

A QUICK GUIDED TOUR

THROUGH THE BIBLE

STEPHEN M. MILLER



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INTRODUCTION

Hello there.
I wrote this book for you if you're...

- a Bible newbie
- a Christian who doesn't know the Bible especially well
- someone who isn't a Christian but who is curious about the Bible

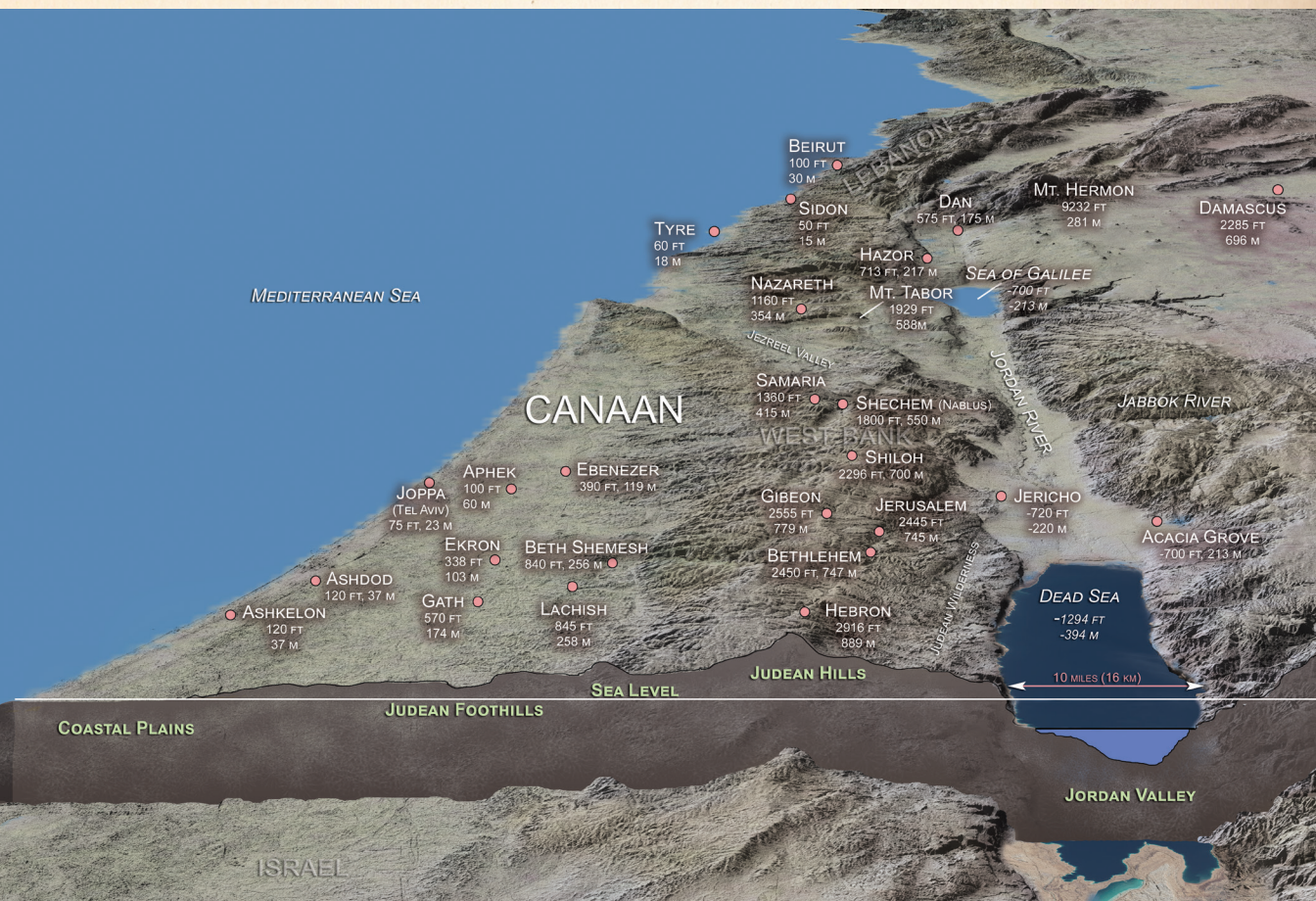
When I decided what Bible highlights to cover and how to put them on a page, I was thinking about people who don't generally crack open a Bible. Some of my neighbors. Friends. Relatives.

I don't write in a bubble for imagined readers. I write for people I know, trying to introduce them to the Bible.

I'm not a preacher or a Bible scholar. I'm a news reporter who went to seminary. I cover the Bible beat.

I don't write to convert you. That's the Holy Spirit's beat, far as I can tell.





I don't write to win you over to my way of thinking about the puzzling Bible stories. That's the Bible prof's beat.

I write simply to report the Bible stories as accurately as I can and to fill in some of the most interesting background details that Bible experts uncover—facts as well as educated guesses that might help us all better understand why some of the Bible heroes and villains did what they did.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about.

It seems odd to some Bible newbies that a hard-nosed Roman governor like Pilate would buckle to local Jewish priests and order the crucifixion of Jesus after declaring him innocent. It doesn't add up.

But some Bible experts say Pilate caved because he was already on shaky ground with the emperor. A Jewish historian writing in the first century said the official in Rome who recommended Pilate for his job had gotten himself dead with good riddance. The emperor executed him and a bunch of his associates



for plotting a coup. Pilate must have wondered if the emperor suspected him as well (see “Jesus’s Last Week,” page 174). Pilate didn’t want the Jews complaining about him to the emperor.

I hope you enjoy reading the book—and that you learn a thing or two.

I enjoyed writing it. In fact, I have a great job. I get to study the Bible and what experts have to say about it. Then I get to pass that good news along to you.

I get paid for it too. Assuming you buy the book. It’s a wonderful life.



Jesus calms the storm.



An angel stops Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac.

A WORD OF THANKS

This is what some savvy publishers call a *complex book*.

What makes it complex is that the publishers have to deal with more than just words. They’ve got to grapple with photos, maps, and charts. And they’ve got to spread it all out on the pages in magazine style so it’s gorgeous.

A job like that takes teamwork. I’d like to thank the team: Bob Hawkins, Terry Glaspey, Gene Skinner, Janelle Ho, and many others too numerous to name. God bless them every one.

Stephen M. Miller
StephenMillerBooks.com

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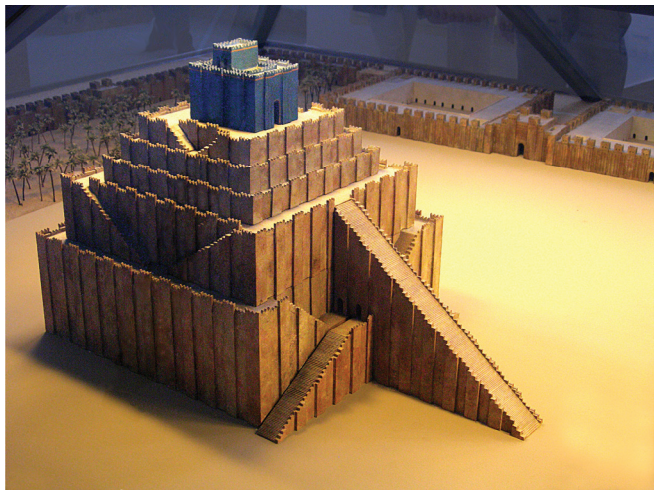
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IN SEARCH OF THE BEGINNING

TIMELINE *(dates are approximate)*

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 5900 BC | Beer is brewed from barley in what is now Iraq. |
| 5000 BC | The Stone Age ends; metal tools are made in Iraq. |
| 4000 BC | Wine is made from grapes in the Middle East. |
| 3500 BC | A Sumerian drawing in Iraq confirms the invention of the wheel. |
| 2900 BC | A flood devastates the Sumer kingdom in south Iraq. |
| 2200 BC | Pyramid-like ziggurats are built in Iraq with temples on top. |
| 2025 BC | Abraham moves from Iraq to Israel. |
| 1950 BC | Ur loses control of the city and region. |
| 1920 BC | Jacob marries Leah and Rachel. |





QUEST: GARDEN OF EDEN

OASIS PARADISE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east... A river watered the garden and then flowed out of Eden and divided into four branches... Pishon... Gihon... Tigris... Euphrates.

GENESIS 2:8-14

Eden never existed, some Christians speculate.

As far as they're concerned, sinking money into an expedition to find it would make as much sense as hiring a detective to track down a fairy godmother.

East of what? Genesis puts the Garden of Eden "in the east." Probably east of what is now Israel, many Bible experts guess, since the book was likely written by a Jew in Israel. Theories put the Garden in the ballpark of the Fertile Crescent, the river-fed land where archaeologists say civilization started in what is now Iraq. Genesis identifies four of the rivers, leading to one theory that God put the Garden at the source of the rivers in the mountains. Another theory puts Eden at the end of one of the rivers in an ancient river valley flooded by Ice Age melt and today known as the Persian Gulf.

It's not that these devoted Christians say the creation story is a fairy tale. Many of them would, however, call it a myth—but a myth with a message. A bit like a parable. They read a lot of symbolism into the story.

They say the writer's main goal was to paint word pictures to help folks understand that the Creator was God and not one of the other Middle Eastern gods that had been getting credit in earlier stories, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, first written in about 2100 BC.

That Epic of Gilgamesh, which credits a goddess named Aruru for making a man from clay, came out of what is now Iraq. Middle Easterners had been telling that story for several centuries before Moses came along in either the 1400s or 1200s BC (scholars debate which). Moses is generally credited with writing the anonymous book of Genesis.

Most Christians, however, say they read the creation story as history—possibly God's account delivered personally to Moses. Some of these Christians say they wonder where the first humans lived: Adam and Eve in the mysterious Garden of Eden.

BIBLE CLUES POINTING TO EDEN

The Genesis writer teases readers with clues to Eden. There's a word clue (Eden) and four landmark clues (the names of four rivers).

That's not enough to pinpoint the Garden. But it does seem to get us in the neighborhood—at least in the right part of the world.

The word clue. Eden is a word that many scholars say might have come from Sumer, the world's first known empire. Homeland of Abraham, father of the Jews, Sumer was located in what is now south Iraq. In Sumerian lingo, the root word *edinu* refers to the fertile grazing pastures along the Iraqi river valley.

The word also shows up in ancient writings discovered in Syria. There, it describes a fertile land with lots of water.

The landmark clues. “In the east” (Genesis 2:8). East of what?

East of the writer and his intended readers, many Bible experts speculate. If that writer was Moses or just about any other Jew in early Old Testament times, and if the intended readers were the Jews of Israel, *east* could have been what is now Syria, Iraq, or Iran.

Historians say civilization began there, in the valley along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This stretch of land makes up part of a huge, green crescent on the ancient Middle Eastern map. Nickname: the Fertile Crescent.

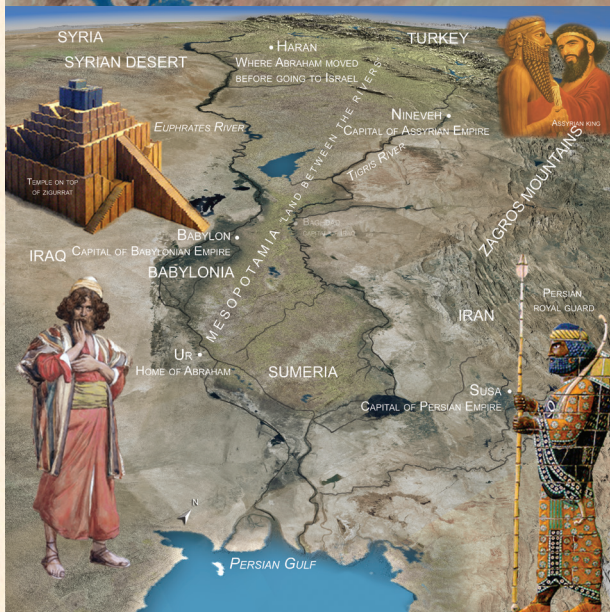
“Pishon” (2:11). Flowing through a land “where gold is found,” the Pishon River has been lost to history. One contender: Kuwait River. It's now just a sunbaked gully that runs diagonally from Saudi Arabia through Kuwait and empties into the Persian Gulf. Satellite pictures tracing the gully suggest it may have been an ancient river fed by streams from the Hijaz Mountains—mountains nicknamed the Cradle of Gold because they were the only major source of minable gold in the Arab world.

“Gihon” (2:13). Another mystery river, the Gihon “flowed around the entire land of Cush.” In the Bible, Cush usually refers to what is now southern Egypt and Ethiopia. But in Genesis, many Bible experts say, this region was the land settled by descendants of “Cush...ancestor of Nimrod...He built his kingdom in the land of Babylonia” (Genesis 10:8,10). Babylon's empire grew up in what is now southern Iraq. That would put the river somewhere near the last two rivers mentioned.

“Tigris...Euphrates” (2:14). These are two

of the most famous rivers in the Middle East. They start in the hills of southern Turkey and flow southeast through Syria and Iraq before emptying into the Persian Gulf.

As the Genesis writer tells it, these four rivers were branches that broke off from the main river in Eden that “watered the garden” (2:10). That description has inspired lots of theories



The Angry Eyebrow. That name doesn't sound as scholarly as the Fertile Crescent, the name an American archaeologist gave to the thousand-mile-wide (1600 km) stretch of land where human civilization began. Yet it captures the feel of the place over the long haul of 2000 years before Christ. Here is where the world's first empires rose and fell like dominoes, one after another: Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. Most of the first cities grew up in the greenest stretch, an area scholars call Mesopotamia—a mouthful of syllables that comes from a Greek term meaning “between rivers.” Many scholars include Egypt's Nile River Valley as an extended part of the Fertile Crescent.

about where the Garden of Eden may have been, including...

- *In the mountains.* Turkish mountains are the source of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Perhaps the Pishon and Gihon are now long-lost, dried-up rivers that once flowed out of these mountains as well. Or maybe they are a couple of the other streams feeding into the river valley.
- *In the valley.* Perhaps the four rivers did not flow out of Eden, but into Eden. Maybe the Genesis writer flopped the description to hide the location of Eden. That's one theory. This theory puts the Garden of Eden underwater in what is now the Persian Gulf. As the theory goes, the Persian Gulf was once a river valley. As ice melted after the Ice Age, seawater
- *In Neverland.* Some Bible experts say it's a mistake to think of the river of Eden as a squiggly line on a map. Instead, they suggest, this river was the writer's way of describing God as the source of all life-giving water on earth. They say that may be why the writer of Revelation described heaven in a way that reads like a flashback to Eden: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life. It was shining like crystal and was flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the street of the city. The tree of life was on each side of the river" (Revelation 22:1-2 NCV).

GOD'S CREATION TEMPLE

Some Bible experts who read the creation story as more metaphor than history say they see God creating the universe as a kind of temple. Creation's "worship center" includes...

A dome. "God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome" (Genesis 1:7 NRSV). The ancients seemed to think the sky was a hard dome. It was blue because there was water above the dome, which God sometimes released as rain.

A floor. "Let the dry land appear" (Genesis 1:9 NRSV).

Holy water. "He called the waters that were gathered together 'oceans'" (Genesis 1:10 NIRV). Jews would later call each large bronze basin of water in the temple courtyard a "sea" (1 Kings 7:23 NASB).

Supplies. "Let the land produce plants... Let the land produce all kinds of living creatures" (Genesis 1:11,24 NIRV).

Priests. "Let us make man in our likeness. Let them rule... over the whole earth" (Genesis 1:26 NIRV).

Holy day. "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Genesis 2:3 NIRV).



WATERWORLD NOAH'S FLOOD— WORLDWIDE OR REGIONAL?

Water covered even the highest mountains on the earth, rising more than twenty-two feet [7 m] above the highest peaks.

GENESIS 7:19-20

Why Mount Ararat? The Bible says Noah's ark came to rest "somewhere in the Ararat mountains" (Genesis 8:4 CEV). Some Bible experts say Mount Ararat was the likely spot because it's the highest mountain in the range and because no other mountains appeared for two months. Supposed ark sightings on Mount Ararat remain unconfirmed.

Most Christians read the Bible story of Noah's flood like it's a news report—accurate in every detail. So say Gallup polls.

Other Christians—a minority—are puzzled by the story. They say the tale of a worldwide flood some 4000 years ago doesn't seem to have a shred of science to back it up.

FLOOD WARNING

The Genesis writer said that by ten generations into humanity, God was fed up. As far as God was concerned, these creatures who knew right from wrong couldn't seem to get anything right. A rotten excuse of a species, they stunk up creation like junkyard dogs at a garden wedding.

"The Lord said, 'I brought them into this world. I'm going to take them out'" (Genesis 6:7, author's paraphrase).

God planned a creation do-over. This time he wouldn't start humanity with a sinner like Adam. Instead, he would reboot the race with Noah, "the only person who lived right and obeyed God" (Genesis 6:9 CEV).

To wash away humanity's sins, God decided to wash away the sinners. As the Genesis writer reports it, God sent an extinction level event—a global flood.

To reseed the planet, God told Noah to build a barge with the storage capacity of about 370 railroad cars. Noah could have parked two arks side by side on a football field. They would have pushed beyond both end zones and into the front rows. They would have risen almost as high as the top of the goalposts. Ark specs: 150 yards long by 25 yards wide by 15 yards high (137 by 23 by 14 m).

Noah herded into the ark a pair of every air-breathing critter along with seven other humans, including his wife, his three sons, and their wives.

Rain fell. Underground water exploded in geysers. This water poured and gushed for 40 days, which some Bible experts say was a common expression meaning a long time.

From the time of the first raindrop to Noah's last day on the barge, more than a year had gone by. Only then did the passengers disembark.

READING THE STORY AS FACT

Many Christians say God reported this story to the writer. Jewish tradition tags the anonymous writer as Moses (1400s or 1200s BC—scholars disagree which).

These Christians insist that if God said water covered the planet, he ought to know. When they look at science, they say they start with the presumption that the writer got his facts right.

As a result, many theorize that the earth is just a few thousand years old. They base this on genealogies reported in Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible—as though these genealogies are complete and not just the headlines as some other Christians theorize.

Many "young-earth" Christians say Noah's flood gave the planet an instant facelift:

- splitting land masses into continents
- chiseling valleys
- shooting flatland prairies a mile high to become mountain ranges

READING THE STORY AS FICTION

So far, no geologist widely respected in the field has gone on record supporting these theories. Nearly all geologists insist that the earth is 4.54 billion years old and that there is no evidence of a worldwide flood in any millennia this side of carbon dating.

That's one reason why some Christians read the creation story for its message, not for its science. They don't have trouble believing there was a devastating flood in ancient times. But they say it makes more sense, given Geology 101, that the flood wiped out only the world as the ancients knew it—riverside cities in the Fertile Crescent, where human civilization started.



Mopping up. After the flood, Noah and his family leave the Ararat Mountains behind as they lead a caravan of critters to the chore of rebooting life on earth.

There is science to back that up.

Archaeologists confirm that floods wiped out entire cities in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valley, including one of the oldest cities—Ur, the New York City of its day and the hometown of Abraham (2100s BC). The flood, dated to about 3500 BC, buried Ur in a layer of mud up to 11 feet (3.5 m) thick.

Another massive flood about 4500 years ago churned a freshwater lake into the Black Sea. Rising ocean water fed by an Ice Age melt-down broke through a narrow wall of land, creating the Bosphorus Strait (see the map of the Fertile Crescent on page 14). Like a busted dam

allowing a mountain lake to flood the valley, the Bosphorus Strait released enough ocean water to push the lakefront several miles back. Fossils of freshwater creatures show the limits of the ancient lake.

Some Christians say they read the entire flood story as a kind of parable intended to teach us not about our history but about the nature of God—specifically, that he doesn't tolerate sin. That's a minority opinion though.