

DR. G. DOUGLAS YOUNG
Founder

CLARENCE H. WAGNER, JR.
International Director,
Editor, Dispatch from Jerusalem
Israel Update Letter

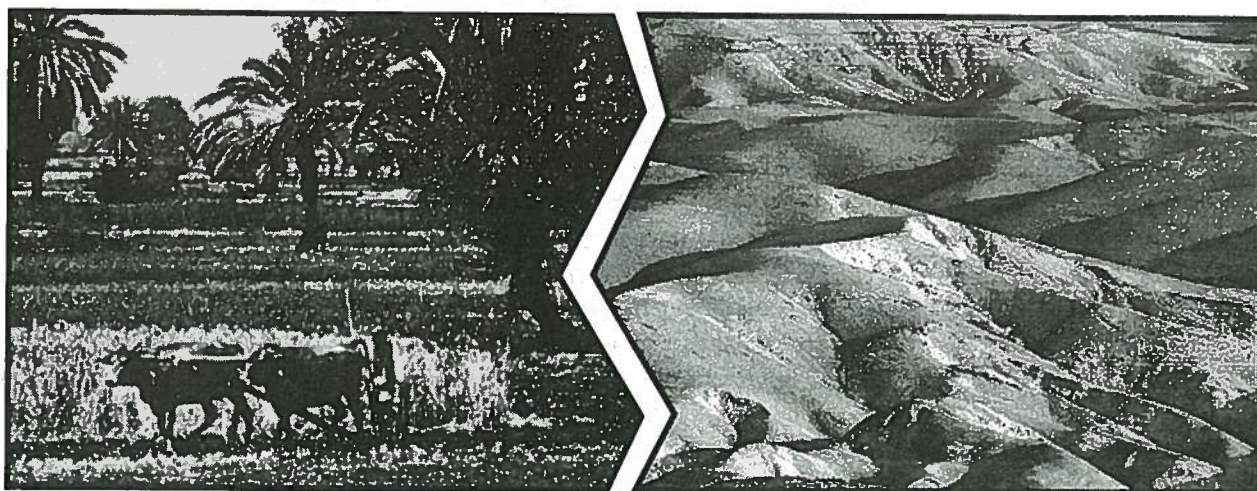
JIM GERRISH
Project Director, Israel
Editor, Jerusalem Prayer Letter

LARRY J. EHRlich
National Director, USA



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The Land Of Milk And Honey PART 1



Physically, the land upon which the biblical drama is staged presents two faces. In God's word one is depicted by "milk," the other by "honey."

Dear Friends:

The Bible, for many readers, is like a favorite Broadway play that you often listen to on tape, but have never seen on stage. Once you see it, it becomes three-dimensional and rich with new meaning.

A trip to Israel can do the same thing for us as it brings our Bible to life with new and delightful revelations. Truly, the land which provides the setting of the Bible narrative has become a "fifth gospel." The writers of the four Gospels don't mention this "fifth gospel," because they assume that you know as much about it as they did.

Yet, 2,000 years later, most Christians live thousands of miles from Israel and don't share an understanding of our Jewish roots, the Hebrew language, the culture, the festivals, or the land. Putting the Bible into context helps us understand the presuppositions of the biblical writers and fill-in many of the missing, and often vital, details of the biblical drama.

This is exactly what I am trying to do with our series of monthly Teaching Letters.

This month, I want to launch into a two-part series on the land of the Bible, so that we can understand "the stage" on which the biblical drama is set.

To do this, I will be sharing from material researched by my good friend, Dr. James Fleming, who is the Founder and Director of the Biblical Resources Study Center here in Jerusalem.

THE STAGE OF THE BIBLICAL DRAMA

Ninety-five percent of the Bible happens on a stage only fifty miles wide and a hundred and fifty miles long. If you think of a place fifty miles from your home, and another place one hundred and fifty miles from your home, you can place 95% of what happened in the Bible in that small area! The few Scriptural events that occurred further afield were the early patriarchal journeys, the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity, and the missionary journeys of Paul.

Where is this tiny area? From Dan at Mount Hermon, in the north, to Beer Sheva, in the south, is the 150-mile length of the Land of the Bible. From the Mediterranean Sea in the west to just east of the Jordan River is the 50-mile width.

All around that small compass of land, however, is tremendous variety. There are four seas, each of a different salinity; three continents; Africa, Asia, and Europe; two deserts; the Sahara and the Arabian; and the longest scar on the earth's crust, running right through the middle of the biblical stage — the Syrian/African rift. Truly, it would be hard to find another place on the surface of the earth with as much variety in such a small area.

This means that geography has had a greater influence on biblical history than if it had taken place anywhere else in the world. If, for instance, West Texas had been the site of the Bible, you would only need to know that on the map "dot A" is half an inch from "dot B," for the terrain looks about the same for hundreds of miles. In Israel, though, two dots on the map, side by side, can be in terrain of entirely different characteristics. There may be different geologies, elevations, climates — as well as different hopes and fears represented in those dots. One town may be on a very secure mountain slope with strong building materials for a city wall and excellent, fertile fields. Another town may be less secure, with rocks that shatter or crumble and infertile fields. In Israel, just across the valley floor from a very nice location, the geology and climate can be very different.

GOD IS A GOD WHO ACTS

Let's recreate, in a general way, the stage of the biblical drama. The God of the Bible is a God who has acted and those acts have happened in time and place: history and geography. This means that the Scriptures are open to the critical disciplines through archaeology, language, history, geography, ancient anthropology and culture.

The same scientific methods that have given many thinking persons cause for doubt about other religions are available for the serious student of the Bible to authenticate the God of the Bible, who has manifested Himself in reality.

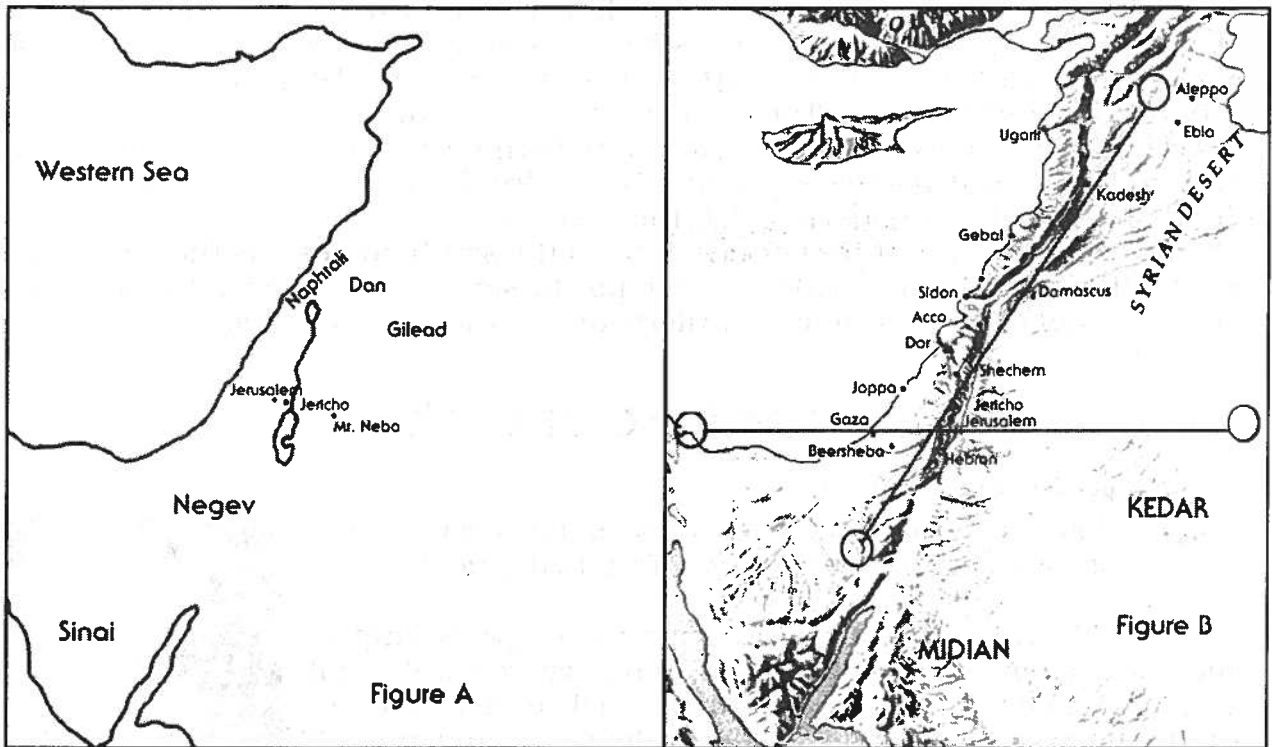


Figure A depicts general area in discussion. Figure B divides the area into four quadrants according to the precipitation in each respectively.

Christianity and Judaism are not man-made philosophies, but a dramatic verification of God who planned the redemption of the world.

WHAT IS THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY?

Figure A is a basic outline of the region. Looking from East to West, as Moses did from Mount Nebo, you see the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, the Oasis of Jericho, the mountains around Jerusalem, and part of the Mediterranean. Moses would have been looking across a dry desert to the distant mountains that caught the rain. The Bible describes the Promised Land: *"The land you are going over to possess is not like the land of Egypt, from whence you came, where you watered your garden with your feet. For the land you are going over to possess is not like that. It is land of hills and valleys, which the Lord your God waters from the heavens."* Then the passage summarizes: *"It is a land flowing with milk and honey."* The Land of Israel is referred to as the Land of Milk and Honey 23 times in the bible.

The phrase, *milk and honey* refers to two lifestyles here: *milk*, referring to shepherds with sheep and goats who provide milk, and *honey*, speaking of the farmer who grows fruit trees.

On the map, you see the Eastern Mediterranean world, from the Sinai, the Sea of Galilee, and the Jordan River coming into the Dead Sea. The line divides the rainy and dry parts of the country. Below the horizontal line it rains very little under the influence of the great Desert of Africa. The vertical line, roughly, following the coast of the Mediterranean, divides the rainy left side from the dry right side, influenced by the Arabian Desert to the East.

The intersecting lines divide the area into four quarters, like the face of a clock. The top left quarter (9 to 1 o'clock) is the wettest area, furthest from both deserts. That quarter the Bible calls *honey*, a wetter land, with farmers. The second wettest quarter is on the top right (1 to 3 o'clock). That is *milk and honey*, with herds and farmers. The third wettest is on the bottom left (from 7 to 9 o'clock). Notice that the quarter closest to both deserts is on the bottom right (3 to 7 o'clock). That is *milk* territory. It's too dry there for farming: instead, folks herd sheep and goats, from which they get milk.

Basically, the side of the country toward the south and east is the *land of milk*, with little farming and herds. The opposite side, near the cool Mediterranean breezes, has more of rain and farmers, and is the *land of honey*.

THE LAND OF MILK

THE RIGHT STAGE

Let's look at three characteristics of life over on the desert, or *milk*, side of the country. This is the *right stage*.

UNPREDICTABLE: First, life on *right stage* is unpredictable. When you sow your seed, you never know if you'll end up harvesting, or plowing it all back under. It is an area of marginal agriculture. Jerusalem's annual rainfall has been measured at anywhere from four inches to forty inches. Minimal winter wheat needs at least eleven inches of rain. So this side is very unpredictable.

Some thought questions: Is the God of the *right stage* an unpredictable God? I don't mean unfaithful. But does the God on the side of the country near those two deserts like surprises? Can this God not be anticipated, or put into a box?

SILENT AND LONELY: The second characteristic of life on *right stage*, is *silent and lonely*. If you took a hike from Jerusalem in a southeasterly direction, toward the Arabian Desert, you would leave walled cities, come to unwalled villages, then find scattered housing, and eventually come upon Bedouin living in tents and caves. The further you go down south and east, the more silent and lonely it becomes.

Some more thought questions: What draws people to that silent lonely stage? Why did Elijah flee from Jezebel to the desert south of Beer Sheva? What is it about the unpredictable, silent, lonely side of the stage that lends itself to hearing the "still small voice?" Why did Jesus spend forty days in this desert, before He began His ministry? Why did John the Baptist live in the wilderness and minister to thousands? Why did Paul live three years in the desert before he began his ministry? Why did five thousand idealistic Byzantine Christians in the fifth century A.D. fill up three canyons in this desert, living as hermits? What drew them out to the desert, and what did they find on that unpredictable, silent, lonely stage?

Why did Judaism and Christianity come from the desert? Why not from the



A lush spring-fed oasis in Wadi Feran, in the Sinai wilderness.

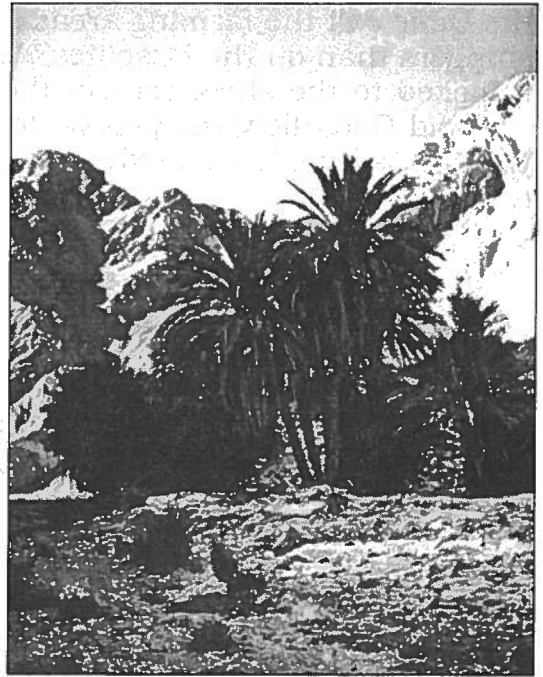
river cultures on the Tigris-Euphrates in Mesopotamia, with its three hundred and fifty gods, none of which is worshiped today? Or why not Egypt, the Nile River culture, with its seven hundred and twenty gods, none of which is worshiped today? Why did God bless His people with such authentic spirituality on the unpredictable, silent, lonely, exhausting *right stage* of the Promised Land? What is so special about this unpredictable, silent, lonely stage?

EXHAUSTING: The third characteristic of the *right stage* is that life is *exhausting*. The desert culture of the Bedouin is particularly exhausting for women. It takes a Bedouin woman about ten years to make a tent; she collects the hair from camels and goats and weaves it, always working on a new panel. She also raises the children, until the boys are old enough to go with their father: she is in charge of the flocks and herds, grazing them all day; she's in charge of the cooking, the clothing, the "tent-keeping;" and she is in charge of packing and moving from place to place. The Bedouin husband does everything else!

One of the main problems of *right stage* is nutrition. Today, the further south and east you go, the less protein there is. While the average Muslim family in Jerusalem has seven or eight children, the average Bedouin family, who are also Muslims, has one or two. They would like to have more, but there is such malnutrition that they are simply unable to conceive. It's all part of the unpredictable, silent, lonely, exhausting life on the right-sided of the biblical stage.

In Genesis 12, we see that God chose a land and a people through which He would work out His redemptive plan. He chose for His people to live on the *right stage* throughout most of biblical history. Three hundred of the 350 cities mentioned in the Old Testament are found in the *right stage - milk* side of the biblical stage. Yet, it was there where life demanded more serious prayer and dependence to the Lord, that God was able to meet the needs of His people and show forth His miracle power and love to sustain them. Often, when life got too easy, His people began to turn away from Him. That is often true for us as well.

In my next letter, we'll explore life on the *honey side* of the Promised Land. Why does



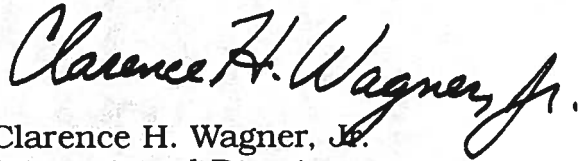
In the exhausting right stage, life is sustained by oasis like these in the Sinai.



The desert culture of the Bedouin is particularly exhausting for women.

the Bible call the farming areas *honey*? Why did more rain fall on the Baal worshippers than on the Israelites? Was life in the rich coastal cities as attractive as it looked to the shepherds in the hills bordering the desert? Most importantly, why did God allow His people, for most of biblical history, to live on the unpredictable, silent, lonely, exhausting, *right stage* of the Promised Land?

Shalom from Jerusalem,



Clarence H. Wagner, Jr.
International Director

P.S. Bridges for Peace and Biblical Resources are co-sponsoring an exciting Red Sea Cruise with the study theme, "Origins of the Hebrews," from January 15-27, 1997. Prices start at \$2,900! The cruise will begin in Egypt and take you throughout the Red Sea and Gulf of Eliat, visiting the sites of the Exodus overland, while sleeping and eating in comfort. The cruise includes lectures, study materials, transportation, meals, sightseeing, all transportation overland, guiding, hotels, transfers and portorage. Bridges for Peace is also offering an pre-cruise extension in Israel. Write to our U.S. office for a beautiful color brochure.