

# Dr. Perry Phillips, Historical Geography

## Session 2 – Hill Country

### Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Perry Phillips provides a detailed **geographical and historical examination** of Israel's central **hill country**. He identifies the region as a "land between" major global powers and describes its unique **topography**, which includes the coastal plains, the **Rift Valley**, and the rugged central mountain range. The text highlights how the **hard limestone geology** influenced ancient travel patterns along ridges and shaped agricultural practices like **natural terracing**. Key biblical locations such as **Hebron, Jerusalem, and Shechem** are discussed to illustrate the strategic importance of various tribal territories. Ultimately, Phillips demonstrates how the physical landscape of the **Judean and Samaritan hills** directly impacted the political and spiritual history of the Israelite people.

### Briefing Document:

Historical Geography of the Israelite Hill Country: A Strategic and Topographical Analysis

#### Executive Summary

The central hill country of Israel serves as the geographical and historical spine of the region, defined by its rugged "hard limestone" geology and its position as a "land between" international empires. Characterized by deep valleys and natural terracing, the region necessitated travel along mountain ridges and dictated a unique agricultural economy focused on olives and viticulture.

The hill country is divided into three primary sectors: Judah to the south, Ephraim in the center, and Manasseh to the north, with the Central Benjamin Plateau serving as a critical, low-lying "saddle point" and crossroads. While the Judean hills offered isolation and protection for the southern kingdom, the more open topography of Manasseh and Samaria facilitated greater international commerce but also increased vulnerability to conquest. Historically, the region served as the stage for

patriarchal sojourns, the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, and the evolution of northern capitals from Shechem to the fortified heights of Samaria.

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### Topographical Context: The Five Zones of Israel

Israel is defined by five distinct topographical zones running roughly north to south. The hill country, or the central mountain range, represents the second zone and the primary focus of historical Israelite activity.

<b>Zone</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Key Features</b>
<b>Coastal Plain</b>	Western strip along the Mediterranean.	Includes the Philistine, Sharon, and Akko plains.
<b>Central Mountain Range</b>	The "central spine" of the land.	Pinkish area on maps; contains Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh.
<b>Rift Valley</b>	A deep depression extending from Turkey to Africa.	Contains the Jordan River and the Dead Sea (lowest point on earth).
<b>Transjordanian Mountains</b>	High ridge east of the Rift Valley.	Agriculturally rich due to high rainfall.
<b>Eastern Desert</b>	Arid zone east of the Transjordanian ridge.	Boundary of the habitable land.

- **Cis-Jordan:** The area west of the Jordan Valley.
  - **Transjordan:** The area east of the Jordan Valley.
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### Geology and Agricultural Economy

The hill country is geologically defined by **hard limestone**, which influences everything from travel to architecture.

### Geological Features

- **Soil and Water:** Hard limestone erodes into a rich red soil. Unlike softer stones, it allows groundwater to emerge as springs in valleys, a feature highlighted in Deuteronomy 8 and 11.
- **Natural Terracing:** The limestone breaks down into natural "steps." Farmers enhance this phenomenon by building stone walls to hold back soil, creating flat surfaces for planting.
- **Watchtowers:** Surplus stones from fields are used to build watchtowers. These served as security outposts and temporary residences for farmers during the harvest to protect their goods.

#### Agricultural Practices

- **Primary Crops:** The terrain is best suited for olive trees and grapevines. Pomegranates, wheat, and barley are often interplanted.
- **The Shepherd-Farmer Symbiosis:** In the fall, sheep graze on crop stubble. This benefits the shepherd with food for the flock and the farmer with manure, which acts as fertilizer for the next planting season.

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#### Regional Analysis of the Hill Country

##### 1. The Judean Hill Country (South)

The Judean region is characterized by high elevations (approx. 3,000 feet) and relative isolation.

- **Hebron:** The primary city of the Judean hills. It served as Abraham's residence and burial site, a city of refuge, and King David's first capital.
- **Bethlehem:** Located five miles south of Jerusalem; the birthplace of David and Jesus.
- **Tekoa:** Situated on the edge of the wilderness; home of the prophet Amos and a refuge for David when fleeing King Saul.

##### 2. The Central Benjamin Plateau (Strategic Crossroads)

Located between Judah and Ephraim, Benjamin is a "saddle point"—flatter and lower (approx. 2,800 feet) than the surrounding mountains. This makes it the most critical strategic juncture in the land.

- **The Crossroads:** This is where the major north-south "ridge route" meets the primary east-west routes connecting the Transjordan to the coast.
- **Strategic Cities:**
  - **Jerusalem:** Technically located within Benjamin on the border of Judah.
  - **Jericho:** Known as the "back door" to Jerusalem.
  - **Gezer:** Known as the "front door" to Jerusalem from the west.
  - **Ramah:** A highly contested city at the junction of the north-south and east-west routes. King Asa of Judah famously moved fortifications from Ramah to Mitzpah to secure Jerusalem's northern approach.
  - **Gibeon:** A major city with a sophisticated water system (a "great pool"). It was the site of a significant battle involving Joshua.

### 3. The Hill Country of Ephraim (Central)

Ephraim features rugged topography similar to Judah but reaches slightly higher elevations (3,000 feet).

- **Shiloh:** Located in eastern Ephraim, it was the initial site where the Tabernacle was established after the Israelite conquest.
- **Isolation:** The deep valleys of Ephraim made travel difficult, leading to more isolated cultural development.

### 4. The Hill Country of Manasseh and Samaria (North)

The northernmost section of the hill country is more open and easier to traverse, facilitating commerce but increasing military risk.

- **Shechem:** Situated between **Mount Ebal** (mountain of curses) and **Mount Gerizim** (mountain of blessings). It was the site of Abraham's first sojourn and Joshua's covenant renewal.

- **Evolution of Capitals:** The Northern Kingdom moved its capital three times to find the optimal balance of geography and security:
    1. **Shechem:** The first capital; lacked easy defense.
    2. **Tirzah:** More isolated and protected.
    3. **Samaria:** The final capital, built on an isolated hill by Omri. It was highly fortified and showed significant Phoenician influence under Ahab and Jezebel.
  - **Vulnerability:** Because Manasseh is more accessible than the rugged south, the Northern Kingdom was more susceptible to foreign influence and was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC, long before the fall of Judah.
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#### Historical and Archaeological Significance

The Source Context highlights several key archaeological findings that corroborate the biblical narrative:

- **Ivory in Samaria:** Excavations in the palace area of Samaria uncovered numerous ivory items (jewelry boxes, accouterments), aligning with the biblical prophet Amos's descriptions of the kingdom's luxury and idolatry.
- **Herodian Grandeur:** During the Roman period, Herod the Great rebuilt Samaria as **Sebaste** (Greek for Augustus). He constructed a temple to Augustus so large its glint could reportedly be seen from Caesarea, 30 miles away.
- **Gibeon Water System:** The "great pool" and a stepped water system at Gibeon provide physical evidence of the city's importance as a fortified center.

#### Conclusion: Geography as Destiny

The geography of the hill country dictated the political and spiritual history of Israel. The rugged ridges of Judah provided a defensive shield that preserved the southern kingdom, while the strategic "saddle" of Benjamin became the site of its most significant battles. In the north, the accessible valleys of Manasseh fostered a

kingdom that was economically vibrant but militarily and spiritually vulnerable to the surrounding nations.

## **Study Guide:**

### Historical Geography of Israel: The Hill Country

This study guide explores the central mountain range of Israel, often referred to as the "Hill Country." Based on the lectures of Dr. Perry Phillips, this document examines the topographical, geological, and historical significance of this central arena, including the regions of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh.

#### Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions based on the provided text. Each response should be approximately two to three sentences.

- 1. What are the five topographical zones of Israel mentioned in the lecture?**
- 2. Describe the geological composition of the hill country and its resulting soil.**
- 3. Why is travel in the hill country generally restricted to ridges rather than valleys?**
- 4. How do farmers in the hill country enhance the natural geological terracing for agriculture?**
- 5. What is the strategic significance of the Central Benjamin Plateau?**
- 6. Why is Jericho referred to as the "back door" to Jerusalem, and who is noted for using this route?**
- 7. What historical and religious significance does the city of Shiloh hold in the hill country of Ephraim?**
- 8. Describe the movement of the northern kingdom's capital through different cities in Manasseh.**

9. **What is the "mutually beneficial" relationship described between farmers and shepherds in the fall?**
  10. **How did Herod the Great honor his benefactor in the city of Samaria (Sebaste)?**
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#### Part II: Answer Key

1. The five topographical zones are the Coastal Plain (including the Philistine, Sharon, and Akko plains), the Central Mountain Range, the Rift Valley (the lowest point on earth), the Transjordanian Mountains, and the Eastern Desert. These zones define the geographical diversity of the region.
2. The hill country is composed of "hard limestone," which is resistant to erosion but eventually breaks down into a rich red soil. This soil is highly fertile and supports the growth of various crops, particularly olive trees and vines.
3. Travel is difficult because the valleys are very narrow and deep, making them impractical for transit or crossing. Consequently, communication and travel routes are established along continuous ridges where movement and visibility are more manageable.
4. Farmers clear rocks from the soil and stack them to create walls at the edges of natural limestone terraces. This process stabilizes the soil, prevents erosion, and creates flat areas suitable for planting vineyards and olive groves.
5. The Central Benjamin Plateau acts as a "saddle point" that is lower and flatter than the surrounding mountains. It serves as a vital crossroads where the major north-south ridge route meets the primary east-west routes connecting Transjordan to the coast.
6. Jericho is considered the "back door" because it serves as the entry point from the Jordan Valley up into the mountains toward Jerusalem. The text notes that the Israelites entered the land through Jericho, and Jesus used this same ascent during his final journey to Jerusalem.
7. Shiloh was a major religious center where the Tabernacle was set up shortly after the Israelites arrived in the land. It remained a site of significant spiritual

importance until the Ark of the Covenant was lost to the Philistines during a battle near Aphek.

8. The northern capital first resided at Shechem for its historical prestige but moved to the more protected Tirzah because Shechem was vulnerable to western armies. Finally, the capital was moved to Samaria, an isolated and strongly fortified hill that offered better connections to the Phoenician north.
9. After the fall harvest, shepherds bring their sheep into the fields to eat the leftover stubble. In return, the sheep "pay rent" by providing manure, which fertilizes the soil for the farmer's next planting season.
10. Herod built a massive temple dedicated to Augustus (Sebaste being the Greek name for Augustus) on the hill of Samaria. This grand structure featured enormous columns and was so large that the sun reflecting off it could be seen by ships 30 miles away in Caesarea.

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### Part III: Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Use the provided source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **Topography and Defense:** Analyze how the geographical features of Judah and Manasseh influenced their respective vulnerabilities to foreign invasion. Contrast the ruggedness of the south with the more "open" nature of the north.
2. **The Strategic Crossroads of Benjamin:** Discuss why the tribal area of Benjamin was the most contested region in Israel's history. Include references to the "saddle point," major routes, and specific biblical conflicts such as the struggle between King Asa and King Baasha.
3. **Agricultural Adaptation:** Explain how the inhabitants of the hill country adapted their agricultural practices to the specific geological features of hard limestone. Detail the roles of terracing, water systems, and watchtowers in their society.
4. **Patriarchal and Monarchical Significance of Shechem:** Trace the historical importance of Shechem from the arrival of Abraham to the division of the

kingdom. Why did various leaders choose this specific location for covenants and capitals despite its tactical weaknesses?

5. **The "Land Between" Concept:** Using the hill country as a focal point, discuss Dr. Phillips' description of Israel as "the land between." How did proximity to international empires in Mesopotamia and Egypt shape the historical geography of the central mountain range?

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#### Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Cis-Jordan</b>	The geographical area located to the west of the Jordan Valley.
<b>Transjordan</b>	The high ridge and plateau area located to the east of the Jordan Valley and Rift Valley.
<b>Rift Valley</b>	A deep geological depression running through Israel, starting in Turkey and extending to the Dead Sea and eventually Africa.
<b>Hard Limestone</b>	The primary geological component of the hill country; it erodes slowly into rich red soil and creates natural terracing.
<b>Saddle Point</b>	A topographical term for the Central Benjamin Plateau, describing its lower elevation relative to the mountains of Judah and Ephraim.
<b>Nahal</b>	The Hebrew word for a river, often used to describe a valley that may carry water (e.g., Nahal Shechem).
<b>Tell</b>	An archaeological term referring to an ancient site composed of built-up layers of historical occupation (e.g., the Tell of Shechem).
<b>Natural Terracing</b>	The step-like geological formation characteristic of hard limestone erosion in the hill country.
<b>Watchtower</b>	A stone structure built in fields to protect crops during harvest and provide a place for farmers to sleep and guard their products.

**Sebaste** The Greek name for Augustus; also the name of the Roman-era city built at the site of Samaria by Herod the Great.

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**Central Spine** A metaphor for the central mountain range that runs north-to-south through the land of Israel.

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**Ivory Palace** The luxurious residence in Samaria built by King Ahab, noted for its archaeological remains of ivory accouterments and jewelry boxes.

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