

Why Bible Geography Matters

Biblical geography is much like Biblical poetry in that they are both greatly neglected in the studies of most Christians. Geography and topography are considered boring endeavors with little reward compared to other areas of study. In a society of instant gratification, studies in Biblical geography are found wanting.

So why should we study the geography of the Bible? Would it surprise you if I told you that the geographical and topographical features have presented some of the strongest evidence to sceptics about the inspiration of Scripture? Did you know that geography often plays an important role in understanding Biblical prophecies? More than that the geography of the Bible often lends insight into passages that would otherwise seem obscure, confusing, or meaningless.

The following study is not exhaustive by any means, and is intended to merely whet the appetite of readers and provoke them to further study.

1. Historicity

One of the major battlefields of Biblical inspiration centers around the validity of the historical accounts of Scripture. Since history takes place in time and space, the spacial setting proves critical to the truthfulness of history. If a writer states an event happened in a certain location at a specific time, and it can be proven that either the location did not exist where or when it was alleged, the writer is shown to be a fraud. Authentic history demands accurate contextual descriptions of geography, topography, and time.

Consider the following example as it emphasizes the geographical content of the Bible within a historical setting:

In the 1880's the sceptic Sir William Ramsey set out to disprove the New Testament based upon the historical details (including geographical details) in the book of Acts. Consider Sir Ramsey's own admission regarding one of his many discoveries:

"I set out to look for truth on the borderland where Greece and Asia meet, and found it there [in Acts]. You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment... "I may fairly claim to have entered on this investigation without any prejudice in favour of the conclusion which I shall now attempt to justify to the reader [i.e., the reliability of the book of Acts]. On the contrary, I began with a mind unfavourable to it, for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tübingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not lie then in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself often brought in contact with the book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvellous truth. In fact, beginning with the fixed idea that the work was essentially a second-century composition,

and never relying on its evidence as trustworthy for first-century conditions, I gradually came to find it a useful ally in some obscure and difficult investigations."¹

For Sir Ramsey, the topography of Bible lands as recorded in Acts was one of the crystalizing features of its historicity.

It is also the geographical and topographical recordings of Scripture that have led to the discovery of many ancient cities. Students who wish to pursue this area of study further should investigate the archeological findings of Goshen (where Israel dwelt in Egyptian captivity), Jericho, and Herod's palace. An excellent film to watch regarding some of these locations is Patterns of Evidence.

#2- Prophecy

There are several prophecies in the Bible that require an understanding of Biblical geography in order to understand their fulfillment. Consider the following examples.

In Jeremiah 4:5-8 the Bible states the following:

Declare in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say:
"Blow the trumpet in the land;
Cry, 'Gather together,'
And say, 'Assemble yourselves,
And let us go into the fortified cities.'
Set up the standard toward Zion.
Take refuge! Do not delay!
For I will bring disaster from the north,
And great destruction."
The lion has come up from his thicket,
And the destroyer of nations is on his way.
He has gone forth from his place
To make your land desolate.
Your cities will be laid waste,
Without inhabitant.
For this, clothe yourself with sackcloth,
Lament and wail.
For the fierce anger of the Lord
Has not turned back from us.

Here the prophet described the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, yet he described the destruction as coming "from the north." Why is this problematic?

¹ Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 1904, Putnam and Sons, p.8.



Babylon was clearly located to the East of Jerusalem. Why would they attack from the North rather than the East? The answer lies in understanding the geography of Bible lands. Between Babylon and Jerusalem lies the great Arabian desert that prohibited Babylon from marching its army due East. In order to supply themselves with water, the Babylonian army had to follow the Mesopotamian peninsula and descend on Jerusalem from the North.

A second case study in Biblical prophecy comes from Ezekiel 37:14-17. In verse 14 Ezekiel predicts that God will place Israel back in her land and place His Spirit in her. In verses 15-17 Ezekiel clarifies that this will happen when Judah and Israel, “all the house of Israel” are reunited in their land.

Question: When was all the house of Israel reunited in their land? Acts 2:5, 8-11, and 36 declares that Peter stood and preached to all the house of Israel. It was on this occasion Ezekiel 37:14-17 was fulfilled when God poured out His Spirit on the apostles and promised it to all those who would obey the gospel (2:38-39). The reunification of Israel in Acts 2 comes to greater life when one considers the geographical locations of all the nations listed in Acts 2:8-11.



Jews from the four corners of the earth were brought together in a dramatic fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

#3: Puzzling Locations Clarified

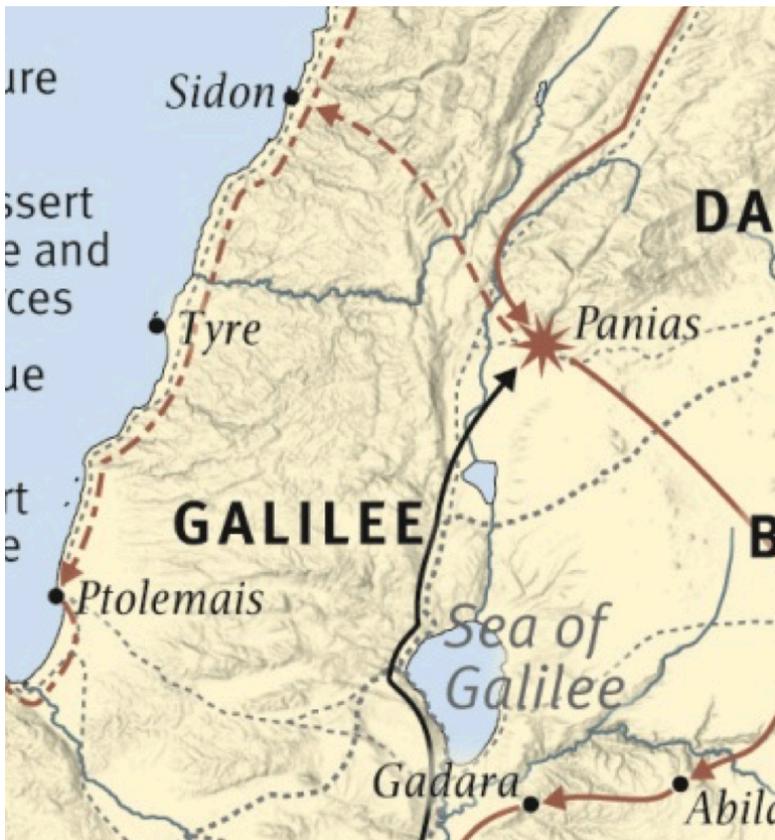
There are some questions of puzzlement that present themselves to Bible students that can be answered through a study of geography. Take a look at the following examples and consider how their solutions might be transferable to other similar settings.

Our first account of puzzlement is found in Mark 7:31. There the Bible states that Jesus traveled from Tyre to Galilee by way of Sidon. Why do sceptics find this account problematic? Take a look at a map:



Why would a person travel north in order to head south? This would be like traveling from Dallas to New Orleans by way of Oklahoma City. Why would Jesus choose such a route? The answer is found in Biblical geography and topography.

A topographical map shows that the region is mountainous.



What the map does not clearly depict is the presence of Mt. Meron and its 3,963 feet of elevation that stands immediately between Tyre and Galelee as is shown in the following picture:



If you notice to the left of the picture, the mountain begins to slope and eventually provide a gap. The trip from Tyre to Galilee through Sidon was preferred over a direct route due to the availability of water and ease of travel. Again, this alleged problem can only be answered through a study of Biblical geography.

A second puzzling scene can be found in Luke 3 when we find John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness region of Jordan. Why would John choose to preach in the wilderness rather than the city of Jerusalem? One reason is likely that the Bible is contrasting the mission of John with the Temple cult in Jerusalem; they were pitted against one another. But beyond that, a study in geography brings forth bountiful fruits.



As can be seen by looking at the map and through the aerial picture, the Jordan River Valley cuts through a mountainous region making travel easier for people for people headed north or south. In addition to the ease of travel, the region supplies travelers with water in abundance. For these reasons, the Jordan region was one of the major thoroughfares in the land. As is noted in Luke 3, the area not only provided John with ample space to baptize, but also brought men and women from all walks of life into contact with his message.

One final case will now be presented to help solidify the importance of geographical studies in connection with Biblical interpretation.

#4: Missed Facts

In Revelation 3:15-16, the Apostle John in writing to the church at Thessalonica wrote,

““I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.”

What seems like a straight-forward statement takes on a whole new meaning when the geographical setting of the city is considered. Thessalonica sets in a valley between the cities of Hierapolis and Colossae. Colossians 4:13 bears this fact out when it states that Epaphras worked with all three congregations. Both Hierapolis and Colossae could be seen from Thessalonica with Hierapolis setting on a hill several miles to the north west, and Colossae several miles to the south east. Hierapolis was known for its hot springs and Colossae for its cold springs, while Thessalonica had no springs whatsoever. When John states that he wishes they were “either hot or cold” he was relating something to the church at Thessalonica to which they could readily relate. Whether they imported water from Hierapolis or Colossae, it was always luke-warm and less than satisfying. The church had become like their city and must either change or be destroyed.

Conclusion:

I hope that today’s study has peaked your interest in an important and oft neglected area of Bible study. Studies in Biblical geography are not by nature boring or inapplicable, but are rather greatly rewarding when properly engaged. May God bless His children in the pursuit of the knowledge and defense of His Word.