What is the Geography of the Holy Land Like?

**Nomenclature** – The land we call Israel today, or the Holy Land, was known in ancient times, at the time Jesus, as Palestine by the Greeks and Romans. This name had derived originally from the Philistines who had lived there in ancient times some 2000 years before Christ.

**The Jewish people however never called their land Palestine**, though they did use this term to refer to one area near the Mediterranean, a kind of district, by that term. They tended more to refer to their land is the “Promised Land,” or the “Land of Canaan.” They also spoke of it is the “Land of Judah.” The Talmud simply speaks of it is "The Land"

**The Holy Land is volatile geologically.** Earthquakes and volcanoes have plagued the region for millennia. Numerous plates and rifts run under an adjacent to the land of Israel. Although many Bible lands are thought popularly to be desert landscapes that are flat, the region is in fact better described as mountainous, or at least hilly, and has regions that are green.

**Much of the intense diversity in terms of vegetation is ascribed to the rather significant hills** that stretch from Judah in the south, all the way up through Galilee in the north. These hills tend to collect the Mediterranean moisture and concentrate it in that region. However, areas to the east remain very dry deserts. They are not steep high mountains like the Rockies, but neither are they simply small hills. In many areas they resemble the Appalachian Mountains here in the east in terms of slope and height.

**Though forests are not widespread in the Holy Land, the presence of numerous trees is notable in these Mediterranean hills.** Sadly, many areas that were once more heavily forested have been deforested. The slender band of forest along the western side of Israel just east of the Mediterranean Sea is sometimes called the Mediterranean forest. It is not a dense forest, but it is dotted with small pine and oak trees. Between the foothills, and the encroaching deserts to the east are the steppes – areas filled with low shrubs and wild grasses. These regions are devoid of trees but are particularly good regions for shepherding. Due to the rainfall, the western side of modern Israel was the favored land. This was Canaan, the land of milk and honey.
The Sea of Galilee, is really just a lake. It is 700 ft. below the level of the Mediterranean Sea, and surrounded by gently sloping hills that descend from the Mountains to the west and down to the lake that is called today “Kinneret.” Galilee is a beautiful region, with reasonably abundant rainfall, to support varying types of agriculture, and the tending of flocks.

**Geographically the land is rich in complexity,** featuring a coastal plain, a semi-mountainous hill country, in Judah and Galilee, a wide valley of Jezreel, and a fertile sloping region in Galilee that sloped down to the Sea of Galilee. A tremendous rift in the earth makes up the southern part of the Jordan River down near Jericho and the Dead Sea. Here is deep desert of Judah which swings around south and West to the Negev. West of the Jordan is the steppe, and the dry, barren Golan Heights. There is a snow-covered Mount Herman to the northwest and the rich stands of cypress trees in Lebanon to the northeast.

**It is a land of great variety and incredibly complex terrain,** which brings about dramatic effects quite locally on the weather and vegetation. Fertile valleys can give way to deep desert within miles. Just to the west of Jerusalem stand the green hills of the Judean Hill country that, as noted, remind one almost of the Appalachian Mountains. Yet just to the east of Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives begins 3500 ft descent into a deep and extremely dry desert of the Dead Sea and Jericho (see right). The Dead Sea, is the lowest place on earth at 1,400 ft below Sea Level. Here two plates in the earth’s crust are opening up.

Indeed, there is probably no place on earth like the holy land that shows such diversity in such a small area and extent. A walk of one hour can take one from one of the richest valleys, up over more barren of hills, and down on the other side into the hot wind of the desert. And yet on a clear day one can see the snow shining at Mount Herman to the north.

As we discuss in another section about climate, it is likely that the holy land at the time of Jesus did have more greenery than today, but not so much more that it would be unrecognizable to an ancient Jew who might visit today. The diversity described here still existed at that time.

The people who lived in Jesus’ time were surely a hearty stock to dwell in such diverse conditions that also featured steep hills and often challenging climatic conditions.