



WEATHER CONDITIONS

IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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DURING THE REIGN OF KING AHAB (874-853 BC), one of the most evil kings of Israel's Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 16:33), Elijah the prophet appeared suddenly on the scene and announced to Ahab, "There will be no dew or rain during these years except by my command!" (17:1).¹ The prophet's bold statement proved true; no rain fell for three years and six months (18:1; Jas. 5:17).

Israel's annual weather cycle differs significantly from what most of us experience. This article explores Israel's usual weather patterns, Israel's weather anomalies, and weather as God's vehicle of communication to His people.

Israel's Weather Patterns

Israel's weather pattern is quite predictable from about mid-April through September. No rainfall occurs, and the weather is sunny and warm. October and November feature what the Bible calls the "early rains" (Deut. 11:14)—light rains that soften the soil and prepare it for tilling.² A vast majority (about 75%) of the rainfall typically falls from December–February, when hard rains come, sometimes accompanied by strong winds (Matt. 7:27) and typically lower temperatures (Ezra 10:9,13). During these days, living conditions are often unpleasant, but the rainfall is welcome, for it provides water both to sustain crops and to drink. In March and early April, the "latter rains" (Deut. 11:14; Joel 2:23) fall and help the grain to swell prior to harvest time.³

The amount of rainfall varies depending on region and elevation. Northern regions receive more rain than southern regions. Western regions receive more rain than eastern regions. Higher elevations receive more rain than lower elevations. Thus, places such as Mount Carmel (north, west, and high) receive much more rain than places such as Jericho along the Dead Sea (south, east, and low).⁴

Due to rain's seasonal occurrence and the need for plenty of water to last throughout the summer, Middle Eastern peoples always view rain as a blessing.⁵ We might use the adage, "Into every life a little rain must

fall" to describe life's trials or setbacks, but no Israelite would have ever used the expression that way!

Israel's Weather Anomalies

Despite the seemingly predictable weather patterns of Israel, weather anomalies do occur. Two deserve special attention: flash floods and extreme winds.

Flash flooding can occur during the heavy rain season of December–February. Rain that falls in the Judean Hills rushes eastward down rugged canyons toward the Jordan Valley. The elevation drops over 3,000 feet in just over 15 miles, and the narrow downward-sloping canyons provide even more momentum for the rushing water.⁶ This imagery lies behind the psalmist's prayer: "Restore our fortunes, LORD, like watercourses in the Negev" (Ps. 126:4). The prophet Amos also utilized this image when he called on Israel to let righteousness flow "like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5:24). The psalmist prayed for a flood of blessing, while Amos called for an overflowing of righteousness in the land.

Flash flooding also presents a real danger to inhabitants of the Jordan Valley. They must keep a watchful eye westward to the hill country even if the valley itself is not experiencing rain, for unexpected flash floods can lead to drowning. During the summer, this valley

Right: From Ras Shamra, Ugarit, stele of Baal who is depicted as standing in the traditional pose of the ancient storm gods. He is holding either a lightning bolt or a sprouted shaft in his left hand and a scepter in his right and is walking on the waves. The scene depicts Baal as he unleashes a storm on the earth.

Below: Farmland in the Jezreel Valley; the Mount Carmel Mountain Range is in the distance.



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Left: Snow at the Tower of David in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Above: Numerous

springs begin at the southern opening of this canyon in Israel's Negev Desert; they then descend

into deep pools in series of waterfalls. This photo was taken just after a flood had filled the pools.

is largely parched and dry, but during the winter rains, the flooding produces green vegetation everywhere.

Sirocco winds also can pose a serious threat. They come from the eastern desert—a hot, dry region—and suck all moisture from the air, leaving it dry and dusty. The yellowish dust it produces irritates the sinuses, heightens fatigue, and produces a yellow tint to the entire landscape.⁷ The Bible mentions the Sirocco (eastern wind) many times, often likening

it to God's judgment (Ps. 103:16; Isa. 27:8; Jonah 4:8; Jas. 1:11). The winds are common in the spring during the transitional period as the rains start coming to end.

Another dangerous wind pattern can occur in Israel's northern region. Cool air patterns coming eastward from the Mediterranean or descending from Mount Hermon above the Sea of Galilee suddenly rush down into the lake basin. Their unpredictable and violent nature renders them especially terrifying and dangerous; even seasoned fishermen fear such winds and try to avoid them. Such a wind likely brought the storm that caused Jesus' disciples to fear for their lives. Jesus, however, demonstrated His power over the wind and calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-41).⁸

Weather: God's Vehicle of Communication

God sometimes used weather to communicate with His people. Favorable weather, including the rains at their proper time, communicated His blessing in response to His people's faithful obedience to His commands (Deut. 11:13-15). On the other hand, the Lord could withhold rain if His people strayed from Him (11:16-17). The Israelites lived in a land where they could survive and even thrive, but they needed to depend on the Lord and follow Him faithfully.

The Lord brought a three-plus-year famine upon Israel as judgment for King Saul's evil treatment of the Gibeonites, a subject people (2 Sam. 21:1). The



Left: Grey cranes winter at the Hula reserve in northern Israel. In the distance are the snowcapped peaks of the Mount Hermon Range in northern Israel, which reach an elevation of 9,263 feet. Snow covers the peaks almost year round.

Below: The western edge of the Jordan Valley as seen from atop the ruins at Old Testament Jericho.

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prophet Amos also described how the Lord used famine and drought to get Israel's attention (Amos 4:6-8). The Lord withheld rain, which led to both lack of drinking water and to poor crops. Poor crops meant not enough for people or animals to eat. Nevertheless, the people's difficult times did not lead them to repentance. Of course, the most dramatic example of the Lord using weather to communicate His displeasure was the flood He sent in Noah's day (Gen. 6-9).

Today, the Lord also can use weather phenomena such as extreme temperatures, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes to reveal His power and to turn people to Him. We should not view every bad weather incident as God's judgment, but God does use these things for His purposes. Many times such conditions provide strategic opportunities for believers to communicate the love of Christ as they minister to people's basic needs.

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were doing their best to establish the Canaanite deity Baal as chief god over Israel. People viewed Baal as a god of rain and god of the storm; he brought the rain that blessed the land. Consequently, when Elijah announced to Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, in whose presence I stand, there will be no dew or rain during these years except by my command" (1 Kings 17:1), God's prophet was directly challenging Baal's supremacy. Could Baal "overrule" the Lord God of Israel and bring rain, or could He not? First Kings 18 describes the classic confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on



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Mount Carmel—a confrontation in which the Lord answered with fire from heaven, showing His supremacy over Baal (18:38-39). Shortly thereafter, the Lord brought rain to the land, demonstrating again that He alone controlled Israel's weather (vv. 42-46). 📖

1. All Scripture citations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
2. Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 42.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Mount Carmel may receive over 30 inches per year, while Jericho averages 4 inches per year. See John A. Beck, *Discovery House Bible Atlas* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2015), 30.
5. Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible: New and Revised Edition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 49.
6. Readers can find a number of video examples on YouTube by entering the key words "Israel flash flood."
7. Denis Baly, 52.
8. I. H. Wright, *Greatness Grace & Glory: Carta's Atlas of Biblical Biography* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 184.

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