

What is the significance of the Negev in the Bible?

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The Negev is a hot, dry region in the southern part of Israel that receives less than eight inches of rainfall each year. The Negev Desert factors into the events of Abraham's life and through the period of Israel's wilderness wanderings. The area is also significant throughout the time of the united monarchy until the period of the divided kingdom. Three of the Bible's prophets mention the Negev as well.

The name Negev means "dry land" in Hebrew, but the Bible sometimes uses the term to refer to the "south country," or "south." An alternate spelling for Negev in the Bible is Negeb. The King James Version regularly translates Negev as "the south," whereas the New International Version (Negev) and English Standard Version (Negeb) normally use the name for the territory.

Although no specific geographical boundaries define the Negev in the Bible, the region extends between Beersheba and Kadesh Barnea from north to south, and from near the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabah Valley from west to east, an expanse of about 70 miles wide. In Bible times, the territory resembled an hourglass or figure eight turned on its side. On all but the west side, highlands and mountains border the Negev, but to the west it stretches to within a few miles of the Mediterranean coast.

Today, the Negev is the largest region in the modern state of Israel and includes more territory than it did in ancient times. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the total area of the Negev Desert covers about 4,700 square miles, "occupying almost half of Palestine west of the Jordan River and about 60 percent of Israeli territory under the 1949-67 boundaries." Rather than a figure eight, current Negev is shaped like an

inverted triangle.

After God called Abraham, the patriarch set out in obedience, leaving his pagan country to go to the land of promise. In the initial part of his journey, Abraham traveled as far as the Negev (Genesis 12:4-9). When a severe famine entered the land, Abraham left the Negev and went to Egypt (verse 10). Later, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham returned to settle in the Negev (Genesis 20:1). Abraham's son Isaac was living in the south country of the Negev when he first met Rebekah (Genesis 24:62).

During much of the 40-year wilderness wanderings, the Hebrew people camped around the oasis of Kadesh Barnea in the southern part of the Negev (Deuteronomy 1:19, 46). The Negev was included in the lands the people of Israel were to possess (verse 7 and 34:1-3). When the Israelites spied out the Promised Land, Moses instructed the scouts to head northward through the hill country, starting in the southlands of the Negev (Numbers 13:17-20). The seminomadic Amalekites also lived in the Negev (verse 29).

Joshua led the people of Israel in military conquest of the lands of the Negev, taking control away from its native inhabitants (Joshua 10:40; 11:16; 12:8). Eventually, the region was allotted to the tribes of Judah and Simeon (Joshua 15; 19:1-9; Judges 1:9).

Ziklag, a city in the Negev, was given to David by Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. David had fled there when King Saul sought to harm him (1 Samuel 27:5-7). Later, this same city in the "Negev of Caleb" was raided by Amalekite warriors (1 Samuel 30:1). In the Bible, territories in this southern region are called the "Negev of Judah," "Negev of the Kenites," "Negev of the Jerahmeelites" (1 Samuel 27:10), and the "Negev of the Kerethites" (1 Samuel 30:14).

With limited rainfall, the Negev Desert offered little opportunity for agriculture or economic development in biblical times. However, in northern areas of the Negev, some grain farming was done as well as raising of goats, sheep, and camels (1 Samuel 25:2; 1 Chronicles 4:38-41; 2 Chronicles 26:10). Farmers of the Negev used terrace farming for the best use of the land. During the time of the kings, many small villages and fortifications were established in the Negev to guard the southern borders of Judah.

Isaiah mentions the wild animals of the Negev in an oracle denouncing Judah's reliance on Egypt, calling the territory "a land of hardship and distress" (Isaiah 30:6). Jeremiah said that, if Israel were to keep the Sabbath, people would come from all around Jerusalem, including the Negev, to observe the holy day (Jeremiah 17:26). And Obadiah prophesied about the inhabitants of the Negev after their time in exile: "People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau, and people from the foothills will possess the land of the Philistines. They will occupy the fields of Ephraim and Samaria, and Benjamin will possess Gilead. This company of Israelite exiles who are in Canaan will possess the land as far as Zarephath; the exiles from Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negev" (Obadiah 1:19-20).

After the fall of Jerusalem, at the time of the exile in 587 BC, the lands of the Negev fell under control of the Edomites. The territory supported few inhabitants until the arrival of the Nabateans in the last two centuries BC. The Nabateans rebuilt many settlements of the Negev and established new villages. Through careful water conservation, they became skilled at farming and pasturing in the dry region. The population of the Negev continued to grow until the Arab conquest in AD 632 but then diminished again until more recent times.