

Dr. Perry Phillips- Historical Geography of the Bible, Lecture 1, Land Between

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This series of six lectures on historical geography of Israel will be presented by Doctors Perry and Elaine Phillips, who have taught for many years at the Jerusalem University College on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Dr. Perry Phillips will introduce the series with the talk on Israel as “The Land Between.”

I’m Perry Phillips. I’m teaching a set of courses on historical geography. This is the first one, “The Land Between”--why the land of Israel is very significant in biblical studies. We want to discuss in this lecture why this little piece of real estate--that’s about the size of Vermont--is so important for biblical history. I have taught historical geography numerous times here at Gordon College and also at Jerusalem University College in Jerusalem, Israel.

So first lecture: “The Land Between-- why the land of Israel? Here is a map of Israel. If you want to compare it to something in the United States, it is about the size of Vermont, or perhaps the size of New Jersey, about the same thing. One question that we want to ask and answer in this lecture is why Israel is so significant. So first of all, let’s go to Israel in the context of the Middle East. This is a very familiar map, and we are interested in this little piece of real estate right here. As I mentioned before, it’s very small compared to the rest of the Middle East. If you go from Greece all the way down to Saudi Arabia, and then you go up here to Turkey all the way down the Egypt, you find then in a way Israel is at a crossroads, and we’ll see how that works itself out.

First of all, “the land between” is the land between the sea and the desert. By the sea we’re talking about the Mediterranean Sea over to the west, and then over to the east we have the Saudi Arabian, desert which is down in this area. But we want to make a contrast between what we find in the sea and what we find in the desert. First of all, the sea: we think of coolness, breezy, moist, and it’s quite a contrast to the desert, which is hot, and breezy, and arid. The conjunction of those different types of bodies--one hot and

dry and the other cool and moist--is going to give some very interesting weather patterns to the land of Israel.

The other thing we want to discuss before we get into that in more detail is to say that Israel is part of the Fertile Crescent, and the reason this is called the Fertile Crescent is if you follow the arable land, that is the land where people can actually do agriculture, it looks a little bit like a crescent, little bit like a crescent moon if you like. What we find is there are various kinds of agriculture that go on in this area. First of all, if you take a look up in the Mesopotamian region, we have the mighty Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. There you have irrigation as the way in which the agriculture takes place. Some rain in the northern part, but agriculture primarily is through irrigation and irrigation canals. And that turns out to be the same in Egypt as well, in this area of the Nile Delta. However, in-between in this area of Israel, this area of the Levant that includes not only Israel but also what would become Lebanon and Syria, what we have is rain. That brings an interesting verse to mind: Deuteronomy chapter 11, verse 11, "This is the land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from the heaven." And this is the description that we have in Deuteronomy for the land of Israel.

Well, the conjunction, as I said, between the cool, moist water and the hot, dry desert is that we have interesting weather patterns in Israel. First of all, let's discuss the daily wind pattern. Normally what happens is the following as the sun comes up and begins to heat the area, what you find is that the desert heats up more than the water, and as a result of that, the air in the desert begins to rise. Well, as it rises, air is going to have to move in from some place, and where it moves in from is the ocean. So generally speaking, what you have on the normal day would be that early in the morning things are fairly still, but then as the sun begins to heat up the desert area, resulting in a breeze that comes in from the ocean and begins to take the place of the air that is rising.

And so if you are on the coast of Israel, about 10 o'clock you begin to get a sea breeze. Well what's the importance of that? The importance is that things begin to cool off, and so the region around Israel stays cool during the day because of the sea breeze that comes in. And if you are on the coast, let's say at Tel Aviv, about 10 o'clock you

begin to experience the sea breeze. If you are up in Jerusalem which is about 34 miles away, about noon time you begin to experience the sea breeze. Then if you are over in Ammon, over in Transjordan, you will experience the sea breeze later in the afternoon; but the whole point is that you begin to get cooling during the day as the result of the rising air in the desert.

However, sometimes this changes, and what you have is a situation where the air coming in off the ocean is blocked, and you have what is known in Arabic, they say *Khamsin* or in Hebrew a *Sharav*, and basically what happens is that as a result of this blockage that takes place, instead of having nice, cool air coming in off the ocean of the Mediterranean, what you have is hot, dry air, dusty air coming in off the desert.

And it's interesting to see in Jeremiah chapter four how the Lord uses the *Khamsin* as an indication of how the Lord is going to deal with the Israelites. He is talking about the Babylonians that are going to be coming in and making life very difficult for the Israelites. And in chapter four of Jeremiah--I'm looking at verses 11 to 12--and he says the following: "At that time this people in Jerusalem will be told a scorching wind from the barren heights of the desert blows towards my people, but not to winnow or cleanse, a wind too strong for that comes from me."

Now here is what's happening during the *Sharav*. Normally speaking, what people will do is they will use the gentle wind that comes in off the ocean in order to winnow their grain. By that we mean the chaff and the grain is thrown up into the air, and since the chaff is that much lighter than the grain, the chaff gets blown away, and what we have is the grain that remains.

The other thing that people will do even in modern day Israel is they will take their bedding and put it out on their balcony and beat the bedding so the dust comes off, and the wind blows that away. The trouble is, however, with the *Khamsin*, is that this desert wind comes in. It is hot, it is dusty, it is strong; one cannot winnow, one cannot use the wind for cleansing, and this was is an indication of what it is going to be like in Israel from a political standpoint when the Babylonians come in against the people of Israel.

So this is the *Khamsin*. I have been in many *Khamsins*. They are miserable. Sometimes they last a day or two; one time they lasted for about two weeks, and by the end about the third day, people are grouchy, irritable, and it was just kind of a miserable situation. Fortunately, they don't last much longer than they do.

We also have interesting rainfall patterns in Israel as a result of the geography of Israel and the proximity, again, between the desert and the ocean. I want to read a passage from Deuteronomy chapter 11, which shows what this is all about. As I mentioned in an earlier slide, Israel is different than the land around in that Israel depends on rain and not on irrigation. The Lord takes this into account when he describes the land of Israel in chapter 11 of Deuteronomy. This is a very important chapter, which is going to set the stage for what we say later. So I do want to read the entire passage. Again Deuteronomy chapter 11, verse 8-17: The Lord says through Moses to the Israelites: "Observe therefore all the commands I am giving to you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess and so that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your forefathers to give to them and to their descendants a land flowing with milk and honey." I'll get back to that in a moment. But here's the essential aspect. "The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven."

Let me pause for a moment. Watering their gardens in Egypt: what would have that implied? Well it would've been irrigation. It wouldn't have been rain. So the implication here is possibly reference to a water wheel. When it talks about watering the land with one's foot, maybe a water wheel where one is on maybe a little bit like a bicycle and the wheel has buckets on it which take water from the irrigation channel and dumps it into the vegetable garden or whatever area they want to irrigate. The other possibility it might be is, the soil is kind of sandy around the Nile in Egypt. What the Lord may be referring to is digging a small channel with one's foot, and then when that area of the garden is watered, taking one's foot, kicking dirt into that channel, and

digging another one. The point, however, is that the land they are going into is different. The land that they are going into is one that is going to drink rain from heaven. It is not dependent upon irrigation; it is not dependent on the steadiness of the Nile River which is always there, which is always providing water.

So the Lord goes on and says the following and I am starting at verse twelve. “It is the 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. So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today--to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul--then I will send rain in your land in its season, both autumn rains and spring rains.” That’s the way the *New International Version* translates it. Literally it is “the latter rains and the early rains.” These rains coming in autumn and in spring. And he says the Lord will send these rains, “so that you may gather in your grain and new wine and oil. I will provide grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.”

Then he goes on to say, “Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods... Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is giving you.”

Do you see what is going on? The Lord is the one who is going to control the rainfall, and how the rainfall comes down is going to be dependent on the obedience of the people.

Well, rain yes, but we also have dew. Dew turns out to be an important aspect of watering some of the plants in Israel. Dew occurs when the cool, wet breezes come in off the ocean, and then at night the water out of those breezes condenses and then becomes dew on the ground. This becomes an important aspect of watering Israel as well.

We also find some spiritual analogies in Scripture that deal with the rain pattern that you have, and the dew. For example, in Proverbs 19, verse 12, it talks about a king. “A king’s wrath is like a roaring lion; however, his favor is like dew on the grass.” And in Amos chapter 1, verse 2, Amos says, “The Lord thunders from Zion, and the grass on

Mount Carmel withers.” And as you’ll see in just a few moments, grass on Mount Carmel hardly withers because you always have heavy dew and rains in that area of the country. The point that I am making is that there are interesting weather patterns that occur in Israel. And the Lord directs these weather patterns on the basis of the obedience of the people who are living there. That’s the whole point of Deuteronomy chapter 11.

Well, I said something about the rainfall; let me mention a little bit more of that. Here’s a rainfall map that we have and the average rainfall in Boston is for comparison is 42 inches a year; again that’s an average. A couple things to see about his map. First of all, if you got to the northern part of the country up in this area this is the Mount Hermon area. This is Mount Hermon, here’s Mount Carmel and Jerusalem is right in this area for reference. If you want latitude, Jerusalem is pretty much the same latitude as Atlanta, Georgia here in the States. But even up here in this upper region, northern region, this higher region of Israel up around Mount Hermon, the rainfall is only about 25 inches or so. So even when you’re in that area, what you find is the rainfall is less than what you find in Boston.

If you go down to the southern part to Beersheba, and what I’m doing is basically going from Dan to Beersheba, which is the end points of what the scriptures generally describe as the land of Israel, the north and south down in Beersheba one is lucky to get 8 inches a year of rain. 8 inches is basically the cross-over point. 8 inches and above you can have reasonable agriculture. 8 inches and below it turns out that agriculture is fairly difficult. But these are the extremes. One of the areas that we want to look at is Jerusalem. And Jerusalem only winds up with about only 22 inches a year. Not bad. And it provides a good bit of water for agriculture. Up here in Mount Carmel, which I mentioned in connection with Amos in chapter 1, Mount Carmel is a peak of land that sort of jets out into the Mediterranean, and there also we wind up with 20 or so inches of rain.

Now, one of the areas in Israel is the Rift Valley, or the Jordan Valley, where the Dead Sea is located. If you take a look at Jericho, which is just north of the Dead Sea, it turns out that they get about 5 inches of rain a year. It hardly rains there.

I have a kind of an amusing story that happened to me one winter. It was kind of a rainy day, and I was trying to show people some of the sights in the hill country, but it was very rainy. And so I said, “Look, let’s just forget about this. Let’s just go down to Jericho. Let’s go down to the Jordan Valley and just spend our time down there because it never rains there.” So we got down to Jericho, and just as we ready to get out of the bus, we had one of the most severe thunderstorms that I’ve ever seen in my life. Needless to say, for the rest of the trip, I didn’t hear the end of that. “Hey, Perry, does it ever rain in Jericho?” The interesting thing about that, too, was that afterwards there was one of the most glorious rainbows that I’ve ever seen in my life. Of course, that reminds us of what the Lord said after the Flood to Noah where he says that he will see the rainbow and will remember his covenant with all creation: never to send the flood again.

Anyways, that is the Jordan Valley, and then if we go across the Jordan Valley, more to the east into what is Jordan today—these are the Trans-Jordanian Mountains--we can actually get rainfalls up around 30 inches or so. So, you’ll notice something general about the rainfall in Israel: the farther north and the farther towards the coast you go, the rain increases. The farther south and the farther east you go, the rain decreases, except for elevation. So, if you have a high area, even though it’s to the east, such as you have in this area of Jordan, you can still get a pretty good amount of rain. So, to generalize then: go north, go west, and go up in elevation you get quite a bit of rain. If you go east and south and down in elevation (down towards the Dead Sea, for example), well there, in some of the areas, you’re lucky to get even 2 inches of rain a year. So that’s the general rainfall pattern that you have in Israel.

Now, I mentioned what’s happening weather-wise (climatologically, if you like). You also have various political situations that occur from people who come in from the ocean--from the Sea--or from the desert. So, here’s some of the politics from the sea. These are people who have come in and conquered the land from the sea: Phoenicians—they settled primarily in what would be Lebanon today—great sailors. Later on: Philistines—possibly from some of the Greek Isles, from Greece themselves, came and settled along the coast of Israel. In fact, it is the Philistines that give the name to the place

that we call it today—sometimes Palestine. Greeks came in, especially with Alexander the Great; Romans, with Pompeii in 63 B.C., came and conquered the land; and of course, we read in the New Testament that it's the Romans who really rule the land of Israel at that time. Later on, Crusaders came as they tried to take back the Holy Land from the Muslim conquest. English were there. General Allenby in 1917 conquered the land from the Turks, and it became a British Mandate. The French were there a little earlier under Napoleon, and Germans during the Wars. Finally, people would say even the Israelis, a number of them who have come from the West. So they bring their own culture, their own politics, and this is the political influence that you would have in Israel coming in from the sea.

Well, what can we say about some of the characteristics of what we might call “the sea people?” They are more cosmopolitan, more progressive; maybe a little more liberal if we use a modern term for them. Here are some examples of what is going on where people from the sea are ruling Israel: we all know the story of Samson. In Judges chapter 15, verses 9 to 11, we have a very interesting story. Let me just relate it: Samson is going to be married to a Philistine woman. (That doesn't quite work out). But then later on he leaves her. Later on he goes to get her back and he finds that she's married to somebody else. So what he does is take a number of foxes, ties their tails together, puts a torch in their tails, and then sends them running across the field in order to burn down fields of the Philistines. The Philistines aren't too excited about this. Samson goes off to a place in Judah in order to escape the Philistines.

And the Philistines come to the people of Judah, and they say, “We want Samson.” And so they go to get Samson to hand him over to the Philistines, and here's the essential verse. This is Judges chapter 15 verses 9 to 11. They come to Samson, and they say to him, “Samson, don't you know it's the Philistines that rule over us.” So here we have people from the sea that are coming over and ruling over the Israelites. As it turns out, Samson is able to escape by grabbing the jawbone of a donkey and slaying the Philistines who come to capture him.

In 1 Samuel chapter 13 (vs. 20ff.), we again have difficulty between the Philistines

and the Israelites. Part of the problem was the Philistines had the ability to work with iron; the Israelites did not. And so iron metallurgy was desired by the Philistines to the point where they would not allow the Israelites to have even iron tools, and if they had any tools, the Israelites would have to come down and actually get their tools sharpened by the Philistines.

Just as a side note: David, you recall, spent some time with the Philistines, and it may be that David himself, then, learned iron metallurgy in working with iron and brought that knowledge back to Israel because certainly later on Israel had iron as well.

John chapter 11: The Pharisees are having a discussion along with the Sadducees and wondering what to do about Jesus because they feel that he is endangering the nation of Israel with his exclamations and with his teaching, and we read that the High Priest at that point is saying, “Don’t you know if we don’t do anything about Jesus, the Romans are going to come and take away our land.”

And then finally in Acts chapter 11, we again see the control that the Romans had over the land of Israel. Cornelius is in Caesarea, and that’s the story that follows Peter going to Caesarea and preaching the Gospel to Cornelius.

So what’s the point here? The point is that just as weather-wise, the sea can dominate what’s going on weather-wise in the land of Israel, the people who come from the sea (the “sea peoples” as I’ve called them) also dominate the land as well.

Well, if you have domination from the sea you probably have domination from the desert as well and we read about a number of peoples from the desert that also put pressure on Israel and at times have conquered Israel. So politics from the desert: We read about Moabites from the land of Moab; we remember Moab was one of the sons of Lot. We read about Edomites coming from Esau, one of the sons of Isaac. We have the Ammonites, also sons of Lot. The Amalekites who lived in the southern part of Israel in the desert and at times made raids against Israel; Kennites, Midianites, we have Munites and of course, we can’t forget “Termites” ☺ that were there as well.

So, at any rate, these are politics from the desert, and how are we going to characterize these people? How are we going to characterize the desert dwellers? More

provincial, and I don't say that in a pejorative sense, but they're more provincial. Some were more backwards, or a little bit more conservative; perhaps we might say that they were the ones that keep the "ways of the fathers" with their traditions of the fathers. We have more examples of this as well. In Judges chapter six we read about the Midianites that come in like a swarm of locusts and just gobble up everything in Israel. In fact, they seem to be controlling Israel all the way from the Jordan Valley all the way down to the coast, down to Gaza. And in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, during the time of the good king Jehoshaphat, we find desert people ganging up on Israel and trying to make a sneak attack upon Jerusalem. So here's where the desert politically is influencing Israel.

So what you have then in this land of Israel, you've got this unique weather pattern. Then you also have the peoples that come either from the desert or from the ocean and you keep getting this conflict, right in Israel, of these political and physical interactions. But that's not all; you have other enemies of Israel that are farther away: international powers.

Take a look at the map, and look right in the center here, where Israel is located. Notice how it's a pathway between the nations: a pathway between various powers, through the north and south, to the east and to the west. Over here we have Egypt. Egypt always had great influence upon the land of Israel, and over to the north in this area of Mesopotamia, you have various nations that put great pressure on Israel: Assyria in northern Mesopotamia, but also Babylon and southern Mesopotamia in the area of Iraq. Then even farther to the East the Medo-Persian Empire, which today would be characterized by the land of Iran. Over to the west you have Greece. I've mentioned before people who came from Greece, Alexander the Great being the most significant, and then even farther to the west we had Rome that came and influenced the land of Israel. Interestingly enough, Rome influenced Israel politically but then remember Paul took the gospel to Rome and you have the reverse influence as well.

But notice how Israel is right in the center of all these powers, all these international powers. And even today that is the case. We have Israel in the midst of a huge variety of Islamic nations; from Turkey to the north, Egypt to the south and west.

You've got Jordan and Iraq and Iran over to the east and even today, politically, you find that Israel is the "land between," not just the land between the sea and the desert, but the land between the international, the large Muslim majorities that you have surrounding Israel.

Well, interestingly enough, God uses international enemies to chastise Israel as well as local enemies, which we discussed earlier. In 2 Chronicles 12, after the death of Solomon, Rehoboam his son becomes king. Rehoboam is great for about four years, but then he becomes very prideful, and in order to punish him, in order to discipline him and the nation, the Lord sends Sheshaq, King or Pharaoh of Egypt, to come up against the land of Israel to the point at which even Jerusalem was taken, and this is given to us. In 2 Chronicles chapter 12. But other nations also come as punishment against Israel. In 2 Kings 16 we read about the Assyrians that come in and wipe out the Northern Kingdom, and 2 Kings 17 gives the reason why and that is because the people had become unfaithful.

Of course, there is Babylonia that comes in and wipes out the Southern Kingdom, and we can read about that in these passages. Jeremiah calls attention to this in chapter 5. Then the very, very sad chapter in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 that discusses the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar.

Persia is the nation that is influencing Israel in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and then we have Greece that is there during the Inter-Testamental period. Finally, Rome comes in, as we mentioned, during the New Testament Period.

Well, here's the question: given the "iffy" nature of the land of Israel, why would God bring them there? Why not bring them to a nation or place that is a little bit more secure? Interesting quote from Golda Meir, she used to say that when Moses brought the people out of Egypt and they crossed the Jordan, and they crossed the Rift Valley going east, they should have turned south instead of turning north. They should have turned right instead of turning left. The implication there is that if at least Moses had gone south instead of north, they would have gone to a place where they would have gotten some oil as opposed to what they have now. Anyway, the answer to the question why God would

bring them there in spite of the iffy nature of the land, is the following: Israel is--and here is the thing to keep in mind--the “testing ground of faith.” This is from my good friend Jim Monson, who taught at Jerusalem University College. It is the testing ground of faith. One needs to be faithful to God in order to live there. One must constantly depend upon God for rain--we have mentioned that before: dew; for food, of course, that comes for having adequate rain and dew. For protection from enemies the Lord promises that he will protect them both from local and international enemies if they are faithful to him, and again I would refer to Deuteronomy 8 and 11 in order to show how all of this works out, which we’ve read before.

So back to the map, and looking at this area of the map that we call Israel, it may be that this piece of real estate would not be our choice, but it certainly was God’s choice for the Israelites to live for the reasons that we have mentioned. It is again: “the testing ground of faith.” And with that, we will end this lecture.

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