Teacher Background

Geography of the Bible
Real estate agents say three things bring success to a property: location, location, location. That same concept explains the tremendous influence of a tiny strip of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Though barely 200km from north to south and 80km from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, Israel/Palestine has been a pivotal crossroad for thousands of years. Prior to the advantages of modern travel, mountains, deserts and seas limited travel between the great empires of the Fertile Crescent. Armies and caravans travelled between Egypt and Arabia in the south and Assyria, Babylon and Persia in the north and east by means of a narrow land corridor subsequently named Canaan, Palestine or Israel.

Palestine’s Four Regions
Palestine has a unique geography. Four narrow strips running north to south divide the area into four diverse topographical and climatic zones. They are: the coastal plain; the central hills; the Jordan Valley and Transjordan.

The Coastal Plain
The coastal plain is flat. There is no natural harbour along the 200km coast. Consequently the Mediterranean Sea is not significant for either travel or the economy. Herod created an artificial harbour at Caesarea Maritima, which remained the capital of the Roman province of Judea for 600 years.

The Central Hills
Just east of the coastal plain are the central hills. This section is divided into Galilee, Samaria and Judah. Most of the events of the Gospels took place in the central hill country. Rugged mountains dominate the north end of Galilee. Mount Hermon, 2033m, is the highest peak and snow-covered throughout much of the year. The headwaters of the Jordan River are in these mountains. The river carries fresh water to the Sea of Galilee.

There were a few large cities in south Galilee, namely Tiberias and Sepphoris, but most of the residents were peasants who lived in tiny hamlets and made a living from farming or fishing. Today visitors to the newly excavated archaeological site at Bethsaida can almost see the outline of the synagogue at Chorazim; the next village to the southwest. Peter’s hometown, Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and the centre of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, lies nearby in the other direction.

Nazareth is about 48km from Capernaum, south and uphill, through fertile valleys and lavish hills. The village is built on the side of a hill in a valley that opens only to the south. The Sea of Galilee is 24km east, the Mediterranean Sea 32km west. The altitude, protected position and 60cm of rainfall annually provide a moderate climate favourable to vegetation.

The southernmost end of the central hills is Judah, a mountainous region around Jerusalem. The distance from Hebron (south of Jerusalem) east to the mountains of Moab (modern Jordan) is approximately 58km. However, the deep east-west valleys divide the area, making north-south travel almost impossible. Getting from one side to the other requires a descent from 900m above sea level to 400m below sea level, the lowest point on earth and up again to 900m. This daunting divide separated the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. A portion of Judah is desolate, empty, lonely land, the haunt of nomads, uncultivated and therefore not permanently settled. This wilderness
begins barely a half-mile east of Jerusalem. The image and symbol of desert are used at critical turning points in the journey of biblical spirituality.

Jerusalem was a fortified city built on a mount with three valleys surrounding it. Thus, it was easily defensible. Jerusalem was also situated on a trade route and had a plentiful water supply. These characteristics made Jerusalem a good choice for the capital of a kingdom.

**The Jordan Valley**
The third strip of topography, east of the central hills, is the Jordan valley, 65 miles long, extending from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Though it flows through the centre of this valley, the Jordan River is actually about 320km long because of its meandering. This depression in the earth is also called the Rift Valley and constitutes the lowest point on earth. The Dead Sea is 400m below sea level and 400m deep. Its salt content is six times greater than that of other seas. The high mineral content of the Dead Sea prevents any plant or animal life from existing there, but provides many nutrients used as health and beauty aids.

The fourth north-south strip of land constituting ancient Palestine, east of the Jordan Valley, is called Transjordan. These highlands, in contrast to the arid Rift Valley, are fertile and productive. Caesarea Philippi and Bethsaida are two New Testament sites in the northeast region of Transjordan. Four main rivers, the Yarmuk, Jabbok, Arnon and Zered, serve as natural boundaries separating the territories of Bashan, Gilead, Ammon, Moab and Edom.

This amazing array of landforms, from snow-covered mountains to the lowest point on earth, from fertile plain to rugged dry wilderness described the world in which Jesus lived. How did this geography affect Jesus' life and preaching?

The usual mode of transport was on foot. The terrain almost everywhere involves significant climbing. As an itinerant preacher Jesus and his disciples were always outside and on the move. Walking 25km or 30km a day was common. A pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem two or three times a year required a round-trip journey of 190km. Knowing the landscape in which Jesus lived suggests that he was a strong rugged man used to the outdoors who lived close to all the elements of nature.

Jesus also used images from the landscape. The Gospels suggest that Jesus went up the mountain (Matt 14:23) or to a deserted place (Mark 6:32) to be alone. Wadis, narrow corridors where water drains from the hillsides toward the Sea of Galilee, separate the alternating hills and plains of lower Galilee. The wadis are pockmarked with caves; cool streams and thick vegetation provide privacy in a setting of natural beauty.