

The Land Bridge

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Two of the first great civilizations developed about five thousand years ago in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The reason was mud. In order for a civilization to be established, people must stay put. This means that they have to be engaged in agriculture. But even that is not enough: the first farmers, we may assume, did not know about allowing the soil to replenish itself by letting it lie fallow or rotating crops. After ten years or so, they would have had to move. Precisely in Egypt and Mesopotamia, however, the flooding rivers deposited silt, so the soil was never depleted.

http://new.netours.com/images/stories/dating/land_bridge/08112002145657.jpg The Fertile Crescent After the rise of these two civilizations, the potential existed for contact between them. People traveled mainly on foot or by donkey, doing perhaps 20 miles per day. In the third millennium BC they used heavy carts, which developed into light horse-drawn chariots in the early part of the second. We find references to horseback riding only from about 1000 BC and mainly in connection with warfare. Camels too came into general use around then. Mules were rare (David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991 Chapter 1).

All traffic between the great civilizations had to pass through the narrow funnel of Canaan, because it had water. In the rainy season, the air moving eastward from the Mediterranean drops its moisture on the plains and mountains as far as Amman in Jordan, 75 miles from the coast. Due east of that lie 400 hundred miles of desert, until we reach the region of Babylon on the Euphrates.

The roads had to avoid the desert, following the Fertile Crescent. As far as possible, they would stay on level land near springs, seeking the easiest fords.

http://new.netours.com/images/stories/dating/land_bridge/10122002112338.jpg Routes from the Jezreel Plain (There were 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. No bridges in the land until the Roman period.) Suppose you were traveling in the time 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 most likely take a route across the Jezreel Plain, stopping at Afula, then heading around Mt. Tabor, north to a city on the Horns of Hattin, down to the Sea of Galilee, up to Hazor, and around the south side of Mt. Hermon to Damascus. For seventy years or so, geographers and guides have called this route the Via Maris (Isaiah 9:1), but this is probably mistaken. We shall call it the Great Trunk Road.

From Hazor, if your destination was Kadesh on the Orontes, Hammath, Carchemish, Haran, Nineveh or Asshur, you would continue north through the Beka Valley between the Lebanese mountain ranges. On the other hand, if you wanted to get to Damascus, Tadmor, Mari or Babylon, you would keep south of Mt. Hermon.

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 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.

From the Great Trunk Road, at several points, there was the possibility of taking link roads to the King's Highway ("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." Numbers 21:22), which stretched from Arabia Felix ("happy Arabia," Yemen today, then rich in perfumes and spices) through Transjordan to the great oasis at Damascus.

As long as travel was only on foot or by donkey, contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia must have been scarce. Early in the second millennium BC, however, horses were hitched to light chariots, and the two great civilizations came into more frequent contact. The Egyptians wrote the names of their enemies on clay figures, which they then smashed or maltreated, hoping that a similar fate would befall those designated. Execration Texts of 1800 BC mention Jerusalem, Shechem, Hazor and Laish (later called Dan). In an archive of the same time from Mari in Mesopotamia, commercial documents mention Hazor. After the Egyptians expelled the Hyksos in the 18th and 17th centuries BC, Canaanites settled massively in the eastern Nile delta, eventually seizing dominion over lower Egypt. The Egyptians called them "Hyksos" ("foreign rulers") and managed to throw them out after a century. The ceramic remains, scarabs and weapons at the Hyksos capital of Avaris (biblical Zoan) are very similar to those found in contemporary Canaanite sites. In the century before this Canaanite conquest of lower Egypt, the major cities in Canaan received massive systems of fortification, including huge earthen ramparts, which gave many of the tells the shape they hold to the present day. Hyksos and surged again into Canaan, the Canaanite cities squirmed under Egypt's yoke. The king of Mitanni ("that miserable Asiatic," as Pharaoh Thutmose III called him) spurred the Canaanite city-states, led by Megiddo, to rebel against Egypt. From this time we find the two civilizations vying for control of Canaan, the "land bridge" between Asia and Africa.