



A CLOSER LOOK

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

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Biblical Backgrounds in Geography

The Serendipities of In-depth Bible Study

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The Bible asserts that God has eternal purposes for humanity on earth. An attempt to describe the study of Biblical Backgrounds is challenging because clarity about the Christian Faith will depend upon the grasp of the Old Testament.

The purpose of this limited study is to illustrate that God's design is the key to the content of the Bible, and that you will benefit from a study of Bible Geography.

God's creation of humanity is an expression of His love, and a demonstration of His sovereignty. He gave us instructions to enable us to actualize his blessings.

The Old Testament gives us the fiber for the Christian Faith. Key elements include: 1) The universe was created for man's benefit, 2) Planet Earth was intended as a "Garden of Eden" and, 3) the Promised Land was the laboratory for man's learning.

A SIGNIFICANT ANSWER TO A CRITICAL QUESTION

EXODUS 5:22-6:8

This text presents a dialogue between God and Moses, which the usual chapter division obscures. Moses addresses God primarily with questions (Exodus 5:22, 23). The larger part is devoted to God's crucial reply (6:1-8). God asserted His self-

identification, "I am Yahweh." God's purpose in this context signals, in a fourfold aspect, a divine presence to save. First, God's design for His people is deliverance (6:6). Second, God's intension is to form a godly community (6:7a). Third, God's desire is that there be an ongoing relationship with His people (6:7b). Finally, He intends that they enjoy the good life (6:8).

WHAT DID THE PEOPLE OF MOSES' DAY KNOW ABOUT THEIR WORLD?

The people of the Bible knew that the country they occupied, the land that God had promised to their fathers, was only a small part of the "world." By the New Testament times, it had long been the Roman world. This corresponds roughly to what we today call the Ancient Near East.

Despite much variety and contrast, it has specific geographical features. Its' inhabitants had developed independently, but they had economic and cultural connections. They had been actors in a partly common history, which is the most ancient history we can write. The Children of Israel were latecomers to this part of the world. They occupied only a small part of it, and played only an insignificant role in the political scene and in the development of material progress.

We must place the land of the Bible in its larger geographical framework to understand, as Ancient Israel understood, her spiritual calling. "For you

this month's
focus:
Bible
Geography

are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession, out of all the peoples that are upon the face of the earth. It is not that you are more in number that the Lord your God has chosen you, for you were the fewest of all peoples ...” (Deut. 7:6-7)

BIBLICAL BACKGROUNDS IS A MEANS TO AN END

The Bible is a marvelous collection of inspired information designed to enable each individual to “experience” the intended relationship with God. Scripture, while being “God-breathed,” accurate, and effective in its purpose, is not always recorded in sequence of time. Therefore, it is necessary to utilize the “timetables” that are essential for understanding.

These resources include, 1) The Timetables of History, 2) The Timetables of Science, 3) The Timetables of Technology, and 4) The Drama of Redemption.

By the same rationale, learning to utilize a good Atlas of the larger Bible World is the counterpart of using accurate timetables. Maps that deal with geography help us to see “the rest of the story” of God’s eternal purpose.

The field of archaeology and related aspects of material evidence of man’s past, open up the present status of legitimate research. George Adam Smith (1856-1942) first wrote his classic study, *The Historical Geography of The Holy Land* in 1894. It remains the starting point of any serious study of this field.

Yet, science has revolutionized all aspects of studying the past. Today, satellite cameras using laser, ultra-violet, and sonar technology that is computer enhanced, now generate maps with pinpoint accuracy. The results are breathtaking!

The Earth Sciences have been harnessed to enable us to understand the material progress mankind has made through the millennia. Examples of this are the marvelous cooperation of worldwide scientists to gather and preserve inestimable amounts of data for further study. Especially in the wake of enormous dam construction projects

on three of the world’s greatest rivers: the Nile in Egypt, the Euphrates in Iraq, and the Yangtze in central China.

William G. Dever, a world-class scholar, is Dean of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He is retiring after a stellar career as an archaeologist, teacher, and author. His latest book, *What Did The Bible Writers Know & When Did They Know IT?* (Eerdman’s 2001) is required reading for anyone who wants to know the current status of rapidly changing attitudes in Archaeology and related fields as they relate to the world of the Bible.

THE BIBLE WORLD BEFORE THE ORIGINS OF WRITING

The Book of Genesis is pure revelation about things beyond the discovery of mortals. Its primary purpose is to give the Israelites coming out of Egypt a sense of their “roots.” They are the Children of Israel because God intended to have a chosen people.

Chapters six through nine give us an account of God causing a universal flood during the days of Noah. Chapters ten and eleven are a cryptic summary of how humanity multiplied in quantum leaps from one couple, Noah and his wife, to an immeasurable population. The remaining thirty-nine chapters summarize the lives of the Patriarchs.

All the basic material sciences were operational prior to the flood. The descendents of Noah made a “new beginning” of life on earth. Prior to Abraham’s birth (c. 2100 BC) all the basic technologies we use today were already in place and functioning well. These included, for example, 1) the domestication of plants and animals, 2) the origins of writing in Iraq (c. 3100 BC), and 3) the development of civilization that centers in cities, was already “ancient history” on three continents. The three Riverine Civilizations are, 1) the Sumerian Dynasties on the Euphrates Plain, 2) the Nilotic cultures along the Nile in Egypt, and 3) the Harappan Culture on the Indus River of west India (from which we derive the Indo-European languages).

The classic work of Karl W. Butzer, *Environment and Archaeology: An Introduction To Pleistocene Geography* was published in 1964. Today, a half-century of progress has been made in our understanding of the environment and its essential role in the progress of all living on earth.

Jared Diamond won a Pulitzer Prize for his *Guns, Germs, & Steel* (1993). The scope and explanatory power of this book are astonishing. The author is a professor of Physiology at the UCLA School of Medicine. He discusses several aspects that illuminate Biblical Backgrounds in Historical Geography. Among them are: 1) the regionally differing course of history, 2) how geography variously molds societies, 3) the rise of food production, 4) the cause and spread of food production, 5) why did peoples of some regions fail to domesticate plants and animals? 6) the evolution of germs, writing, and technology, 7) the evolution of government in human history.

The twenty-nine pages of annotated suggestions for further reading is a treasure house of information about human history. His thematic approach to the discovery, invention, and utilization of environmental factors is like watching James Burke's *Connections* on PBS television, or reading his book on the same topic.

This masterpiece of writing updates the classic work (1976) by Hugh Thomas, *A Short History of The World*.

WAS THERE REALLY AN ICE AGE?

Were there ice ages in the remote past? If, when, where, how, and why did it occur? Such questions echo the "Lost Atlantis Theory." The scientific discovery of this reality began in 1837. Current stud-

ies bring us up to the close of the twentieth century, with much research still pending.

John and Catherine Imbrie published a scholarly, yet easily readable book, *Ice Ages: Solving The Mystery* (Harvard 1974). They adequately cover the essentials of this field of study. The chapters include: 1) The Discovery of The Ice Ages chronicles Lonnie Agassiz and his theory of glaciation, its acceptance by science, and how we are exploring this aspect of our past. 2) Explaining The Ice Ages chronicles the various efforts to understand the physical evidence, and how to relate it to our present "ecological concerns" about today's weather. 3) A seven page Appendix lists sequentially key persons and events related to this field of study.

THE SEA IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND

The Mediterranean Sea, while not center stage in the Old Testament, is, however, the "arena" of the spread of Christianity. This "Sea in the middle of the land" links the peoples of the Bible world. Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia, Syria, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Crete, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, and North Africa—all share the Sea as their "marketplace" of ideas, products, and services. The Roman Empire is a series of roads and cities surrounding the Sea "like frogs around a pond."

Three works are essential for an understanding of the Mediterranean in history, and particularly in Biblical Geography. 1) Michael Grant's classic *The Ancient Mediterranean* (1968) with its nineteen detailed regional maps. 2) Fernand Braudel's remarkable *Memories and The Mediterranean* (Knopf 2001). 3) The monumental work by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Percell, *The Corrupting Sea—A Study of Mediterranean History* (Blackwell 2000).

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PASTORAL LIFE, THE COMING OF HORSES, AND COUNTER-CULTURE

In 1964, E. D. Phillips published his detailed and informative work *The Royal Hoards: Nomadic Peoples of the Steppes*. This study begins with the nomadic people from the region we know today as Asiatic Russia, and the rise of pastoral societies. He discusses: 1) The origin and rise of pastoral societies (4000-2000 BC), 2) The spread of pastoral societies (2000-1400 BC), 3) The beginning of mounted nomadism (1400-1000 BC), 4) Full development of horsemanship in the Western Steppes (1000-500 BC) and, 5) Development among non-European peoples (500-0 BC).

This is the background for the study of warfare in the ancient world, because the horse-drawn chariot radically changed warfare by Abraham's time. Yagel Yadin's two volume, one-of-a-kind, *Warfare in the Old Testament* (1961) rounds out the background as recorded in the Bible.

WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS?

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls (445 BC) of Jerusalem is the last date recorded in the Old Testament. The Date of Christ's birth occurs during the time of the first census "taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2), which is 5/4 BC as we reckon time today.

The Bible is silent during this four hundred year period, yet history continued, and God was still Sovereign Ruler of the universe. Secular history gives us, "providentially preserved," marvelous details to fill in this gap.

The Persian Empire established by Alexander the Great (Isaiah 44:28-45:8) continued to rule the Ancient Near East. Alexander, son of Phillip of Macedon, changed history between 335 and his death in 323 BC. See Daniel 8:7,8 for a cryptic prediction of Alexander, and the four kingdoms that resulted from his death. Alexander's Hellenistic Kingdom would last variously until the coming of the Roman Empire.

For example, General Pompey entered Palestine in 63 BC, and made Syria a Roman Province.

The Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt (Macedonian Greek), with its capital of Alexandria, created in 331 BC, would by the time of the Apostle Paul be a city of one million, (2/5ths of which were Diaspora Jews). Alexandria would be the home of the rabbinic translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (LXX) in the second century BC.

The Seleucid Kingdom (Macedonian Greek) likewise created its capital at Antioch, Syria, from ground zero (c. 300 BC), where its rulers took the name Antiochus (I, II, III, IV, etc). Antiochus IV, in his zeal to Hellenize Jerusalem, triggered the Macabean Revolt in 168 BC that gave Judaism its sacred holiday in December known as Hanukah, or "Festival of Lights."

This period also gave rise to the Hasmonean families of Jerusalem, who in their internal power struggles invited Pompey to come and settle their differences. This proved to be the proverbial "camel in the tent" syndrome.

IS BIBLE GEOGRAPHY FOR YOU?

Like the "timeless" Paul Harvey News on radio, we want to know "The Rest of The Story." Biblical Backgrounds in Historical Geography is a commonsense study that will "fill in" some truly remarkable details. A good place to start is *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of The Bible* (Moody Press 1967) written by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos. Learn more about God's providence, His eternal purposes and your invitation to share in the "experience of knowing" how God is working in your world today—He is the same God, yesterday, today, and forever!



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