

GOLAN HEIGHTS

The Golan Heights are located in Israel's mountain region east and north of the Sea of Galilee. The elevations range from about 9,230 feet above sea level in the north at Mount Hermon to below sea level along the Sea of Galilee and the Yarmuk River in the south. It is a beautiful, well-watered area, supplying Israel with a substantial portion of its water. The Golan Heights receive much winter rainfall, which drains into the Huleh Basin and the Sea of Galilee.



The Golan Heights (from the Eastern Coast of the Sea of Galilee);
Covered Banana Trees in the Foreground



Golan Heights East of the Sea of Galilee

Golan is a basalt plateau that averages about 2,950 feet above sea level. In the north-eastern corner of the Golan Heights, there is a chain of inactive volcanoes. Geologists speculate that the thick basalt layers were caused by volcanic activity in the past, resulting in rocky terrain that is unsuitable for some types of agriculture. The Golan Heights are mainly used for pastureland, but there are also some wheat fields, vineyards, and orchards.



Vineyard

The name “Golan” derives from the ancient city of refuge, located east of the Sea of Galilee in Manasseh’s allotment (Deut. 4:43; Josh. 20:8; 1 Chron. 6:71). The Golan Heights are referred to as Bashan in the Bible. The area was known for the well-fed “cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1-2) and the strong “oaks of Bashan” (Zech. 11:2). “Golan” became used for the district; the Greek name is *Gaulanitis*. “Golan Heights” is a more modern designation.



Cows and Oaks of Bashan



Stone Piles in a Field (See Hos. 12:11)

The Israelites took Bashan from Og (Num. 21:32-35), and it was given to the half tribe of Manasseh. The area in the far north was later possessed by the tribe of Dan (Judg. 18:1-31). Bashan was sometimes taken over by Aram (Syria) and then later reclaimed by Israel. (This land has been fought over by these nations for a long time!) For example, King Ahab (874-853 B.C.) defeated Ben-Hadad I in the southern part of the region (1 Kings 20:26-34; see 2 Kings 13:17). Later, the territory was controlled by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks (Seleucids) respectively. It was taken back by the Jews under Judas during the Maccabean Re-

volt (1 Maccabees 5:9-52) and controlled later by Alexander Jannaeus (Josephus *Wars* 1.4.8).

In the first century A.D., this territory oscillated between Israel and Syria. Augustus Caesar gave it to Herod Philip II (4 B.C.—A.D. 34). Then it was absorbed into the Syrian province. A few years later, it was given to Herod Agrippa I (A.D. 37-44), only to revert to Syria. Then it was made a part of the territory controlled by Herod Agrippa II (A.D. 52-100).

In the third century, the Golan Heights were inhabited by Christians. Later, in the seventh century, the place was invaded by Arabs. In more modern times, the Golan Heights were conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century. Many Druze communities were established there during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; about 15,000 Druze live in the Golan Heights today.

This district became a part of the newly formed Syrian Arab Republic in 1944. It belonged to Syria until 1967. During the Six Day War, Israel took the highland overlooking the Huleh Basin and the Sea of Galilee. The land is internationally recognized as Syrian territory even though Israel has occupied it since 1967. Syria demands the return of the Golan Heights as a part of any peace agreement with Israel. However, because of its strategic position as a buffer zone against terrorism, it is in Israel's national interests not to surrender the land. At this time, the total population of the area (including the Druze) is about 53,000.



Israeli-Syrian Border

Many notable features and artifacts can be found in the Golan Heights. There are hundreds of Dolmens there. These were used for burial because it was too difficult to dig graves in basalt. A Dolmen was made with two large vertical stone slabs with a horizontal stone on top which could weigh up to thirty tons. There is also the mysterious Rujum el-Hiri (Circle of Ghosts). This stone structure dates to about 3000 B.C. and may have been used for a calendar, astronomy, or some worship ritual. Berekhat Ram, which means "Ram Lake" or "Pool," is believed to have been formed from a crater resulting from volcanic-like activity. "The Venus of Berekhat Ram" was found there; some believe that it is an artifact worked by ancient man.

Mount Hermon is on the southern end of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range and its highest peak is 9,230 feet. It is also known in the Bible as Baal Hermon (Judg. 3:3), Sirion (Deut. 3:9), Siyon (Deut. 4:48), and Senir (1 Chron. 5:23). Psalm 133:3 speaks of “the dew of Hermon,” giving the image of being well watered. Mount Hermon receives an average of sixty inches of precipitation each year. Caesarea Philippi is at the bottom of Mount Hermon, where Jesus took his disciples when Peter made the good confession (Mt. 16:13-20). It is possible that the transfiguration of Jesus took place nearby on the slopes of Hermon (Mt. 17:1-2).



Snow-capped Mount Hermon

Nimrod’s Fortress has been mistakenly attributed to Nimrod, an ancient man of great strength mentioned in Genesis 10:8-9. It is actually one of the castles built by the Muslims, although several groups occupied it throughout the twelfth century. The ruins seen today are from when the fortress was reinforced and strengthened in the thirteenth century. The fortress is over 1,310 feet long and in places as wide as 490 feet. It is also called the Citadel of the Mosquitoes since swarms of mosquitoes are known to rise up and cover the whole area.



Nimrod’s Castle

Other significant places in the Golan Heights include Kursi (the traditional site of the swine miracle; Mk. 5:1-20), Gamla (“the Masada of the north”), Um el Kanatir, Hamat Gader, and Hippos. Katzrin is the administrative center for Israeli control today. It is home of the Golan Archaeological Museum, which features artifacts from the Golan Heights. There is a room there dedicated to the story of Gamla’s destruction by the Romans in A.D. 67. Also featured in the museum are artifacts from synagogues and Byzantine churches.



Northern Golan Heights
(Lebanon in the Background)



A City in the Northern Golan Heights