

Introduction to the Middle East – Part 1

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By: Ray Handisides

Introduction

The Middle East is an area that is central to world events. Everyday we read in the newspaper or see on television some development that is happening in this part of the world. For centuries it has been the hub of the world. It was the birth place of civilization as we know it and it continues to dominate our lives and future. When we read our bibles we read of places in Middle East, some have the same names and some different. From the next two weeks we will look at the Middle East, see the relation between the Biblical countries and the nations as they are today. We will explore recent changes and how the conflicts we read about came to be and what is the cause of so much strife in the area. It is the intent of these studies to give a relationship between biblical geography and present day geography, biblical politics and present day politics so that you can understand the dynamics of the region.

- This first study will look at the area during bible times, the politics that formed the geography and the relationship between the biblical geography and today's geography.
- The second study will look at the area as it is today and the conflicts that exist and background and longstanding issues that lead to these conflicts.

Geography is influenced by history and politics. In recent years we have seen many changes in Eastern Europe as the old communist People's Republic collapsed and we saw what had been states become countries. Today's maps look completely different from those of only 20 years ago. During the 19th and early 20th century we saw the European countries controlling a great deal of the world. As they lost their hold on their colonies we saw new develop and take on new names, for example Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. The same has been true of the Middle East over the centuries. There have been many political changes that have had a great impact on the makeup of the area. Much of this has left lasting animosities in the region that continues today in the regional conflicts that we see.

It is hoped that in these two studies you will get a better understanding of the Middle East and will have a greater empathy for all sides in the struggles that continue in the area.

The Biblical Middle East

Although the Bible is not a geography book it has many references to places that can be identified. Just like today the politics of the day played a major role in defining areas as the struggle for control swept through the area. We also read of this in the Bible and see that what we recognize today as Israel came under the rule of many different empires.

From your reading of the Bible you know that most of the Old Testament is based in Mesopotamia and Egypt and the lands between and many of the places still exist by the same name they had in Biblical times. When we move to the New Testament Jesus ministry is in the area of Israel around the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem but after his crucifixion the emphasis moves to the lands around the Mediterranean and the Roman Empire. Many of the places Paul visited and mentioned in his letters and in the Book of Acts still exist today, such as Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch and Rome. Let us now turn our attention to some of the places we read of in the Bible.

■ Syria

Modern-day Syria is a nation-state in the Middle East slightly larger than North Dakota. After World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire of which it was a part, Syria was administered by France until it received its independence in 1946. In 1958 it united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic, which was unsuccessful and dissolved in September 1961, and the Syrian Arab Republic emerged. It is interesting to note that the word Syria never appears in the Hebrew Bible. One often finds the expression 'Airaḡum (אֲרָאֲמַי), referring to land part of which is now called Syria. Likewise, 'Airaḡum Nahafrayim (אֲרָאֲמַי נַחַפְרַיִם), literally “Aram of the Two Rivers,” is used to refer to what moderns would call Mesopotamia. The expressions *Syria* and *Mesopotamia* do not exist in the Hebrew Bible, but they do exist as *Suria* and *Mesopotamia* in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint. They also appear in the New Testament, which was written in Greek. However it is important to note that neither in Greek nor in Hebrew would the areas referred to as Syria or Mesopotamia correspond to the geography of the current Middle East.

■ Lebanon

Modern Lebanon is a country less than three-quarters the size of Connecticut and is bordered by Syria on the north and east, Israel on the south, and the Mediterranean Sea on the west. The expression *lebanon* (לְבָנוֹן) appears many times in the biblical text. The name is derived from the Semitic word-root *lbn*, which means “white.” The indication is that the word originally referred to the high, perpetually snow-capped mountains that are found between the Bekaa Valley and the Mediterranean Sea. This is to some extent born out by the usage of the term in the Hebrew Bible. In some instances “Lebanon” clearly refers to a mountain or mountain range. The usage, however, is not consistent. The word *Lebanon* can refer to a valley/valleys in the aforementioned mountain range, the forest growing on the mountains, or a generic region. Yet nowhere is Lebanon described as having an army or a king. That is, Lebanon is never referred to as a concrete geopolitical reality such as the kingdom of Israel or the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

■ Israel

The expression *Iarcy* (יִשְׂרָאֵל, Israel) has several meanings in the biblical text. The first meaning and perhaps the oldest is the second name for Jacob, the son of Isaac. According to the biblical tradition, Jacob wrestled one night with a mysterious figure (Gen. 32) and at the end of the struggle received the nickname Israel, which according to a folkloric understanding of the name is related to “having contended” (תָּרַג, *saa ru i ru*) with God. As father of twelve sons, Jacob-Israel becomes the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. The expression *Israel* is used many times to refer to the entire people. “YHWH, the God of Israel” clearly refers to the entire people, all the tribes. In other instances Israel is used in a more restricted sense, referring to ten northern tribes. Thus when Solomon is declared to be the rightful successor of David, he is “ruler of Israel and Judah” (1 Kgs. 1:35). David, in fact, wore a double crown as the king of Israel and Judah. The two kingdoms were united for only two generations. With the death of Solomon, Israel broke off from Judah and two kingdoms were formed, the kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem and the kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria (1 Kgs. 12:1–33). The rest of the two books of Kings treats the histories and fates of the two kingdoms and their kings until the destruction of the kingdom of Israel and Samaria in 721 BCE. The kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. However, unlike the northern tribes, Judah was able to survive in exile and ultimately return home and not disappear from the stage of history. In the period after the exile and into the Roman period, *Judah* and *Judeans*¹ were the common expressions for those monotheists who worshiped YHWH, followed the Torah, and considered themselves the descendants and heirs of the patriarchs. Nonetheless, while words derived from *Judah* were the more common references to the Jews, the notion of Israel never died out. Even today there is a certain difference in usages. The modern state of Israel was formed on May 14, 1948, and is officially the State of Israel. Nonetheless, from time to time one hears the expression “Judea and Samaria” used by Israelis to refer to a larger parcel of territory than is generally recognized by the world community as belonging to the State of Israel.

Even at its greatest extent during the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Judah-Israel was never a major power in the world of the Middle East. Indeed, it seems that one of the reasons that David and Solomon were so successful in extending their power was because of a basic power vacuum that existed at the time. Throughout the history of the ancient Near East, one power or another held sway in Mesopotamia. The Sumerians (until the beginning of the second millennium BCE), the Akkadians (early second millennium BCE), the Assyrians (late second millennium BCE), the Neo-Assyrians, and finally the Chaldeans (first millennium BCE) ruled and often fought one another throughout the period of the Bible. Outside of Mesopotamia the Hittites formed a powerful empire in Anatolia, or what is now central Turkey, until the end of the first millennium BCE. Throughout the entire period Egyptian dynasties were either more or less powerful. The result was three spheres of power, namely, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt, often competing with one another and using small countries such as Israel as pawns in the struggles. Later on in the biblical period, the Persians (sixth to fourth centuries BCE), the Greeks (fourth to end of third centuries BCE), and ultimately the Romans (second century BCE through the Christian era) controlled the Middle East one after another. Although some of the empires were very powerful and covered large areas, none except the Roman was able to maintain control over vast territories for much longer than a century and a half. The result was a constantly shifting political scene and, hence, a constantly shifting geographical reality.

Ancient Empire vs. Nation-State

From what has been said it is clear that there are many geographical names that appear in the Bible and that still can be found on modern maps. However, it should also be clear that what those names referred to in the Bible are often quite different from what the same names refer to in modern times. In addition, a more profound change has occurred since biblical times, and that is the emergence of the nation-state. The nation-state is a reality that emerged in Europe in the last four hundred years. The city-state existed in the Middle East in biblical times; the nation-state did not. It is important not to confuse an ancient empire, for example, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (sixth century BCE), with the nation-state. Both the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the British Empire of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century were empires. However, they were actually quite different in conception. The British Empire was a true nation-state empire with a bureaucracy, a culture, and a clear self-identity as a world power centered in London. Although the Neo-Babylonian Empire at its height covered an area from modern Iran to Egypt, it had more in common with a city-state, albeit a huge city-state, than it did with the British Empire. Thus, there is historically a qualitative difference between “countries” that are found in the Bible and modern nation-states that are found in the Middle East. Because of the Ottoman Empire and later European colonialism, the rise of the nation-state occurred later in the Middle East than it did in Europe. To understand how the geographic situation in the Middle East arrived at the point it is today, it is necessary to briefly understand the Islamic conquest and the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The Islamic Conquest

The Prophet Muhammad died in the year 632 CE in Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia. At the time of his death, the world of the Middle East was divided between the Byzantines and the Persians. The Persians for the most part controlled the lands east of the Euphrates River. The Byzantines controlled the coast of the Mediterranean and all of what we refer today as the Levant² and the Holy Land. With incredible speed and for any number of reasons, Islamic power and control took over the Middle East. It is important to note what happened here. It is not true to say that Islam as a religion was spread by the sword. In point of fact, the Muslim armies discouraged Christians and Jews from converting to Islam. However, Muslim political power was clearly spread through military action. Within fifty years of the death of Muhammad, the entire Levant, Mesopotamia, and most of North Africa were under Muslim control. Thus the Holy Land had changed hands once again. The Romans had taken over the land of the Jews after the Jewish revolts of the first and second centuries CE. When the Roman Empire converted to Christianity and moved to Byzantium, the lands of the

Bible came under Byzantine Christian control. With the rise of Islam, political control of the traditional lands of the Bible came under Muslim Arab control. While many of the Byzantine elite were Hellenistic and Greek speaking, the Muslim conquerors were Semites and spoke Arabic, a language related to Hebrew and Aramaic. The Roman influence was replaced by a resurgence of Semitic place names.

The eleventh to thirteenth centuries CE were a tumultuous time for the lands of the Bible. Islam was experiencing inner conflict from groups of Muslims vying for power in the region. The Crusades began, and Jerusalem fell to the Christian crusaders in July 1099. For almost a century the Levant was dotted with crusader kingdoms, principalities, and the like, often little more than fortified city-states. To the east the first wave of the Mongol invasions had begun. Ultimately it was the Mongols and not the crusaders who were to radically change the history and geography of the Middle East. By the beginning of the fourteenth century CE, the crusaders had been completely expelled from the Levant. The Mongols, however, had completely destroyed the Muslim leadership that had governed Muslim lands for well over five hundred years. The Mongols brought the leadership effectively to an end and created a vacuum in the world of the Middle East.

The Ottoman Empire

Even before the arrival of the Mongols, groups of Turkic peoples were moving into the Middle East and setting up areas of influence and control. One group of Turkic people migrating into the region was the Ottomans. The Ottomans enjoyed greater success than any other related Turkic group and quickly began filling the vacuum left by the destruction of the Muslim leadership in Baghdad. Early on, different Turkic groups had converted to Islam. However, they were not Arabs or even Semitic. The languages they spoke were not even remotely related to Arabic or the other languages of the Bible.

The Ottomans were ultimately able to set up one of the greatest empires the Middle East had known. They conquered the entire Arabic-speaking Middle East, North Africa, and Anatolia. On May 29, 1453, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II, “the Conqueror,” conquered Constantinople and brought the two-thousand-year-old Roman Empire to an end. With the loss of Constantinople, Europe lay open to Ottoman imperialistic designs. The Ottomans ultimately attacked and annexed Greece, the Balkans, and parts of modern-day Hungary and Poland and attacked Vienna. The Ottomans controlled access to the markets of India and China and were extremely powerful and wealthy. As such, they presented a great military and economic threat to Europe.

As far as the Middle East was concerned, although the Ottomans were Muslims, they were not Arabs. The Ottomans controlled not only the Holy Land but also the heart of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula with its holy cities of Mecca and Medina. For centuries the lands of the Bible had been ruled by a Semitic people, speaking a Semitic language—Arabic. Islam had an empire whose centers—Damascus and Baghdad—were in the historical lands of the Bible. With the rise of the Ottomans, the political weight shifted north to Constantinople, renamed Istanbul. While Arabic remained the language of prayer and theology, the language of power became Ottoman Turkish. For the most part, the center of history in the region moved away from the lands of the Bible, and many areas suffered from neglect.

Points to Ponder

- When you read the Bible and a place name comes up, do you tend to imagine that place in its modern context?
- Do you think God is concerned with national borders?
- What are some of the differences between empires and nation-states
- When you think of the State of Israel, do you most often think of it in terms of biblical geography or of modern political decision making?

Conclusion

Although many place names found in the Bible have survived for up to four thousand years, almost none of them have survived with the same meaning they originally had. Changes in politics, religion, language, and so on over the centuries have worked to change the meanings and referents of many, if not most, biblical place names and geographical names.