

## **Dr. Perry Phillips, Historical Geography, Lecture 2—The Hill Country**

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Hello, I'm Perry Phillips. We're continuing with our discussion of the land of Israel. Today we want to talk about the "Central Arena," which is the hill country of Israel. We'll review a little bit of what we introduced last time. We talked about Israel as the land between; and recall it is the land between the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the large Arabian Desert on the east, which brings interesting weather patterns that we discussed. But it is also the land between the large populations to the north and the populations to the south, over here in Mesopotamia as well, where we had international empires that arose, and they put pressure on Israel. Egypt also put pressure on Israel, so that way Israel is the land between. That is kind of the overall arching situation that we have with Israel.

What we want to do is take a look a little bit at the topographical zones of Israel, and then we are going to be concentrating on the central area. First of all, we have the Coastal Plain, and the Coastal Plain is made up of the Philistine Plain to the south and the Sharon Plain to the north, and then the Plain of Acco, which is to the north of Mount Carmel. That's the first topographical zone.

The second topographical zone, which is what we will be concentrating on today, is the Central Mountain Range that goes all along this pinkish area that is like a central spine up through the land of Israel.

Then we have the Rift Valley, the steep depression that is running right through the land of Israel that actually starts up in Turkey and goes all the way down to the lowest point on earth, which is the Dead Sea, and then continues down along the Red Sea and eventually even down through Africa, and into Kenya and Tanzania.

Over to the east we have the Transjordan Mountains, which is a high ridge east of the Rift Valley. As we mentioned last time: you get rain that falls on the Trans-Jordanian Mountains, and so that area is fairly rich agriculturally.

Then finally we have the Eastern Desert.

These are the five topographical zones that we have. And a couple more names:

“Cis-Jordan” is what is used to describe the area to the west of the Jordan Valley. “Trans-Jordan” is what is known as the area to the east of the Jordan Valley.

Let’s take a look at the maps of the Hill Country and contacts. There’s Jerusalem nicely marked, and the Judean hill country is to the south with the main city there being Hebron. Over to the north we have the hill country of Ephraim, and we’ll be getting into a little more detail there as to what’s going on. To the north of there we have the hill country of Manasseh, and then right in between Judah and the hill country of Ephraim we have the tribe of Benjamin. I’m calling that the “Central Benjamin Plateau” for reasons we will see. It is a little flatter and a little lower than the hill country to the south and the hill country to the north. We will see that that area is extremely strategic in the history of Israel.

Let’s take a look at some of the topographical features of the hill country. First of all, geologically it is composed of what we call limestone. Any kind of limestone that someone would bounce against your head you would think would be really hard, but limestone comes in various categories. The kind of limestone that comprises the hill country is a very hard limestone. It is not eroded quite as easily as some other stones, but when it does erode, it erodes into a nice red soil, and this soil is really rich. The other thing we find about the hill country that is composed of this hard limestone is we have a lot of springs in the area--they’re in the valleys. The ground water is able to come up in springs. We read about this in Deuteronomy chapter 8 and Deuteronomy chapter 11. We will not go over those verses, but the verses describe the quality of the land there: good soil, land and springs, and being able to dig copper out of the soil and to dig iron out of the rocks is also mentioned.

Topographically, as I have mentioned, we have ridges and we have very deep valleys and we have natural terraces. I’ll show you a picture of that in a moment and how that ties into the agriculture of the land. Travel is not easy because the valleys are very deep, so one doesn’t travel in the valleys because they are very narrow and very deep. On the other hand, if one doesn’t try to cross the valleys, how does one travel in the hill country? One travels along ridges, continuous ridges, from one place to another.

Then agriculture is on the terracing of the hill country, and what you find primarily is a lot of olive trees and vines, but in between you can find some others things growing like pomegranates, and sometimes wheat and barley is planted as well. Culturally these areas are more isolated because of the difficulty of traveling.

Here is an example of what I'm talking about in the hill country. You notice this looks like steps, and this is the natural terracing; this is the way the hard limestone breaks down in the hill country. I remember when we first went to Israel back in the 70's and the first time and we saw this coming back from Jerusalem, and we were wondering what in the world is going on here. It was as though some giant had carve out steps on the hill. Imagine one kind of bounding up and down these steps. Actually, this is a natural phenomenon that occurs in the hard limestone. If you take a look very carefully close by here you see a number of things. First of all, the red soil is fairly obvious. These trees are olive trees and you notice that the terraces have been somewhat enhanced, and what the farmer does is the following: you've got to dig some of the rocks out of the soil, and the rocks are then taken and put in the edges of terraces and a little wall is built there to hold the soil back. So you do have the natural phenomenon of terracing that occurs just geologically. But you also have the farmer who is enhancing it by putting the rocks together as a wall that holds back the soil upon which he can plant his vineyard and his olive trees. Notice the road is also going along the ridge, and if you look very carefully, you will see a little village up here on top of the ridge as well. Why on top of the ridge? That is where communication was a little more easily done.

Well, Judean hill country. We want to take a look at some historical connections. First of all, Judean hill country: the main city there is Hebron. You say, "Wait, what about Jerusalem?" We will mention Jerusalem a little later, but Jerusalem is actually in the land of Benjamin. The main city is Hebron in the Judean hill country; that is where Abraham's three visitors were from who visited him when he was there. That is where he purchased his land to bury his wife, Sarah. It was a city of refuge, and it was David's first capital, King David, and following suit, Absalom then during his coup went to Hebron to be crowned king to come back and take the kingdom from his father.

Another important city, of course, is Bethlehem. It is where David was born, it was where he was anointed king by Samuel, but it is also where Jesus was born; the greater king of David's descendants. And another place I want to mention is Tekoa. This is important because it is on the edge of the wilderness. It is the hometown of Amos but it also was the area connected with Maon and Carmel where David fled from Saul for quite a bit of time.

So with those cities in mind, let's take a look at where they are. You can see Jerusalem up here to the north. Again, it is right on the border of Judah, but it is really in the tribal area of Benjamin. There is Bethlehem about 5 miles to the south. Hebron is about 10 miles south of there. Then another city that I didn't mention--but since it is used as the southern-most city of Israel when we talk about Israel being from "Dan to Beersheba"--Beersheba is another 20 miles south of Hebron. And the other areas that I mentioned Ziph, Carmel, and Maon are there. Quite a bit of history occurs there, as I mentioned previously. It is where Amos came from but it is also where David was fleeing from Saul.

Let's take a look at some of the other areas: the Hill Country of Benjamin. This is a very important crossroads, as we will see. The Hill Country of Benjamin--first of all it is very strategic. It is a plateau area. It is a little flatter than the hills around. The other thing to keep in mind as well is that Benjamin is a little lower than the hill country of Ephraim and Manasseh to the north, and Judah to the south. In a sense it is like a saddle point. What we will see as a result of this saddle point, it becomes the most reasonable way to move east and west from the area of Trans-Jordan across the Jordan valley and then over Benjamin and over to the coast. We'll get into that a little more thoroughly later.

But here the Ridge Route north and south meets the major east-west connecting routes, and they meet right in the Central Benjamin Plateau. So here's your major north-south route that goes right along the central spine, right along this ridge of mountains that are part of the central part of Israel. And here is your east-west route. The crossroads are right there in Benjamin, just slightly north of Jerusalem.

Important cities in Benjamin—Jericho. Jericho is where the Israelites first came in to the land of Israel after the 40 year wandering. Jericho is considered the “backdoor” of Jerusalem. Remember that Jesus on his last ascent up to Jerusalem started at Jericho and went up to Jerusalem. So Jericho is the backdoor of Jerusalem. Bethel is to the north and on the boundary with Ephraim. Bethel is an important city in connection with patriarchal history both coming into the land with Abraham and later on with Jacob as well. Geba and Michmash--I’ll say a few things about them. An important battle took place there between Saul and the Philistines. I’ll say a little about that.

Major cities right in the center of Benjamin are Gibeah, Ramah and Mizpah. Gibeah is where Saul’s palace was located. It was his home town. Well, I use “palace” in quotes because it wasn’t very elaborate. Other cities are Gibeon, the great Gibeonite city along with Beeroth, Kephirah and Kiriath-Jearim. Remember, Joshua fought a big battle to protect Gibeon from surrounding city states that had ganged up on it. We’ll see from the map why this is a very important place. Gezer is the “front door” to Jerusalem from the west. And then finally, of course, we have Jerusalem as part of this complex of cities in this central Benjamin area.

Well, let me say a little about history regarding some historical events that occurred in this area. I mentioned the conquest. The Gibeonite cities and their location are in Joshua chapters 9 and 10. When we look at the map, we’ll see why the King of Jerusalem was so concerned about these cities falling into the hands of the conquerors, that is, the Israelites that had come in under Joshua.

In the transition to the monarchy we find Samuel in the Central Benjamin area. His home town was Ramah. It was a very, very important city strategically but also the hometown of Samuel as he judged the people of Israel before king David and King Saul, before that. I mention that Saul’s hometown was Gibeah, sometimes called Gibeah of Saul. I know this gets confusing because there is a town called Gibeah; there is one called Gibeon, there is one called Geba, and it’s hard to keep them straight. But all of them are based on a Hebrew root word *gib‘a*, which means “hill,” because they’re all on a hill.

Jonathan and his armor bearer are part of the topography at Geba and Michmash, and we also have a continuous battleground after the split of the kingdom in this area at Ramah in Benjamin, which is the crossroads of a major north-south and east-west route.

Well, ok, enough of that--let's see how all these things tie together in the Central Benjamin Plateau. Do you see the central tribal area of Benjamin as it is outlined here? Jerusalem is to the south. I have added a couple other cities: Gibeah of Saul just to the north, and Ramah, which is just a little bit to the north from there. If you want distances, Gibeah is about three miles from Jerusalem, maybe 2.5 miles. This is the Central Benjamin Plateau, and it is comprised of the cities of, going from north to the south clockwise: Mizpah to the north, Geba to the east, Gibeah to the south, and Gibeon to the west; the great Gibeonite cities. That is in an extremely contested area because of the crossroads that come right in central Benjamin. Over to the west, as I have outlined here, you have the Gibeonite cities that I had mentioned before. So you have a block of people that are ensconced in the western part of Benjamin and, of course, they are going to have quite a bit to say about who goes back and forth east and west through that particular area.

2 Kings 15, verses 16-22, is repeated in 2 Chronicles 16. We read about the Northern King Baasha that came down, and he fortified the city of Ramah. Now you say, "So what?" Well here's the "so what." Do you notice Ramah is right along the north-south route and right along the east-west route. That's where they met. When this northern King came down and fortified that area against Asa who was the southern king. King Asa in Jerusalem realized his whole northern approach had been cut off. So instead of fighting the war against Baasha, what he did was send a note off to one of the Aramaic kings, the Syrian king, to come down and attack Baasha from the north. Baasha eventually had to relinquish this area of Ramah, and Asa then took the fortifications of Ramah and moved them up to Mizpah thereby opening this very critical juncture at Ramah so that Jerusalem would be able have the proper flow of traffic that he was looking for.

Well, here's the Central Benjamin Plateau, and this is Gibeon right in the center here. This major city is one-of-a-lifetime photo ops that we had one morning when we were in a high area right by Gibeon, and there was fog in the valley, and we were able to get this picture. I debated whether to get the picture now or else go see something else and come back. I'm glad I took the picture when I did because when I came back, all that had dissipated. It was all gone as the sun had come up. But you see, this is even though you've got some hills here, this area is really fairly flat and is very easy to traverse compared to these other terraced areas that we have elsewhere in the hill country.

A little bit more about Gibeon: There's a great pool at Gibeon, perhaps the great pool that is mentioned in 2 Samuel chapter 2 where you have a battle between the forces of Saul and the forces of David at that point. There's also an interesting water system shown by the steps over to the right. We had a great time taking groups to Gibeon. Unfortunately, the political situation is such that for the last number of years we have not been able to take people there, but it is a fabulous place historically and archaeologically.

Well, that was western Benjamin; here's eastern Benjamin. And I think you can see from the topography this is a very difficult area to traverse. We are looking east: this is Wadi Michmash, and you're looking all the way out. Right there if you look very carefully, is the Dead Sea; and if you look even a little more carefully up here, you can see an outline of trans-Jordan. So you're right at the edge of what we call the Judean Wilderness. You can see that this is a very, very rugged area.

However, what we read about in Scripture is a story where the Philistines are up on this mountain and the Israelites are over here. The Philistines are over at Mishmash up here, the Israelites are here, and we have that very heroic story of Jonathan and his armor-bearer in 1 Samuel chapter 14. What Jonathan and his armor bearer are able to do is climb up along the rugged ridge that we have towards Michmash. They're able to overwhelm a Philistine fortress, and a great battle is won as a result of his bravery. Well, that's the Hill Country of Benjamin.

Let's say a few things about the Hill Country of Ephraim, and some of the important things that are going on there. First of all, we mark Jerusalem that is going to

become our peg; and again, to get an idea of the scale here from Jerusalem over here to Gibeon, we are probably talking about 7 miles or so. Rough topography like Judah's. Whatever I could say for Judah I can say for Ephraim, except to say that the mountains there actually reach a little higher elevation than what they do in Benjamin. In Benjamin we might get up to about 2,800 feet; in Ephraim we can get up to about 3,000 feet, and if we go south in Hebron, we're up about 3,000 feet again. So as I said, we have the saddle point in Benjamin.

One of the major cities in Ephraim is Shiloh, and that is located over in the eastern part. Shiloh became important because that is where the tabernacle was set up soon after the Israelites came into Israel.

Here is a picture of Shiloh and some of the excavations that have taken place here at Shiloh. This is a new Israeli settlement at Shiloh, a very important area, religiously. Remember that the tabernacle originally set up was there. During a battle that the Israelites had with the Philistines, the ark was taken from there down towards the coast and near an area called Aphek. There it was lost, though eventually the Philistines learned their lesson and the ark was returned to Beth Shemesh down in the southern part of Judah, off to the west near the coast.

Another thing you find in the hill country are watchtowers. And to give you an idea of how elaborate this particular watchtower is: there's somebody right up here in the watchtower. I mentioned that you've got to do something with the rocks that you dig up out of the soil. One thing you can do is build walls at the end of the terraces in order to keep the soil back and be able to plant your vines and your trees. The other thing you do is build a watchtower. Why do you want a watchtower? Well, the time that you're harvesting your goods, you want to be able to protect them, and so the watchtower serves as that. Not only watchtower, but also kind of a sleep-tower as well because during the harvest season people will actually sleep there overnight in order to protect their products.

Hill country of Manasseh is just to the north of there, and there are some major features of the Hill Country of Manasseh. First of all, we have the hills of Ebal and



Gerizim, or I should say Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim that are right by a place called Shechem, a very important city. Shechem is important again for patriarchal history. When Abraham came into the land, he stayed at Shechem. Later on when Jacob came into the land, after he was off to Mesopotamia for a while, he came back into the land again and stayed at Shechem for a while. I'll say a few more things about Shechem, but Shechem is right in between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. Also this is the connection from Shechem out to the coast, so called Nahal Shechem. "Nahal" is the Hebrew word for river, but loosely speaking it's more like a valley. As I say, it goes from Shechem, and it continues on out towards the coast. This is a major connection between Shechem and the West.

Samaria is an important area. It turned out to be the capital eventually, the final capital of the Northern Kingdom after the kingdom divided. Samaria was an isolated hill that was bought by Omri, and he was able to build his palace there.

Finally, we have the plane of Sychar, and we have the capitals of the north. Here's the plane of Sychar—that's important. It's just a little bit to the north of Shechem—that is the area where Jesus met the lady at the well. All this is happening in Manasseh.

And then I mentioned the capitals of the North. I mentioned Shechem. That was the first capital. When the kingdom was divided in the time of Rehoboam, and Jeroboam then took over the Northern Kingdom, what he did was in contrast to Jerusalem, being the capital of the South, he put his capital in the north. Of course, he wants to put it at a city that has a certain amount of history associated with it, so he puts it at Shechem, and that becomes the first northern capital. Shechem, however, is not easily protected. This Nahal Shechem, this connection to the West, not only brings in commerce, but it can also bring in armies, and as a result of that, after a little bit, what Jeroboam did was to go to Tirzah, and his next capital, which is over here a little bit to the north of Shechem, a little bit more isolated, little bit more protected.

Well, later on when Omri and Ahab come on the scene, they want a capital that is a capital. They want something that is strong, fortified, and yet has good connections with the west, with what is going on up north, especially a connection with the whole

kingdom of the Phoenicians; and so what eventually happens is Samaria, a very important city, becomes the third capital and final capital of the Northern Kingdom. That capital was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. So this again is just by way of summary of a very, very important area. First of all, you have Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim with Shechem in between and the history associated there.

One other thing I want to mention about these mountains is that after the land was taken over by Joshua and the Israelites, it was in this area at Shechem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, that the blessings and the cursings were read. They were supposed to do that when they came into the land. Joshua was instructed to do this, and he did it at Mount Gerizim and at Mount Ebal. Those who were giving the blessings were on Mount Gerizim, and those giving the curses were on Mount Ebal. So it is a very important area--Shechem and the mountains. You also have the capitals Tirzah and Samaria. You have Jesus in chapter four of John and his interaction with the woman at the well also at that particular place near Shechem. So very busy area that we have here in the Hill Country of Manasseh.

Key points in history, just by way of review: Abraham arrives at Shechem; this is Genesis chapter 12. That's where he begins his sojourn in the land that the Lord has promised him. Joshua gathers the people at Shechem, Joshua 8 and 24, for a renewal of the covenant. Joshua 24: This is the great speech that Joshua gives when he says "as for me and my house, we will follow the Lord." He commands the people and encourages the people to put away their foreign gods that they have and to follow the Lord. That all happens at Shechem.

I mentioned the movement of the capital from Shechem to Tirzah to Samaria; this is 1 Kings, chapters 14 to 16. The Phoenician influence during the time of Ahab and Jezebel is felt there. My wife, Elaine Phillips, will be giving a talk that discusses more thoroughly that particular connection.

And during the Hellenistic and Roman period I mentioned Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. I should mention also that during the Roman period at the area of Samaria that was called "Sebaste" at the time. Herod the Great built a huge temple to

Tiberius, his benefactor.

Well, I mentioned Shechem, Gerizim, and Ebal enough; let me show you some contrast. Here, not only to show you what is going on between the mountains. You have Shechem right here. Of course, it's in the middle of this modern city called Nablus at this point, but we are looking west and we are pretty much in the plain of Sycar; and we are looking west, and you see this pass right over to the coast. This is the knoll Shechem that I mentioned before. Mount Gerizim, over here Mount Ebal; part of it you can see, and this is what the situation is like in the fall. Notice the crops have been harvested and the sheep have come in to eat what's left.

Now, there's a very nice relationship between the farmer and the Shepherd. The sheep are there eating what has been left and eating some of the stubble, but the sheep pay rent, and they pay rent in the form of manure, which then becomes very helpful to the farmer when he plows the fields and plants his grains again later on in the year. So what you have is this very nice correspondence between the farmer and the shepherd. What is left by the farmer is helpful to the shepherd; and if I may use the term, what is left by the sheep is then helpful for the farmer. But this is what it looks like in the fall.

Here's what it looks like in the spring after the winter rains. Ta-da, what a transformation, huh? You can see a little bit of Mount Ebal in this particular photo. Again, the ancient site is right in here among the buildings. You can see the pass that goes off to the west. Then you see the field that is very full of flowers and certain goods and vegetables over in this area here. Well, the plain of Sycar is down below us in this flatter area that you see over here to the right. If you want to know where the tel of Shechem is--and by "tel" I mean the ancient site of Shechem--that's over here to the left. The pass is to the left of that.

We are looking north towards Tirzah, which I mentioned is just a few miles down this wadi, so called Wadi-Beida, is where Tirzah is located. And although I haven't mentioned it before, Tirzah has a nice connection right down to the Jordan valley with the so called Farah valley. But more on that later when Elaine talks about this area.

Looking north from Samaria, from the hill of Samaria, to the rest of Manasseh,

you see again it's very hilly. It's not quite as rugged as areas to the south but still very hilly, still lots of rain, lots of dew. Transportation is still easier than what you find in Judah, and it's really a comfortable area to live in. But here's the one problem: Since it's a little more open than what you have in Judah, you have greater commerce with the rest of the world and with the nations around. But it's easier for enemies to conquer Samaria than it is Judah. We find that working out in the Old Testament where the Northern Kingdom fell before the Southern Kingdom fell. Part of that, of course, is spiritual because the Southern Kingdom followed the Lord longer than what the Northern Kingdom did. But just from a geographical, historical standpoint, it is much easier to conquer the land of Samaria than what it is to conquer the land of Judah. It's much easier to traverse through the mountains of Manasseh than what it is even farther south in Ephraim, and certainly farther south in Judah.

Samaria, I've mentioned, was a palace area. Let me just say a couple things about Samaria and then we will be finished with this lecture. We read that Samaria had a glorious palace that was built by Ahab. We also read that one of the characteristics of the palace was ivory. Ivory was used for a number of items: jewelry boxes, earrings, etc. Ivory is even used today in many part of the world for those kinds of accoutrements. This is a palace area; it was strongly fortified, but interestingly enough, in the archeology, they have found a number of things that are mentioned by Amos. For example, Amos condemns the Northern Kingdom for its idolatry. A number of items, palace items, made of ivory were found in this palace area.

I mentioned that history repeats itself in a way. We had not only the palace, but we also had idolatrous worship going on in Samaria. Later on during the Roman Period, when Herod the Great was ruling the land, he wanted to honor his great benefactor in Rome. And so he built a temple there and called it Sebaste. Sebaste is the Greek name for Augustus. And this is a temple for Augustus. These are the stairs leading up to the temple of Augustus. Herod was never one to do things in a small way. Just to give you an idea of how big this temple was, I want you to concentrate on one of the column bases. This column base is actually turned upside down. But just to give you an idea of how big this

column base was, and to give you an idea of how big the temple itself must have been, we need a meter stick. And the meter stick here is my wife. Here she is stretched out on this column base. So when it came to a matter of grandeur, Herod knew how to do it. In fact, you'll see Josephus the historian tells us that the temple to Sebaste, to Augustus, was so large that 30 miles away in Caesarea, when the ships came in and the sun was low in the western horizon, they could see the glint of the grand temple that Herod had built all the way up into the hill country of Samaria.

Well, in a subsequent talk we'll pick up from here. At this point I will end the discussion of the hill country of Israel.

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