by King Herod the Great - not long before Jesus was born.