

What is the importance of the Dead Sea in the Bible?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Dead-Sea.html>

The Dead Sea is a large body of salt water on the southern end of the Jordan River. Cited sixteen times in the Bible, the Dead Sea is mentioned primarily to describe the borders of the Promised Land.

The Dead Sea is known by a few different names in the Bible, including the Salt Sea (Genesis 14:3; Numbers 34:3, 12; Deuteronomy 3:17; Joshua 3:16; 12:3), the Sea of the Arabah (Deuteronomy 3:17; 4:49; Joshua 3:16; 2 Kings 14:25), and the Eastern Sea (Ezekiel 47:18; Zechariah 14:8). It was called the Salt Sea for its unusually high salinity. The name Sea of the Arabah was given for its location in the Arabah Valley. In Hebrew, arabah means “a wasteland” or “barren district.” And the name Eastern Sea originated from the Dead Sea’s position on the eastern boundary of the land of Israel.

Only in Genesis 14:3 is the Dead Sea referred to as a location. In all other instances, it is used to designate a border for the land of Israel. Thus, the Dead Sea was likely considered more of a territorial boundary line than a destination for the people of the Bible. Nevertheless, several noteworthy biblical settlements were positioned on the shores of the Dead Sea, including Masada, En Gedi, and Qumran.

The Dead Sea is located 16 miles directly east of Jerusalem. A long and narrow oblong, the sea, in Bible times, measured a little over 50 miles from north to south and about 11 miles wide at its broadest point. The Dead Sea lies within the great trough of the Jordan Valley, also known as the Rift Valley, which forms part of the longest and deepest crack in the earth’s crust. At approximately 1,300 feet (400 meters) below sea level, the Dead Sea sits at the lowest point of the earth’s surface.

Fed mainly by the Jordan River and a few smaller streams and rivers, the Dead Sea receives an average of six or seven million tons of daily inflow with no outlet for the water except through evaporation. The extreme heat and dry conditions of the region produce an exceptionally high rate of evaporation. Even with no outflow of water, the Dead Sea's surface rises no more than 10 to 15 feet a day.

The waters that feed the Dead Sea contain an unusually high salt content (approximately 26 percent), making it the world's most saline body of water, with almost five times the level of salt concentration of the ocean (on average 3.5 percent). With such high salinity, no marine life can live in the Dead Sea.

Even with its inability to sustain life, the Dead Sea provided a valuable commodity for trading in ancient times—salt. The sea was also known for producing bitumen, a natural petroleum product similar to asphalt, prized for its waterproofing properties. Historians have suggested that Cleopatra's ambition to rule the Dead Sea region was motivated by her desire to control the bitumen trade.

Biblical archaeologists believe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18–19 took place in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. Some believe that Sodom and Gomorrah lie underneath the Dead Sea. Exactly how God destroyed these cities is still debated. Some theorize God used a volcanic eruption or a spontaneous explosion of subsurface pockets of bituminous soil. Curiously, at the southeast corner of the Dead Sea is a salt rock plug known today as Mount Sodom. On its slopes, which are formed by a combination of gypsum, salt, limestone, and chalk, can be seen strange formations of salt, like pillars. These pillars are often pointed out to tourists by the nickname “Lot's wife”

(see Genesis 19:26).

When David fled from King Saul, he found a place of refuge on the western shore of the Dead Sea in the town of En Gedi. In contrast to the lifeless nature of the Dead Sea, En Gedi is an oasis full of fresh flowing springs, fine dates, aromatic and medicinal plants, and semitropical vegetation.

The prophet Ezekiel foresaw a time when the Dead Sea's toxic waters would be transformed into a fresh River of Life flowing from the throne of God: "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. . . . Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezekiel 47:8-12).

In recent times the Dead Sea has been shrinking because its waters are evaporating faster than the inflow from the Jordan and other streams can replenish. In the last 40 years or so, the sea has lost about 30 percent of its area and has divided into two basins. The shallow southern basin is used primarily for the mining of Dead Sea minerals.