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Because Context Matters

The Bible AND the Land: Essential or Irrelevant? **Implications for Biblical Literacy and Spiritual Formation**

The narrative of the New Testament from its beginning to end assumes the reader is familiar with the physical setting that served as a stage for the unfolding drama. – Anson Rainey & Steven Notley¹

Walking the Land Preparing for another 13-day “*The Life and Land of Jesus*” study program in Israel has caused me to focus again on the role that biblical geography plays in deepening our understanding of the Scriptures. At PBT we have long espoused the importance of biblical geography in helping to discern the original meaning of passages. As a result, the first two questions we typically ask about each site we visit are:

- **Where are we?** This is a geography (and a visual) question. Wherever Jesus was standing when He said what He said and/or did what He did, is the visual that is often implicitly woven into the text. Evoking (or seeing) that image helps us in discerning the Holy Spirit’s original meaning of a passage. If Jesus always taught with visuals, shouldn’t we be trying to do the same as best we can?
- **What happened here before?** This is a history question. In a small land (150 miles N/S, 50 miles E/W) containing several thousand years of history, events from different eras tend to (re)occur in the same place/locale. And since the past is often the prologue to opening up a passage, what happened at a site before is often embedded in the meaning of the next event occurring there.

Missing Pieces If these two preceding questions are foundational to setting the stage for a passage, what happens when we 1) don’t instinctively think about biblical geography and 2) are foggy when it comes to biblical history? Usually something tends to get lost in our understanding of a passage. A good example can be found in Luke 6 where Jesus visits Nain and brings back to life the only son of a widow.

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her “Do not weep.” Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to “arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” And this report about him spread throughout the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. (ESV added)

Setting the Stage for Luke 7:11-17 Using the two-question template, we quickly discover some important contextual facts that lay the groundwork for delving into this Lukan passage:

- **Where are we?** Nain is located on the northern slope of the Hill of Moreh in the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley about nine miles SE of Nazareth. Just a short distance away on the base of that same hill (facing south) can be found the remains of the OT town of Shunem.
- **What happened here before?** From II Kings we (re)discover that roughly 700 years earlier Elisha brought back to life the only son of the Shunammite woman (4:8-37) in essentially the same place.

An Action Remez Wow! With this approach, we have discovered a *remez* that might easily have been missed. A *remez* is an intentional harkening back to a prior event that everyone knows and understands and for which no further explanation is necessary.² Without the surprising insights provided from the answers to these two initial questions, we easily miss Jesus intentionally performing the same miracle in essentially the same place as Elisha did several hundred years earlier. That's why the crowd responded as they did proclaiming, *A great prophet has arisen among us!* They remembered that miraculous day from their collective past. It was part of their oral tradition. With this Nain miracle, Jesus was identifying with the long prophetic tradition of Israel as well as with one of their great prophets. Jesus' identification with Elisha, and His emulation of that long-remembered miracle, would not have been lost on the villagers of Nain that day.³ It's only lost on us today because we usually fail to connect with those where-are-we-and-what-happened-here-before questions.

Where is Biblical Reality? Something else I have been wondering about lately is this: Is it possible to spend a dozen years in Sunday school and church youth groups and never get exposed to the reality of the Bible **AND** the Land? Is this omission a contributing factor as to why college freshmen often struggle in Philosophy 101 with the reality of their faith? When I ask churches how they communicate the reality of the Land - Jericho, Wilderness of Zin, Elah Valley, Sorek Valley, Jerusalem - to their children and youth, their responses usually suggest that they consider that question to be irrelevant. But the question still remains: How are we communicating that these Bible narratives are about real people, in a real place, dealing with the real issues of life? The answer you usually get is "*because we tell them it's true*" or "*they know it's true.*" For too many Christian educators, it seems that the Land of Israel and the culture of the Ancient Near East are essentially irrelevant to teaching Sunday school, or youth groups (or adults for that matter) about the three-dimensional, contextual reality of Jesus. Is this a significant omission or not? Is biblical geography essential or irrelevant when it comes to studying Scripture? Is it nice but not necessary to understanding God's Word and "*the renewing of our minds?*" In light of these questions, let's look at another aspect of today's church culture.

A Simple Church or an Oversimplified Church? On my reading list a few years ago was the book *Simple Church*,⁴ which seemed back then to be generating significant traction among pastors. The thesis of the book is that many churches have made things too programmatically complex – far too many non-re-enforcing, non-aligned activities producing too little fruit. As a result, many pastors seem to function as defacto program managers of an array of church activities that yield little discipling fruit. That diagnosis is to be applauded.

The book's recommended solution for this overly programmed condition is to uncomplicate the church by removing most/all of these activities from the church calendar. The intent is to pare the church back to three essentials: 1) worship service, 2) small groups and 3) community service. If something needs to be delivered to the congregation, e.g., quality Bible study or intentional discipling, then it will have to be delivered via one (or more) of these three conduits, but not by other programmatic events or organizational means. I've wondered if there was another conclusion that could have been reached from the same observations: Making sure that everything taking place in the church is consistent with and aligned with the church's mission/vision.

Upon pondering the *Simple Church* thesis, my first reaction was: What happens to Adult Christian Education (ACE) in this pared-back ministry model? Thirty-minute Sunday morning messages certainly won't

compensate for the lack of a robust ACE program. Expecting small groups to effectively deliver quality ACE is unrealistic. Small groups can certainly facilitate fellowship and certain aspects of congregational care. They are also venues where faith can be “caught;” but quality, gifted teaching has never been its forte (at least from my experience over 35 years). The more I read *Simple Church*, which has a lot of good things to say, the more it struck me that its thesis could easily lead pastors to go from the ditch on one side of the road to the ditch on the other side. In the quest to keep church life uncluttered, the biblical literacy/making disciples baby could easily be thrown out with the bath water, and sadly, few would even know that it had happened.

Visiting the Holy Land In 1988 I had the opportunity to go to Israel on a study program with The Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies. This was after I was teaching the Bible for ten years. Suffice it to say that walking the Land, which is a total immersion experience in biblical geography, history, and culture had a profound effect on me. As each day unfolded and more and more sites were underfoot, I wished I could go back and reteach every lesson I had ever taught. It became abundantly clear to me how much I was missing in trying to “*rightly handle the word of truth*.” I was the Bible-teaching equivalent of the “*emperor without clothes*.” I repeatedly asked myself: Where has this historical, cultural, and geographic contextual information been regarding the Bible **AND** the Land? Why wasn’t I ever told about this reality, let alone taught this? How could we in Western Evangelicalism have missed the obvious (existentialism is a big part of that answer)? Maybe you’ve wondered about some of these same questions.

Go and Do Likewise! Without knowing it, I had acquired through my teachers, and was likewise passing along to others, an often one-dimensional Hellenistic, urban, industrialized, post-modern understanding of Jesus. What I was missing was a three-dimensional Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, village, agrarian understanding of the Gospels. How had I (and so many others) missed the importance of the Land of the Bible and how it is woven into the message of the Bible? And by the way, this is not exactly a new thought! Going back to 348 AD, Cyril of Jerusalem observed that “The Land is the fifth Gospel.” Question: Do we embrace that thesis in our approach to teaching, studying and understanding God’s Word in our Western Evangelical world today?

Needless to say, that first visit to Israel was life-changing for me. In fact, when I lay out a time line for my own journey of faith, two of the most significant inflection points are a) before and after encountering Jesus, and b) before and after visiting Israel. That transformational impact of the Land is part of the motivation for offering our team-teaching “*The Life and Land of Jesus*” study program in Israel. It’s also the motivation for our “*Bible Alive*” multimedia, contextual immersion experience in churches for those who won’t ever get to the Holy Land.

Not a Unique Experience It seems that every time I run across a follower of Jesus who has had the opportunity to go to Israel and engage biblical reality, their experience seems to parallel mine. Walking the land for 10-15 days forever changes the way a person approaches, reads and understands the Bible. A brief period of time in the Holy Land often seems to have had more impact on the spiritual journey of a believer than does years of Sunday morning messages, small group Bible studies, or Sunday school classes. Unfortunately, only about 1% (a guess) of followers of Jesus will ever have a chance to go to Israel and be impacted in that way. That begs a question.

How can we give those followers of Jesus who will never have the opportunity to walk the Holy Land some of the effect of that experience as if they actually had? Can we share some of the impact of visiting Israel without ever leaving the church? With the multi-media and publishing resources now available to us, I believe that is possible. But the scope of such an undertaking is beyond the simple church model because it can’t be covered as part of a Sunday morning message, nor will a small group experience ever be equal to the task.

Jesus and Geography 101 As previously mentioned, one of the arresting insights for me was the realization that Jesus was a great believer in the significance of biblical geography! While Jesus certainly used words as He taught, His teachings often wove the reality of the Land into His message. For example,

- O When He wept over Jerusalem, He was overlooking Jerusalem.

- O When He taught the “Good Samaritan” story, He assumed people understood what that terrain and environment not only looked like, but what it meant to go down from Jerusalem to Jericho via the Roman road on the southern edge of the Wadi Qilt.
- O When He talked about a faith that moves mountains, He was on the Mount of Olives looking at a prominent hill six miles to the SE that Herod the Great had moved and placed on top of an adjoining hill 20+ years earlier so he could build a monument to himself called the Herodian.

If Jesus infused the power of His message (and particularly His parables) with the integrated context (culturally, historically, and geographically) of the Land, shouldn't we have as our objective the three-dimensional restoration of that context whenever we teach, preach, or study God's Word? By now you can tell where I am heading. I am increasingly convinced that we need to teach the Land as a Siamese twin with teaching the Bible. If Jesus taught “on site,” shouldn't we be doing the best we can to simulate that “on site” experience when we teach/expound His words?

The Demise of Robust Adult Christian Education Paradoxically, it is becoming harder and harder to find churches that are making a significant commitment to Adult Christian Education that emphasizes biblical literacy over “therapeutic self-improvement” consumerism offerings. In a fallen world, people do need to learn how to budget, be a good parent, spouse, deal with teenagers, etc., but they also desperately need teaching on “Knowing God,” “Knowing God's Word,” “Knowing God's Kingdom,” etc. It seems more and more that people want microwave (two minutes on power 10) sound-bite tips for better living rather than in-depth, slow-bake, biblical teaching and transformational learning experiences. Thus, when all is said and done, as one pastor recently observed to me, “*sociology will usually trump orthodoxy*” in the lives of many in his congregation.

Getting Started If a journey of many miles starts with a single step, what are some things we can do to close the gap between where we find ourselves and an expanded integrated understanding of the Bible AND the Land?

- **Make use of those maps in the back of most Bibles.** Start by finding the site of a passage on one or more of those maps. Always ask the question: Where are we?
- **Get a good Bible Atlas.** One of my favorites is Anson Rainey's and Steve Notley's *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*. It's not cheap, but Amazon has good pricing.
- **How about putting an Israel topographical map in every church class room.** That way when Joshua and the battle of Jericho is taught, the teacher can point to where Jericho is. Likewise, when David and Goliath is taught, the teacher can point out where that confrontation took place in the Elah Valley. You get the idea. And if your initial reaction to this notion is that the teachers won't know where to find biblical events on the map, you've just re-enforced the thrust of this Reflection.
- **Take a look at our “Above Israel” DVD series.** It's a great way to teach biblical geography. We've included an index of sites and Bible verses to make it easy to use the aerial video clips in conjunction with Bible passages. You could go to Israel and walk the land for months and still not see all the sites we've filmed. It is a unique resource for visually engaging the Land.
- **Check out two great books** which integrate biblical geography with biblical history. Each over-sized two-page spread offers maps and pertinent photographs to illustrate how geography and history are woven into understanding 100+ selected passages (from Baker Books and available from Amazon).
 - *A Visual Guide to Bible Events* by James C. Martin, John A. Beck and David G. Hansen.
 - *A Visual Guide to Gospel Events* by James C. Martin, John A. Beck and David G. Hansen.
- **Have your church host one of our “Bible Alive” multimedia, contextual immersion experiences.** That can serve as a good “jump start” to getting (re)oriented to the Bible AND the Land.
- **Invite someone knowledgeable in biblical (culture and) geography to be a Teacher in Residence** for a few weeks. That's another way to “jump start” biblical geography and cultural awareness in a church as well as provide intensive instruction to teachers, small group leaders and staff.

- **Come to Israel** with us on another of our Israel Study Programs and forever change your understanding of biblical history, culture, and geography. You will never read, teach, or preach the Bible the same way again! Your excitement for studying God’s Word will indeed get an order of magnitude “jump start.”
- **Get Dr. James Monson’s *Regions on the Run*** self-teaching course in biblical geography. If you so desire, you can invest a hundred hours in pursuit of his programmed learning assignments. His topographical maps are superb. *Regions on the Run* is currently out of print, but you can often find used copies on the internet – Key words: “*Regions on the Run*.”
- **Create a “Context Corner” in the church library** and stock it with the geographical resources mentioned. For further suggestions on other good contextual (history and culture) resources (by category), see FAQ #1 on the Preserving Bible Times home page, www.preservingbibletimes.org.

More to Geography Than You Might Think! Before closing, it needs to be observed that there is more to this whole issue of biblical geography than proximities. While geography does indeed cover the issue of proximities of sites (as we saw in understanding that Lukan passage at Nain), it also encompasses

- **Climatic** issues of rainfall (N/S of Jerusalem and E/W of the central ridge), wind directions (day and night), morning dews in late spring and early summer, etc.
- **Geological** issues that create gentle U-shaped, soft limestone valleys in Western Judea and sharp V-shaped hard limestone valleys in Samaria. Then there is the whole Jordan Valley geological rift which creates the lowest points on the face of the earth as well as an elevated Central Ridge.
- **Soil** types that determine what kinds of crops can be grown where. There are reasons why grains are grown in certain regions and why vineyards and olive orchards grow elsewhere.
- **Regions** – are we in Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Coastal Plain, Wilderness of Judea, the Decapolis, Perea, Hellenistic Judaism, etc., when biblical events happen? It matters where we are when Jesus does what He does and says what He says.
- **Routes** for trade (including the International Highway), military invasion routes, as well as walking trails between villages. Such an understanding helps us understand why cities and fortresses are placed where they are and why battles are fought where they are. From a walking trail perspective, we also see the significance of Cana as an overnight stopping point on the northern walking route going from Nazareth to Capernaum (and thus why Jesus knows people in Cana – John 2).
- **Line of Sight** issues. What can you see while standing on the Mount of Olives? What do you see looking North, East, West, and South while standing at Megiddo in the Valley of Armageddon? Do you realize you can see across the Sea of Galilee? That’s why people always know where Jesus is going when He gets into a boat. Also, standing on the seashore at Capernaum allows one to easily see Hippos, a Decapolis city high on a hill on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. On many a summer night, the appealing lights of this city would have been very visible and the sounds of this hedonistic city very enticing as they drifted westward across the water to Capernaum, perhaps mesmerizing the younger of those two prodigal sons to the point where he just had to leave town.

We could continue with the implications of biblical geography. But it suffices to say that geography often matters when it comes to understanding the three-dimensional meaning of a passage. That’s why we are intentional in teaching biblical geography as part of our Israel study program as well as during our various “*Bible Alive*” and “*The Bible: Its Land and Culture*” contextual teaching times in churches. It’s part of our paradigm for engaging the Bible in its integrated context. Both of these teaching weekends are now available on DVD along with 24-page seminar handouts.

Notes

¹ Anson F. Rainey and Steven Notley, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible* (Carta, Jerusalem, 2007) 224.

² For more on this *remez* genre of communicating, see Doug Greenwold's book, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, "Remez: A Helpful Interpretive Tool" (Bible-in-Context Ministries, Columbia, MD, 2008) 9-11.

³ For more on the contextual issues at work when Jesus brought back to life the only son of the widow of Nain, read David Hansen's book, *In Their Sandals: How His Followers Saw Jesus* (Xulon Press, 2007), pp. 25-31, Chapter III, "Sorrow to Joy: A Widow's Son Lives." (available from Preserving Bible Times)

⁴ Thomas S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN, 2006)