

King's Highway

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In the First Testament period, the key to wealth and power was twofold: (1) to control the main roads of the land bridge between Egypt and Mesopotamia, and (2) to have an alliance with Phoenicia, which gave access to the markets of the Mediterranean.

The land bridge had two main thoroughfares. One we are calling the Great Trunk Road (often mistaken for the Via Maris, part of it is called in Exodus 13:17 "the way of the land of the Philistines"), and the other is the "King's Way." This usage may be generic - that is, the name may refer to any main road protected by a king. The term is used today by Biblical geographers for the route connecting the Arabian peninsula with Damascus, which in turn gave access to the rest of the Fertile Crescent. In addition, starting from Egypt, the traveler on the Great Trunk Road could cross to the King's Way by a number of link roads.

The King's Way is mentioned in the context of the Israelite journey to Canaan. After a sojourn at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea in Sinai, Moses wanted to use this route. According to [{tips2}](#) "Please let us pass through your land: we will not pass through field or through vineyard, neither will we drink of the water of the wells: we will go along the king's highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed your border." Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you." The children of Israel said to him, "We will go up by the highway; and if we drink of your water, I and my livestock, then will I give its price: let me only, without doing anything else, pass through on my feet." He said, "You shall not pass through." Edom came out against him with many people, and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border, so Israel turned away from him. [Numbers 20:14-21](#), [{tips2}](#) however, the king of Edom would not allow it. A study of the itineraries in Numbers and Deuteronomy leads to the conclusion that this conversation occurred in the Negev and that the road in question was there.

Later in the journey, Moses makes a similar request of Sihon, king of the Amorites, who rules in Heshbon (south of Amman, opposite Jericho):

"Let me pass through your land: we will not turn aside into field, or into vineyard; we will not drink of the water of the wells: we will go by the king's highway, until we have passed your border."

But Sihon also refuses. This time, however, the Israelites attack, capturing Heshbon and the vicinity. Here the King's Highway does seem to mean the road traditionally called by that name.

A road, in the time of the First Testament, was an unpaved path broad enough to take wagons and chariots. Because there were no milestones, we cannot know the exact course a road took. We can make a reasoned conjecture, however, based on the assumption that travelers would have preferred level ground near water sources. Proximity to a road also helped determine the location of cities, of which we do find remains. Putting the elements together, we may assume that the central section of the King's Way followed the plateau on the watershed linking Rabbath Ammon (Amman of today), Heshbon, Madaba and Dibon (where the Moabite Mesha stele was found). There are [{tips}](#) The presence of water is due to the following fact: after crossing the Dead Sea, the east-bound air, bearing moisture from the Mediterranean, rises and cools, so that its remaining vapor condenses into drops above the Transjordanian plateau. [water sources along this route](#), [{tips}](#) and erosion has leveled it out. We can see how part of it looks today with the help of a tilted satellite photo:

Below, facing east, is a satellite view of the whole road system, including the King's Highway and the much more recent Desert Highway:

From Dibon (right), the King's Way would have continued south to Karak, known for its Crusader castle. It may have been "Kir of Moab." Next, crossing Wadi Hasa (the Biblical Zered) into Edomite territory, the road entered a fertile region today called Al-Tafilah, watered with hundreds of springs; just west of the road, at Dana, is a nature reserve. Figs, olives and grapes grow here in profusion.

South of Dana, overlooking the road, is an impressive 12th-century castle, built by the Crusaders but largely redone by the Mamlukes; it is called Shobak or, in Crusader parlance, Montreal. Continuing southward, today's traveler finds, tucked among the mountains, the Nabataean city of Petra, counted today among the world's seven wonders.

During the First Testament period, however, there were no major cities in the difficult stretch between Kir of Moab and the Red Sea port of Ezion Geber (Aqaba). Indeed, a [Piotr Bienkowski and Eveline van der Steen, "Tribes, Trade, and Towns: A New Framework for the Late Iron Age in Southern Jordan and the Negev," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 323 \(Aug., 2001\), p. 23](#) recent archaeological survey found no sign of settlement at all south of Wadi Hasa before the 10th century BC at the earliest. That is, the Edomites did not settle here before that, and there was no "Kingdom of Edom" in Transjordan at the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

Let us switch to the highway's northern section, between Rabbath Ammon (Amman) and Damascus. Here Ramoth Gilead stood out as a city in First Testament times. This was the main battleground in Israel's quest for empire during the 9th century BC. The [In the Kingdom of Israel, Omri founded a dynasty, best known for the reign of his son Ahab.](#) [Omrides](#) had the requisite alliance with Phoenicia. They had also allied with Judah, thus gaining control over the Great Trunk Road. For a time they also subdued Moab, giving them a hold on the central part of the King's Way.

Their problem was its northern section: At Damascus, city of the Arameans, both trunk roads met, continuing north and east as a single route into Mesopotamia. Damascus was therefore Israel's natural rival for domination of the land bridge. Ramoth Gilead sat south of Damascus on the King's Way, and so it was here that the armies engaged, as recorded in 1 Kings 22: 1-29 and [He \[Ahaziah, King of Judah\] went with Joram the son of Ahab to war against Hazael king of Syria at Ramoth Gilead...](#) [2 Kings 8:28.](#)

In terms of the Second Testament, the northern section of the highway includes most of the [A league of cities under Roman auspices.](#) Sometimes ten are mentioned, sometimes more. They included Damascus (an honorary member), Hippos, Gadera, Gerasa (Jerash), Pella, Scythopolis and Philadelphia. [Decapolis.](#) Between Damascus and Philadelphia (Amman) was Gerasa, today's Jerash, second only to Petra as a major attraction in Jordan today.

North and east of Gerasa, as early as the 2nd century BC, the Nabataeans used their skills for gathering water in arid land to develop Bostra, today in Syria. (See the satellite photo of the Land Bridge above.) The Roman Emperor Trajan annexed the Nabataean realm in 106 AD, and five years later he began paving a road from the Red Sea port of Aela, the former Ezion Geber, northward for a distance of 250 miles. In general, he followed the King's Highway. At Gerasa, however, he left the old route, branching north and east to Bostra, which became the northernmost point on this "Via Nova Traiana." The cutting edge of technology, Trajan's new road revolutionized the political economy of the day: commerce from Arabia and India found it faster than the older routes.

For centuries, then, merchants plied the King's or Trajan's Way. Its cities provided them with security from marauders, in

turn growing wealthy from commerce. Along it spread the intangible as well: Christianity and Islam.

The King's Way remained the preferred north-south route as late as the Mamluke period. When the Ottomans took over in the 16th century, they developed a new road, east of it on the desert edge. This became part of the Darb el Haj, the pilgrimage route from Damascus to Mecca. According to legend, an Ottoman princess preferred it to the King's Way, so it also got the name of the "Maiden's Way," Tariq al-Bint. On its line, at the start of the 20th century, the Hejaz Railway was built for Muslim pilgrims. Today's modern Desert Highway follows this course. It is faster than the King's Way, but with much less to see.