Introduction

There is geography in my Bible, and much of the geography of the Bible that we study is going to be focused on the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, the land of Israel. But before we zoom in and look really closely at that land, I’d like to zoom out and take a look at the geographical context of the Promised Land so that we might better understand the geography of the Promised Land itself.

When we think about context for Israel today, we’re prone to think about the modern states that surround it—a context that includes a relationship with Syria and Lebanon and Jordan and Egypt. But what I’m talking about in terms of context is the geographical context of the Promised Land within this large arch of land that you see here, known as the Fertile Crescent. In this session we’re going to take on three questions: Where is it? What is it? And thirdly, what are the implications for the Promised Land?

Where Is It?

Let’s start with the question, where is it? Where is the Fertile Crescent? The Fertile Crescent as you can see in this illustration is a 1,800-mile-long arch that runs from the head of the Persian Gulf all the way over to the Nile River in Egypt. I call it a bracketed arch. That’s because when you go north and south of this generally east/west running arch you’re going to run into natural obstacles. It’s bracketed on the north by the Alpine-Himalayan Mountains and it’s bracketed on the south by the Syrian/Arabian Deserts. And here you can see that Israel–Jerusalem–lies on the far western side of the Fertile Crescent. That is where it is. And it brings us to the second question, what is it?
What Is It?

When you hear the word *fertile* you might come to a picture that isn’t quite so accurate in terms of the Middle East. So what I want to do is give you several characteristics of the Fertile Crescent that will help you better understand what it is.

Number one, the Fertile Crescent is food-producing land. Not tropical land, but food-producing land. About one-third of the ancient diet was composed of grain products, and in order to grow the most drought-resistant of the grain products, barley, you need about twelve inches of annual precipitation or its equivalent delivered by irrigation. And not every place in the Middle East is capable of growing grain. But when we chart where there’s enough water to grow grain, we’re gonna find that it follows very nicely the 1,800-mile arch of the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent is food-producing land.

The second characteristic that I’d like you to know about is that the Fertile Crescent is empire-building land. In order to build an empire societies have to abandon the hunter/gatherer strategies. Hunter/gatherer societies by their very definition need to be mobile. They need to disperse and they need to live apart from one another so that they can take advantage of the natural food that’s available—or follow the moving herds of wild animals that provide them with protein. Settled communal living requires a stable, local food supply, and that is what the Fertile Crescent offers.

In many respects this is a story of latitude. The Fertile Crescent exists in a latitude which allows for a storable surplus of grain and the domestication of animals like sheep, goats, and cattle. It allows for labor specialization. It allows for cultural innovation and it allows for formation of large cities and empires. All of those things are a product of the latitude of the Fertile Crescent. Let’s review them, but let’s review them by looking at photographs.

In order for empires to build, they need to have a stable food supply. And at this latitude of the Fertile Crescent, we do have a storable surplus of grain possible as people grew grain in their own fields rather than harvesting it wild. They were able to raise their own livestock rather than moving after animals. At this latitude we have specialization possible, and that leads to creativity. Not everybody had to be hunter/gatherer. There was time for people to sit and reflect, and this leads in the Fertile...
Crescent to the invention of things like the plow and writing, the lever, and the arch. But most importantly for our conversation it means that people can begin to form larger groups, which become cities, which can eventually bond into empires.

This is empire-building land and we see that reflected in our Bible reading. We read about large empires like Egypt, Aram, Assyria, Babylon, and notice their location. They’re all located on the Fertile Crescent, where latitude favors the very basics of having a storable food supply, the start of empire building.

The third characteristic of the Fertile Crescent that I’d like you to learn about is that it’s travel-friendly land. It is travel-friendly land. You see the grain fields combined with sufficient water throughout the Fertile Crescent to make travel possible, and that means that by repeated trips over the same arch we have a roadway formed. This is the international highway that connects all the major empires of the ancient world. You see it here in red on our map, and I’d like to show you something on this map.

Find Jerusalem about middle left. Find Babylon about middle right. The straight-line east/west distance between those two is 525 miles. No one virtually traveled that direct route between those locations, but in almost all cases you have armies and merchants traveling along the arch of the Fertile Crescent. This makes that 525-mile trip a 900-mile trip, 1.7 times longer. But no one chose to cross the Arabian Desert, and so this Fertile Crescent that fostered the development of empires also fosters the development of transportation.

**What Are the Implications For the Promised Land?**

That leads us to our third question about the Fertile Crescent: What are the implications for the Promised Land? First implication, the Promised Land becomes a land bridge that’s traveled between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Virtually all overland mercantile traffic—the heavy hauling that we might think of in terms of trains or semi-tractor/trailers—was done by camels. And if there’s one thing we know about the anatomy of a camel, it lacks wings. So there’s no way you fly a camel across these spaces. The camels and you as their leader have to move across the ground. And that means around natural obstacles like deserts and mountains and seas that need to be avoided.
Take a look at this map and notice where we have the three major areas circled in red: Europe and Africa and Asia. In the midst of those three, in blue, I have circled the area of the Promised Land. It’s a problem solver for travelers, because if you go west of the Promised Land you’re out in the Mediterranean Sea. If you go east of the Promised Land you’re in the Arabian Desert. And that makes the Promised Land a land bridge, which connects the overland traffic moving between Asia and Africa or moving between Africa and Europe. First implication for the Promised Land is a land bridge traveled between Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Secondly, because it’s easier to travel here, merchants move trade goods through this land. If you’ve come to think of the Promised Land, the land of Israel, as an isolated land in Bible times, it was very much at the center of a thriving enterprise as people were moving their trade goods through this land. And because empires wanted to collect tariffs from the merchants who were traveling through the Promised Land, they fought again and again and again to control the land bridge and the right to harvest the taxes.

And what did they do with that tax money? They improved their military technology in an effort to dominate other empires that are on the Fertile Crescent. So not only was the Promised Land at the focus of ancient economic enterprises; it was also the focus of military enterprise as well. And so this land between became contested land. A land that was repeatedly fought over by the ancient empires who wanted to be sure and control the movement of the alternative empires on the Fertile Crescent who might choose to invade them.

**Conclusion**

The Fertile Crescent. In this session, we’ve talked about where it is: a 1,800-mile-long arch that stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Nile River. We’ve talked about what it is and we’ve talked about the implications for the Promised Land. Putting it all together, it brings us to a phrase I trust that you’ve heard before: When it comes to real estate, it’s all about location, location, location. And to fully understand the Promised Land’s geography you need to understand its larger geographical context in the Fertile Crescent. Then you’ll be able to better understand the geography that’s in your Bible.
In this session we’ve zoomed out to take a look at the geographical context of the Promised Land within the Fertile Crescent. In our next session we'll zoom in, and we’ll look at five key qualities or characteristics of the Promised Land itself.