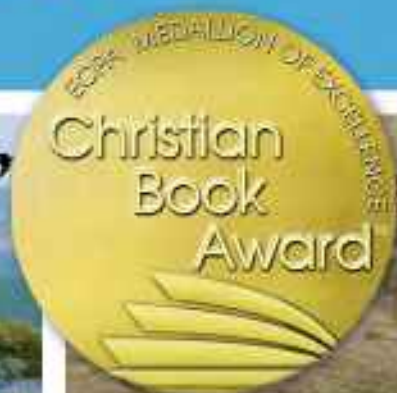




Our Daily Bread

# Bible Atlas

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JOHN A. BECK



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**Bible  
Atlas**

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# Geography and the Human Spirit

**We are bound to the natural world** by divine design. This dependence is not due to our sinfulness. It is how God made us. The first pages of the Bible highlight this connection. Before the Lord created Adam and Eve, the first humans, he meticulously shaped the world where they would live and on which they would depend.

What the Bible says about our connection to the natural world is confirmed in our everyday experiences. The earth's gravity keeps us from drifting into the perilous vacuum of space. Precipitation falls to the earth and is ultimately drawn from the earth to hydrate our bodies. The rich soil that covers the earth nurtures crops and pastures, which in turn provide us with food—vegetables, fruit, grain, meat, milk. And the many plants and trees provide medicines that address a variety of our ills. As mortals, we are bound to the natural world.

Despite the vital relationship we have with our living space, we are prone to think about it less and less. Insulated from the natural world by the buildings where we work and the homes where we live, we can spend days separated from the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. Future generations are increasingly likely to experience the natural world indirectly by watching nature programs or by exploring nature using virtual reality programs. All of this

can separate us from the realities of the natural world. We become less attentive to the signs in the atmosphere that signal a change in weather. Traveling in our vehicles instead of walking, we are less sensitive to changes in the elevation along our route. And when we see wildlife, it's merely a glimpse through a window or screen rather than a personal encounter while walking in the wild.

This disconnection from the natural world comes at a price. We are deprived of the lessons the natural world can teach us. But when we feel the pulsating power unleashed in a thunderstorm or marvel at the size of a mountain when standing at its base, we gain a more accurate perspective of ourselves, of our world, and the God who made it. The immensity and complexity of the ecosystem direct us to the ultimate architect and power broker of this world and of our place in it. If this sounds like just so much nature talk, realize that Scripture itself celebrates what nature can do. God left evidence of his power and wisdom in the natural world so that every mortal might search for a fuller understanding of him (Romans 1:20).<sup>1</sup>

The natural world is also a place that can restore a greater sense of well-being. John Muir, a Christian with a powerful love of nature, plunged himself wholeheartedly into the wilderness and found a peace that no urban setting could offer. His frequent trips into the wilderness led him to offer this unqualified encouragement: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn."<sup>2</sup> That is why it is so healthy for us to spend time in natural settings listening to the wild sounds, smelling the freshness, and immersing ourselves in the restoration nature dispenses. Nature can reinvigorate tired beings in ways that other settings cannot. Those who have known the experience join with Muir when he says, "In every



**Nubian ibex in  
the Judean Wilderness**



➔ Map 1.1—Ancient Near East

walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks. . . . Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play and pray, where nature heals and gives strength to body and soul alike.”<sup>3</sup>

## Geography and the Bible

Our disconnection from the natural world also creates a problem for Bible readers. This disables our sensitivity to the geographical world presented to us in the Bible. The Bible is unique among the sacred writings of the world in that it makes frequent mention of geography.<sup>4</sup> When we pay attention to these geographic details, we become aware of the important role geography played in shaping events during Bible times. Even more importantly, we will consider the role that

the geography plays in shaping those who read the Bible. Our study of geography and the Bible in this atlas is formed by two types of investigation:

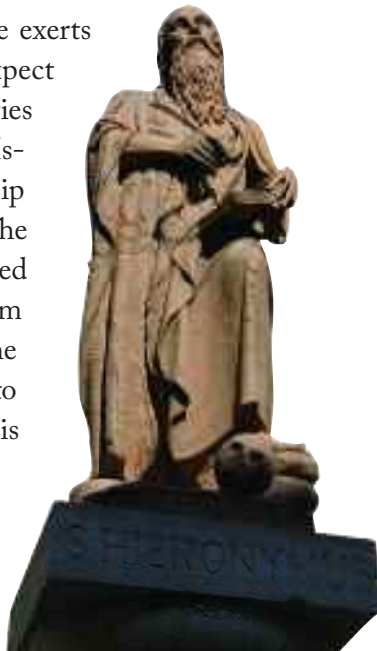
- Historical geography, a study of how geography shaped events.
- Literary geography, a study of how the geography mentioned in the Bible shapes readers.

### **Historical Geography**

The geography of a region shapes the events, cultures, and worldview of that region. The study of geography along with the history of Bible times reveals the influence geography had on how the people lived. Geopolitical borders often coincided with natural boundaries imposed by water courses or rising terrain. People established cities where they could best take advantage of natural resources, natural defenses, and natural trade corridors. The principal diet of a region and the raw materials residents used to make their clothing and homes and tools were influenced by what was available locally. Worship of a solar deity or a rain deity was strongly influenced by the way the people obtained their water.

Given the powerful influence place exerts on the human experience, we can expect to find geography permeating the stories of people in the Bible. For example, Israel's insidious attraction to the worship of the rain deity Baal is a product of the uncertain rainfall in parts of the promised land. King David's selection of Jerusalem as his capital city was influenced by the site's natural defenses. Jesus's decision to create a ministry base at Capernaum is better understood when we see this city sitting near an international transportation route.

Thoughtful Bible readers and interpreters have made a point of honoring and studying this link



Jerome, Church of  
St. Catherine, Bethlehem

between place and Bible event. Among the earliest was the church father Jerome, who moved to Bethlehem while translating the Old Testament into Latin. He believed that a better understanding of the promised land and its culture would help the cause of Bible translation and interpretation. In the introduction to his commentary on Chronicles, he wrote, “Just as those who have seen Athens understand Greek history better, and just as those who have seen Troy understand the words of the poet Virgil, thus one will comprehend the Holy Scriptures with a clearer understanding who has seen the land of Judah with his own eyes.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Literary Geography**

Geography was not just a shaper of Bible events. Biblical authors used geographic details to influence and shape the thoughts and beliefs of readers. For example, the poet of Psalm 125 refers to specific topography to increase the reader’s confidence in the Lord: “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore” (Psalm 125:1–2).

The inclusion of geography in the Bible flowed naturally from the way people first engaged their stories. For people living in Bible times, to walk the land was the near equivalent of reading our Bibles. They did not have Bibles to carry with them as we do today. But as they walked the land of the Bible, they told the stories of the places they passed. Some of these places were even given names that helped to recall those events, like “The LORD Will Provide,” “Ebenezer,” and “Perez Uzzah” (Genesis 22:14; 1 Samuel 7:12; 2 Samuel 6:8). Their walks became opportunities for spiritual reflection; the places they passed gave them an opportunity to teach their children the Bible stories that defined them as God’s people. “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you *walk along the road*, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6–7, emphasis added). To walk the land was to “read” their Bible.

This teaching via landscape is interwoven into the fabric of the Bible’s communication. The Bible is not a geography book, but it is a book filled with geography. As the biblical authors received the



Iron Age fortress at Arad, strategically located in the Negev

thoughts of God and recorded them in the language of mortals, the Holy Spirit led them to include geographic details. While some Bible passages are geography free, others, like Psalm 104 and Obadiah 1, are filled with descriptions of the natural world. Entire books, like the book of Acts, employ geography as their organizing principle.

The risk for us is that we skip those passages with geography and fail to consider the way the geography contributes to the message. For example, even the most inexperienced Bible readers are likely to know the main details of the story about David and Goliath. But how many have weighed the role geography played in this event? This familiar story begins with some unfamiliar geography: “Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah” (1 Samuel 17:1–2). If we skip this geography, we miss the grave national crisis the Israelites were facing. The land on which the Philistines camped was the very land the Israelites had to hold in order to protect access routes that led into their heartland. In this story, we consider who is the best leader for Israel, David or Saul. That evaluation takes place during a national crisis that is, in part, defined by the geography at the start of this story.

Geography is not just incidental in the stories of the Bible. It's an integral part of the Bible's communication with us, and we need to recognize its role in shaping the meaning and message of a text. That is where literary geography comes in. This idea is likely new to you. Here are three steps that help Bible readers evaluate the role of geography in a given passage of Scripture.

- Notice the Bible's mention of geography or natural history.
- Learn about that geography—the topography of a place, its geology, the forces that work on the land, like the wind and the rain. Understand how the people use that place to build their homes, grow their food, and develop roadways. Take into account the appearance and behavior of birds, animals, and plants.
- Ask this question: How does this geographic detail help to deliver the message of this passage of Scripture?



▶ Map 1.2—Modern Middle East

## How This Atlas Builds Better Bible Readers

Over the last three decades, I have been speaking, teaching, and writing about the important relationship between geography and Bible reading. This includes my many trips to the Holy Land where I have seen the impact of Bible geography on my students' reading of the Bible. This atlas taps into that Holy Land experience for you, the reader. As you read, you become a "visitor" to the Holy Land and can improve your sense of orientation in the region, learn the connotations attached to places, and see the vital role geography plays in the Bible's communication with us.

The people of Bible times carried a mental map that allowed them to quickly orient themselves to the geography mentioned in Scripture. This mental map is similar to the one we have that allows us to run errands, find our way to school or to work, and walk about in our neighborhood, all without consulting a physical map of any kind. Back in Bible times, the people knew where Bethlehem was in comparison to Capernaum. They knew which direction to point when someone asked the way to the Dead Sea or to Galilee. The intent of this atlas is to help Bible readers develop a similar familiarity with the important places mentioned in the Bible.

Both the maps and the photographs in this atlas are designed to help with that orientation. Some of the maps show a particular period of Bible history, while others focus on a specific event or series of events. The photographs capture a modern-day view of some of the historic places the Bible authors would want you to see.

It is important not just to know where a place is but to know what people thought about it. That perception is formed by the events that occurred there and by the nature of the place. Consider the differing impressions and feelings communicated by mention of places like Hollywood, Pearl Harbor, the Alamo,



Black basalt foundation of the first-century synagogue at Capernaum





➔ Map I.4—Old Testament Regions



➔ Map 1.5—New Testament Regions

the World Trade Center in New York, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), or the Great Wall of China. Prior events shape our response. The nature of a place can also give it a distinctive connotation. Think of the different impressions you have of Death Valley, the Everglades, and the Rock of Gibraltar.

The same is true for Bible places. They have distinctive connotations formed by the nature of the place and its history. The articles that accompany the maps and photographs in this atlas explore how the biblical authors use these in their writing. For example, we will see how Mount Hermon became linked to the topic of God’s identity and how Bethlehem became a place associated with solutions.

The articles in this atlas call attention to the often-forgotten connections between what God is saying or doing and where he is speaking or acting. My prayer is that readers, after exploring these connections, might say the same thing I hear from students in the Holy Land: “This experience has completely changed the way I read my Bible.”

Our connection to the natural world has a profound impact on how we think and how we communicate. So it should come as no surprise that the biblical authors also were influenced by where they lived and that this influence becomes a part of how God communicates with us in his Word. This atlas gives special attention to that connection between the words of God and our physical world. It does not address every passage in Holy Scripture or even every passage that involves geography. But it will open a new way to read the Bible as it discusses key passages, illustrating how geography helps to communicate what our God wants us to know.



Dead Sea Scrolls



Experience the rich history of the landscapes  
of the Bible, and discover why they are  
important to your relationship with God today!

*Our Daily Bread Bible Atlas* will help you connect the dots between culture, language, geography, and the long, storied history of God's people.

Scholar and adventurer John Beck brings the Scriptures to life with engaging commentary, vivid photographs, and full-color maps. QR codes link to short videos where Beck further explains interesting insights from the Holy Land. With expert information shared simply and clearly, you will gain a profound understanding of the intersection between the lands of the Bible and the teachings and events of Scripture.

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