

# The Great Trunk Road

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For a larger article on this road, often misnamed the Via Maris, see the piece on the Land Bridge.

In the period of the First Testament, the trunk roads had to avoid the desert, following the Fertile Crescent. As far as possible, they would stay on level land near springs. There were then <sup>{tips2}</sup> In Assyria bridges are mentioned from the 11th century BC. (The Egyptians used ferries.) Yet the First Testament lacks a word for bridge, and no remains of any have been found in the land for this period. Except when miracles occur, the Israelites are portrayed as fording. The location of fords in this land was a major factor in determining the location of cities and roads. It was the Romans who first made bridges general, building them wherever they conquered.<sup>{tips2}</sup> in the land. When travelers encountered a river, they would either find a fording spot or go around its headwaters.

Suppose you were traveling in the period of the First Testament, coming from the Nile and heading for the Tigris or the Euphrates. You would probably take the Coastal Road until you reached the mountain pass that leads to Megiddo. From here you would likely take a route across the Jezreel Plain, then head around Mt. Tabor, down to the Sea of Galilee, up again to Hazor, and around the south side of Mt. Hermon to Damascus. Using a term from the Latin version of Isaiah, geographers and guides (including yours truly) have mistakenly called this route the Via Maris. (Isaiah probably had a different road in mind.) We shall call it the Great Trunk Road.

In the Roman period, the road's course shifted at several places. Megiddo was gone. Heading toward Damascus, one came out of the former "Megiddo pass" at Cfar Otnay, which later got a military base beside it, known as Legio. Soon after, the road divided, one branch going toward Sepphoris, the other toward Scythopolis (Beth Shean). Because the Romans built bridges, the branch that skirted the Sea of Galilee did not have to go north to Hazor (which had ceased to exist). Instead one could cross the mouth of the Upper Jordan near Capernaum, then head north toward Paneon (Caesarea Philippi) and Damascus.