**Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 10**

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**Introduction**

We are working on our course in the Synoptic Gospels. We’ve looked so far at the historical Jesus, at the Jewish background, at an introduction exegesis, exegesis of the narrative genre, at the authorship and date, characteristics of the Gospels, at exegesis of parables, at the Gospels as literary works, and, most recently, at the synoptic problem. In this session, we want to take a look at the geography of Palestine, including the geography of Jerusalem. So, let’s jump in and have a look at that.

In order to have a good overview of what’s going on in the Bible, whether it’d be in the New Testament or the Old Testament, and in the Gospels in particular, it’s desirable to have a handle on the relevant geography. For the synoptic Gospels, this is out of Israel at New Testament times. We’ll look, first of all, at the physical features of Palestine, and, on a large scale, there has been little change in the basic geography since New Testament times. So as it stands now, [the geography] is basically how it was then.

**Regions**

We want to first kind of survey the major regions of the territory from east to west, and then we’ll look at the more minor features going from North to South. The reason we look at the major regions from west to east is that the major geographical structures take a form of bands running north and south. So we will list these here starting at the west, or the Mediterranean coast, and moving eastward to the desert. The direction of prevailing winds is also from west to east, and since on the west we have the Mediterranean Sea, these winds carry moisture from the Mediterranean and then begin to deposit it as they come inland. As the ground rises, it causes the air to rise, and the air then becomes saturated and drops its moisture. So this will help us understand the climate of each region as well.

**Coastal Plain and Shephelah**

The first region running along the coast is the Coastal Plain and sometimes called the Plain of Sharon. That’s not the whole of the Coastal Plain, but that’s a good bit of it. This is a very low, rather flat plain, which is fertile where it’s not too sandy or too salty. From a military
perspective, this area was easy to travel along so long [as] we didn’t get too close to the water where chariots or horses would tend to get slowed up by the sand. So this area was easy to invade from outside [the] country.

The large scale geography around Israel is Egypt to the south; and Egypt, for the period of the Old Testament, was a major political power. By the time we reach New Testament times, it had been under foreign domination for many centuries. Then the coast there [i.e., the Levant], because of the rainfall, was fertile, and that runs upward and then turns over into the Tigris-Euphrates valley and comes down this way [towards the Persian Gulf]. So we’ve got a shape that’s, although not exactly, a crescent shape, which was called the "Fertile Crescent." Typically, the big military powers in the Old Testament period [that] had been out on the other part of the Fertile Crescent had been Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. Then after Alexander’s death, the Seleucid piece of Alexander’s empire was also there as well. So invasion would often take place, and the invasion could come rather easily in on the Coastal Plain, either from Egypt to the south or Syria from the North.

Going in then a little farther from the west coast, we come to another north-south region, more or less, that is somewhat higher, somewhat more rolling terrain, though it’s still low relative to what we’re going to call the "central hill country" here, which will be our next item. With these rolling hills [Shephelah] and wide valleys, most of the travel was along the valleys, and this area was still relatively easy to invade. It was also a fertile and got decent amount of moisture as well.

**Hill Country**

The kind of central region of Israel/Palestine, etc. is what’s called the “hill country.” This is a region of rather sharp hills and v-shaped valleys. If you’re from the United States, this is perhaps rather like West Virginia in the eastern U.S., although its climate would be more like, say, southern California; what we call a Mediterranean climate. Here, because the valleys are very sharp bottomed and because they’ve got rock in them, and usually intermittent streams of some sort in them, travel does not typically take place along the valleys but rather up along the ridges. So there is no particular thing interfering with travel in the Coastal Plain except, perhaps, where you crossed a stream coming down to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore you might get some swampy lands.
The lowlands, I don’t think I gave the name before—the "Shephelah"—was more rolling. You could travel on either kind of territory, but here on the hill country, you really needed to, at least for vehicle travel, or travel at all you need to travel up on the ridges and, even for foot travel that was the better way to go.

This is therefore more difficult to invade. The invaders had to go uphill to get into the area and did not find it easy to use chariots, which were the equivalent of tanks, I suppose, in ancient warfare. Farmers did not find this area nearly so nice for farming, and yet, because of the way the material was structured—it was basically a limestone—there was a tendency for it to form terraces; as you go up, the strata were basically horizontal. So at the edge of the hill you would have a little piece stick out. Basically, the farmers manipulated this by putting rocks along the outside edge and letting soil build up; or, perhaps, even helping soil build up along these terraces. Not great terrain for growing grains, but they did grow grains in it; but [it's] pretty good for growing olives, grapes and things of that sort. On the west side of this hill country, where you had the moist air coming in from the Mediterranean and flowing up the hill, you had good moisture, good rainfall. So it was rather nice there.

**Rain Shadow east of the Central Ridge**

Unfortunately, when you reach the ridge, the air coming up off the Mediterranean and having dumped [a] certain amount of its moisture typically as it goes up the ridge, you now come over the ridge, and the air begins to fall; and falling air warms up, and that means that the relative humidity goes down quite substantially. So it’s not likely to rain; so typically you get what’s called—on the east side of a ridge like that—you get what’s called a "rain shadow." In the United States that phenomenon typically shows up in the Rockies where you get pretty good rainfall to the west, and also with prevailing winds from the west as we have as here in Israel. All that’s from being in the temperate zones where the prevailing winds are out of the West. When you get over the edge of the Rockies and start to drop down, you get the same thing: a warming air, a drying air, and so typically rather poor rainfall east of the Rockies, which would be in the valleys up there, say around the Great Salt Lake[, which] would be a nice example of that whole area that’s a very dry area. Well, that’s the same situation you get here. So the rainfall is good in Israel west of the main ridge but poor to the east of the main ridge.

**Rift Valley (North-South Region)**
Then coming down off the hill country, we reach a north-south region, which we call the “Rift Valley.” You might have heard of that name in terms of missionaries in Africa, or something, because there’s an important Rift Valley in Kenya as well. It’s actually part of the same rift system. The rift we’re talking about here in Israel runs from up in Lebanon down through the middle of Lebanon; it then runs through the Sea of Galilee, runs down along parallel to the Jordan River (actually, the Jordan River runs in Rift Valley). It runs down past the Dead Sea, and then down to the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Red Sea there below it, and (that’s not the Red Sea; that’s the Gulf of Aqaba), and then runs on down, and runs into Africa. So it is a geologic rift due to two plates on the continental plate system that’s been discovered and worked out in the last now 60 years, approximately since the 1950’s. And in this particular case, actually, [it] is a rather deep fault.

And at the Dead Sea, the surface of the Dead Sea is actually over 1000 feet below sea level. The surface of the Sea of Galilee is about 600 feet below sea level, and this air that has been coming from the west has come over the rift, over the hill country, and comes down to that [level], so you get very little rain in here. But you do have this river that, rising from the north, which we’ll talk about the mountains up there, will help water the area. The climate down here is typically very hot and very arid away from the river. So in modern times, it’s been irrigated to have crops, and at least some sort of irrigation was going on in some places in ancient times as well.

**Trans-Jordan**

Well, we keep moving east, and we have one more territory to think of. We have the Mediterranean, we have the Coastal Plain, we have the Shephelah, or low rolling hills; we have the Hill Country, we have the Rift Valley and then you come back out of the Rift Valley when you come up onto what we call the “Transjordan Plateau.” It turns out the Transjordan Plateau is actually higher than the hill country so that the air coming back up again is cooled off and actually squeezed and dumps a little bit more [rain], almost all the rest of the moisture that it had in it, which it hadn’t dumped east of the ridge because the humidity of the air was too low. Now the humidity comes back up. It does dump the rest of it, but within a few miles, after you get up on the Transjordan Plateau, that’s all gone [the moisture, that is] and you’re out into what would be kind of the northern part of the Arabian Desert, or the Syrian Desert there as well. So, it is pretty well watered at the west edge, but very desert-y as you get a few miles in east of that.
So, that’s a quick tour of the territories running north and south, and we’re coming in from the west. So, there is the Mediterranean Coastal Plain, the rolling country or the Shephelah, the Hill Country, the Rift Valley and then the Transjordan Plateau.

**Specific Geographic Features**

Now there are some smaller features that it’s convenient here to look at going from Mount Hermon north to south. So, if we go up north of Israel, we come fairly quickly just to the east of the Rift Valley to the highest peak in the Palestine area, up over 9000 feet above sea level, and that’s Mt. Hermon. It’s the southernmost large peak in what’s called the Anti-Lebanon Range. The Rift Valley, you see, runs up out of Israel into Lebanon, and you have mountains to the west side of the valley that are called the Lebanon Range, and mountains to the east side called the Anti-Lebanon Range. The top of Mt. Hermon is generally snow covered all year, and if you’re up in Galilee in clear weather, you can usually see a little bit of that.

**Territory of Galilee**

Coming south from that, we come to the area around the Sea of Galilee, which is called Galilee, the circle of territory, or something of that sort. This hilly region is a kind of, in some sense, an extension of the hill country down in Israel itself except there’s a valley that separates there, so it has some of the features of the hill country down in Judea such as is around Jerusalem. But this is the best-watered area in Palestine. Not only do we have the situation where the water coming in from the moist air coming in from the Mediterranean dumps its moisture on the hills as you come in eastward from the Mediterranean, but you also have a latitude effect going on here, that we’re getting near the bottom end of the temperate zone, and so, as you go down south, you get into an area where there's rather low rainfall. But up in Galilee we have pretty substantial rainfall. This is about equal in rainfall to the eastern United States, so in the 40 to 50 inches per year rain. You can convert that to metric system if you’d like. It’s higher in the north and lower in the south, so we’ve got upper Galilee and lower Galilee. The climate is reasonably cool in the mountainous part, but as you drop down to the Sea of Galilee, you’re well below sea level, and it’s pretty warm there.

**The Jezreel Valley and Mount Tabor**

We mentioned also Mt. Tabor in this area; it’s got an isolated peak and it’s south of the Sea of Galilee. It’s over 1900 feet above sea level. Contrast that with Mt. Hermon at 9000 feet
above sea level, so one’s a little under 2000 and the other’s around 9000. It’s just north of this next territory we’ll mention, which is the Jezreel Valley.

As we’re thinking about coming from the North, Mt. Hermon here, the Upper and Lower Galilee here, and then we have something coming across here this way: it is the Jezreel Valley, and also called sometimes the Plain of Esdraelon. That’s more or less an east to west valley. It actually runs from northeast to southwest, but more east to west than north-south. It connects the coast with the Jordan Valley. It separates Samaria to the south from Galilee in the north. It actually forms the easiest transportation corridor to get from the Mediterranean Sea to the Rift Valley. Above it, you have to go across to Galilee with all their hills, and below it you have to go across the hill country. But if you go right through this Jezreel Valley, the terrain is actually fairly low. So as a result, an important trade route crossed from the coast over into the interior at this particular point.

The south edge of the Jezreel Valley is marked by Mt. Carmel, and then a range continuing east from that. It's a long ridge, again approximately east-west, as the Jezreel Valley is. It is the south side of the Jezreel Valley with a maximum height of about 1800 feet. So again, much, much lower than Mt. Hermon, but actually getting up around the same height as Mt. Tabor is. This range forms a barrier to north-south travel. A person traveling northward from, say, Egypt, comes up the Coastal Plain; but when you get near this Mt. Carmel, you’ve either got to go all the way over to the coast and kind of work your way around the end of Mt. Carmel, which actually sticks out into the Mediterranean there, or you have to come back in a ways and go through one of two or three of the passes.

Control of the passes was important in ancient times militarily; remember that at the time of the New Testament we’re thinking about here, Israel’s not an independent state. Rome, in fact, controls everything on the east end of the Mediterranean until you get into the Parthian Empire. So, they’re not so worried about it then. But in Old Testament times, control of passes was important militarily. The city of Megiddo is on one of these passes. Revelation’s “Armageddon” is actually a modification of [the Hebrew] "Har Megiddo," "hill of Megiddo," and controls one such pass. The plains north of Megiddo were, in fact, a site of many major battles over the course of military history.
**Wilderness of Judea**

Jumping south now across the areas where Samaria and Jerusalem and that sort of thing would be, we come to the Wilderness of Judea. This is a badlands area. It’s actually in the—what should we say—western side of the Jordan River, and so in the Rift Valley, more or less. It’s actually in a rain shadow of the ridge of the hill country. I use the term badlands because it reminds me a great deal of the Badlands of South Dakota. It is hilly, but there’s virtually no vegetation on it, not at least at the tree level. There are a little bit of shrubbery and some grass during the rainy system.

Well, this is an area where the combination of low rainfall here in the rain shadow of this ridge is running down from the hill country. The combination of the rain shadow and a poor, rather chalky soil produces an area that is bad enough in regard to vegetation that it is virtually uninhabited. So today, and probably through most of its history, it has been an area where nomads come in seasonally and graze their sheep while there is grass growing and get out of the area when nothing is going on. So it's territory used for grazing sheep and for grazing goats in the wetter winter season.

**Negev**

One more area we’ll mention here, and that is south of the hill country. Hill country eventually comes kind of to an end somewhat south of Jerusalem. We have an area called the Negev. The King James Version typically translates that: “the south.” I don’t recall now how some of the other modern versions translate that. It’s an arid land south of actually the city of Hebron, which from Jerusalem down you would go down maybe 30-40 miles to get down to Hebron: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and then Hebron. The territory [Negev] is flat to rolling. The soil is actually pretty good but now, due to the latitude effect getting out of the bottom the North Temperate Zone, if you like, you are getting very little rainfall. You might for a moment stop and look at the zones, if you like, of our globe. You have the equatorial zone, and then you’ve got the tropical zones on either side of that; and then you've got the temperate zones on either side of that; and then you get up into a more subarctic type further [in the] northern area. The transition between the temperate zone and the areas down closer to the equator has a rather low rainfall. So the Negev is an area rolling or flat, pretty good soil, and very little rainfall.
Even in ancient times, and still now in modern times as well, certain inhabitants had figured out a way to actually grow crops there by concentrating water by certain types of tricks. A number places you would have a valley that would catch rainfall, and the rainfall would then tend to run off rather quickly and deposit, therefore, soil down in the bottom of the valley. The water would run off to the low side of the valley and out of the valley. They’d basically put a dam in the bottom of the valley, and it would catch water for a little while and would pick up all the silt that had run off. So you could then grow crops in that silt area. Where you might only be getting 2, 3, 4 inches of rain a year, you were getting your little farming plot down on the bottom concentrating rainfall from a much, much bigger area.

Well, that's kind of a quick tour then of the major regions of Israel from the north-south, ones running from the coast inward, from west-east, and then some of the peculiar individual features running from south to north.

**Bodies of Water**

I’ll say a word or two about the major bodies of water around Palestine. You have the Mediterranean Sea on the west. The Israelites of Old Testament period were not really seafarers, but they did work as middlemen to a certain extent for people who were seafarers and who were bringing trade in from the Mediterranean, or taking spices and other things out from Arabian areas or such. So occasionally they had engaged in trade in that particular way. The Mediterranean Sea, is a large body of salt water, actually connected to the Atlantic, 1500 miles further west of Gibraltar. Palestine has few natural ports compared, for instance, with Greece or Phoenicia. Phoenicia was on the east coast of the Mediterranean further north, so the Jews were involved in trade only as middle men.

Then the bodies of water in Israel: you had the Sea of Galilee, or the Lake of Tiberius, or Kinnereth are various names given to it. It is a little lake that was perhaps 7 by 14 miles, something like that. It is a freshwater lake. The surface is 600 feet below sea level, so lower even than Death Valley in United States. It is fed by the Jordan River, which basically its waters came out from the Mount Hermon area, and then they still consider it the Jordan River when it runs out the other side of the Sea of Galilee and continues on down in the Rift Valley. The Sea of Galilee was important for fishing both back then and even now, but its peculiar topography and climate was such as to produce some fierce storms. You're talking about a lake that's a few miles across,
so it's big enough that you can get some substantial waves on it, although it’s not like the Mediterranean or anything. It’s got a hot desert east of it; it's got Mount Hermon at 9000 feet northeast of it; it’s got this Rift Valley that runs north and south of it; it's got higher terrain to the west of it, and it’s got the Mediterranean Sea west of that. So you’ve got weather systems coming in from the Mediterranean. You’ve got an area up here where cold air can be produced around the mountain; you’ve got the hot air over here, and frequently the combination of those produced some very fierce storms that arose in a very short period of time.

So, the Mediterranean Sea, the Sea of Galilee, then you got the Jordan River. The river began on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon, descends about 2300 feet in about 100 miles, not counting all the meanders of the river, but just as a the crow flies, if you like, southward from Hermon, and it flows through the sea of Galilee and then on down to the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is also called by the Romans Lake Asphaltitus. Its surface is the lowest point on earth; 1296 feet below sea level [and] probably lower than that now because they’ve been using up a lot of the water for irrigation, and that has lowered the Sea of Galilee. But that was typically the kind of depth, kind of elevation in antiquity and up until the big irrigation projects started in the last 30 years. The water is extremely salty; fish can’t live in it; people find it irritates their skin. But if you go swimming in it, which number of people do, you float in it like a cork, and that is a rather unusual phenomenon. Its waters and the salt deposits were mined back in antiquity and today for various sorts of minerals, particularly salts of one sort or another.

So this is a quick tour then of the major bodies of water around Palestine. All of these things we’ve talked about, the north-south regions and these little individual, peculiar regions and the major bodies of water, they’re all the same as they were in antiquity. I've left out perhaps one item. A very small lake north of the Sea of Galilee, Lake Merom, which I think still existed in some of the maps I remember seeing from late 40s; but when I went in the after Israel/Jews began to resettle the land because it was good land that could be used agriculturally, and so is now farmland rather than water.

The Politics of Palestine

Political features of Palestine, however, have changed drastically since New Testament times; and we're not going to deal with the changes that have taken place, nor what’s there today; but basically we will look at the political features back at New Testament times. This will be
helpful in understanding of the Gospels. So we’re going to start with political divisions at the
time in the ministry of Christ.

We start first of all with Judea, and that's the territory that runs, well, at various times it
has run all the way from the Mediterranean, but by this time it's back in a little bit from the coast
and runs up and over the central hill country, around north and south of Jerusalem basically. That
was the old territory of the tribe of Judah. At this particular time [New Testament], it had been
expanded to include Samaria on the north, which still was known by that name, and Idumea on
the south, which was also known by that name. But it was the administration unit often called
“Judea,” which is obviously a modification of Judah. It was part of the territory that was ruled by
Herod the Great during his reign, and I’ve here got that in my notes as 37-4 B.C. There’s some
argument about the end point on that, but we will not do anything with it here. This was also then
ruled when Augustus verified and modified Herod’s will by Herod’s son Archelaus from (let’s
say) 4 B.C. to about A.D. 6, and then ruled by the Roman procurators from AD 6 to 41, and then
by Herod’s grandson, Herod Agrippa I, from 41 to 44, and then back by the Roman procurators
again from 44 to 66. The population of this Judea proper was mostly Jews, but Samaria was
mostly Gentiles, including some Samaritans, but lots of others; and the Idumea mostly
descendants of the Edomites who, however, had converted to Judaism during the Maccabean
Period, and I don’t know to what extent or how serious they were about that.

North of Judea was Galilee, but this was the area west of the Sea of Galilee. This had
once been the domain of some of the northern tribes of Israel, and then after the Assyrians
carried off the Northern Kingdom, it was for a long time the home of Gentiles until the
Maccabees became dominate from 163 to 160 BC, and they repopulated it with Jews. It may well
be that Mary and Joseph wound up in Nazareth as a result of their ancestors having moved back
up into that area. We don’t know really much about that. After the Death of Herod the Great,
when his territory was split up under his will, this was ruled by Herod Antipas, and he shows up
in the Gospel accounts from (we think) about 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. And then it’s ruled by the
Roman procurators from 39 to 41 (not very long), and then by Herod Agrippa, 41 to 44, and then
by the Roman procurators again. Some considered Galilee a hotbed of revolutionaries, and it
certainly had some up there. Herod had some trouble with that, and the Romans, certainly later in
the first century leading up to the Jewish revolt, had troubles with revolutionaries in that area.
Perea in Trans-Jordan

A narrow strip east of the Jordan River was called Perea, presumably from the Greek *peria* – “across,” and was inhabited mainly by Jews by New Testament times, and I think basically the situation was rather like that of Galilee. It had been largely Gentile from the Babylonian captivity down to the Maccabees, and it had been repopulated. It had the same rulers as Galilee. So when Herod the Great was in control of things, this was part of his territory, and then when his territory was split up, this went to Herod Antipas. After Antipas and Herod Agrippa I were not ruling it, then the Roman procurators were ruling it.

There is another territory that had some Herodian rule, and that’s typically called today the Tetrarchy of Philip, or Trachonitis is another name that’s given. It was a multi-ethnic region northeast of the Sea of Galilee and had mostly Gentile inhabitants. After the death of Herod the Great, because he had been ruling over that, it was ruled by another one of his sons, Philip, from (let’s say again) 4 B.C. to 34 A.D., and then by Roman procurators and Herod Agrippa as we’ve mentioned already before. So some of Jesus’ ministry takes place in that territory as well, probably the feeding of the 4,000 and some miracles as well.

A fifth region we should mention is a region called the Decapolis, Latin-Greek for "ten cities," but it wasn’t just 10 cities. The whole administrative operation of those areas, and probably very commonly in the ancient Near East, was a city-dominated territory around it. The Decapolis cities were a league of usually ten Hellenistic cities (the number of cities actually went up and down some) and their city territories. We now have some evidence that the territory of several of these cities included a piece of coast of the Sea Galilee, so presumably they shared fishing rights and had their own piers and, perhaps, their own fishing fleets on the Sea of Galilee. The Decapolis would be mostly Gentile inhabitants, though again it’s most likely, since it was a Hellenistic city, there were also probably some Jewish people there as well. After the Romans came, so after the Maccabean period ended, this was made independent of Jewish control. So it was never under the control of Herod the Great or of his descendants. So that was a quick tour then of the territories, political territories, if you would like, around the time of Jesus.

Outbreak of Revolt

We might mention a few of the cities of Palestine during the first century A.D. There was, of course, Jerusalem. Jerusalem is located right up on the ridge of the hill country, so that
not going too far west you could look down and see off in the distance where the Mediterranean would be; it would be very obvious. Going over east of Jerusalem, you could actually see the Dead Sea, and you could certainly see the wilderness to the east. It was what we might think of as the Jewish religious capital of Judea and Palestine. Herod certainly would have his palace there, but not his only palace there. He perhaps was not excited about being in that area in the winter. You’re up getting towards 3000 feet, so he had one other winter palace in Jericho, which has much nicer weather, and even Masada (we’ll say something about Herod’s fortifications here in a bit).

The Romans did not consider this their capital of Judea while they were in control of the east. Herod himself had built a port city to the northwest of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast, and because Palestine did not have any natural harbors (well you have a little sort of something where Mt. Carmel sticks out, but even that’s not very satisfactory), Herod had spent a great deal of money to build an artificial harbor by putting huge stones in the water. He’d use cement (cement, we think, well, as far back as we know, is a Roman invention that they might conceivably have gotten it from someone else.) They had even figured out how to make cement that would dry underwater, which we have varieties of that that will do that as well. So they had made sort of large jetties that would run out and made an area of calm water that you could bring ships into, and they could ride out the storms in there and not be mashed. So that became an important port during Herod the Great’s control. And then after his death, the Romans took this as a capital.

When their procurators, prefects or whatever, were ruling over Judea, they operated this as the capital. It was a city in which there were both Jews and Gentiles and, in fact, the outbreak of a Jewish revolt against Rome spins out of a riot there. Probably the right term to say is a confrontation between the Jews and Gentiles at Caesarea. So Herod had a palace there. The Roman procurators had a palace there. An inscription mentioning Pontius Pilate was found there, which was probably part of the theatre at Caesarea as well.

A rather important city in Old Testament times was the city of Samaria that became the capital of the Northern Kingdom. That had its ups and downs, but Herod the Great rebuilt that during his reign, and he named it Sebaste, which is Greek for “Augustus” essentially. So Caesarea was named for Caesar, which becomes the whole family name eventually, but only [for] Julius and Augustus at the time when Herod was around. Sebaste then [is] named even
more explicitly for Augustus. Why he chose Greek for it instead of Latin Augustus, I don’t know. It was rebuilt for Herod’s army veterans. The inhabitants of that were mostly Gentiles.

A third city in Palestine is Tiberias named for another emperor. So you have Julius, who made a shot for emperor and got killed, and Augustus who succeeded, and then his adopted son—a nephew or something—named Tiberius. This city was built by Herod Antipas when he was made heir of the territory of Galilee and Perea. So he built it on the shore of the [Sea of] Galilee and named it in honor of Tiberius. The spelling is for the emperor “ius” at the end and for the city “ias”--Tiberias. That is actually pretty near where Jesus ministry takes place and yet, as far as I know, there are no explicit references to him being in the city at any time.

Besides Antipas, you remember one of the other heirs was Philip. Philip got the area northeast of the Sea of Galilee. So he built a city, and he called it Caesarea again, but for purposes of not confusing it with the other Caesareas, some people in antiquity called it "Caesarea Philippi" or Philip’s Caesarea, and that has stuck for use in modern times. So to distinguish the two "Caesareas," if it is nothing said, it is the earlier Caesarea that Herod built, or what is sometimes called Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea on the sea. The other one was Caesarea Philippi. It was built as a capital for Herod Philip’s tetrarchy. So it was up in that territory and up pretty close to head waters of the Jordan River there.

There are a number of Decapolis cities; more than ten at some times and less than ten at other times. I just gave my students five of them here which show up now and then either in the New Testament or in Josephus’ writing: Scythopolis, the city of the Scythians, so something about its history back several centuries; Hippos, named for “horse,” I’m not sure what the reason for that is; Gadara, one of the alternative names that comes up in Gadarene Demoniac texts—that is one of the passages we’ll look at here later, so we will say something about that then; and Gerasa, one of the other names that shows up for that; and then Philadelphia, named for Ptolemy Philadelphus probably—so “city of brotherly love,” as those of you who live in the east, or live in the Philadelphia area, know it from Pennsylvania here. So those would be some of the Decapolis cities.

Galilean towns: probably “city” would be pushing it a little bit. These are not fortified cities. Nazareth, where Jesus comes from, is not named explicitly in the Old Testament, though there are these netzar passages that we mentioned in relation to Messianic prophecy. Cana, Magdala, Capernaum, Korazin, Bethsaida. Magdala, Capernaum, Korazin, and Bethsaida: all
basically on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Cana and Nazareth [are] back up in sort of the hill country of Galilee.

Some Judean towns besides Jerusalem are: Jericho is certainly important in Old Testament times and still important at New Testament times. There was an old and new Jericho; probably that is part of the explanation for how Jesus heals this particular blind man coming to one of the Jerichos. So he was coming to Jericho in Luke, and leaving Jericho in Matthew and Mark. The new Jericho was a snazzy place and well-to-do people lived there, and that’s probably where the tax collector Zachaeus lived. The other one was the traditional city and probably what Matthew, at least, would have thought of in terms of as a Judean city.

Bethany was across the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem. Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem, actually had a little bit [of the town] out into the wilderness. Then Emmaus where there is some uncertainty on where the two [disciples] are going to Emmaus. There are a couple different locations, but general agreement [is] it is northwest of Bethlehem.

So cities of Palestine during the first century AD: Jerusalem, which was the religious capital; Caesarea, the Roman capital; Sebaste, the Old Testament Samaria rebuilt for Herod’s veterans; Tiberias, the capital of Galilee; and Caesarea Phillip.

3 Major Roads

A word or two about major roads: to the best of my knowledge, we do not have names for these roads that come from New Testament times. So the names I’m going to use here for the three roads we’re going to discuss are traditional names that are used in biblical studies, and some of these certainly come from the early history of the region.

The first of these the name actually comes from Isaiah: “Via Maris,” the “Way of the Sea,” which is a nice, descriptive term. It was the coastal highway that came up from Egypt—not quite at the coast—but paralleled the coast a few miles inland. Then just south of the Carmel ridge it split, and one piece went up to the west and stayed on the coast and went on up then to Tyre, Sidon and Antioch—eventually up in that direction. The other one turned east, went through, I think, the Megiddo Pass, and comes down to the Sea of Galilee, goes by Tiberias, and then goes on up and heads out to Damascus. So it was a major north-south coastal road. It certainly carried a good bit of trade traffic that did not go, say, by sea. Certainly a lot of trade traffic would have run up the coast and come into a port.
The second road I want to say a word or two about kind of parallels this, but it is back across the Rift Valley and up on the Trans-Jordan Plateau. It had the name “the Kings Highway,” but runs on the Trans-Jordan Plateau, and runs from the Gulf of Aqaba at the top of what, I guess, we can call the Red Sea. So goods shipped in from the south came up to the port there and then went up overland up the Kings Highway that went by some of the Decapolis cities, and then angled over to Damascus as well. Both of those, Via Maris and the Kings Highway, joined at Damascus and connected into the area of the Mesopotamia Valley, to the cities over there, Palmyra and such, over to the east.

A third road, rather more used by the Jews in connection with their travel from Galilee to Jerusalem, is the road that stayed along the ridge of the hill country and so has the name that we use the “Ridge Route.” It was less important for international traffic because it was not as easy to travel along. It went up and down and perhaps was not as well paved, we might say. But it was rather important, as I say, for pilgrims going from Jerusalem to Galilee with one serious drawback: it went through Samaria. So people going from Jerusalem back home to Galilee, or vice versa, coming down for festivals, might use it; but if they were edgy about the Samaritans, or not in too much hurry, they might instead go down into the Rift Valley and use a road there and then come back up again. We see both of those kinds of routes used in connection with people going to and from Jerusalem.

So this is a quick tour of the three major roads. There were obviously a lot more roads. There were obviously roads that connected from the Via Maris over to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem over and down across the Jordan over to the Kings Highway and there would be something similar to that couple of other places along the way.

Herodian Fortifications

Lastly, under our discussion of the geography of Palestine, are the Herodian fortifications. One of the reasons Herod is called Herod the Great is not because of his great personality, but because of his great building activities. The major structures around the Temple at Jerusalem are his. The major structures in Sebaste and in Caesarea are his. The major structure at Hebron is his—the patriarchal burial there of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc. are all Herod’s.

He also built some fortifications. He was well aware that: 1) that he was not super popular with the Jews, but 2) the Roman Empire ended not too many miles to the east of him and
that there was a pretty strong nation, the Parthians, to the east there. Right at the beginning of his career, well, not quite the beginning, right before he became the king of the Jews, the Parthians had invaded, captured, and imprisoned his older brother Phasael. Phasael committed suicide to avoid, I suppose, being tortured or something like that sort. Herod had gotten away. So Herod already had that in mind. Then somewhat later in his career after he was King of the Jews, but did not feel terribly safe yet, there was still Cleopatra and Anthony to worry about; and then, even after all that was over, there were still possible rebellions to worry about. So he built himself a number of fortifications.

He built himself a fortification at Machaerus east of the Dead Sea. This is a location where, according to Josephus, John the Baptist was put to death. John the Baptist was beheaded presumably there. The New Testament does not tell us where that took place, but it was in the territory of Herod Antipas who was the Herod who put John to death. You remember Herod the Great was gone by then. He was the one who had put the babies to death trying to get Jesus. But Herod Antipas had put John the Baptist to death.

Then there was Masada on the west side of the Dead Sea. I guess both Machaerus and Masada were not only fortifications but palaces for Herod. He wanted somewhere where he could retreat to and did not have to give up—at least all of his royal prerogatives—while he was laying low until whatever revolt blew over to the west of the Dead Sea. That [Masada] has been pretty well excavated and has two palaces on it. One is kind of up on top of what we call a mesa, I guess, in southwestern American English. It’s a plateau with rather steep sides. The Dead Sea is off to one side and various wadis coming down to the Dead Sea on the west side. So he built a western palace on top. Then on the north end, kind of working its way down the cliff so he got some shade there, was his north palace, and some elaborate stuff surviving there has been found in recent excavations.

So this was his palace; and then after he died, it fell into hands of the zealots during the Jewish revolt, and this was the place where they made their last stand against the Romans. The Romans conquered Jerusalem in AD 70 but it wasn’t until AD 73 that they felt they were ready to go and surround Masada and smoke them out, so to speak. In fact, the zealots at Masada committed suicide rather than give up there.

A third fortification of Herod is one called “Herodian.” So Herod modesty named it for himself. Here he took a hill southeast of Bethlehem and built up the top of it, so it looks like a
volcano today, and put a palace in there. That was his retreat palace, and then down at the base of the hill he had a palace that he could use for, what shall we say, less dangerous situations. For many, many years since Josephus, it’s been understood that Herod’s tomb was there, and I believe that the evidence for that has been recently discovered, but I haven’t heard how that all settled out. So no body of Herod has been found there, but some structures that might well be Herod’s tomb have been recently found.

Jerusalem

Well, that’s our tour of the geography of Israel, Palestine if you like. We want to say a few words about the geography of Jerusalem, so some more detail on that. Here we are going to divide our stuff up first of all into what we might call the natural features: the valleys and hills around Jerusalem, and then look at the city walls, which we can still find some fairly good traces for some of them anyway. Then the various sections of the city and a few of the particular major buildings, structures and things that were there at Jesus’ time.

Valleys of Jerusalem

Jerusalem is up basically on the ridge of the hill country. It is surrounded by some valleys. Jerusalem was pretty easy to fortify in three directions and not so easy on the north side. We have a valley running down the west side of Jerusalem and then across the bottom [south] that is called the Hinnom Valley. This is a pretty deep valley. It became at one point a place where garbage was burned. So the Hebrew ge-hinnom became a picture in Jewish thought of hell. “Gehenna” is the term you will see in the New Testament now and again, unless your translation translates it away in some way; it is this particular term.

To the east of Jerusalem there was a fairly deep valley called the Kidron Valley. It’s between the Temple and the Mount of Olives. When Jesus does his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he comes down the Mount of Olives and then back up to come in, probably, the east gate of the Temple complex. So the Kidron Valley would be the location of Gethsemane, though there are a couple of suggestions for just where the Garden of Gethsemane was.

There is a third valley, which is not nearly as noticeable today. with aerial photos taken near sunset, you get some hints of it. It was the valley in Josephus called Tyropoean, [or the] Cheesemakers Valley. I’m not sure exactly what the Hebrew of it might have been. I don’t know that we have a document that tells us that. It was between the Temple Mount on the east side of
the city and the territory south of that where David had originally conquered Jerusalem and such, and the western part of Jerusalem where the upper city was and such. This valley is now pretty largely filled in, but there are some traces of it. So those are the valleys around Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was also surrounded by hills. It’s in the hill country, and it’s a hill country with lots of valleys and such. So here are a few of the important hills around Jerusalem: David, you remember, conquered the city from the Jebusites. The Jebusite city had been a rather small city on a hill that is south of where the Temple is now. That was called the city of the Jebusites and also called Ophel, and again I don’t know for sure about the history of that name; so it is the area south of the Temple, but still up on this hill between the Kidron Valley on the east and the Tyropoean Valley on the west is the Ophel.

The hill on which the Temple came to be built is Moriah. It is the site of the Temple and apparently the site of Abraham’s almost-sacrifice of Isaac. There is not quite as much certainty there, but [there are] some hints in that direction from the biblical material.

There is the term “Zion” that also occurs in connection with Jerusalem. That was probably originally either Ophel, or Moriah, and comes to be a generic term for the whole city. But then in Mediaeval times that comes to be applied to the western hill or the upper city, if you like. So if you talk about going to Mount Zion now, if [you] tell a taxi driver you want to go to Mount Zion, he will put you over there rather than at the Ophel or the Temple site.

A third hill is the Mount of Olives. It is outside the city, perhaps to the ridge, about one half mile east of the city. It was at the edge of the wilderness, so up on top of the Mount of Olives you can see the wilderness to the east of you and much more vegetated area to the west of you. It was on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem, so the road would come over the Mount of Olives there. It is the site of Jesus’ ascension.

The hill of the upper city is west of the Ophel across the Cheesemakers’ Valley and higher than Ophel or Moriah. So if you stand on the Mount of Olives and take a picture looking west across the city, you can see this territory standing higher there. That is to say, it was called Zion in the Middle Ages, but probably misidentified. So that’s the hills and valleys around Jerusalem.

Walls of Jerusalem

The next thing we might mention are the city walls at New Testament times. Some of
these walls still stand or have walls built on the same general line, same foundations, as they did. The walls roughly follow the valleys so as to make it, when a person attacks the city, they have to go down into the valley and up to the wall to get into the place. So the south wall is generally taken to run around where the Kidron and the Hinnom Valley run together, and so it kind of encloses the Tyropoean Valley in the city. So that’s the south wall around this way with the Hinnom Valley over here and the Kidron coming down here.

The east wall: you get the Kidron Valley over here on the east side of the city. The Kidron Valley here and the east wall is up the slopes of the Kidron Valley and along the east side of the Temple.

The west wall on the Hinnom Valley, but on the east side of it that, is on the city side of the Hinnom Valley, and so those walls go back, I think, probably as far back as the bigger city has existed, so probably from shortly after Solomon’s time; although doubtless they have been rebuilt on several occasions.

The north side of the city, though, did not have any good valley protecting it. So over history they have built several walls going out further as the city has expanded. The first north wall just basically ran east from the Joppa Gate right over to the Temple. The second north wall ran out from there and went north and came back to the Temple. So it enclosed a little bit bigger area on the north side of the city.

Then the third north wall was not there in Jesus’ time, so the territory it enclosed was a suburb; you would use the term [suburb] there, but it didn’t have the same flavor as it does today. It began after Jesus’ ministry. [It was] begun by Herod Agrippa [II], and then when the Roman emperor said cut that out, he stopped, and it was finished during the revolt 66-70 AD. It ran north from the east side of the Temple up the Kidron Valley for a ways and then swung around and came back down to Joppa Gate. So there were three north walls.

These sets of walls then divided the city into sections. Down here south of the Temple is the old City of David, the territory he conquered, the old Jebusite city. It is basically on the Ophel hill. Then there is the Temple Mount north of that. That was built by Solomon, and it’s on Mount Moriah. Then there is the Lower City, and there is disagreement by map makers on just where to put that, but I go along with what appears to be the majority of them: that is, the Tyropoeon Valley. So west of [the] Ophel, before you get up onto the upper western part of the city--the Upper City; so the Lower City. The Upper City: this hill that runs—here’s the
Tyropoeon Valley—it is over here to the west of it, and then the Hinnom Valley is over here. So it is up in that particular region—the Upper City.

There are a couple other pieces to the city. There is the territory called the Second Quarter, which is between the first and second city walls. Then, finally, what was called the New City of Bethsaida, which was between the second and third walls. So these would both be extensions to the north of the city.

**Buildings and Structures in Jerusalem**

Some major buildings and structures from the New Testament period: We first of all have the Temple complex. The Temple we generally think of as the building, but there was also a large platform it was built on. When Herod the Great, at least thought in terms of refurbishing the Temple about 20 BC, he realized that because the land fell off like it did around that hill of Moriah, it would be necessary [in order] to build what he wanted, he needed to extend that. So he took what was perhaps initially 500 cubits square—probably left over from Solomon’s Temple, but at least standing in the Second Temple times—and extended that some significant distance to the south; and then we get a kind of longer rectangle. At the outer edge of this platform, if you like—or terrace, if you like—you’ve actually got a pretty long drop off to the bottom of the Tyropoean Valley on the one side and the Kidron Valley on the other side.

On top of this platform then the Temple stood; not in the exact middle, but roughly [the] middle. There was an open porch-way with a roof on it around three sides; [well,] two sides anyway. The south side was called the Royal Portico, and the east side Solomon’s Portico. Solomon’s Portico probably indicates that Solomon had something there in the original Temple, though the material we have now is later than that. The Royal Portico was probably built by Herod, but the name suggests that the followers did not want to advertise Herod, or something of that sort. In any case, that is the Temple building.

So a platform with the courts; i.e., the outer court of the Gentiles and then the main court being the Court of the Women, and then inside that you come up a stairway, [and] there is a very narrow Court of the Men where they could stand and put their hands on the animals as they were being sacrificed; and then the bigger court of the priests, and then back of that the Temple complex itself. The platform was probably about 750 feet east-west; that is about 500 cubits, and about twice that north-south. So Herod had substantially increased the Temple platform from
what we get as the traditional size that shows up in rabbinic literature.

Just north and west of the Temple, and adjoining it, is the Fortress Antonia. That, at least, [was] rebuilt by Herod, and by New Testament times that was being used as the place where the Roman garrison kept an eye on things because Temple festivals sometimes developed into riots of one sort or another due to dissatisfaction of some of the worshippers with the Romans and things of that sort. The Romans wanted to be right there to be able to do anything. Traditionally, the Fortress Antonia is the site of Jesus’ Roman trial, though a number of people now think perhaps it was over at Herod’s Palace, which we will say a word about here in a moment.

The west gate out of the city of Jerusalem, and where a road then ran off to Joppa, was called the Jaffa Gate. There were three big towers for defensive purposes built there at that gate. One was named for Herod’s brother, Phasael, who had died in the Parthian invasion; one was named for Herod’s, what shall we say, favorite wife, Mariamne, who, in spite of which, he put to death; and one named for a friend of his, Hippicus--so three Jaffa Gate towers. One of those towers, the lower parts are still surviving, and you can actually visit and view that when you are at Jerusalem.

Just south of [the] Jaffa Gate towers is Herod’s Palace. It was built by Herod the Great, so obviously, with Herod off the scene, this is probably used by the Roman governor when he was in the city rather than by Herod Antipas who, after all, didn’t have quite the—what shall we say—political standing that the Roman governor had. That is the alternate site for the Roman trial of Jesus. So if Pilate was down here, then that’s where it was because we are told Pilate came out and went back in, etc. Or if it was being used for some other reason at the festival, for instance, Pilate might have felt safer in the Antonia Fortress, then it would have been there. Whatever, those are the two candidates for that.

There was a Sanhedrin building, and we think it was near the Temple and on the platform somewhere, but we do not know now where it was. The rabbinic literature calls it the Hall of Hewn Stones. This is probably the site of Jesus’ condemnation on Friday morning before they take him to trial and to get Pilate to validate their sentence.

The model of Jerusalem at the Holy Land Hotel [now at the Israel Museum] also attempts to place a chariot racing stadium called [the] Hippodrome in Greek—“horse run.” If you have ever seen the film Ben Hur, they have a very authentic looking hippodrome with a long straight-
away with sharp turns on either end. So rather than being a nice oval as horse racing places are in Western culture, there was a long straight-away and [a] sharp turn, and then long straight-away, etc. I refer you to Ben Hur for that particular thing. The location is uncertain, although some put it in the Tyropoean Valley; that is where this model puts it.

Josephus also tells us there was a theatre in Jerusalem. So both of those features would have been much more Hellenistic; they certainly were not Jewish sorts of things. The location of that is uncertain. Most of us when we think of a theatre either think of a movie theatre or, perhaps, we think of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre or something of that sort. The Greek and Roman theatres, particularly Greek theatres, were kind of half-circle often cut into the side of the hill and with stone, I guess, though they may have used concrete as well. Bleachers [were] around going around higher and higher with various aisles running down through them. So this is the actual model [that] has been used even into the twentieth century for theatres and various kinds of stadiums as well. They would probably have been used to perform plays of one sort or another. We are told by some of your Jewish writers that some of the Hellenistic Jews had, in fact, constructed plays of Ezekiel and that sort of thing, so that there were religious plays rather than just the pagan Greek plays and the very lewd Roman plays around.

**Sites Related to Jesus’ Ministry**

Some other sites related to Jesus’ ministry: The pool of Bethesda, you remember, in John 5 where Jesus finds a lame person at the pool of Bethesda. The tradition is at least that he was waiting for the movement of the water, etc. I don’t think the best text of John 5 supports the tradition, but it appears that at least somebody, perhaps in a marginal note, entered a note about that. Certainly the narrative of John 5 indicates that the lame guy had some such thing in mind.

We’re told this pool had five porticos. A portico is a term for these covered porches, usually with columns on either side to hold up the roofs. Lo and behold, just north of the Temple and northeast of the Antonia Fortress, they have found buried pretty deeply at this point with the rubble over the centuries—but now dug out a pool that had four porch-ways around the outside and one across the middle dividing it into two pools. So the general belief is it is the pool of Bethesda; [it] is the particular place where Jesus healed the lame man.

There is another pool in the ministry of Jesus; that is the pool of Siloam where Jesus sent the fellow who was blind. You remember he made clay and put it on the blind man’s eyes. The
location of the pool of Siloam has been known for a long, long time. It is south of the Temple, south slightly west of the Temple in the Tyropoean Valley right down near the south end of the city where the Tyropoean and Hinnom valleys come together. That has been excavated also and is narrated for us in John 9.

Some other places are the Upper Room where the Last Supper was held. Well, there is a traditional site of the Upper Room, and it is on the second floor. The problem is, from Josephus’ descriptions, there does not appear to have been any second floors left after the Romans were finished with Jerusalem in AD 70. So it might be near the site; it is hard to say. But that is the traditional one. If you are in Jerusalem as a tourist, they will take you to that. The architecture there is what I would call as a non-architect Gothic, or something like that. So it is from the Crusader period, clearly.

Caiaphas’ House is a place where Jesus was taken for perhaps a preliminary hearing of some sort with possibly, with a part or maybe even all of, the Sanhedrin there. That is traditionally in the Upper City, and a site is shown for that, and even a little cave where Jesus is claimed to have been held as a prisoner overnight. I don’t know what to say about that. It was a shrine of some sort for Christians a few centuries later, but whether they have the right site is somewhat hard to be sure of.

Gethsemane we know is an olive grove in the Kidron Valley on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, and there are several sites claimed by various religious groups.

That brings us last of all to Calvary, or Golgotha. There are three sites that I am aware of up now that are claimed. That is up from two when I first taught this course. The traditional one is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That may very well be authentic, but it certainly does not look very authentic any more. It has had a church built over it for probably at 1500 years at least. It is the most widely recognized and has been recognized since the time of Constantine. They show you a place where Calvary was and a place where the tomb was, and that sort of thing; and for at least Western Christians, it looks too ornate and such and kind of turns you off.

There is Gordon’s Calvary—a site that, I guess it was, General Charles Gordon suggested that probably looks more like what Calvary looked like in Jesus’ time, but the evidence is rather strongly against its historicity. The tomb there is not a new tomb, which is what the Gospels tell us the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was; but this tomb appears to go back to Iron Age time, so many centuries old by New Testament times.
Ernest Martin has done a number of things in suggesting a date for the birth of Christ that is fairly close to the traditional date, but not very close to the date that has been used for the last few centuries of 4 or 5 BC. He goes with 1 BC, 2 BC actually. He has also suggested a site for Golgotha on the Mount of Olives. He basically claims the centurion standing on Mount Calvary was able to see the Temple curtain ripped in half. As I read the text over, it doesn’t look like that is necessary to the text, though perhaps you can read it that way. So he puts Golgotha east of Jerusalem, so in the direction that the Temple actually faced, and puts it on the Mount of Olives. He puts it near the site of the slaughtering of the red heifer citing typological reasons as well as historical reasons. So that is his suggestion.

Well, that is a quick tour. There is lots and lots more that can be said, and I hear Ted has some good stuff up on the geography and archaeology and such of Jerusalem [“Get Lost in Jerusalem” and 6 video lectures by Drs. Elaine and Perry Phillips on “The Historical Geography of Israel: an Introduction,” free online] and Palestine, so I refer you to those here, but this is what I have in my Synoptic Gospels course. Thank you for your attention.

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