

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION OF BIBLE STUDY

Introduction:

Applying the geographical dimension to your study of the Scriptures is like upgrading from black and white television to wide screen High Definition. A knowledge of the geography of the land of Israel will increase your enjoyment in your Bible study as it improves your understanding of its people and events. The more you know about the contours of the land, the more you will develop a sense of “virtual reality” that collapses the centuries passed and place you in the scene of the action.

To ignore the physical settings in which Israel’s history unfolded is akin to watching actors read a Shakespearian play in an empty gymnasium. We hear their voices, but we have no sense of the context in which they are living and speaking.

God designed the hills and the valleys of Israel as the stage on which a variety of men and women would act out their roles. He wrote the script and cast the actors. Each advanced the drama, building the story line on the generations that had walked that stage before them.

What can a knowledge of the land contribute to our Bible study?

- 1. Historicity.** It provides objective evidence for the historicity of the people and places recorded in the text. There is important apologetic value in recounting biblical events in terms of the real people who lived in identifiable places in real time periods.
- 2. Interpretation.** It provides an important contextual resource for accurate exegesis.
- 3. Relationships.** It offers us opportunity to think about the ways people related to each other. For instance, where they lived determined, to a large extent, who were their friends and who were their enemies.
- 4. Personalization.** The lives of individuals, families and generations had geographical centers. Each had unique meanings for them as places have in our lives. Observing people in their physical environments can help us appreciate what was important to them and how they conducted their lives.
- 5. Presence.** It draws us into the lives of the people of the Bible, giving us a sense of “presence” as participants rather than observers. We can learn to “see” what they saw and “feel” what they felt.

Why do we need to know the physical context of the Bible?

1. This was the world in which the people of the Bible lived. We cannot fully understand or appreciate their historical and theological significance if we ignore their life situations.
2. Understanding the *Zeitgeist* ("spirit of the times") of people of the Bible enables us to

perceive parallels to our own times. As we increase our knowledge of where and how they lived, their lives become more relevant to our lives and their experiences with God to ours.

3. The people mentioned in the Bible were not just names or fictional characters in an ancient sitcom. They were real people. They had faces, they had families and frustrations, aspirations and emotions. They experienced the same varieties of interpersonal relationship issues that we do in our lives.
4. Learning about their worlds, their lands, their cities, and their cultures reinforces our realization of the fact that these were real people living in real places, as real as ours are today. Scripture is not an anthology of fables; it is grounded in a literal, geographical context.

Why is important to locate places on a map?

Your hometown or city is important to you. The places where we have lived, the neighborhoods in which we have grown up, the people who have affected our lives there, are a part of who we are today. Each place we live has a character, an ethos, a culture. Each place holds significance and stores memories for us – memories of where we made transitions through the stages of our lives. We string together the beads of our personal biographies by referring to the places we have lived and the places where we have had defining experiences, beginning with the place we were born.

We move through the air at 500 miles or on the ground at 65 miles an hour. Compare this with travel in biblical days, at most 3 to 4 miles an hour, often in the heat without air conditioning! Cargo and equipment moved at the same rate, by camel or donkey and most people walked. The result? With few exceptions the worlds of the people we meet in the Bible were very small. Limited in scope, their experiences were concentrated in small geographic areas. To understand these people we must “visit” the places where they lived. Although their life contexts differed from ours, in many ways, many of our experiences today parallel theirs.

How did their geographic location affect the lives of people?

Because travel required much time and effort the people of Bible days lived lives very differently from ours. Compared with our "fast forward" pace theirs were lived in "slow motion."

1. Most events recorded in the Bible were centered in limited, local areas, most less than 50 to 70 miles across and often much smaller. Compared with the United States, the cities and towns, mountains and valleys of Palestine were located very close to each other. Geographically, Judea and Samaria and Galilee would appear to be microcosms, very small worlds, compared with the scope of our travels and experiences. For instance, the distance from Jerusalem to Shechem is 30 miles; from Shechem to the Sea of Galilee, is only 45 miles.
2. Most people lived their lives in a circumscribed area, perhaps 20 or 30 miles in diameter. They tended to live in one place longer and to know it more intimately, to know fewer people but to know them well.
3. The indigenous religions of the land, for example Baal worship, tended to emphasize local

deities, associating them with particular locations such as hills.

4. People tended to associate spiritual events in their lives with the places where they occurred. For example, Hagar looked back to her experience at "Beer-lahai-roi," ("the well of the God who sees me," Gen. 17:13-14). Jacob knew the "God of Bethel," the God who confirmed the Abrahamic covenant to him in a vision at that place.
5. Settlements appeared where three basic conditions were present: a **source of water**, some **line of communication**, and a **defensible position**. From these settlements an economy developed in Old Testament days which could best be described as pastoral-agrarian. It was this pastoral-agrarian economy that was most influential in shaping the cultural background of the people of the Bible. Most of the illustrative material used by the writers of Scriptures and by Jesus himself, reflected this milieu: the sower going out to sow, the shepherd and his sheep, the vine and the vineyard, the barren fig tree, the hen and her chicks. The cycle of the year in ancient Israel was based on the seven agricultural feasts.

What do we need to know about the land?

1. **Its position.** Located astride the great communication routes that followed the Fertile Crescent between Mesopotamia and Egypt, Israel was ideally situated to become a "light to the nations." (Isa 40:6) Bounded by desert on the east, this narrow strip of land along the Mediterranean coast functioned as a bridge between the great river civilizations of the ancient world. It is well referred to as the "Land Between."
2. **Its dependence on God for water.** Unlike the great civilizations of the Nile and of the Tigris and Euphrates river basins, Israel depended on rain to sustain life. (Deut 11:10-12)
3. **Its topography.** God designed Israel's hills and valleys, its streams and rivers, soils and elevations, to provide the physical context for the events recorded in the Scriptures. (Deut 8:7-9)
4. **Its climate.** In a largely agrarian culture, location and the seasonal changes in rainfall, winds and temperature, were major factors in everyday life. (Deut 11:14)
5. **Its communication routes, international and internal.** Whether for war or commerce or worship, the contours of the land determined where and how people moved about. Over the centuries, major centers emerged on these routes or at their crossroads. Their strategic locations usually determined their importance and influence.

The "Way of the Sea," the international route from Egypt, followed the Mediterranean coastline, then turned inland through the Aruna pass to Megiddo. Crossing the Plain of Megiddo and passing through the Valley of the Doves, it veered eastward near Hazor to reach Damascus and Mesopotamia.

The "King's Highway," that passed along the highlands of Edom, Moab, Gilead and Bashan, connected Ezion Geber (Elath) on the Gulf of Aqaba with Damascus.

The main east-west route led from the Medaba Plain in Moab down through the Jordan

Valley and up past Jericho, Gibeon, and the Beth Horons to the Mediterranean coast. The northern connector joined Ramoth-gilead on the King's Highway to the Mediterranean coastal highway, passing down through the Jordan Valley to Bethshan, along the Valley of Harod and across the Plain of Jezreel.

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Dr. Hulbert's extensive travels and teaching experiences have provided the resource and inspiration for his *Walking in Their Sandals 2.0* CD-ROM (Columbia Global Media, 2002).