



Bible atlases

Few Bible students have the opportunity to actually visit the land of the Bible. However, it is often helpful to know where events take place, how far places are from each other, and geographical features of the area. It can make the Bible come to life when we can picture where events are taking place. And sometimes it can explain why events happen the way they do.

Bible atlases can give a number of different perspectives on the Bible story. They usually use different types of maps to give us different types of information. Topographical maps show what the land looks like. They show mountains, rivers, plains and lowlands so that we can get a feel for the terrain. This can help us understand how the landscape affected an event. Political maps show the territory of different groups of people. Economic maps describe the natural resources of an area. Archaeological maps show the location of archaeological sites and major finds. Historical maps give a geographical perspective on events such as the route the Israelites when they left Egypt.

You may want to find out what kind of natural resources were available in the "land of milk and honey." Or where and why the Israelites crossed the Red Sea when they left Egypt. A Bible Atlas will give you answers.

Try to find a good atlas. Some may include a summary of relevant history, historical charts, city plans, photographs and other useful information. The more recent atlases generally are more reliable.

- Harper Collins Concise Atlas of the Bible
- Zondervan NIV Bible Atlas
- Moody Atlas of Bible Lands
- Holman Bible Atlas

The following is an example of how knowing a bit about the geography of an area can help your Bible understanding.

Elijah was a prophet of God. Because of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, there had been no rain for three years. Elijah had called all the people together to show them who was the true God. They were to prepare a sacrifice to Baal (the false god they were worshipping) and call upon him to send down fire to burn it up. Elijah would do the same with his God. There was no response from Baal and it was Elijah's turn...

Elijah and the twelve barrels of water

"I spoke before of the flight of Elijah, and gave my reasons for believing it. I speak now of a trifling incident in that magnificent scene which is said to have been the prologue to his flight. This it is. Twelve barrels of water, at the command of the prophet, are poured upon the sacrifice, and fill the trench.

But is it not a strange thing, that at a moment of drought so intense, when the king himself and the governor of his house, trusting the business to no inferior agent, actually undertook to examine with their own eyes the watering-places throughout all the land, dividing it between them, to see if they could save the remainder of the cattle alive; when the prophet had been long before compelled to leave Cherith, because the brook was dried up, and for no reason else, and to crave at the hands of the widow-woman of Zarephath, whither he had removed, though a land of danger to him, a little water in a vessel that he might drink; is it not, I say, a gross oversight in the sacred writer, to make Elijah, at such a time, give order for this wanton waste of water above all things, whereof scarcely a drop was to be found to cool the tongue; and not only so, but to describe it as forthcoming at once, apparently without any search made, an ample and abundant reservoir?

How can these things be? Let us but remember the local position of Carmel, that it stood upon the coast, as an incidental remark in the course of the narrative testifies; that the water was therefore probably seawater; and all the difficulty disappears. But the historian does not trouble himself to satisfy our surprise, being altogether unconscious that he has given any cause for it; he, honest man as he was, tells his tale, a faithful

one as he feels, and the objection which we have alleged, and which a single word would have extinguished, he leaves to shock us as it may, nothing heeding. But would not an impostor have preserved the keeping of his picture better, and been careful not to violate seeming probabilities by this prodigal profusion of water, whilst his action was laid in a miraculous drought, for the removal of which, indeed, this very sacrifice was offered—or, if of these twelve barrels he must needs speak, by way of silencing all insinuation, that the whole was a scene got up, and that fire was secreted, would he not have studiously told us, at least, that the water was from the sea which lay at the foot of Carmel, and thus have guarded himself against sceptical remarks?"

Undesigned Scriptural Coincidences, J.J. Blunt (Birmingham, Great Britain) 1999.

TIP 4

Use a bible atlas, bible dictionary and history books to help you better understand events that you read about.

Bible Dictionaries

Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias include articles on persons, places, objects, customs, history and much more. They are a great as a quick reference to topics that puzzle you.

More recent Bible dictionaries will be more reliable due to the advantage of up-to-date information.

Even though dictionaries are reference works, they are written and edited by persons with particular

points of view. This is not always relevant depending on what you are trying to find out but it is wise to remember this and read articles from more than one viewpoint.

If you have access to the internet there are a few online Bible dictionaries. For printed editions, the following are a few that are available:

- *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*
- *Holman Bible Dictionary*
- *New International Bible Dictionary*
- *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*
- *Smith's Bible Dictionary*

For example: In Leviticus 18 the Israelites are told to not let any of their descendents pass through the fire to Molech. You may wonder who this Molech is?

A Bible Dictionary will tell you that Molech was the fire god of the Ammonites. Molech was the lord of the Ammonites and their country was his possession. He was worshipped by human sacrifice. His face was that of a calf and his hands were stretched out like a man receiving something. A fire burned within it and the priest would take a baby and throw it into his hands.

It is hard for us to understand why anyone would choose to worship a god that required such a thing. But the Israelites did unfortunately get involved in worshipping the gods of the nations around them. King Solomon himself built a highplace for Chemosh and Molech and Jeremiah speaks of God's great sadness that His people had chosen "*to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which [He] did not command them, nor did it come into [His] mind that they should do this abomination.*"

Why not draw a map yourself of Palestine? When the outline and the general geographical features have been prepared, you can begin to insert the cities and localities, and show where incidents occurred...

Do not be content to read of an incident in either Old or New Testament. Find out where it all happened, and indicate it on your map. Here, surely, is a hobby far more interesting than those pastimes which so often claim attention, and it will have the great advantage of increasing your knowledge and strengthening your memory in connection with matters of enduring importance. Some of the movements, experiences and wars can be better understood, the people often having their customs moulded, their adventures caused, and warfare enforced upon them by the physical features of the land in which they lived.

Where it Happened, Islip Collyer (Birmingham, Great Britain)1971, p.147-8

Leading up to Christ

After the last prophet, Malachi (around 430 BC) there is a period of silence from God for 400 years. The Jews had been allowed to return to their land and rebuild their cities under Persian rule. The Persian kingdom was eventually conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the Great and the tiny Persian province of Judah wisely submitted to its new ruler without resistance.

After Alexander's death, the Greek empire was divided and Israel became a buffer zone between two generals Seleucus and Ptolemy as each tried to capture the others territory. This went on for more than a century until 198 BC when Antiochus III defeated Ptolemy IV.

While the Ptolemies had been fairly tolerant towards their subjects, the Seleucids were determined to force the Greek culture upon their people. Antiochus Epiphanes was particularly cruel. His aim was to mould all the nations under his rule into one united people. To do this he chose to use the Greek way of life. Although there was much in the Greek way of life that was admirable, the Jews could not accept the Greek religion which included the worship of Greek gods.

When Antiochus realized the Jews would not totally accept his scheme, he began a campaign against them. His troops invaded Jerusalem on the Sabbath knowing that the Jews would not take up arms on that day and thousands were slaughtered. Everything sacred to temple worship was cleared from the temple, a Greek god was erected on the high altar and unclean animals were sacrificed to Zeus inside the temple. Any Jew following the Law of Moses would be sentenced to death.

As a result of this, a Jewish family known as the Maccabees rose in revolt, reclaimed Jerusalem and purified the Temple. The Jews ruled their land for a short time until the Roman empire swallowed up the Greek empire and asserted control over the area then known as Palestine, which included the land of Israel.

At the time Jesus was born, Herod the Great ruled over the land of the Bible under Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome. Herod's friendship with Augustus brought political peace and stability to Judea. As a result, trade between Jerusalem and Rome flourished and the Jewish nation prospered.

This was the setting when the New Testament began.

History books

The events in the Bible took place within a historical context. It can help to understand biblical events better if you know a bit about the other nations that existed at the same time. What were their social norms, beliefs, and material traits? How did their customs and ideas affect the people of Israel?

There are many good history books available today. Your local library is a good place to start if you want background to a specific period.

For example:

If you have some knowledge about the Egyptians and the many gods they worshipped, the reason for the ten plagues God put upon them becomes clearer. God wished to show them that "*there [was] none like [Him] in all the earth.*" Each plague attacked one of the gods the Egyptians worshipped. For example, the first plague was upon the Nile River and it was turned to blood. The Egyptians worshipped the river as their source of life and God wished to show them that it was not the river but Himself that was the source of life.

The ten plagues gave the Egyptians the opportunity to believe in Him by witnessing His power and some did and left with the Israelites.

Some books you may find interesting and helpful are:

GENERAL -

- *Nelson's Complete Book of Maps and Charts*
- *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, Ralph Gower
- *Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, Bill Manley
- *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat

ANCIENT ISRAEL -

- *The Holy Land*, Peter Connolly
- *Israel and the Nations: The History of Israel from Exodus to the Fall of the Second Temple*, F.F. Bruce, David F. Payne, ed.
- *Life in Biblical Israel*, Philip J. King, Lawrence E. Stager
- *New Testament Life and Times*, Lawrence O. Richards
- *Historical Atlas of Jerusalem*, Meir Ben-Dov

Why four Gospels?

Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as the ideal Israelite (Isaiah 49:3-6), implying by this that he would manifest all the qualities of virtue to which Israel, as a nation, was called. The Israelites were taken out of Egypt to glorify God (Jeremiah 13:11; Isaiah 43:7) by manifesting His characteristics both individually and nationally. The nation of Israel was divided into four sections under the leadership of the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, Reuben and Dan with the standards of a Lion, Ox, Man and Eagle (Ezekiel 1:10), representing royalty, service, humanity and divinity. The four faces of a lion, ox, man and eagle also overshadowed the Mercy Seat in the Tabernacle.

Many Bible students have long recognized that these same four aspects are exhibited in the four accounts of Christ's ministry. Matthew emphasizes his royal dignity, constantly drawing upon the prophecies of the Old Testament in confirmation of his majesty. Mark gives attention to the Lord's work of service, recording what he did for others, including the miracles and acts of love that he rendered. Luke treats his ministry from the standpoint of his humanity, tracing his genealogy back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38). John shows Christ as divine—the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the Son of God (John 20:31) and the manifestation of the Father (John 14:9)—the means by which the foundation for the righteous character he revealed was provided.

The four Gospel records, therefore, are like the four standards of Israel, exhibiting the Lord in four different aspects. The four accounts show that he rules (Matthew—the Lion), because he served (Mark—the Ox), and though he was flesh (Luke—the Man), he conquered through the spirit (John—the Eagle).

At another level, the four Gospel accounts can be distinguished by their intended readers. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, Mark wrote for Roman readers, Luke crafted his account for the Greek mind and John appears to have written for all believers. It is significant that these groups represent major peoples in the cosmopolitan world of the first century Mediterranean: the Gospel is for everyone, regardless of background.

Thus the four accounts of Christ's life, though not in themselves complete (see John 21:25), provide a much fuller and more balanced presentation of the Lord than would be possible in a single account.

Luke's historical accuracy

In Colossians 4:14, we are told that Luke, the author of the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, was a doctor by profession. In the introduction to his gospel, Luke addressed his remarks to a man called Theophilus.

Luke gathered his information from the people who had been in the company of Jesus during his ministry, so that he could present as complete a record as possible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Luke wrote his gospel in an orderly way so that Theophilus could understand the things which had been fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus. His two books are really two parts of one continuous history of the life and work of Jesus, from the birth of John the Baptist down to about the year AD 60.

He sets his story against the background of Roman history. Three Emperors are mentioned by name in his record (Luke 2:1; 3:1). You will see that these Emperors are Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius. The Emperor Nero was also referred to, being the "Caesar" to whom Paul appealed.

The birth of Jesus can be fixed in the reign of the Emperor Augustus, when Herod the Great was king in Judea, and Quirinius governor of Syria.

The beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist is dated by a series of references to the rulers of the time (Luke 3:1).

In addition to the Emperors, Luke named men and women of note in the Jewish and Gentile world of his day.

Any writer who relates his story like this to the wider context of world history is asking for trouble if there are historical inaccuracies in his record, because he gives his critics many opportunities for testing his accuracy. One of the most remarkable things about Luke's accuracy was his familiarity with the correct titles of all the notable persons he mentions.

All of these examples show that the historical accuracy of the gospel of Luke is second to none. This is what we would expect of someone writing under the power of God.

The book *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* by F.F. Bruce gives more information on this subject.