

# ST. JOSEPH ATLAS OF THE BIBLE



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# The Lands of the Bible

The story of salvation began to unfold in a particular part of the world and during a particular period of history. It is impossible to understand it without some knowledge of this historical and geographical setting. God disclosed Himself to people living in a certain place at a certain time—in concrete personal situations that are intelligible to every generation. The Biblical record of His dealings with individuals and with the nation of Israel is intended to instruct us (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

We need to understand God's ways with people of Bible times, and to know where and when it all happened. A study of the land and story of the Bible is both fascinating and indispensable; for this history and geography are the arena in which God chose to speak and to act.

Medieval Christian geographers believed Jerusalem was at the center of the earth, and their maps illustrated this. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, which was built over the traditional site of Jesus' burial and Resurrection, a stone in the floor marks what was believed to be the world's exact center. Geographically, of course, this is nonsense. Theologically, however, for Christians this is "the Holy Land," a place distinct. It is also the center of world history and geography in the sense that it is the land promised by God to Abraham some two thousand years before the time of Christ. Jesus lived and died here; and the Christian church was formed here, outlasting the Roman Empire and changing the course of world history.

It seems no accident that this land was chosen as the site of salvation history. It forms a kind of bridge between three continents: Africa, Europe, and Asia meet at the eastern end of the Mediterranean and their peoples have always encountered each other on its trade routes. During ancient times, this land was invaded and conquered by armies from all three continents—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. God set Jerusalem "in the center of the nations" (Ezekiel 5:5).

## THE PROMISED LAND

The wider scene of the arena of Old Testament history is often called the "Fertile Crescent," as it sweeps in a semicircle from Egypt to Mesopotamia, from the Nile valley to the

alluvial plain of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, enclosing the Arabian desert. This wider region features prominently in the early history of the Jews: God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, situated just nine miles from the River Euphrates in southern Iraq, and Moses from Egypt, where as a baby he narrowly escaped drowning in the River Nile.

When God told Moses that He was to bring His people out of Egypt into Canaan, He described it as "a rich and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). Similarly, when Moses sent spies to explore the land, they confirmed this description: "The land we passed through and explored is excellent . . . a land flowing with milk and honey" (Numbers 14:7-8). They showed concrete evidence of

**The domed roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem.**



## THE FERTILE CRESCENT

As we have seen, the Fertile Crescent is the arc of land running from the Gulf to the Nile Delta, hedged by mountains on the east and north and enclosing the deserts of central Syria and Arabia. Rainfall in those mountains and in the Amanus and the Lebanon ranges along the Mediterranean coast fills the great Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the lesser Orontes and Jordan. The first two make farming possible in Babylonia and so enabled cities first to arise there six thousand years ago. Rainfall in Ethiopia fills the Nile, giving life to Egypt.

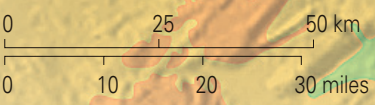
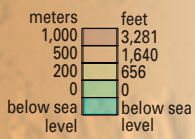
### Agriculture in the Fertile Crescent

The earliest farming consisted of grain production in the river regions, while grapes and olives were grown as well in the hilly regions such as the Holy Land. Animals grazed in the fields and on the hillsides, sheep being especially important in Babylonia, where their wool supplied a major textile trade (Joshua 7:21). Horses were raised in the hills of Ararat (eastern Turkey) and Iran, though the usual animal for load-carrying was the donkey. From about 1200 B.C. camel breeding began to be important in Arabia.

**The well-irrigated banks of the River Nile form the western end of the Fertile Crescent.**



**RELIEF MAP OF THE HOLY LAND**





**Model of Herod's temple. Jesus' parents found Him in the temple court, debating with the Jewish rabbis.**



## THE FIRST YEAR OF JESUS' MINISTRY

John the Baptist was an ascetic, who wore only a camel's hair cloak, and ate locusts and wild honey. He summoned people to repent and to be baptized in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Crowds flocked to the River Jordan to listen to him.

When Jesus presented Himself for Baptism, John protested, saying that he was unworthy to undo the sandal of the One coming after him. But Jesus persuaded John to baptize Him. At that moment the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, and the Father's voice proclaimed Him to be His beloved Son. Immediately after His Baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the Judean desert, where He fasted for forty days. After this period He was tempted by the devil.

After the temptation, Jesus called the brothers Andrew and Simon Peter to serve Him. They left John the Baptist and began to follow Jesus. Returning to Galilee, Jesus performed His first miracle, chang-

**Left: Nazareth and the Basilica of the Annunciation from the hill overlooking the town. The "Mount of Precipitation" is in the background.**

**Below: The traditional Baptismal site on the River Jordan, at the southern end of Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee).**

