

Dr. Perry Phillips, Historical Geography, Session 1 – The Land Between

Abstract:

Dr. Perry Phillips introduces the **historical geography of Israel** by defining the region as a **vulnerable "land between"** characterized by its position between the **Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert**. This unique placement creates distinct **weather and rainfall patterns**, making the inhabitants entirely dependent on **divine provision** rather than the stable irrigation systems found in Egypt or Mesopotamia. Historically, this small territory served as a **geopolitical crossroads**, facing constant pressure and cultural influence from both local **desert tribes** and massive **international empires**. Phillips argues that the land's environmental and political fragility was intentional, serving as a **testing ground of faith** where survival required spiritual obedience. Ultimately, the text illustrates how Israel's **physical landscape** and volatile climate were designed to reinforce a **continuous reliance on God** for both sustenance and protection.

Briefing Document:

Briefing Doc: Israel as the Land Between

Executive Summary

The land of Israel, though geographically small—comparable in size to Vermont or New Jersey—occupies a position of disproportionate significance in biblical history. Functioning as a "land between," it serves as a geographical, climatic, and political crossroads. Unlike its neighbors in Egypt and Mesopotamia, which rely on river-based irrigation, Israel is uniquely dependent on rainfall, a characteristic the biblical text frames as a "testing ground of faith." The region's survival is inextricably linked to its inhabitants' spiritual obedience, with weather patterns and foreign invasions serving as instruments of divine discipline or favor.

Geographical and Climatic Context

Israel is situated at the intersection of the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Saudi Arabian Desert to the east. This positioning creates a unique interplay between cool, moist sea air and hot, arid desert breezes.

Daily Weather Patterns

- **Sea Breezes:** On a standard day, rising air in the desert draws in a cooling sea breeze from the Mediterranean. This breeze typically reaches the coast (Tel Aviv) by 10:00 AM, Jerusalem by noon, and Amman by late afternoon.
- **The Khamsin (Shurav):** Periodically, the sea breeze is blocked, allowing hot, dusty, and strong desert winds to dominate. This weather event, known in Arabic as a *khamsin* and in Hebrew as a *shurav*, is used metaphorically in scripture (Jeremiah 4:11–12) to describe impending political judgment. Unlike gentle winds used for winnowing grain, the *khamsin* is too powerful for cleansing and causes significant distress.

Rainfall and Elevation

Israel's agriculture is defined by "rain from heaven" rather than irrigation. Rainfall levels vary significantly based on geography:

- **North and High Elevation:** Receives the most rain. Mount Hermon averages roughly 25 inches, and Jerusalem averages 22 inches.
- **Coast and Elevation:** Mount Carmel receives over 20 inches due to its proximity to the sea.
- **South and Low Elevation:** Rainfall decreases sharply. Beersheba averages 8 inches—the critical threshold for sustainable agriculture.
- **The Rift Valley:** Jericho, located north of the Dead Sea, averages only 5 inches annually.
- **Transjordan:** Eastern mountains can receive up to 30 inches.

The Fertile Crescent: Rain vs. Irrigation

Israel is a distinct component of the Fertile Crescent. While the Mesopotamian region (Tigris and Euphrates) and Egypt (Nile Delta) rely on predictable irrigation systems, Israel is characterized by mountains and valleys that depend entirely on seasonal rains.

- **Egyptian Irrigation:** Described in Deuteronomy 11:10 as watering a garden "by foot," possibly referring to water wheels or manual channel-digging in sandy soil.
- **The Biblical Promise:** The land is described as one that "drinks rain from heaven," with the "latter rains" (spring) and "early rains" (autumn) provided by God as a reward for faithfulness.

Political Dynamics of the "Land Between"

Israel has historically been a pathway for international powers and a site of conflict between cultures emerging from the sea and the desert.

Influences from the Sea

Powers arriving from the Mediterranean are characterized as more cosmopolitan, progressive, and liberal.

- **Key Entities:** Phoenicians, Philistines, Greeks (Alexander the Great), Romans (Pompey), Crusaders, the British (General Allenby), the French (Napoleon), and Germans.
- **Impact:** The Philistines dominated early Israelite history through superior iron metallurgy, forcing Israelites to sharpen tools at Philistine stations. The Romans later exerted total political control, as seen in the New Testament.

Influences from the Desert

Powers arriving from the east and south are characterized as more provincial, traditional, and conservative.

- **Key Entities:** Moabites, Edomites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Midianites, and Kenites.
- **Impact:** These groups often made raids or sneak attacks. The Midianites, for example, are described as a "swarm of locusts" that once controlled the land from the Jordan Valley to Gaza.

International Crossroads

Israel sits at the center of massive international powers, serving as a buffer and a pathway between:

- **South:** Egypt.
- **North/East:** Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia (modern-day Iraq and Iran).
- **West:** Greece and Rome.

The Testing Ground of Faith

The central thesis of the geographical study of Israel is that the land is an intentional "testing ground of faith." Its "iffy" nature—unpredictable rain and exposure to powerful neighbors—demands constant dependence on God.

Factor	Dependency	Biblical Implication
Water	Dependence on rain and dew rather than steady rivers.	Drought serves as a sign of divine displeasure (Deuteronomy 11).
Security	Vulnerability to sea, desert, and international powers.	God uses enemies (e.g., Shishak of Egypt, the Assyrians, Nebuchadnezzar) to discipline unfaithfulness.
Ecology	Precarious agriculture (8-inch rainfall line).	God's favor is manifested through "grain, new wine, and oil."

Ultimately, Israel was not chosen for its security or resources—such as oil—but for its role in forcing a relationship between the people and God. As noted by Dr. Perry Phillips, the land's physical characteristics ensure that to live there, one must be faithful.

Study Guide: Israel as the Land Between

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the historical geography of Israel, focusing on its unique position as a "land between" various geographical, climatological, and political forces. The material is based on the lectures of Dr. Perry Phillips.

Part 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences, based on the provided text.

1. How does the physical size of Israel compare to regions within the United States?
 2. What is the primary difference between the agricultural methods of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian regions compared to the land of Israel?
 3. Describe the daily wind pattern that typically occurs in Israel due to its proximity to the sea and the desert.
 4. What is a *khamsin* (or *shurav*), and how does it affect the daily life and agricultural practices of the region?
 5. According to Deuteronomy 11, what is the spiritual significance of rainfall in the land of Israel?
 6. What is the significance of the "eight-inch" rainfall line, specifically in the context of Beersheba?
 7. How do elevation and geography generally dictate rainfall patterns across the land of Israel?
 8. What are the general cultural and political characteristics associated with the "sea peoples" who have influenced Israel throughout history?
 9. Contrast the characteristics of the "sea peoples" with those of the "desert dwellers" who have historically pressured Israel.
 10. Why did Dr. Perry Phillips, citing Jim Monson, refer to the land of Israel as the "testing ground of faith"?
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Part 2: Answer Key

1. **How does the physical size of Israel compare to regions within the United States?** Israel is a very small piece of real estate, approximately the size of the state of Vermont or New Jersey. Despite its small size, it occupies a

significant role in biblical history due to its location at a crossroads of the Middle East.

2. **What is the primary difference between the agricultural methods of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian regions compared to the land of Israel?** Agriculture in Mesopotamia and Egypt relied heavily on irrigation from major river systems like the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile. In contrast, the land of Israel is described in Deuteronomy as a land of mountains and valleys that "drinks rain from heaven," making it dependent on rainfall rather than irrigation canals.
3. **Describe the daily wind pattern that typically occurs in Israel due to its proximity to the sea and the desert.** As the sun heats the desert, the air rises, causing a cool, moist sea breeze to move in from the Mediterranean to take its place. This breeze typically reaches the coast around 10:00 AM, Jerusalem by noon, and the Transjordan region by the late afternoon, providing essential cooling to the region.
4. **What is a *khamsin* (or *shurav*), and how does it affect the daily life and agricultural practices of the region?** A *khamsin* is a period when the cooling sea breeze is blocked, and hot, dry, dusty air blows in from the desert instead. This wind makes life miserable and prevents agricultural tasks like winnowing, where a gentle breeze is needed to separate light chaff from heavier grain.
5. **According to Deuteronomy 11, what is the spiritual significance of rainfall in the land of Israel?** The text indicates that rainfall is directly tied to the people's obedience to God's commands; faithful service results in autumn and spring rains for grain, wine, and oil. Conversely, turning to other gods results in the Lord "shutting the heavens" so that the ground yields no produce, leading the people to perish from the land.
6. **What is the significance of the "eight-inch" rainfall line, specifically in the context of Beersheba?** Eight inches of annual rainfall serves as the crossover point for viable agriculture; regions receiving eight inches or more can sustain reasonable farming, while those below are quite difficult to cultivate. Beersheba sits at this extreme, receiving approximately eight inches of rain per year.

7. **How do elevation and geography generally dictate rainfall patterns across the land of Israel?** Rainfall generally increases as one moves farther north, farther west toward the coast, or higher in elevation. Conversely, rainfall decreases as one moves south, east toward the desert, or down in elevation toward the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea.
 8. **What are the general cultural and political characteristics associated with the "sea peoples" who have influenced Israel throughout history?** Peoples coming from the sea, such as the Philistines, Greeks, Romans, and later European powers, are characterized as more cosmopolitan, progressive, and liberal. These groups often brought advanced technology, such as the iron metallurgy possessed by the Philistines.
 9. **Contrast the characteristics of the "sea peoples" with those of the "desert dwellers" who have historically pressured Israel.** While sea-based cultures were often cosmopolitan, the desert dwellers—such as the Moabites, Edomites, and Midianites—tended to be more provincial, conservative, and traditional. These groups frequently exerted pressure on Israel through raids or sneak attacks, as seen during the time of the Judges and King Jehoshaphat.
 10. **Why did Dr. Perry Phillips, citing Jim Monson, refer to the land of Israel as the "testing ground of faith"?** Israel is considered a testing ground because its "iffy" nature requires the inhabitants to depend constantly on God for basic necessities like rain and dew. Living there successfully is contingent upon faithfulness, as God promises protection from both local and international enemies only if the people remain obedient.
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Part 3: Essay Questions

1. **The Crossroads of Empires:** Analyze Israel's position as a "pathway between the nations." How did its location between major international powers like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome shape its political and spiritual history?
2. **Climatological Theology:** Discuss the theological implications of Israel's weather patterns. How do the "early and latter rains," the *khamsin*, and the

dew serve as both physical realities and spiritual metaphors in the biblical text?

3. **The Irrigation vs. Rain Paradox:** Contrast the "security" of Egypt's irrigation-based agriculture with the "vulnerability" of Israel's rain-dependent agriculture. Why would God choose a land for His people that was less naturally secure than the land they left?
4. **Cultural Influences from the Periphery:** Examine the dichotomy between the "Sea Peoples" and the "Desert Dwellers." How did these two distinct cultural forces create a unique social environment for the Israelites to navigate?
5. **The Geography of Obedience:** Using Deuteronomy 11 as a foundation, explain how the physical geography and climate of Israel functioned as a mechanism for divine discipline and reward.

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Arable Land	Land that is suitable for agriculture and the growing of crops.
Dew	Moisture that condenses from cool, wet sea breezes at night; a vital source of water for plants in the arid climate of Israel.
Early and Latter Rains	Also referred to as autumn and spring rains, these are the seasonal rains essential for gathering grain, new wine, and oil in Israel.
Fertile Crescent	A crescent-shaped region of arable land in the Middle East stretching from Mesopotamia through the Levant and down into Egypt.
Khamsin / Shurav	Arabic and Hebrew terms, respectively, for a hot, dry, dusty wind blowing off the desert that occurs when the normal sea breeze is blocked.

Levant	The region along the eastern Mediterranean shores, including modern-day Israel, Lebanon, and Syria.
Rift Valley	Also known as the Jordan Valley, it is a deep geological depression containing the Jordan River and the Dead Sea; it is characterized by extremely low rainfall.
Sea Breeze	A daily cooling wind that moves from the Mediterranean Sea toward the desert to replace rising hot air.
Testing Ground of Faith	A concept describing Israel as a place where survival and prosperity are dependent upon a relationship with God and obedience to His commands.
Winnowing	The agricultural process of throwing grain into the air so the wind blows away the lighter chaff, leaving the heavier grain behind.