

Week #:	250	Series:	The Gospels	Title:	The Land of Palestine
Scriptures:					
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## The Land of Palestine

This week we will look at the layout of the land known as Palestine.

The word ***Palestine*** is not mentioned in the Old or New Testament. It does, however, occur at least eight times in eight verses of the Hebrew concordance of the King James Version Bible.

Though the definite origins of the word “Palestine” have been debated for years and are still not known for sure, the name is believed to be derived from the Egyptian and Hebrew word *peleshet*, which appears in the Tanakh (Old Testament) no fewer than 250 times. Roughly translated to mean “rolling” or “migratory,” the term was used to describe the inhabitants of the land to the northeast of Egypt – the Philistines. The Philistines were an Aegean people – more closely related to the Greeks and with no connection ethnically, linguistically, or historically with Arabia – who conquered the Mediterranean coastal plain that is now Israel and Gaza in the 12th Century BCE.

Before the Israelite conquest, the Egyptians called what is now Israel, Syria, and Lebanon *Retenu*. The term *Canaan* appeared in the fifteenth century BCE and was subsequently referred to as “*Eretz Bnei Yisrael*,” the “Land of the Children of Israel” (Joshua 11:22) or “*Eretz Yisrael*” (1 Samuel 13:19) after the Jewish return from Egypt. The name “Israel” was first used in the tenth century BCE to refer to the northern Jewish kingdom following the division of Solomon’s kingdom.

During the Persian Empire, the area that is now Israel and Syria was referred to as *Coele-Syria*. A derivative of the name Palestine first appears in Greek literature in the 5th Century BCE when the historian Herodotus used the word “*Palaistine*” to refer to the coastal strip inhabited by the Philistines.

As early as 300 BCE, the term *Judaea* [Judea] appears, most likely to describe the area where the population was predominantly Jewish. It was distinguished from Palestine and Syria. Coins with the word *Judaea* or something similar were produced at the time of the first Jewish revolt (66-70 CE). In the 2nd century CE, the Romans crushed the revolt of Shimon Bar Kokhba (132 CE), during which Jerusalem and Judea were conquered, and the area of Judea was renamed *Palaestina* in an attempt to minimize Jewish identification with the land of Israel.

*Akiva* ben Yosef (born 40 ce in Caesarea —died c. 135 in Palestine) was a Jewish sage and a principal founder of rabbinic Judaism. Rabbi Akiva testified in the second century that Diaspora Jews referred to the land as *Eretz Israel*. The rabbis never refer to it as Palestine. Even vicious anti-Jewish writers in antiquity generally do not use the term *Palestine*.

**PALESTINE** in Jesus’ day was part of the Roman Empire, which controlled its various territories in a number of ways. In the East (eastern Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt), territories were governed either by kings who were “friends and allies” of Rome (often called “client” kings or, more disparagingly, “puppet” kings) or by governors supported by a Roman army. When Jesus was born, all of Jewish Palestine—as well as some of the neighboring Gentile areas—was ruled by Rome’s able “friend and ally” Herod the Great. For Rome, Palestine was important not in itself, but because it lay between Syria and Egypt, two of Rome’s most valuable possessions. Rome had legions in both countries, but not in Palestine. Roman imperial policy required that Palestine be loyal and peaceful so that it did not undermine Rome’s larger interests. That end was achieved for a long time by permitting Herod to remain king of Judaea (37–4 BC) and allowing him a free hand in governing his kingdom, as long as the requirements of stability and loyalty were met.

When Herod died shortly after Jesus’ birth, his kingdom was divided into five parts. Most of the Gentile areas were separated from the Jewish areas, which were split between two of Herod’s sons, Herod Archelaus, who received Judaea and Idumaea (as well as Samaria, which was non-Jewish), and Herod Antipas, who received

Galilee and Peraea. (In the New Testament, Antipas is somewhat confusingly called Herod, as in Luke 23:6–12; apparently the sons of Herod took his name, just as the successors of Julius Caesar were commonly called Caesar.) Both sons were given lesser titles than king: Archelaus was *ethnarch*, and Antipas was *tetrarch*. The non-Jewish areas (except Samaria) were assigned to a third son, Philip, to Herod's sister Salome, or to the province of Syria. The emperor Augustus deposed the unsatisfactory Archelaus in 6 ce, however, and transformed Judaea, Idumaea, and Samaria from a client kingdom into an "imperial province." Accordingly, he sent a prefect to govern this province. That minor Roman aristocrat (later called a procurator) was supported by a small Roman army of approximately 3,000 men. The soldiers, however, came not from Italy but from nearby Gentile cities, especially Caesarea and Sebaste; presumably, the officers were from Italy. During Jesus' public career, the Roman prefect was Pontius Pilate (ruled 26–36 ce).

Although nominally in charge of Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea, the prefect did not govern his area directly. Instead, he relied on local leaders. The prefect and his small army lived in the predominantly Gentile city Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, about two days' march from Jerusalem. They came to Jerusalem only to ensure peace during the pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavu'ot, and Sukkot—when large crowds and patriotic themes sometimes combined to spark unrest or uprisings. On a day-to-day basis Jerusalem was governed by the high priest. Assisted by a council, he had the difficult task of mediating between the remote Roman prefect and the local populace, which was hostile toward pagans and wanted to be free of foreign interference. His political responsibility was to maintain order and to see that tribute was paid. Caiaphas, the high priest during Jesus' adulthood, held the office from about 18 to 36 ce, longer than anyone else during the Roman period, indicating that he was a successful and reliable diplomat. Since he and Pilate were in power together for 10 years, they must have collaborated successfully.

Thus, at the time of Jesus' public career, Galilee was governed by the tetrarch Antipas, who was sovereign within his own domain, provided that he remained loyal to Rome and maintained peace and stability within his borders. Judaea (including Jerusalem) was nominally governed by Pilate, but the actual daily rule of Jerusalem was in the hands of Caiaphas and his council.

Galilee and Judaea, the principal Jewish areas of Palestine, were surrounded by Gentile territories (i.e., Caesarea, Dora, and Ptolemais on the Mediterranean coast; Caesarea Philippi north of Galilee; and Hippus and Gadara east of Galilee). There also were two inland Gentile cities on the west side of the Jordan River near Galilee (Scythopolis and Sebaste). The proximity of Gentile and Jewish areas meant that there was some interchange between them, including trade, which explains why Antipas had *telōnēs*—often translated as "tax collectors" but more accurately rendered as "customs officers"—in the villages on his side of the Sea of Galilee. There also was some exchange of populations: some Jews lived in Gentile cities, such as Scythopolis, and some Gentiles lived in at least one of the Jewish cities, Tiberias. Jewish merchants and traders could probably speak some Greek, but the primary language of Palestinian Jews was Aramaic (a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew). On the other hand, the Jews resisted paganism and excluded temples for the worship of the gods of Greece and Rome from their cities, along with the Greek educational institutions the *ephebeia* and *gymnasion*, gladiatorial contests, and other buildings or institutions typical of Gentile areas. Because Jewish-Gentile relations in the land that the Jews considered their own were often uneasy, Jewish areas were usually governed separately from Gentile areas. The reign of Herod the Great was the exception to that rule, but even he treated the Jewish and the Gentile parts of his kingdom differently, fostering Greco-Roman culture in Gentile sectors but introducing only very minor aspects of it in Jewish areas.

In the 1st century Rome showed no interest in making the Jews in Palestine and other parts of the empire conform to common Greco-Roman culture. A series of decrees by Julius Caesar, Augustus, the Roman Senate, and various city councils permitted Jews to keep their own customs, even when they were antithetical to Greco-Roman culture. For example, in respect for Jewish observance of the Sabbath, Rome exempted Jews from conscription in Rome's armies. Neither did Rome colonize Jewish Palestine. Augustus established colonies elsewhere (in southern France, Spain, North Africa, and Asia Minor), but prior to the First Jewish

Revolt (66–74 ce) Rome established no colonies in Jewish Palestine. Few individual Gentiles from abroad would have been attracted to live in Jewish cities, where they would have been cut off from their customary worship and cultural activities. The Gentiles who lived in Tiberias and other Jewish cities were probably natives of nearby Gentile cities, and many were Syrians, who could probably speak both Aramaic and Greek.

**LEVANT** is the region between ancient Syria (in the north) and ancient Egypt (in the south); bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Jordan River, Sea of Galilee, and Dead Sea to the east. It included Lebanon, Palestine, Cyprus, and portions of modern-day Iraq. We will focus on the area known as Palestine, as this is where Jesus lived and ministered.

**IDUMAEA** is the Greek name for the area of the family line of Edom (Edomites - the descendants of Esau). According to Genesis 36:8, Esau departed from Canaan and took up residence around Mount Seir, approximately halfway between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the northernmost point of the Gulf of Aqaba in modern-day Jordan. In Deuteronomy, it is revealed the Edomites dispossessed the Horites of this land (c. 1900 BCE), and inhabited all of the territory between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba by the time the Israelites passed around them around 1450 BCE (Deuteronomy 2:8, 12). The Egyptians testify to the presence of the Edomites in this territory during the Late Bronze Age (c. 1200-1000 BCE), and the Assyrians of the Iron Age also recognize Edom's existence, even providing the names of some of the Edomite kings of the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. Thus, from around 1900-600 BCE, Edom, the land of the Edomites, was centered on Mount Seir and extended from Moab and the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba to the south and east of the Arabian desert.

**JUDEA** was the area to the south where Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives is located. This was where Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel settled after their return from the Babylonian captivity when they returned to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

By Jesus' day, the majority of people in this region were known as the traditionalists. They didn't want to change anything. They believed:

- When the prophets died there was no more prophecy
- When the prophets died there was no more healing
- There was no resurrection of the dead
- There was nothing beyond death – no eternity

We see this represented in the group of the Sadducees. They were very devout people, but very traditional in their beliefs. They followed the teachings of Torah very firmly.

**GALILEE** was the province with the Orthodox Jews – the Pharisees. After the Babylonian captivity, this part of the country was largely empty. When Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel returned, they settled south in Judea. Most Jews stayed in Babylon (because their country was still under Persian rule, so why exchange one Persian prison for another?). By 200 BC there were a million Jews in Babylon, mostly very Godly people, and 150,000 Jews in Israel. Then came the Maccabees and the revolt against the Greek rule. The Jews were free for the first time since 586 BC. Those Jews in Babylon then wanted to go home. In the generation between 167BC (the Maccabees) and Jesus' time, more than half a million Jews left Babylon and returned to Israel. Galilee was the only place with space for them, so that's where they settled. They founded cities like Cana, Nazareth, Capernaum, Korazin, etc. – all cities mentioned in the New Testament over and over again.

These people were not traditionalists like those in Judea. They raised their hands when they sang. They danced in the Synagogues. Their rabbis all healed the sick. They prophesied. The Judeans thought these people were a bunch of uneducated charismatic fools. This is where the majority of Jesus' ministry took place.

**SAMARIA** is the province between Galilee (to the north) and Judea (to the south). These were the people that had intermarried when the Assyrian captivity happened and had blended the true religion of God with the pagan religions of other people. They were called half-breeds by the Jews and most Jews believed they were

not truly in the image of God – that they had given up the image of God when they took on their half-breed beliefs. They were hated by the Jews. If you were a Jew and walked through Samaria by yourself, you would be killed. If you were a Samaritan and walked by yourself through Judea or Galilee, you would be killed. It wasn't safe to travel alone through the territory of the other.

In John 4 we read of Jesus journeying from Judea to Galilee, traveling through Samaria. He is tired and stops near the town of Shekhem (Sh'khem) at Jacob's Well in the area of Samaria. This is when he encounters a Samaritan woman there at the well to draw water in the middle of the day. It is important to note that Jesus' disciples leave him alone at the well to go into town to get some food. This was highly unusual. Jews did not travel through this area alone. Jesus knew who he would encounter though, so he sent his disciples on to town and remained alone. Another famous story associated with this region is the story of the Good Samaritan (which we will discuss in detail at a later time).

**DECAPOLIS / LAND OF THE SEVEN** is a group of ten Greek cities founded in 333 BC by Alexander the Great. Alexander had a mission to convert the world to the Hellenistic mindset. Hellenism is the view that the human is the center of the universe. He did this by focusing on four things: sports, media, education, and religion. He conquered cities and would then build in each of them: the arena (sports), the theater (media), the gymnasium (school), and the temple (religion). In this way he changed the world view from a theistic view to a humanistic view. Our western world is greatly influenced by Alexander the Great.

The Decapolis is one of these regions set up by Alexander the Great. It had ten Greek cities, thus the name: DECA means "ten," POLIS means "cities" – so Decapolis is "ten cities." The Jews came along and talked of how wicked these cities were. The gymnasium comes from the Greek word for naked. You went to school naked – elevating the human body. The temple had prostitution as forms of worship, because in their view this is how you became one with god. They raised and sacrificed pigs – not a kosher animal as given by God in the law – in the temple of Dionysus, the god of orgy. This false god was known as being "nonbinary" and thus the prostitution (in all forms) was performed in the temples. (This is where Jesus cast out the demons from the man and into the pigs.)

It is odd that it is known as the "Land of the Seven" as well, especially when you note that there were ten Greek cities. The rabbis noticed that in Joshua 3:10 it says:

<sup>9</sup> So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God." <sup>10</sup> And Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God *is* among you, and *that* He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites:

They drove out the 7 pagan nations during the time of Joshua. The rabbis believed that those pagan nations then settled in the area of the Decapolis. This is why it is also referred to as the "Land of the Seven" – referring to the seven pagan nations. It was also nicknamed "the other side" and "a far country."

Mark 5:1

<sup>1</sup> Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. <sup>2</sup> And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit,

Luke 15:13

<sup>13</sup> And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

Both of these events happened in the area of the Decapolis, just on the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

It was also nicknamed the land of the expelled ones (the ones that Joshua had kicked out). In Hebrew the word for expelled is GERUS. To make a word plural you add IM to the end of it. So a group of people who have been kicked out are GERUSIM.

Our translations usually say the Gadarenes (as noted above in the scripture), but this is not a good translation. "Gadarenes" refers to the city of Gadara - 15 miles away from the Sea of Galilee. Some translations refer to this as "Gergasenes", but that would be with city of Gerash – 30 miles from the Sea of Galilee. When translating the text, they did not know the region and therefore assumed the writer was talking of one of these cities, when they were actually referring to the region itself – the Decapolis, the land of the seven pagan nations, or "the other side." This is one of those situations where knowing the region itself would help in getting the translation correct, and not knowing it just leads to confusion.

