

## **Dr. Perry Phillips, Historical Geography Intro.: Session 2 – Hill Country**

This is Dr. Perry Phillips on the historical geography of Israel, lecture number two, the hill country. 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. Want to review a little bit of what we did 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.

And that brought up 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, and Egypt also put pressure on Israel. So in that way, Israel is the land between.

That's kind of the overall arching, overarching situation that we have in Israel. What we want to do is take a look at the topographical zones of Israel, and then we're 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, the Sharon plain to the north, and then the plain of Akko, which is to the north.

That's the first topographical zone. The second topographical zone, which is what we're going to be concentrating on today, is the central mountain range that goes all along this pinkish area that's like a central spine going up through the land of Israel. Then we have the Rift Valley, this deep 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 through the Red Sea and eventually even down into Africa, down through Kenya and Tanzania.

Over to the east, we have the Transjordanian Mountains, which is a high ridge that is east of the Rift Valley. As we mentioned last time, you get rain that falls on the Transjordanian Mountains, and so that area is fairly rich agriculturally. And then finally, we have the Eastern Desert, and 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, and Transjordan 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 in context.

There's Jerusalem, excuse me, nicely marked. And the Judean hill country is to the south, with the main city there being Hebron. Over to the north, you have the hill country of Ephraim, and we'll get into a little bit more detail there as to what's going on.

And north of there, we have the hill country of Manasseh. And then right in between the hill country of Judah and the hill country of Ephraim, we have Benjamin. And I'm calling that the Central Benjamin Plateau, for reasons that we'll see.

It's a little flatter and a little lower than the hill country to the south and the hill country to the north, and we'll see why 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 hard limestone.

Now, any kind of limestone, if somebody were to bounce a piece off your head, you would think it would be pretty hard. But limestone comes in various categories, and 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 very rich.

The other thing we find about the hill country that is composed of this hard limestone is that we have a lot of springs in the area. In the valleys, the water, the groundwater, is able to come out in springs. And we read about this in Deuteronomy chapter 8 and in Deuteronomy chapter 11.

We will not go over those verses, but those verses describe the quality of the land, where these things, good soil, valleys, and springs, and being able to dig copper out of the soil and to dig iron out of the rocks, are also mentioned. Topographically, as I mentioned, we have ridges, we have very deep valleys, and we have natural terracing. I will 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 does not travel in the valleys because they are very narrow and very deep. On the other hand, one does not try to cross the valleys, so how does one travel in the hill country? One travels along ridges, continuous ridges from one place to another. And then agriculture.

Agriculture is on the terracing of the hill country, the terracing of this hard limestone, and what you find primarily is olive trees and vines. But in between, you can get some other things growing, like palm granites, and sometimes some wheat and barley is planted as well. Culturally, these areas are more isolated because of the difficulty in traveling.

Well, here's 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.

Remember when we first went to Israel back in the 70s, and we saw this coming up from Jerusalem, and we were wondering, what in the world is going on here? It was as though some giant had carved out steps on the hill. Imagine one sort of bounding up and down these steps. Actually, this is a natural phenomenon that occurs in 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. 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 the terraces, and a little wall is built there in order to hold the soil back. So you do have the natural phenomenon of terracing that occurs just geologically, but then you also have the farmer who is enhancing that by putting the rocks together as a wall that holds back the soil, upon which he can plant his vineyards and his olive trees. Notice the road also is going along the ridge, and if you look very carefully, you will see a little village appear on top of the ridge as well.

And why on top of the ridge? Because that's where the communication is 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? I'll mention Jerusalem a little later, but Jerusalem is actually in the land of Benjamin. But the main city is Hebron in the Judean Hill Country. That is where Abraham's three visitors were from, or visited him when he was there.

That's where he purchased his land to bury his wife, Sarah. It was a city of refuge, and it was King David's first capital. 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 is where he was anointed as king by Samuel.

But it is also where Jesus was born, the greater king of David's descent. And another place I want to mention is Tekoa. This is important because it's on the edge of the wilderness.

It is the hometown of Amos, but it is also 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.

And again, it's right on the border of Judah, but it really is in the tribal area of Benjamin. There's Bethlehem, about five miles to the south. Hebron is about 10 miles south of there.

And then another city that I didn't mention, but since it's used as the southernmost city of Israel, when we talk about Israel being from Dan to Beersheba, Beersheba is about 20 miles south of Hebron. And the other areas that I mentioned, Ziph, Carmel, and Maon, are there. And 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. And first of all, it is very strategic.

It is a plateau area. It's a little flatter than the hills around. And 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.

And in a sense, it's like a saddle point. And what we'll see as a result of this saddle point is that it becomes the most reasonable way to move east and west from the area of Transjordan 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.

And 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 their 40-year wandering. And Jericho is considered the back door to 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 the boundary with Ephraim. Benjamin, Bethel's important city in connection with patriarchal history, both in the coming into the land of Abraham and then later on Jacob as well.

Geba and Mikdash say a few things about them. An important battle took place there between Saul and the Philistines. Say a little bit about that.

Major cities right in the central of Benjamin are Gibeah, Ramah, and Mitzpah. Gibeah is where Saul's palace was located. This was his hometown.

Well, I use palace in quotes because it wasn't very elaborate. Gibeon, the great Gibeonite city, along with Beirut, Kefirah, and Kiryat Yerim. Remember, Joshua fought a big battle to protect Gibeon from surrounding city-states that had ganged up on it.

And 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 the central Benjamin area.

Well, let me just say a few things about history. Some historical events that occurred in this area. I mentioned the conquest.

The Gibeonite cities and their location. This is in Joshua chapters 9 and 10. And 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 who had come in under Joshua. Transition to the monarchy. We find Samuel in the central Benjamin area.

His hometown was Ramah. Very, very important city strategically, but also the hometown of Samuel as he judged the people of Israel before King David came. And King Saul before that.

I mentioned that Saul's hometown was in Gibeah, sometimes called Gibeah of Saul. I know it's confusing because there is a town called Gibeah. There's one called Gibeah.

There's one called Geba. And it's hard to keep all those straight. But all of them are based on a Hebrew root word, 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 in the kingdom in this area called Ramah in Benjamin, which is the crossroads of the major north-south and east-west routes. Well, OK, enough of that.

Let's try to see how all these things tie together. Central Benjamin Plateau. See the tribal area of Benjamin as it is outlined here.

Jerusalem to the south. And I've added a couple of other cities in there. Gibeah of Saul, which is just to the north, and Ramah, which is a little bit to the north of there.

If you want distances, Gibeah is about three miles from Jerusalem, maybe two and a half miles from Jerusalem. So that gives you the scale of what we're talking about here. This is the Central Benjamin Plateau.

I'll show you a picture of it. It's a flatter area, and it is comprised of the cities of, going from north to south clockwise, Mitzvah to the north, Geba to the east, Gibeah to the south, and Gibeon to the west. One of the great Gibeonite cities.

And that is an extremely contested area because of the crossroads that meet right in Central Benjamin. Over to the west, as I've outlined here, you have the Gibeonite cities that I have mentioned before. And so you have a block of people that are ensconced in the western part of Benjamin.

And of course, they're going to have quite a bit to say about who goes back and forth, east and west, through that particular area. Second Kings, chapter 15, verses 16 to 22, repeated in Second Chronicles, chapter 16. We read about the northern king, Bathia, who came down and fortified the city of Ramah.

Now you say, so what? Well, here's a so what. You notice that Ramah is right along the north-south route and right along the east-west route. That's where they meet.

And when this northern king came down and fortified that area against Asa, who was the southern king, King Asa in Jerusalem realized that his whole northern approach had been cut off. And so instead of fighting the war against Bathia, what he did was send a note off to one of the Aramaic kings, the Syrian kings, to come down and attack Bathia from the north. Bathia eventually had to relinquish this area of Ramah.

And Asa then took the fortifications of Ramah and moved them up to Mitzpah, thereby opening this very critical juncture at Ramah. So that Jerusalem would be able to 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.

This is one of the lifetime photo ops that we had one morning when we were in a high area right by Gibeon, and there was dew in the valley, 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 came 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 is a great pool at Gibeon, perhaps a 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've 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.

I think you can see from the topography that this is a very difficult area to traverse. We are looking east. This is Wadi Mukmas, and you're looking all the way out, and 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 Transjordan.

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 Mikmas, up here. The Israelites are here, and we have that very harrowing story of Jonathan and his armor-bearer in 1 Samuel chapter 14, and what Jonathan and his armor-bearer are able to do is climb up along the rugged ridge that we have towards Mikmas. 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 as 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 seven miles or so.

Rugged topography like Judah's. Whatever I can say for Judah, I can say for Ephraim, except to say that the mountains there actually reach a little higher elevation than 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 to Hebron, we're up around 3,000 feet again. So, as I said, we have the saddle point in Benjamin. One of the major cities in Benjamin is Shiloh, which is located in the eastern part. Shiloh became important because it was 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 was there, and during a battle that the Israelites had with the Philistines, the tabernacle was taken from there down towards the coast near an area called Aphek, and there it was lost, though eventually the Philistines learned their lesson, and the ark was returned to Bethshemesh down in the southern part of Judah, off to the west near the coast.

Another thing you find in the hill country is watchtowers, and to give you an idea of how elaborate this particular watchtower is, there is 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 a 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. The hill country at 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 Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, which 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 in Mesopotamia for a while, he came back into the land again, and he stayed at Shechem for a while. I'll say a few more things about Shechem, but Shechem is right in between Mount Ebal and Mount 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, and as I say, it goes from Shechem and it continues on out towards the coast. And 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. And Samaria was an isolated hill that was bought by Ahab, and he was able to build his palace there. Sorry, it was Omri, his father, who bought that.

And finally, we have the plain of Sychar, and we have the capitals of the north. Here's the plain of Sychar. That's important.

It is 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. And, of course, he wants to put it in 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, a little bit more protected.

But 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 their connection with the whole kingdom of the Phoenicians. And so what eventually happens is that 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 BC. So this, again, just by way of summary, 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 curses 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, with those who were giving the blessings on Mount Gerizim, and those giving the curses on Mount Ebal.

So a very important area with Shechem is the mountains. You also have the capitals, Tirza and Samaria, and you also have Jesus in chapter 4 of John and his interaction with the woman at the well, also at that particular place. So a 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 Joshua 24, for 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.

And he commands the people and encourages the people to put away the 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 Tirza 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 that particular connection more thoroughly.

And during the Hellenistic and Roman period, I mentioned Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. I should also mention that during the Roman period in the area of Samaria, which was called Sebastia at that 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 is right here. Of course, it's right 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 Sychar. And we are looking west, and you see this pass right over to the coast. And this is the Nahal 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 field 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 is helpful for 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 see a little bit more 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.

And 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 Sychar is down below us, this flatter area that you see over here to the right. If you want to know where the Tell of Shechem, by Tell 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 Beta, where Tirzah is located. And although I haven't mentioned it before, Tirzah has a nice connection right down to the Jordan Valley with so-called the 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 a little easier than what you find in Judah, and it's really a very 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, with the nations around, but it's easier for enemies to conquer Samaria than what it is Judah.

And 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 the northern kingdom did. But just from a geographical, historical standpoint, it is much easier to conquer the land of Samaria than it is to conquer the land of Judah.

It's much easier to traverse through the mountains of Manasseh than it is even farther south in Ephraim and certainly farther south in Judah. Well, Samaria, I've mentioned, was a palace area. Let me just say a couple of 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, such as jewelry boxes, earrings, etc.

Ivory is even used today in many parts of the world for those kinds of accouterments. This is the palace area. It was strongly fortified, but interestingly enough, in

archaeology, they have found a number of things that are mentioned by Amos, for example, who condemns the northern kingdom for its idolatry.

A number of 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.

And 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 that lead up to the temple of Augustus. And 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. And here she is stretched out across the column base. So when it came to a matter of grandeur, Herod knew how to do it.

In fact, Josephus, the historian, tells us that the temple to Sebastian, to Sebaste, to Augustus, was so large that 30 miles away in Caesarea, when the ships came in, and the sun was low on the western horizon, they could see the glint of the grand temple that Herod had built all the way up into the hill country in Sebaste. Well, in a subsequent talk, we'll pick up from here, and at this point, I will end the discussion of the hill country of Israel.

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