

# The Shephelah and Gezer

Israel In Depth - "Shephalah"



## Day One:

After 25 hours of travel (ugh!) we finally made it - landing in Tel Aviv at the beautiful, Ben Gurion airport. Passing customs, we piled into the soon to be dubbed "Magic Tour Bus" and began the journey to our first night's kibbutz<sup>1</sup>. But before we arrived, our journey officially commenced with a stop along the way. Sun going down, we slogged our way through a field, up a hill and then we were there - standing in the ruins, thousands of years old, of the ancient city of Gezer. Situated in the northern portion of the area we would soon learn to call "The Shephelah."

**The Shephelah** - The word literally means, "low" and is usually translated "foothills". It refers to a 20-25km wide region that stretches north to south between the costal plain and the mountains of Judea. In the Old Testament period, the costal plain running along the Mediterranean was the home of the Philistines and the Judean mountains were where God situated the early Israelites. The Shephelah then, was the land in-between these two peoples and hence it was the place where two cultures with two world-views met and often collided. As a people who were intended to bring blessing and revelation to the rest of the world, it was no doubt that the Shephelah is where God expected his people to influence these other cultures. Unfortunately, as scriptures record, more often than not the pagan cultures were the ones that were doing the majority of the influencing.

As Christians today, Christ has also called us to live in the Shephelah of our world. We are to be a people



who live an in-between existence - between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The question that obviously must be asked however is,

<sup>1</sup> A kibbutz is basically an Israeli commune, in which a community of people live together and care for each other's needs while engaging in some form of common labour. The highest percentage of kibbutz' are agricultural, though a number of them also run lodges for tourists. We stayed in a kibbutz twice - first in Tel Aviv and then for five nights in Galilee. Interested in reading more? Check out this link: [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society\\_&\\_Culture/kibbutz.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/kibbutz.html)

“As we stand in our Shephelah, who is influencing who?” As our leader Todd was often heard asking, “How is our Shephelah?” Are we engaging with our “world”? Are we living in the Shephelah? Are we influencing those we encounter there or are we being influenced? Are we the ones being pulled further and further away from God’s will for our lives and our community?

Bisecting the Shephelah are four valleys (or wadis), which run west to east from the Mediterranean toward the region of Jerusalem. These valleys provided key strategic access to Jerusalem for would-be invading armies and hence each wadi was guarded by heavily fortified cities. These cities provided the setting for a number of key Old Testament stories. On our first night we visited the city of Gezer, which stood in the northernmost Aijlon Valley (pro. i-lon). On day two we made our way south, eventually arriving at the Dead Sea, and stopped at each of the other three cities: Beth Shemesh in the Soreq Valley, Azekah in the Valley of Elah and finally in Lachish in the Valley of Lachish (pron. Lakish).

**Gezer** - As noted above, this city, though now little more than an archeological excavation<sup>2</sup>, was located in the northern-most Aijlon Valley. The Aijlon Valley itself is best known as being the place where God made the sun and moon to stand still to aid Joshua as he conquered the land the Lord was giving to the Israelite people (Jos. 10).

In addition to guarding this wadi and its access to Jerusalem, Gezer also served as one of the three great cities that guarded the Via Maris - one of the

most significant trade routes in the entire region<sup>3</sup>. It was initially conquered by Joshua, but was later developed and re-fortified by King Solomon who made it one of his chariot cities, a key military center.

Standing in the ruins of this ancient city, tired as I was from the long travel I had just endured, I was for the first time stunned by where God had brought me. I was standing in a land where the most significant events in my life had taken place thousands of years prior<sup>4</sup>. I was not expecting to be overwhelmed by the thought of it all. To be honest, I had never really desired to travel to Israel. But now, standing in this place, I was firmly aware that the two weeks that lay ahead would be life altering. In retrospect, every part of that awareness would be fulfilled.

That being said, my tiredness and further awe led me to take few notes for the opening couple of days, but I’ll do my best to recall what of significance I can from our brief stop, on day one, in Gezer.

**“Daughters”** - Within the walls of a city dwelt the wealthy and important - kings, rulers, military leaders. Hence the vast majority of a city’s population lived around the perimeter of the city walls. Very few actually lived inside the city itself. These people on the outside, who would cluster together in small tent communities, were called the “daughters” of the city. They were the poor and they were dependent on those in the city for protection in the event of an attack. In scripture the mark of a righteous leader rested on whether or not he treated fairly the daughters that lived at his gates.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the things that would soon become apparent was the complete and total access the public is given to stroll through these sites. No fences, no guards, no admission fees - total access to climb in, around and through ruins that are literally thousands of years old. I suppose the sheer number of sites in Israel makes it prohibitive to really guard or protect what is there, although they say though that they have still only exposed 15% of what they know exists!

<sup>3</sup> This was a road that most certainly every major character in the scriptures would have wandered - from Joshua to Jesus, to Peter and Paul. It ran from Egypt in the south, through Israel and on to further cities in the east.

<sup>4</sup> It’s odd to write this phrase: “the most significant events in my life”. In fact, the events preceded my life by at least 2000 years. And yet, connected as I am to those events, how else could they be anything but the most significant of my life? The Cross, and all that led to it and from it, forms the very fabric of my life and existence. And here I was now touching the soil where it all unfolded.



**A Portion of Gezer** - Toward the back, center, can be seen a cut out of the lower portion of a Solomon built gate (yes, he would have walked this gate surveying his city!). Running through the center, out under the gate is the “gehenna” which would have flushed into the field in the background - this is where the “daughters” would have situated themselves.

**“Gates”** - Beyond being a means of defense and protection for a city, these were also the “community centers” of a town. They were where the life of a city took place. They were places of finance, taxation, judging and trade. They were also then the place where the poor daughters would interact with the wealthy and elite who resided within the city walls. Hence, the gates were also often seen as places of oppression and domination.

Bearing all this in mind, it makes sense that so many stories and parables in scripture take place at the city gates. When we read the scripture we must understand the significance of this location in the text. Knowing this sheds so much light on what the stories are communicating. For example, consider this: one day it says that Jesus will make his return to Jerusa-

lem through the “Eastern Gate”. Whether this is the actual Eastern Gate or it is metaphorical is a divided question among Bible students today. What is for sure is that when he returns he will make his entrance into the heart of the world, into the very center of life for the city. Everyone will know and see that he has returned. He’s coming to the gate - the place of life!

Another thought: when mention is made of the gates of hell not prevailing (Mt. 16:18), it is good to remind ourselves that gates are not offensive weapons. They are defensive strongholds intended to protect a city from outside invading forces. The point then of this reference is that the church and the broader kingdom of God is to be an offensive force storming the kingdom of hell. Hell, and all it represents, is

seeking to hold creation within its walls - but its gates will not be able to withstand the attack of its enemy - the kingdom of light led by the King of Kings.

**“Gehenna”** - In the New Testament, the word “gehenna” is commonly translated “hell”. Interestingly, it is derived from the sewer that would flush dung and refuse from inside the city walls to outside. This sewer would pass under the city gate and wash out to where the daughters made their homes. It was, in all respects, the city toilet. It would make sense then that when Jesus was trying to describe the worst place imaginable he would literally reference the city toilet. “...It would be better for you to cut off your hand than to have your whole body thrown into the excrement heap!” Mr. 9.

One other thought, isn't it interesting that scripture often points to the wicked oppressors as ones who will inherit gehenna? Considering what we just learned, the irony should be not lost. The ones who do the oppressing, pour (figuratively) their refuse out into the world where the poor and broken seek to eek by. But they must watch out, for though they act smugly, one day the tables will be turned and they will find themselves clamoring in their own filth! How we must be careful to not link arms with the oppressor.

**“Standing Stones”** - Next to the city of Gezer, we visited a site where 5-6 large pillar-like stones were situated on a hill overlooking the Via Maris running directly below. While it is uncertain who these stones were erected in honour of, their purpose in ancient times is certain. Standing stones were monuments dedicated to the god that the people of a particular city or region served. They stood as a beacon on the hills, announcing to the travelers-by, that the “god of... is worshipped here.”

In closing day one, exhausted from travel and ready for the kibbutz, we paused for a moment resting on the hill with the lights of modern Tel Aviv twinkling below. Sitting in the quiet night, Todd, our soon to

be Rabbi, offered us a poignant reminder: we too, as living stones, are called to also be standing stones. Announcing to the world around us that we, along with our families and our churches, worship the God named Jesus - for the glory of his father, through the power of his Spirit.



So, how am I doing? How are we doing? Are we the standing stones in the middle of our city? Are we living on the main-trade routes while quietly, even boldly, announcing who we serve?

Come Holy Spirit. Venite! Come.

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Written by Andy Lambkin with all scholarly insights borrowed from my “rabbi” for the trip - Todd Lanting. Special thanks to Taryn Herriot for her excellent editing.