

T5P1: Satellite Photograph of the Territory of Ancient Israel and Neighbors

National Aeronautics and Space Administration



Many key features of the landscape of ancient Israel and its neighbors become apparent in this photograph taken from the earth-orbiting Space Shuttle Challenger in 1984. (The map coordinates for the center of this slide are 32.5 degrees north latitude and 35.5 degrees east longitude. North is at the top of the image.)

The crisp line of the Mediterranean coast shows up very distinctly, extending almost directly southward from Phoenicia (modern southern Lebanon) in the upper third of the slide until it finally veers west—at the bottom of the slide—toward Egypt. The coastal plain of the southern Levant is the westernmost of the four basic geographical zones of Palestine, which break down roughly into parallel north-south strips of territory. The Way of the Sea (Isaiah 9:1; Latin *Via Maris*), a major international highway, began in Egypt and then followed the line of the coastal plain up to the Jezreel Valley (see below), where it turned inland. The most prominent occupants of the southern coastal plain were the Philistines (see HB48: Egyptian Depiction of Philistines from Medinet Habu; HB49: Philistine Pottery; HB55: Anthropoid Clay Coffin from Beth-Shean).

A significant exception to the predominantly north-south orientation of Palestine's geography is the Mt.

Carmel mountain range, which begins near the promontory or cape (the site of modern Haifa) visible in this slide on the coastline's midpoint, and extends inland to the southeast, paralleling the fertile and strategically important Jezreel Valley all the way to the Jordan River. The Jezreel Valley provided a natural communication route connecting the coastal Way of the Sea with the Jordan Valley and, farther east and north, with Damascus and ultimately Mesopotamia. (On this slide, Damascus's location is marked by the cloudy blue-black area at the halfway point of an imaginary line drawn from the Sea of Galilee [see below] to the upper right-hand corner of the map.)

The second major north-south geographical zone—the central mountain range—is bisected by the Carmel Mountains and Jezreel Valley (see HB101: Megiddo, Aerial View). To the north of the Jezreel Valley lie the gentler hills of southern Galilee; south of the Jezreel Valley are the low but rugged limestone hills known as the central bill country. The central mountain range as a whole separates the coastal plain

from the rift valley through which the Jordan River flows (see below). The mountains show up in this slide as a vertical (north-south) swatch of dark reddish-brown.

In the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (2000–1200 B.C.E.), Canaanite cities and towns tended to be situated in the more easily cultivated and accessible intermediate Piedmont area (called the *Shephelah*) where the coastal plain rose up toward the mountains. In the Iron I period (1200–1025 B.C.E.), peoples who in time would include the Israelites began to settle in previously uninhabited portions of the central mountain range. Only a few Canaanite cities had been located in this hill country, most notably Shechem (HB40: Mts. Ebal and Gerizim and the Shechem Pass) and Jerusalem. South and east of Jerusalem (the city is located in the mountains to the west of the northern shore of the Dead Sea), the hill country becomes the barren and inhospitable Wilderness of Judea.

Much easier to spot in this slide is Palestine's third north-south geographical zone. This zone includes the Sea of Galilee (visible as the smaller body of water near the exact midpoint of this slide) which is also known as the Lake of Tiberias or the Sea of Gennesaret or the Kinneret; the Jordan River, which winds its way south from the Sea of Galilee; and the Dead Sea into which the Jordan River empties. (The Dead Sea is 65 miles due south of the Sea of Galilee.)

The Jordan River's rapid flow and irregular winding course meant it never played a role in Israelite travel or communications. The Jordan River Valley is itself part of a major geological fault line called the Great Rift, which begins in the Amanus Mountains of Syria and continues into the Red Sea and on to Lake Malawi in Africa. The Sea of Galilee, the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea all lie below sea level. **At 1,300 feet below sea level, the Dead Sea surface is the lowest point on the landmass of Earth.** Between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea stretches a desolate area known as the *Arabah* (*Ghor* in modern Arabic; in the Bible this term can also include the Jordan Valley).

The mountains (reddish-brown) and plateau (sandy yellow) that parallel the Jordan Rift Valley on its eastern Transjordanian side occupy the fourth zone. **East of the Dead Sea lay the territory of Moab,** with Ammon to Moab's north. During the Iron II period (1025–586 B.C.E.), the Aramaeans, centered in Damascus (see above), frequently succeeded in controlling much of the territory to their southwest, including the Transjordanian states and even parts of the northern kingdom of Israel.

In the time of the Israelite kings, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah together occupied a territory approximately the size of the state of Vermont. Although Israel and Judah at different times claimed sovereignty over parts of the Transjordanian states, the kingdoms' combined boundaries tended to be the Jordan River on the east, usually the *Shephelah* or the western extent of the central hill country on the west, and northernmost Galilee. The southern border extended into the Negev Desert between the coast and the *Arabah*.⁵

⁵*The Biblical World in Pictures; BAS Biblical World in Pictures* (Biblical Archaeology Society, 2003; 2003).