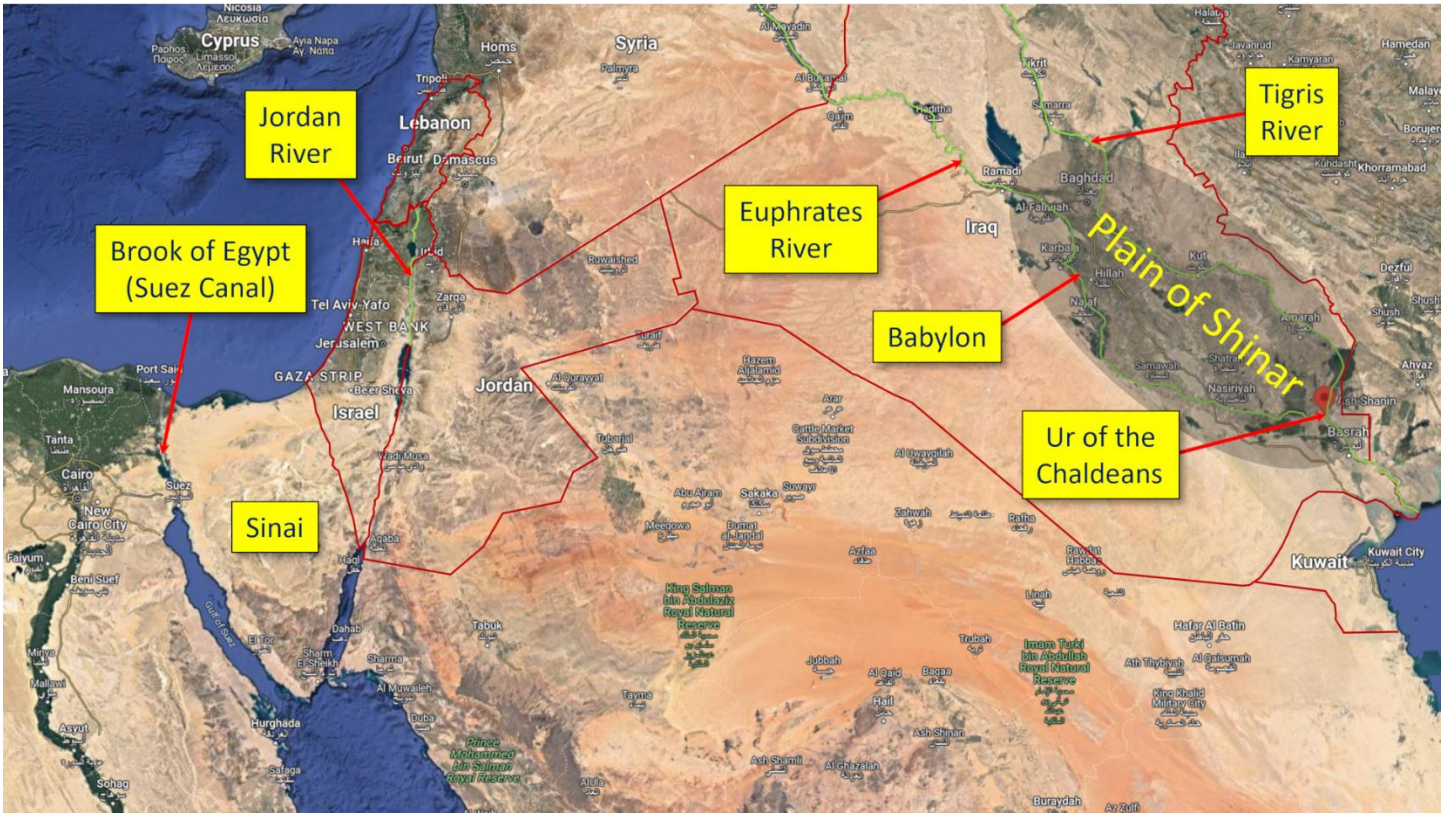


## Biblical Lands Tour

Before we continue with our study in Matthew, I thought it might be beneficial for us to look at the geographical context of the gospel accounts.

### Slideshow 1



Let's start with a space station view of the Middle East. In the upper left hand corner, we find the Mediterranean Sea. On the right is the northern-most reach of the Arabian (Persian) Gulf. On the bottom is the Red Sea with its two northern arms – the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba. The Sinai peninsula between these two arms of the Red Sea was the site of the 40-year wandering of the Israelites documented in the books of Exodus & Numbers. Today the Sinai is part of Egypt. The Suez canal connects the Gulf of Suez with the Mediterranean Sea along the lowlands known in the Bible as the Brook of Egypt. This waterway should not be confused with the Nile River which flows through the middle of Egypt from its origins in the south to its Mediterranean delta in the north.

The red lines are the modern national boundaries. In the south is Saudi Arabia. On the west is Egypt. The western reaches of Iran (formerly Persia) are shown in the northeast corner of this map. To the west of Iran and the north of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is Iraq. Syria lies to the northwest of Iraq. Jordan (formerly Trans-Jordan) is Israel's eastern neighbor between Syria on its north, Saudi Arabia on its southeast, and Iraq on its east. Notice that Jordan is almost entirely landlocked with just a short coastline on the northeast extreme of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Along the east coast of the Mediterranean is the area known as the Levant (a.k.a. Palestine) which includes the modern state of Israel, Lebanon to its north, and the western reaches of Jordan and Syria. The Jordan River flows through the middle of the Levant from its origin at Caesarea Philippi (modern Banius) near the Lebanon-Israel border south to the Sea of Galilee, then on to the Dead Sea

## **Biblical Lands Tour**

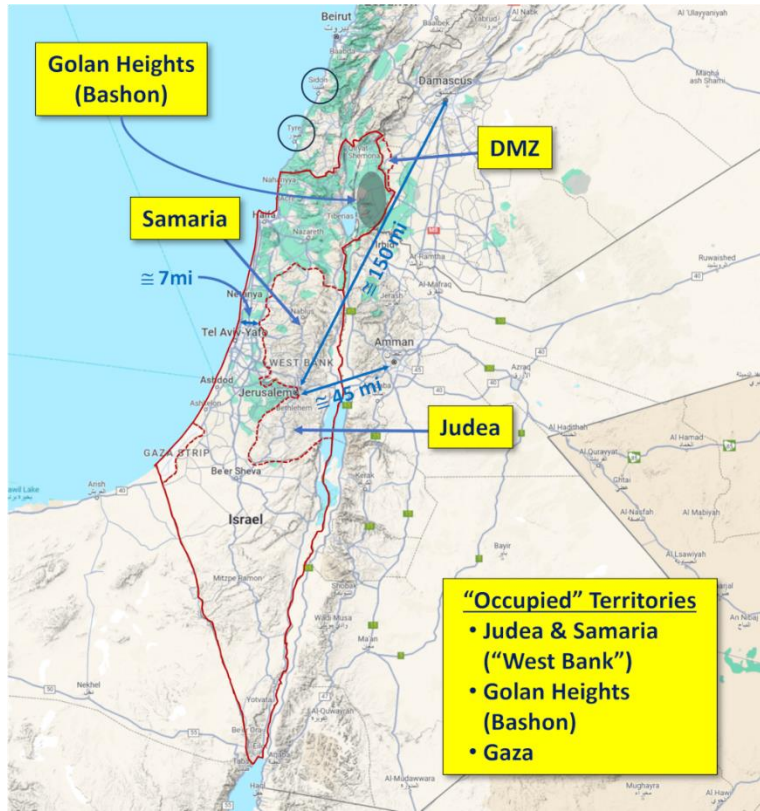
in the south. The Jordan River valley is the northern extreme of the Great Rift Valley of Africa which stretches from southern Lebanon along the Jordan to the Gulf of Aqaba, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. Although the majority of the Great Rift Valley isn't shown on this map, it continues from Ethiopia through eastern Africa to Mozambique. The Jordan River valley at the northern end of the rift contains the lowest spot on the Earth's surface along the shores of the Dead Sea – a little more than 1,300 feet below sea level.

The green lines on the right half of the map are the great rivers – the Tigris on the north and the Euphrates on the south. These rivers originate in the mountains of Turkey and flow down to the Arabian Gulf. The red map pin marks their confluence to form the Shat al Arab just north of the modern city of Basrah, Iraq. Somewhere near their confluence was Abraham's birthplace – Ur of the Chaldeans. The swampy Shat al Arab saw some of the most savage combat of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s which produced over a million casualties – the most of any war since WWII. The shaded area between the two rivers is the so-called "fertile crescent" also known as Mesopotamia – the land between the rivers. The book of Genesis calls this area the Plain of Shinar. Somewhere on this plain, Nimrod and his followers built the tower of Babel (Genesis 10 & 11). The ancient city of Babylon was built on this plain along the Euphrates River just downstream from the modern city of Karbala. Further upstream between the rivers lies the modern capital of Iraq – Baghdad. Upstream from Baghdad along the Tigris are the cities of Samarra and Tikrit – Saddam Houssein's family home.

**ASIDE** – In Genesis 15:18-21 God promised to give Abraham's descendants a huge swath of territory stretching from the "River of Egypt" (presumably the Nile, but possibly the Brook of Egypt) to the Euphrates. This encompasses all of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the modern state of Israel, most of Iraq, and even part of northern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and southern Turkey. The Israelites have yet to possess any but a small portion of this promised inheritance. God's fulfillment of this covenant remains for the future.

# Biblical Lands Tour

## Slideshow 2



If we drop down to about SR-71 Blackbird cruising altitude, we get a closer look at the modern state of Israel. The nation's boundaries are shown as a solid red line. It stretches from Lebanon in the north along the Jordan River valley to the Dead Sea then south to the Gulf of Aqaba. From Aqaba, the line stretches to the Mediterranean at Gaza, then north along the Mediterranean coast to Lebanon about 10 miles south of Tyre. The border then meanders northeast to Mt. Hermon which forms the Israel-Lebanon-Syria boundary point.

The dotted red lines on this map represent the borders of the portions of Israel governed by the Palestinian Authority. These lands were allocated under the 1947 UN Palestine partition resolution as Arab-controlled lands. The so-called "West Bank" lands of Judea and Samaria were governed as part of the nation of Jordan under the terms of the armistice that ended of the Israeli War of Independence in 1949. The city of Jerusalem was divided during this time, with East Jerusalem governed by Jordan and West Jerusalem under Israeli control. During the 1967 six-day war, Israel seized East Jerusalem and the "West Bank" from Jordan, along with the Gaza strip which had been governed by the Arab League between 1949 and 1967. Israel also captured the Golan Heights (Biblical Bashon) from Syria in 1967 and retained them after 1973's Yom Kippur War. Although still technically Israeli occupied territories, Israel has since handed government of the West Bank and Gaza over to the Palestinian Authority. The Golan Heights remain under Israeli control and government until today. There is a demilitarized zone to the north of the Golan Heights along the Syria-Israel border that runs north to Mt. Hermon.

Although Israeli affairs loom large on the geopolitical stage, it is a very small country – much smaller than the area ruled by Solomon at the height of its power. Modern Israel only stretches about 200

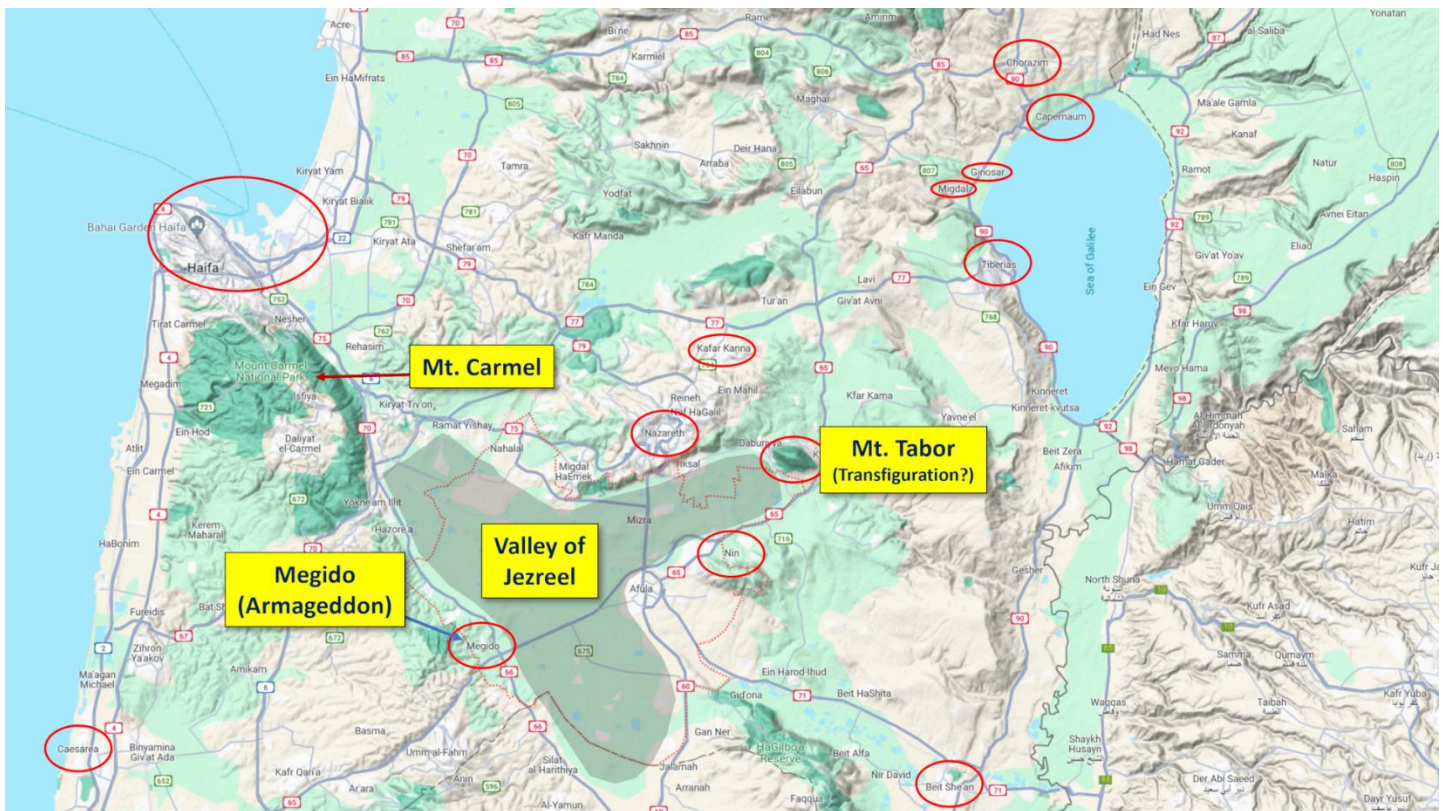
## **Biblical Lands Tour**

miles from the Gulf of Aqaba in the south to Mt. Hermon in the north. At its widest – between Gaza and the Dead Sea – Israel only measures 70 miles west to east, and at its narrowest just north of Tel Aviv it is only 7 miles from the Mediterranean coast to the border of Samaria. From Israel's capital city Jerusalem to Damascus in Syria is just 150 miles. Jordan's capital city Amman is only 45 miles from Jerusalem.

The ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon in southern Lebanon were the most prosperous and powerful seaports of the Phoenician Empire. They were subsequently conquered by the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire (in Jesus' time) and finally the Ottoman Empire. The cities were part of the French Mandate created by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of WWI and remained so until the end of WWII when Lebanon became an independent country.

## Biblical Lands Tour

### Slideshow 3



Let's focus now on the province of Galilee in northern Israel. Of course, the defining landmark of Galilee is the Sea of Galilee around which most of Jesus' early ministry was carried out. Galilee extends from Israel's largest port – Haifa on the west to the Sea of Galilee on the east. In the middle is the Valley of Jezreel. This large flat expanse has been the site of more combat than any other place on Earth. Not only did the Israelites fight all the other local -ites here, and Egyptian Pharaohs, Babylonians, and Persians fight here, but also the armies of Alexander the Great and later the Romans. The European Crusaders fought Arab invaders here, and later the Ottoman Turks defeated them here. Even Genghis Khan and Napoleon's armies saw action on this plain. On the brow of the Valley of Jezreel, King Solomon built his chariot city – Megiddo. The hill upon which this city lies is known by the two Hebrew words for “mountain” (הַר *har*) and “place of crowds” (מְגִדוֹן *m'gīdōn*) – transliterated from Hebrew as Armageddon (Ἀρμαγεδών *armagedōn*). According to the prophecy in Revelation 16:16, the area hasn't seen the last of mortal combat quite yet!

Towering above the Jezreel plain on the west is Mt. Carmel where the prophet Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). On the east of the valley lies Mt. Tabor where Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanite King Jabin's army commanded by Sisera (Judges 4). Mt. Tabor is also one of the two possible locations for the Mount of Transfiguration we read about in Matthew 17 and Mark 9. High on a cliff to the north of the Valley of Jezreel is Nazareth – home of Jesus' earthly parents Joseph and Mary. To the south is the village of Nain where Jesus raised a widow's son out of death (Luke 7). Somewhere across the valley to the north is Cana where Jesus turned water to wine at a wedding feast – the very first of His earthly ministry miracles (John 2). The exact location of Cana is not known, but it may be near the modern town of Kafar Kanna.

## **Biblical Lands Tour**

Near the southern extent of Galilee lies Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean where the apostle Paul boarded the ship that carried him in chains to Rome for trial before Caesar. Built by Herod the Great, Caesarea had a Roman chariot race circus, an aqueduct, and even a fresh-water swimming pool right on the shore of the Mediterranean. During modern archeological excavations, a dedication stone was found. The simple Latin inscription on this stone commemorates the opening of a new public building at Caesarea by the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate – the only known, surviving, extra-Biblical, contemporary record of him. On the east near the Jordan is Beth-shean where the Philistines hung the dead bodies of King Saul and his sons to the city wall. (1 Samuel 31)

The surface of the Sea of Galilee lies about 600 feet below sea level. The floor of the Valley of Jezreel is a little under 200 feet above sea level. So, moist air coming from the seaport at Haifa frequently blows through the Valley of Jezreel and down to the Sea of Galilee through a narrow chasm just north of Tiberias on its western shore. This humid Mediterranean wind then swirls around the bowl of the lake frequently causing sudden violent storms even though the lake is not large.

## Biblical Lands Tour

### Slideshow 4



Now let's focus in on the northern portion of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus did most of His ministry. About half-way along the western shore is the city of Tiberias built by Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee and named after the Roman Emperor Tiberius. After the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD, Tiberias became the center of Jewish scholarship for over 1000 years. It was here that vowel pointing of Hebrew texts was invented during the Middle Ages. Prior to that, ancient Hebrew manuscripts contained only consonants, with the vowel sounds understood only implicitly.

Just north of Tiberias lies Mt. Arbel. From the top of Mt. Arbel about 1200 hundred feet above the Sea of Galilee, one gets a clear view of the northwestern shore of the lake along which Jesus did most of His ministry. Between Arbel and Magdala (home of Mary Magdalene) just to the north is a deep chasm leading down from the Valley of Jezreel in the west to the surface of the lake 600 feet below sea level. It is through this chasm that the Mediterranean winds that cause the Sea of Galilee's notoriously fierce storms come. North of Magdala is the plain of Gennesaret where Jesus and His disciples landed after returning from the feeding of the 5000 (Matthew 14) In the mud along this part of the shore, two local fishermen from Kibbutz Ginnosar discovered an ancient fishing boat dating from the time of Jesus. It is now preserved and on public display in a museum near the kibbutz.

The Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee at its northern end. To the west of the Jordan's inflow is Capernaum – home of Simon Peter and the Sons of Zebedee. Nestled in the hills above Capernaum is the village of Chorazin against which Jesus pronounced woes in Matthew 11. Somewhere along the shore across the river from Capernaum was Philip's home town – Bethsaida – although its exact location remains unknown.

## Biblical Lands Tour

### Slideshow 5

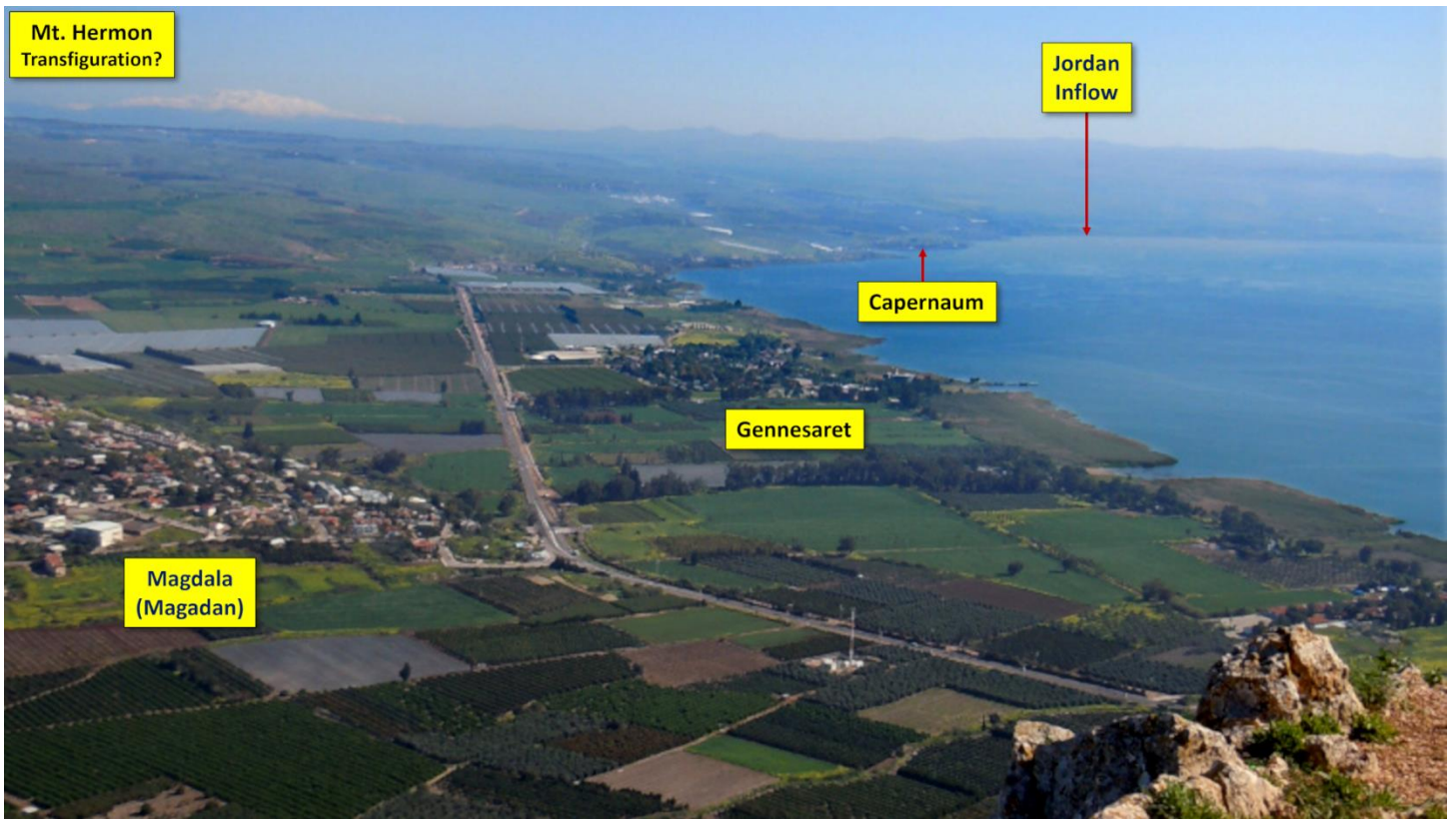


From a boat just offshore, the impressive cliffs of Mt. Arbel stand in sharp contrast to the cloudy sky. The day this photo was taken there had been an early morning storm just before our boat departed from Tiberias. The weather remained blustery all day with whitecaps on the lake. Behind Mt. Arbel, the steep chasm that brought this storm in from the Mediterranean can be seen.



## Biblical Lands Tour

### Slideshow 6



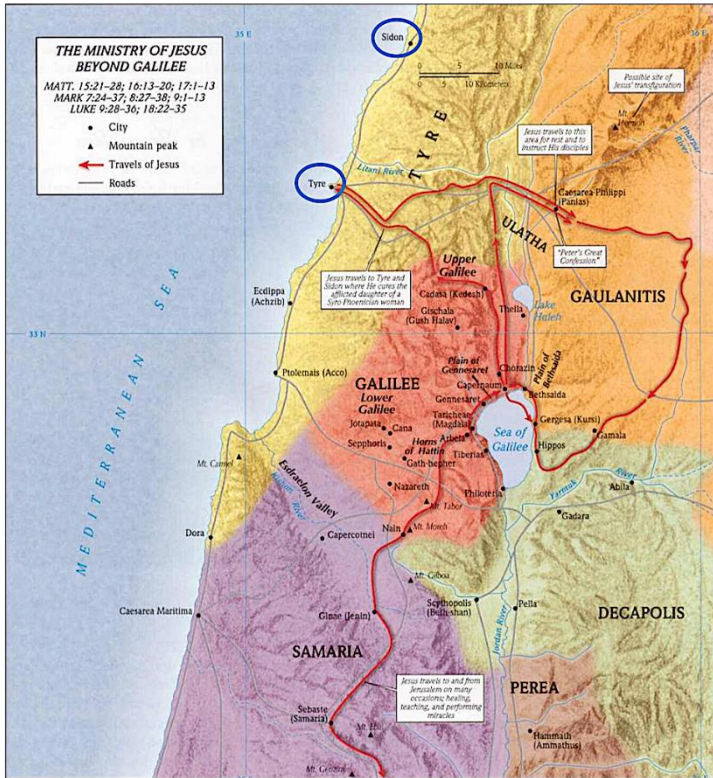
The view of the northern Sea of Galilee from the top of Mt. Arbel is magnificent. Just across the chasm is Magala (a.k.a. Magadan) – the home of Mary Magdalene mentioned at the end of Matthew 15 following the feeding of the 4000. Further along the shore is the plain of Gennesaret where Jesus and His disciples landed after Jesus walked on the water to join them in the boat following the feeding of the 5000 (Matthew 14 and Mark 6).

At the far northern end of the shore, we can see from Arbel the lighter colored sediments carried into the lake by the Jordan. These sediments are very rich in nutrients carried down from the swampy lowlands of northern Galilee. That's what makes the fishing in this area so prosperous.

In the far distance we see the snows of Mt. Hermon – Israel's highest peak – that forms the border where Israel, Syria, and Lebanon come together. Believe it or not there is even a ski resort on Mt. Hermon. This photo was taken in late February, so the mountain still has snow. Mt. Hermon is one of the two possible sites for Jesus' transfiguration that we read about in Matthew 17 and Mark 9.

# Biblical Lands Tour

## Slideshow 7



In the parallel passage to Matthew 15, Mark reports that Jesus returned to the region of the Decapolis following His casting out of the demon from the Canaanite woman’s daughter. The name Decapolis is used in two ways in the Bible. As shown here, the region southeast of the Sea of Galilee was called Decapolis. But the Greek name Decapolis simply means “ten cities.” These cities were mostly populated by Hellenist Gentiles, and most of the Decapolis cities were in fact located in the area east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Damascus – the oldest continuously occupied city in the world and capital city of modern Syria – some 50 miles north, was also one of the Decapolis. Down the Jordan river along its west bank, Beth-shean where the Philistines hung the body of King Saul to the wall was also one of the Decapolis, although during the Roman occupation it was known by its Greek name – Scythopolis.