This paper explores how official environmental narratives produce the Jordan Valley as an untapped agricultural space. The valley is described by current leaders as a neglected and even ecologically hostile territory that, with the proper intervention, could be remade to reach its full potential through agricultural development. As the story goes, ‘modern’ environmental transformation of the area will foster goodwill between conflicting parties and thereby help to bring peace. Accordingly, it is said that improved agricultural productivity will make a nascent Palestinian state more viable.

However in this essay, I trace the overlooked historical connections of these narratives of environmental change. More precisely, the paper explores the continuities between a 1939 survey of the valley by an American scientist and both narrative and material agro-ecological processes in the valley today. These connections reveal the ways in which Palestinian agricultural change is interrelated with historical modes of economic and social classification. The 1939 American survey offers a compelling historical lens to consider these antecedents of current environmental discourse in the Middle East. In particular, it shows how dominant narratives necessarily exclude and re-order processes of environmental and social change in the valley such as: control over hydrological resources and arable land, racialization, restriction of movement, unremunerated labor and resource exploitation, and longstanding agricultural practices. I will consider how these processes shape the conditions of possibility for a ‘modern’ environmental transformation of the valley and reflect on the historical linkages of those efforts.