

Chapter 1

Countries in the Middle East: Who Are They In The Bible?

Did you know that most of the Middle East is really *Western Asia*? The region has many foods such as lamb, dates, figs, raisins, pita bread, phyllo (fie lo), lentils and eggplants common in their cooking traditions. But the area is a melting pot of ancient people groups whom archeology has helped

us understand. The artifacts and the history that experts have uncovered reveal what the Bible said about these cultures was correct.

In fact, many of the people groups and their civilizations mentioned in the Bible were unknown to us. Since no records of them were found anywhere else, the information the Bible provided was thought to be myth and legend. That theory has been proven wrong over and over by each ancient discovery.

The area we know today as the Middle East is divided into countries with permanent boundaries. Many of these boundaries were chosen in the 20th century (1900s) after the Ottoman Empire collapsed during World War I. The Ottomans had ruled the region since 1299 to 1922. Their first ruler

was Osman I which was the origin of the name Ottoman. They were Arabic Muslims.

Following World War I, the area was under the control of European countries, England, France, Russia and Italy. Oil was first discovered in Iran in 1903. In 1938 it was discovered in Saudi Arabia. This interested the Americans. One by one, however, individual countries gained their independence as the European foreign powers withdrew after World War II. Cyprus was the last to gain its independence from Britain in 1960.

But in ancient times, the dividing lines were more fluid. Boundaries depended on agreements with neighboring kings or tribal chieftains. The agreements were always subject to raids and wars.

The most common government in the region was a city-state system. Each city had a king who ruled and defended smaller neighboring towns and outlying districts. There were also nomad tribes of the desert who organized themselves by family and clan and ruled their territories.

Some city-states were walled, some not as in the case of the Perizzite communities. The Perizzites were a people group whose name refers to open country. According to *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, the Hebrew word *perezot* means unwalled country villages. The word unwalled may imply villages of farming communities like what we see in rural areas today.

The people of the Middle East were a mix of descendants belonging to Ham, Shem and Japheth,

Noah's sons. The people intermarried and built cities or farmed, kept flocks and hunted. They spread throughout the area. Genesis 10 is called the Table of Nations and tells where the people settled and the origins of people groups such as Europeans, Asians, Greeks, Persians, etc.

The area lying along the Mediterranean was called Canaan and settled by Ham's and Shem's descendants. This was the land God promised to give Abraham. Much of Canaan and Arabia was later taken over by the descendants of Abraham's eight sons.

Abraham is an important figure because he was born around 1950 BC in Ur (Tell el-Muqayyar, Iraq) and traveled through what is today Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Egypt. The account of his

life has enlightened historians and been supported by archeological discoveries. But he is also famous as being the father of two great nations and three major religions.

The area he traveled is what historians call Mesopotamia, but he knew it by local names like *Beth Nabrain*, The Land of Rivers, tribal names, and by the empires of his day. Let's begin in Iraq and follow Abraham's travels for a brief history of the countries as we know them today.

Iraq



Iraq is associated with the ancient land of Babylon. Babylon means gate of the gods. The city of Babylon was built by a man named Nimrod, a

descendant of Ham. Some scholars connect Nimrod with Sargon of Akkad mentioned in ancient texts. Whether he is Sargon or not is interesting, but it is not the main issue in the Bible. Babylon is thought to be the birthplace of an anti-God message that promoted worship of the sun, moon and stars.

Babylon is famous for the Tower of Babel, a ziggurat type structure. Babel means confused. Some archaeologists are looking at *Tel Brak* in Syria as the location of the Tower. The area of Iraq was also called the land of Shinar which included what is today northwest Syria.

Iraq was the center of the Babylonian Empire, Old and New. It was the location of the Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Supposedly, King Nebuchadnezzar had the

gardens built for his wife who was homesick for her lush green country in northwest Iran.

Nebuchadnezzar is mentioned in the Bible many times, especially in the book of Daniel. Berlin's Pergamum Museum has reconstructed another of Nebuchadnezzar's wonders, the Ishtar Gate. It was the main gate into the city and honored the goddess, Ishtar.

Other important Empires and people groups overlapped Iraq's boundaries in ancient history. The Hittites, Hurrians, Mitanni and Assyrians were neighbors. Assyria was called the land of Nimrod in Micah 5:6.

The Tigris and Euphrates are major rivers in the area. These may not be the original rivers associated with the Garden of Eden but renamed

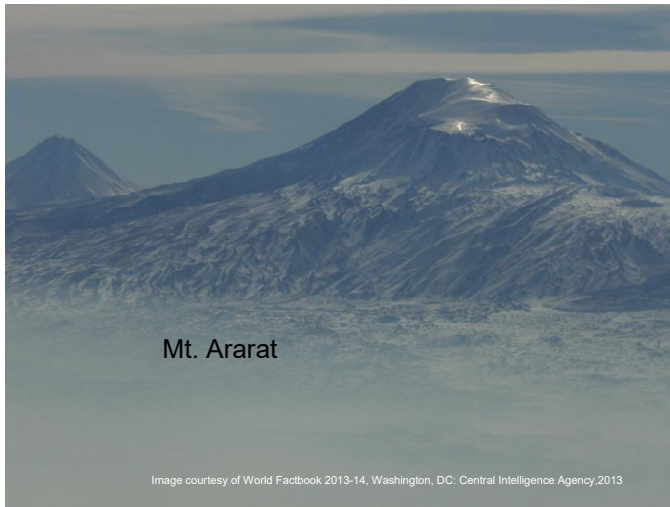
for them. Nineveh was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. The prophet Jonah, visited Nineveh which is today Mosul. Much of Mosul was destroyed by ISIS forces in 2014. The city of Babylon is near *al-Hillah*, fifty miles south of Baghdad. Ur is about 10 miles south of *Nasiriyah*.

Turkey



Turkey is the region of Lud and Gomer in the Old Testament. It overlapped with part of what is the country of Armenia today. It is also associated with Gog, Togarmah, Tubal and Meshech in Ezekiel 38 which includes the rest of Armenia and its neighbor, Azerbaijan.

The Ararat Mountain Range is in Turkey. Somewhere in these mountains Noah's ark came to rest. It is from this area many believe civilizations began to develop.



A *National Geographic* article by Andrew Curry describes the *Göbekli* Temple. It is a discovery that has upset the evolutionary theory of civilization's chain of events. This theory says that man has progressed from hunter-gatherers to farmers and then to builders of cities over a long period of time.

But the temple predates their timeline, putting civilization, or town building, at the time when people were supposed to be farming. There are other temple cities nearby. Clearly man was building cities very early in his history.

Abraham traveled to the city of Haran in southern Turkey. You might confuse the name of this town with the name of Abraham's brother. The English spelling of the town is the same as Abraham's brother, Haran. But the town is *Charan* (H2771 Strong's) and means parched, and Abraham's brother's name *Haran* means mountaineer.

Large ancient empires ruled in this region, including the Lydians, Hittites and the Assyrians.

The Hittites and the Assyrians are mentioned many times in the Old Testament.

The Hittites were a powerful empire with iron chariots. They were also expert horsemen and perhaps the first terrorists. 2Kings 7 records the fact that just the thought of Hittites sent the Syrian army running. The ancient Hittite capitol is near modern day *Boğazkale* east of Ankara.

The Assyrians also struck terror into the hearts of those in their path. Many towns surrendered instead of experiencing horrific tortures and brutal deaths. The Assyrian Royal Court Records support the Bible's description of them. Assyrian armies threatened Israel's kings several times. A miraculous encounter is recorded in 2Kings 18, 2Chronicles 32, and Isaiah 36-37. Both the Assyrians and the

Hittites fought for and against Egypt at different times in their histories.

The land of Turkey had an important role in spreading Christianity. Paul and Timothy were born in the region. Paul traveled there during his first missionary journey. These are some of the towns of this area mentioned in the Bible: Ephesus, Colassae, Galatia, Troas, Pergamum (Bergama today), Laodicea, Thessalonica and Antioch (Antakya).

It was in Antioch that believers were first called Christians. Do you see a few New Testament books represented by town names? The books were letters written to believers in these regions.

Syria



Syria is called Aram in the Bible, the same name as one of Shem's sons. Aram means high table land, and included the northern area between the Tigris and Euphrates. Balaam lived in the hills of Syria. The people are called Arameans. Don't confuse this word with the modern country of Armenia or its people, the Armenians.

According to the *World Atlas*, Damascus, Syria's capital, is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. It has been destroyed by wars and rebuilt several times. Padan-aram is another name identified with Syria in the Bible.

Abraham's brother Nahor lived in northeastern Syria. Abraham's son, Isaac, married a woman

named Rebekah from this region. Abraham's grandson Jacob also married women from Syria. Jacob first married Leah and then Rachel. Jacob lived in the area until he returned to his father's homeland in present day Israel.

Hittites and Phoenicians were present in Syria as well as Amorites. Ebla was a major kingdom in Syria and an important center for trade. Excavations have supported the biblical narrative of the region. Syria was under the rule of the Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian Empires.

In the Old Testament, the Israelite tribe of Manasseh had land in Syria. Joshua and David went to war with Syrian kings. Solomon's kingdom reached into southern Syria. In the New Testament, Jesus spoke Aramaic. He traveled in Syria and

healed a woman's daughter there. Matthew 4:24 says, "And his [Jesus] fame went throughout all Syria."

Lebanon



Lebanon is a country of mountains, cedars and sparkling water. Its beauty inspired Solomon and the Psalmists to write about it. Lebanon is mentioned in the Bible over seventy times. It has also been called Phoenicia and Greater Syria. It was the home of the Sidonians, also called Senir or Sion, and connected with Mt. Hermon.

The Sidonians fought alongside the Amalekites against Israel (Judges 10:12). The tribes of Naphtali and Asher had land in southern Lebanon. It was

near the town of Tyre that Elijah raised the widow's son from the dead. Solomon used Lebanon's cedars to build the Temple in Jerusalem. Jezebel lived in Sidon (also spelled Zidon). Jesus visited Tyre and Sidon, and Paul sailed from Sidon to Rome. Lebanon was an important stronghold for Christianity into the 1900s.

Jordan



Bible History Daily calls Jordan the other Biblical Land. Its capital was called Rabbath Ammon in the Bible or just Rabbah. Uriah the Hittite, one of David's Mighty Men, died near Rabbah. Uriah's death is a sad tale of betrayal at the hand of his king (2Samuel 11).

Jordan was the region where Abraham's neighbors lived, and he engaged in a war with some of them in Genesis 14. He won the battle and rescued his nephew Lot from among the hostages.

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19) were located in Jordan, and Jordan was the area where Lot's sons, Ammon and Moab, settled.

Ammon's family became the Ammonites. They were allies of the Syrians and enemies of Israel. Moab's family became the Moabites and settled south of the Ammonites near the center of the region along the east side of the Dead Sea.

The Moabites raided Hebrew territory. One of their kings, Eglon, is described as extremely fat in Judges 3:17 and another, Mesha, offered his child as a burnt offering during a battle. Another king

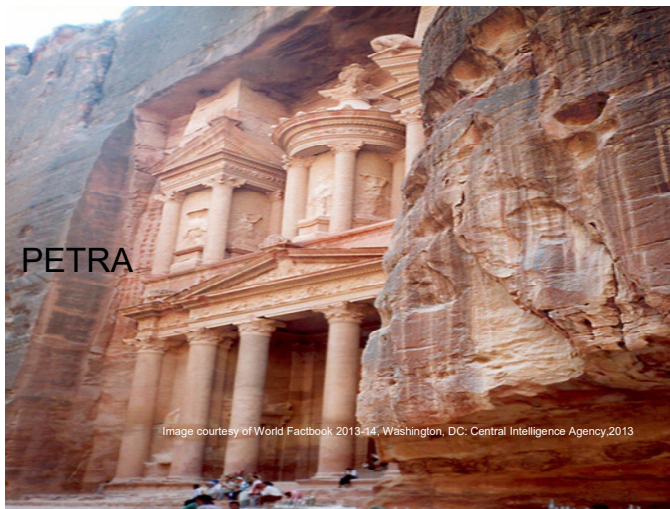
named Balak hired Balaam the Syrian to curse Israel so they would be destroyed.

Nehemiah recorded that the Moabites were working against him to rebuild the Temple. Moab proved to be Israel's enemy throughout the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, Israel's prophets foretold their doom and destruction. The only honorable Moabite mentioned was Ruth who was among Jesus' ancestors. Her story is found in the book of Ruth.

The Edomites lived in southern Jordan. The Edomites were some of Esau's descendants. David fought them, and Israel's kings continued to fight them until Israel ceased being a country. All of these groups in Jordan were Israel's cousins, and all were sworn enemies of Israel.

It was in Jordan that Moses climbed Mt. Nebo to see the Promised Land. Mt. Nebo is located near the town of Madaba. Today if you visit Mt. Nebo, it is possible to see the Jordan River, the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), Jerusalem and the Dead Sea.

Petra is an important archeological site today, and it is in this area that Aaron might have been buried. A people called Nabataeans carved beautiful temples into the rocks there at least three hundred years before Jesus was born.



John the Baptist's ministry was in Jordan. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and may have traveled through Jordan on His way to Jerusalem. Jordan's capital, Amman, is fifty miles from Jerusalem. Matthew 4:25 reads, "Large crowds followed Jesus from Galilee and the region around the ten cities known as Decapolis. They also came from Jerusalem, Judea, and from across the Jordan River." (CEV)

Egypt



Misraim was a son of Ham. Egypt is known as *Mizraim* or *Misr* today. Egypt's name has remained the same throughout history. It is where Abraham and others went when there was a famine.

Abraham's great grandson, Joseph, became the vizier of Egypt. A vizier was an official second in command directly under the pharaoh. Egypt is where the Israelites were made slaves, Moses was born, the slaves were freed, and where God showed His might to Pharaoh. At times, Egypt helped other empires fight against their enemies. It is where Joseph and Mary took baby Jesus until King Herod died. (Matthew 2:20)



While Abraham visited Egypt, the home of Ham's descendants, he did not visit Libya or Ethiopia.



Libya



Put was a son of Ham and brother of Misraim.

Put or Phut was the ancient name for the region known today as Libya and Algeria, perhaps Tunisia and a portion of Yemen. It is mentioned in the Bible for its dealings with Egypt. The city of Cyrene, listed in the New Testament, is modern day Tripoli. That means that the Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross lived in Tripoli. Also an evangelist named Lucius (Acts 13:1) was from Cyrene. Put provided soldiers for Egypt's armies.

Ethiopia



Cush was another of Ham's sons. Part of Cush's family settled in Ethiopia while others traveled into Arabia. Cush's family, Nimrod and others, also built the city and culture of Babylon in Iraq. But, Cush, when mentioned as a country in the Bible, usually means Ethiopia. It was also allied with Egypt and provided soldiers for its armies.



Abraham may never have traveled all of Saudi Arabia or Yemen either, but his sons from his wives Hagar and Keturah did.



Saudi Arabia



Arabia, Kedar, Dedan and Midian were located in modern day Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the region where Abraham's son, Ishmael, settled and those listed in Genesis 25:1-2, "Abraham married Keturah, and they had six sons: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah."

. The text is clear that Abraham sent them away from his son Isaac and that he sent them east. These sons were the step family of the Hebrews. Esau, however, an Israeli by birth, also settled in this area. His family became the Edomites, and their territory flowed north into modern day Jordan and south into Saudi Arabia.

Abraham's sons and grandsons mixed with the Edomites on their border. These groups became the Arabian nations. They fought with the Horites, a people who lived in caves, and other Canaanite tribes settled nearby. They eventually controlled the region.

Arabia is also referred to as Kedar, one of Ishmael's sons (Ezekiel 27:21, Jeremiah 49:28). Dedan is another name for a region in Arabia and also a grandson of Abraham.

Moses fled to Midian (also Abraham's son's name) after killing an Egyptian. He married a Midianite woman and lived there for forty years. Midian was located in Arabia bordering the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula. Mt. Sinai is thought to be in this region. The Hebrew slaves wandered in

Arabia. Elijah came to Mt. Sinai when he fled from Jezebel.

Debates continue whether or not the Wilderness of Shur and Paran were in this region. It is known that Solomon used the port city of Ezion-geber to build his ships. So did Jehoshaphat. Paul went to Arabia after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Syria. (Galatians 1).

Yemen



Yemen is the ancient country of Sheba. It thought the Queen of Sheba sailed to see Solomon. But an ancient historian named Josephus calls her the Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia. Jesus called her the Queen of the South. To muddle things further,

Sheba is the name of one of Cush's grandsons (Genesis 10:28) and one of Abraham's (Genesis 25:3). So even though we don't know for sure who this woman was, we do know Sheba the country is the name for Yemen.

Ezekiel 27:22 refers to Sheba's merchants and their rich spices, gems and gold. They are also called Sabaeans. Some of Dedan's family also settled in this region. Ophir is another name associated with the southern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula.

Iran



Iran is ancient Persia. It is called Elam, a son of Shem. Cherdorlaomer was one of Persia's early kings. He took hostages in a battle, and Lot,

Abraham's nephew, happened to be one of them (Genesis 14). Iran was also called the land of the Medes and the Persians.

It is significant that it is the only country other than Israel that God calls chosen. It is also the only other nation, again besides Israel, out of which God said He would bring a Messiah.

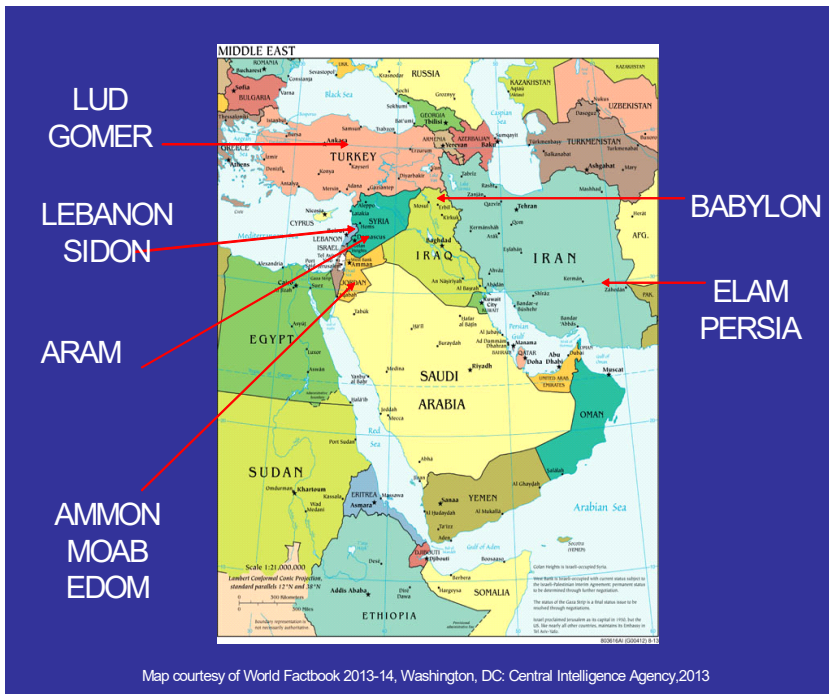
God had a special purpose for Persia. Isaiah 45 describes a man called Cyrus. Isaiah spoke his prophecy 150 years before Cyrus was born. Daniel, as a captive in Babylon, foresaw Cyrus' takeover of the Babylonian Empire.

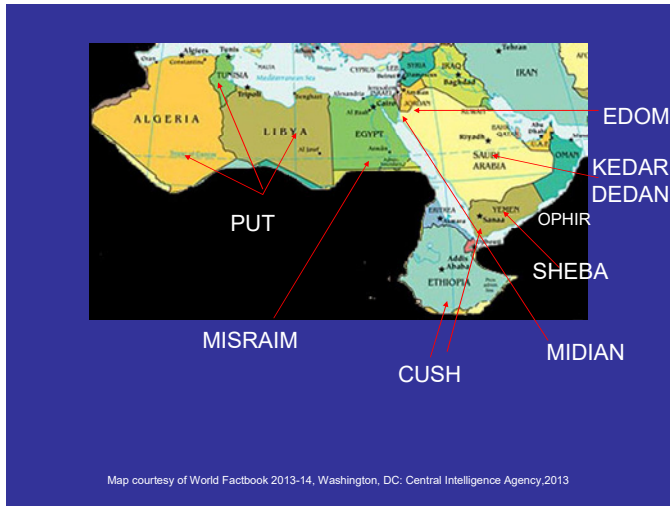
When Cyrus became the leader of the Babylonians, he came into contact with Daniel and the Hebrew captives. Cyrus is remembered for creating a new policy for kings conquering empires.

His policy allowed captives under former leaders to return to their native lands. It respected the captives' gods and helped to rebuild their cities. This policy strengthened his rule because it made the former prisoners happy and loyal followers.

In Persia, Hebrews were favored. One example is Daniel 6:28. Ezra and Nehemiah give the account of Cyrus helping to rebuild the Jewish Temple. The Cyrus Cylinder in the British Museum supports the Bible's history and prophecies about ancient Persia. The book of Esther takes place in Iran during a threat against the Jews as a people. Esther, a Hebrew, was King Xerxes' wife. Xerxes is well documented in history. Parthian is another name associated with a later Persian Empire.

Jews remained influential in Persia. Most scholars believe that the wise men in the story of Jesus' birth came from Persia. The government of modern day Iran is an enemy of Israel. Many Iranians, however, are secretly converting to Christianity.





Map courtesy of World Factbook 2013-14, Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2013

These are the countries of the Middle East in the Bible. We will take a look at Israel in a separate chapter.

All these countries were polytheistic, meaning that they worshipped many gods. They worshiped false gods named Baal, Chemosh, Marduke, Ashteroth, Molech, Ra and many, many others. They had separate languages but the people were related, some more distantly than others.

There were differences in culture north to south and east to west. But there were many things common to them like food, methods of travel and styles of clothes. Living together in mountains, deserts, coastal lands and plains were nomads, city dwellers, wine-makers, farmers, shepherds and even cave dwellers. It still exists today in some of the same measure.

All of these nations became enemies of Israel. Starting in Ezekiel 25, Ezekiel proclaims God's judgment against these nations due to their various reasons for gloating over Israel's demise. The identity of these countries has not been lost. God has always known them, and we can too.

Look up Acts 2:1-12 in the Bible and read it out loud. Did you hear all those people groups? All

the people of the Middle East are represented. Some were converts to the Jewish religion from those areas where they came in contact with the Hebrews.

God knew the identities of the people living in these countries. He cared for them and provided for them even though they worshipped other gods. Sometimes the wickedness grew to a point that God could no longer ignore it. But after Jesus' resurrection, in love, He provided them a chance to hear the Good News of Jesus.

Empires rose and fell. People moved about. But God had His people in every land, ready to take what they saw and heard of this Jesus back home with them. Christian Iranians would take the message to China. Many of the countries had

thriving Christian communities at the time of Muhammad. (Before Mosul was destroyed by ISIS in the summer of 2014, it had Christians whose descendants dated back to the time of Jonah.)

Today God's invitation still stands to the people of the Middle East. Jesus' work on the cross is finished so that anyone who wants to can have the grace and mercy God provided. God's desire is for the nations to accept Him. The Kingdom is at hand, Jesus said. Now, the door is wide open for those who want in.

Special note for the free PDF

This is an excerpt from the book, *Nations of the Bible* by Flying Eagle Publications. The book also explains the birth and formation of Israel, who the Palestinians are, a history of Islam and the biblical prophecies for the nations of the Middle East. It also has a complete bibliography for further study.