

The Countries Surrounding Israel

- **Lebanon**

- In Old Testament times, the region now called Lebanon was Phoenicia, or Tyre and Sidon. Genetically, they are the same group as today's Lebanese.
- Famous for their merchant marine, the Phoenicians dominated sea trade in the Mediterranean from about 1200 BC until they were overrun by the Persians 700 years later.
- The Phoenicians founded many seaport towns around the Mediterranean, the most notable being Carthage. They controlled the Straits of Gibraltar, also.
- The first strong connection with Israel was between Hiram, King of Tyre, formed an alliance with King David (2 Samuel 5:11), supplying cedar, carpenters, and masons for the construction of David's house in Jerusalem, around 950 BC. A strong trade alliance appears to have been formed, Israel exporting agricultural products on Phoenician ships.
- Hiram continued this alliance into the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 5:1 – 18), supplying cedar, cypress, and quarried stone for the Temple, around 900 BC.
- Solomon paid for some of the materials with cities near their mutual border, but Hiram was displeased with their quality in terms of potential tax revenue (1 Kings 9:10 – 14).
- Solomon built his own merchant marine based at Ezion-Geber at the north end of the Gulf of Aqaba, which is on the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula (1 Kings 9:26 – 28). He did not try to compete with the Phoenicians, rather choosing to do the same type of trade on different waters, from India to East Africa.
- Jehoshaphat tried to revive this trade, but his fleet was destroyed in the harbor at Ezion-Geber by a great storm (1 Kings 22:48 – 49) around 850 BC.
- The Second Temple, built under Ezra around 500 BC, also used materials and laborers from Phoenicia (Ezra 3:7).
- The Persians occupied Phoenicia but used the ship-building industry to prepare warships to face the Greeks – which was a disaster for the Persians (480 BC) but the Phoenicians made a lot of money.
- When Alexander's army arrived (330 BC), the Phoenicians felt invincible, so refused to surrender. Alexander easily defeated the part of Tyre that was on the coast, but the Phoenicians escaped to the large, fortified island in the bay. So, Alexander scraped the coastal town to bedrock and used the debris to build a land bridge to the island, enabling its destruction. The island is an isthmus to this day. Only a small fishing village exists there today because there is no soil.
- Sidon remains to this day and is a major seaport.

- **Philistia**

- The five cities of the Philistines were Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron.
- The Gaza Strip today is the same place as the Gaza in the Old Testament.
- Probably, the Philistines settled that area after migrating from central Turkey to Cyprus and attempting to move into northern Egypt. They were rebuffed, so settled to the northeast of Egypt, edging out the Canaanites in that region.
- Abraham interacted with the Philistines, usually pleasantly, but sometimes cautiously (Genesis 21:22 – 34).

- Isaac also interacted with the Philistines (Genesis 26:1 – 18).
- God did not want the Israelites to go directly toward the land of the Philistines upon leaving Egypt for fear that they would give up when it came to war (Exodus 13:17).
- Philistia was part of the area yet to be conquered after Joshua had secured the major portion of the Promised Land (Joshua 13:1 – 6).
- The Israelites failed to drive out the Philistines, so they fought against them repeatedly in the time of the Judges (Judges 10, 13 – 16).
- Israel lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines (1 Samuel 4 – 6).
- The Israelites fought the Philistines in almost every chapter of 1 Samuel.
- Goliath was from Gath of the Philistines (1 Samuel 17) as were other giants.
- King Saul died in a battle with the Philistines (1 Samuel 31).
- King David took Philistia, but the Philistine people remained alive (2 Samuel 8:1).
- After Solomon, the Philistines were independent about 200 years, waging war occasionally, until the time of Hezekiah who subdued them again (2 Kings 18:8).
- Philistia was independent shortly after Hezekiah up to their defeat by the Babylonians (Jeremiah 25:20, 47:1 – 7).
- The Philistines did not return after the Babylonian Captivity (Zechariah 9:5 – 8).
- **On the Other Side of the River (Transjordan)**
 - After camping on the Plains of Moab, Israel captured the region on the east side of the Jordan River, from the river to the Arabian Desert (Deuteronomy 32). The tribes of Reuben and Gad plus half of the tribe of Manasseh asked Moses if they could keep that region. Moses agreed but added the condition that the fighting men go with the rest of the Israelites to conquer the west side of the Jordan. This was prime cattle country with many miles of grassland and small rivers, watered by the rains that fell due to moist Mediterranean air rising over the cool oak forest covering the mountains on the west side of the Jordan.
 - Those on the east side of the Jordan were generally friendly with those on the west with occasional problems. Usually, they acted together. These people were captured by the Assyrians in the mid-700's BC, the first to go into captivity. They were relocated to Halah, Habor, Hara and a region by the river of Gozan (1 Chronicles 5:26). Today, this is in far northern Iraq, extreme southeastern Turkey and perhaps the eastern tip of Syria, the land of the Kurds.
 - This ancient section of the original Israel is now the country of Jordan.
- **The West Bank**
 - When Joshua divided the Promised Land, the region granted to Ephraim was the hill country on the west side of the Jordan, primarily oak forest, but included the fertile coastal plain as well.
 - When Israel divided, the capital of the Northern Kingdom often was in the territory of Ephraim, so sometimes that nation was called by the tribal name of the region around their capital, the city of Samaria.
 - Then conquered by the Assyrians, the rest of Israel also was relocated to the same place as the Trans-Jordan group, northern Iraq (2 Kings 17:6).
 - The vacated region was repopulated by relocated peoples from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvim (2 Kings 17:24). These are southern Iraq, Ethiopia, Syria, northern Lebanon, and southern Lebanon, respectively.

- The imported people were having difficulties, so decided that they must have offended the gods of their new land, so they asked the King of Assyria for priests of that land. The king sent them a calf-worship priest (2 Kings 17:25 – 41). And, they continued worshipping their home-country gods at the same time.
- When the Israelites returned under the Persians, these people wanted to join the effort to rebuild the Temple, but were rebuffed (Ezra 4:2 – 3). This led to strife and political intrigue for generations (Ezra 4:4 – 16).
- This imported group was known as the Samaritans from the time of their arrival (2 Kings 17:26), in the time of Nehemiah 4:2, into Jesus' day. The woman at the well in John 4:12 and 4:20 claimed to be of the same ethnic group as the Jews, but she was mistaken. She was a mixture of several ethnic groups, none of them Israelite.
- The descendants of the Samaritans are today's Palestinians.
- **Arabia**
 - Arabs are descendants of Ishmael (Genesis 16:6 – 14, 25:12 – 18). God predicted that Ishmael, and likely his descendants, would be at war with everyone. They were nomads in the Arabian Peninsula with an economy based on trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.
 - Muhammad, in the early 600's AD, was an Arab. Islam started as an Arab religion. As regions were conquered, Arabs were placed in all the highest position in government in each country. To this day, Arabs have most of the political power in the Middle East, which encompasses many ethnic groups.
- **Moab**
 - Moab was the son and grandson of Lot (Genesis 19:30 – 38).
 - The country of Moab arose from Moab's descendants, on the east side of the Dead Sea, the southern half. The Arnon River was the northern border.
 - Moab fought Israel several times through the time of the Judges through the Kings. They were subjugated by David and Solomon.
 - The Moabites were deported by the Babylonians and never returned.
- **Ammon**
 - Ammon was Moab's brother, son and grandson of Lot (Genesis 19:30 – 38)
 - Ammon's descendants originally occupied the region to the east of the Dead Sea, the northern half plus maybe a little farther north. But, they lost it to some Canaanites and were pushed back into the Arabian Desert to the east.
 - When Israel conquered the region, Ammon wanted their land back (Judges 11:12 – 27). Jephthah reminded them of their sad history and declined to give the land back.
 - Israel fought Ammonites several times in their history. They were subjugated by David.
 - They were not deported by the Babylonians because they were nomads and therefore too difficult to catch. So, Ammonites remained in the region after the Babylonian captivity and worked with other Palestinians to oppose the re-occupation by the Israelites (Nehemiah 2:10, 2:19, 4:3, 13:1, 13:23).
- **Edom**
 - The Edomites were the descendants of Esau (Genesis 36).
 - The Edomites fought with Israel all through the time of the Judges and the kings. They were subjugated by David but were adversaries after Solomon.

- Amalek, those whom King Saul was to exterminate (whom David finally did) were Edomites.
- The Edomites were deported by the Babylonians and did not return, giving rise to the statement in Malachi 1:2 – 3, “Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated” (Romans 9:13). The point was that God did not allow the Edomites to re-establish their nation after the captivity. Their region was taken over by a formerly-nomadic group, the Nabateans, who built the famous sites in the region (*e.g.*, Petra).
- **Syria**
 - Syria, and its capital, Damascus, have been about the same since before the time of Abraham.
 - Syria fought against Israel numerous times throughout the period of the judges and kings.
 - Syria was conquered by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, but always managed to stay intact. Damascus is the longest continuously occupied city in the world because it was never destroyed despite numerous conquests.
- **Midian**
 - Midian was a son of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1 – 6).
 - The Midianites were nomadic and lived on both sides of the Gulf of Aqaba, but mostly in the Arabian Peninsula.
 - Jethro of Midian was Moses’ father-in-law (Exodus 2:16 – 3:2).
 - The family of Jethro and family traveled with Israel in the wilderness and settled in southern Israel, maintaining their nomadic ways. Jethro suggested the system of elders and judges for Israel (Exodus 18).
 - Midian often raided Israel during the time of the judges.