

Role of Geography in Understanding History

Western civilization has commonly embraced the logic of Greek philosophical categories and has endeavored to describe cosmic realities in terms of "time and space." Individuals, ideas, movements, and even the courses of nations are often interpreted precisely in accordance with these canons. Hence, designations are invariably employed in analyzing civilizations past and present: pre-/post-, Early/Late, B.C./A.D., East/West, Oriental/Occidental, Near East/Far East/Middle East' (Note the first word in this paragraph!)

Christian theology itself has not escaped such an encompassing mode of thinking: God may be described in terms that are corollary to time (*infinity, eternity*) or space (*omnipresence*). And Christianity asserts that those attributes of deity were willingly relinquished by Christ through the drama of incarnation, when he became "locked in time and space." Accordingly, even upon superficial reflection, one can begin to comprehend something of the far-reaching significance of the temporal and spatial disciplines: history and geography respectively.

Moreover, history is in many respects inseparably bound by and subject to geographic limitations. Geography is an impelling force that both initiates and limits the nature and extent of political history, what we might call geopolitics. Geologic formation and rock type have a decisive effect on altitude, manner and extent of erosion, location and quantity of water supply, and physical topography. These, in turn, have a profound bearing on certain aspects of climate, raw materials, soil formation, and land use—factors that may alternatively repel or attract human settlement and certainly influence the location, density, and socioeconomic makeup of a settlement. Where settlements are founded, roadways are eventually opened and used by migrants, traders, or armies, and culture ultimately arrives at a particular location. Stated more succinctly, "With every step back in time, history becomes more and more geographical until, in the beginning, it is all geography"⁷²

In short, factors of geography often dictate where and how geopolitics will occur. Surely it is geographically significant that ancient civilizations emerged on the banks of rivers. Ancient Egypt owed its existence to the Nile; Mesopotamia drew its life sustenance from the Tigris and Euphrates; the Indus Valley civilization was situated along the river by the same name; the Hittite Empire rested astride the Halys; Old Indian culture sprang to life in the Brahmaputra and Ganges river valleys; ancient China had its Yellow River and the Yangtze; and European culture emerged on the banks of the Tiber, Thames, Danube, Rhine, and Seine. Nor is it inconsequential that the Roman Empire was able to expand

as far as the Danube and Rhine rivers, a boundary which for part of the 20th century also corresponded to the Iron Curtain. Even in 21st-century America, virtually every major commercial and industrial city has an outlet to river, ocean, or the Great Lakes network. Those few exceptions are located at the hub of important interstate highways or airline routes.

Other factors of geography, such as earthquake activity and volcanic eruption, have likewise played their part in fashioning history.' It is axiomatic that the face of much of western Asia and eastern Africa has been formed through seismic activity. A huge fissure in the earth's surface has been the single dominant factor in shaping the landscape of western Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, and the island of Madagascar. [See map 13.]

In western Asia, earthquake activity has always meant that certain areas were inhospitable to human occupation, causing arterial travel to be funneled into an essentially north-south grid. The seismic forces that produced the mighty Himalayan chain, on the other hand, created what in antiquity was an impenetrable longitudinal barrier that caused culture to expand and traffic to flow on an essentially east-west axis. Vast badlands of congealed lava confront a potential settler in a dreary terrain broken only occasionally by basaltic plugs or cinder cones, gaunt reminders of bygone volcanic activity. More important is the harsh reality that this volcanic activity often rendered the soil totally unsuitable for human productivity. In antiquity it always presented a cruelly hostile environment that was intolerably painful to the limbs of pack animals, and thus precluded any sort of arterial traffic.

Volcanic eruptions can bring a segment of history to an abrupt termination. The image of Vesuvius's eruption upon Pompeii in A.D. 79 often comes to mind. The 1815 eruption of Tambora on Indonesia created a casualty count of approximately 92,000 and produced an ash cloud in the upper atmosphere that reflected sunlight back into space and produced a year without summer. The 1883 eruption of Krakatoa was audible across one-third of the earth's surface, caused a tsunami that was perceptible in all oceans of the world, adversely modified climate on a global scale" for several years, and killed more than 36,000 people. Yet in vivid contrast to all these events stands the eruption of the Greek island of Santorini (Thera), located in the south Aegean Sea approximately midway between mainland Greece and Crete. [See maps 111 and 112 for location.]

Santorini's explosivity index at ground zero is calculated to have been more than 15 times greater than the force of the

atomic explosion over Hiroshima. In the wake of the colossal eruption that occurred on Santorini around 1525 B.C. (± 100 years, whether dated archaeologically or radiometrically), some 32 square miles of earth collapsed into a caldera of approximately 2,250 feet in depth. When the Aegean waters rushed into this newly created and superheated chasm (estimated to have been in excess of 2550°F.), a gigantic tsunami was formed that is estimated to have been as high as 800 feet at its apex. Within 20 minutes, this massive tidal wave—also propelling an enormous volume of searing, toxic gases—catastrophically struck Crete at an estimated speed of 200 miles per hour and at a height of 200 to 300 feet.⁴ Pumice laminated the vestige of Santorini with a volcanic deposit ranging in depth from between 65 and 195 feet. A cloud of pumice, ash, and lava estimated at between 8.5 and 11.25 cubic miles in volume was thrust some 50 miles into the sky where a predominantly northwesterly wind blew it toward Crete. The thick blanket of falling ash would have created an atmosphere of lethal air, producing polluted water, rancid food, and diverse diseases. What is more, basaltic cores the size of a person's head were hurled like missiles directly from Santorini to Crete. Waterborne pumice fragments manifesting a Santorini origin have been found across the entire stretch of the eastern Mediterranean basin, even at inland places as far away as Israel and Egypt.⁵ It is not difficult to comprehend how the entire Minoan culture on Santorini was brought to a disastrous, abrupt end, nor how a number of Minoan palaces on Crete were severely damaged and may even have been destroyed at that time.

Mountains, deserts, and oceans have all influenced the location or nature of geopolitics. Today's newspapers often contain lead stories having to do with the continental effects of El Niño, salination, widespread famine and food shortages, or global warming. Some of those same geographic factors played a profound role in ancient Near Eastern geopolitics. Famines were often described in ancient literature, and scholars have amply demonstrated how climate fluctuations in antiquity had an adverse effect on ancient culture.⁶

A "Mediterranean theater" of history existed from the demise of the Persian navy at the Battle of Salamis (480 B.C.) until the defeat of the Spanish Armada (A.D. 1588). Northern and southern shores regularly vied for political and cultural superiority. But after the oceanic voyages of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan, the geopolitical sovereignty of the Mediterranean was challenged as the Renaissance and some of its important cities began to fade and "history" moved westward.

Natural resources represent yet another geographic factor that has influenced the location and nature of geopolitics. A wide array of ancient documentation explicitly addressed the need to maintain control over the tin of Afghanistan, the cedar of Lebanon, the silver of Assyria, the copper of Cyprus,

the gold of Spain, and the ivory of the African interior. And who can doubt that the whole complexion of modern geopolitics has been dramatically altered by the OPEC cartel? Indeed, geography represents the stage on which the pageant of history is presented, without which history itself would wander about aimlessly as a vagrant.' To paraphrase the aphorism commonly but probably erroneously ascribed to Will Durant, civilization exists by geographic consent, subject to change without notice.⁸

Geography's effect upon history extends also to the theoretical domain. Like the effect of environment on culture, geography actually establishes the boundaries within which history must operate. Students of the effect of geography on history have made a most helpful distinction between its *determining* effect and its *limiting* effect. Where a frigid winter climate necessitates the wearing of heavy clothing, there is nothing in the temperature itself that decrees whether people shall wear sealskins or Shetland wool, *but they must procure and wear winter clothing*. When a region unsuitable for agriculture somehow becomes populated, very little in the environment predetermines which domestic animals shall be grazed or whether food shall be secured with hooks, nets, traps, or spears, *but a non-agrarian society will surely emerge*.

It is geographically pertinent that places in the Near East manifesting the most ancient human habitation—Mt. Carmel, Shanidar, Catal Hüyük, Jarmo, Hacilar [map 231]—are situated precisely in areas that receive an average annual rainfall capable of sustaining the spontaneous generation of wild grains that can support human existence. It is also geographically pertinent that certain plants and animals are peculiar to only one hemisphere, or that writing arose where, when, and in the form that it did. These all represent expressions of geopolitical history that have been and continue to be subject to the limitations and indirect controls of geography.

Many of the same limitations are discernible even in our modern technological world, where deserts can be extensively irrigated or the effects of oppressive heat can be mitigated by air-conditioning; where Landsat photography equipped with infrared capability can discover vast reservoirs of fresh water buried deep in the cavities of the earth's interior, or cloud-seeding and widespread irrigation can lessen the gravity of an arid environment; where rampaging rivers can be restrained by huge dams and even harnessed for hydroelectric purposes; where formidable mountain barriers can be leveled, penetrated, or easily surmounted; and where air travel can put faraway places within quick and convenient reach. One might imagine how much more defined and deeply etched such geographical limitations would have been in a world that existed before such technological sophistication—one like the biblical world.

Role of Geography in Understanding the Bible

Matters of "time and space" remain among the difficulties that vex a 21st-century student of the Bible. The proclamations of Scripture were occasioned and penned from distinctive settings, yet modern students of the Bible live in a different millennium and adhere to a different worldview. Most live on a different continent. So in our desire to properly interpret and apply the Bible, we must ensure as much as possible that our enterprise is built knowledgeably upon the grid of the Bible's

own environment. At the outset, it is imperative for one to view geography (space) as something more than a superfluity that can be arbitrarily divorced from biblical interpretation. To the contrary, the biblical portrait of both Israel and the Church is painted on several levels, including the territorial level.¹⁰

In point of fact, biblical narratives are often driven by the notion of "space." An incident may be said to have occurred on a certain hill, in a particular valley, on a discreet plain, at a given town. At times the name of the place itself becomes an important part of the revelation, frequently including a wordplay or pun on the name in order to reinforce the location of the event in public consciousness. Occasionally an aspect of geography becomes a theological axis around which an entire biblical book revolves, or a large portion of a book is particularly rich in geographical metaphor: for example, fertility and the book of Deuteronomy, forestation and the book of Isaiah, hydrology and the book of Psalms, or agriculture and the book of Joel. Often it is precisely a geographical reference or allusion that enables scholars to assign a book to a place of origin (such as Amos in Israel's northern kingdom, or James in the eastern Mediterranean basin).

Perhaps even more profoundly, Jewish faith in the Old Testament was inextricably tied to space, and "land" became the prism of this faith. Land/space was an arena in which God acted mightily on behalf of his people. (Consider the call and covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the Exodus/Sinai motif, the conquest/settlement of the land, the captivity away from the land, the return to the land, the New Israel.) Many of God's promises related directly to the original possession (or later restoration) of a particular parcel of real estate. It is not an overstatement to declare that, during its years of recorded biblical history, Israel's rootage in this "land" provided its faithful their foundational identity, security, and even prosperity.

When they were not in possession of their land, Israelites were often described in terms that reflected the precarious connotations of landlessness, aimlessness, and estrangement:

- "Sojourning" (Gen. 12:10; 15:13; 47:4; Ex. 6:4; Deut. 10:19b; 26:5b; cf. Heb. 11:13)—A *sojourner* was a resident-alien who did not belong and could not settle down to enjoy the privileges afforded the citizen.
- "Wandering" (Num. 32:13; Hos. 9:17; Deut. 26:5b)—A *wanderer* was someone en route to nowhere. He was not just between stops, but actually had no specified

destination or home.

- "Going into exile" (2 Kings 18:11; Isa. 5:13; 49:21; Ezek. 39:23; Ezra 1:11)—An *exile* was someone who had been forcibly uprooted or disenfranchised from his own land and obliged to live in another "placel"

Whether removed to Egypt, Babylon, or elsewhere, landlessness was tantamount to hopelessness. Israel's covenantal faith was very much based on and grounded in events that transpired at certain places *in this world*. There was an acute consciousness of a national home, a definable geographic domain in which even the soil was divinely consecrated, what one may call "the holy land;" One can rightly characterize Israel's faith by its "here and now essence—one where the ascetic principle of 1 John 2:15-17 was largely absent.

Similarly, in the New Testament gospels, much of the teaching of Jesus may be related to where he was situated at the time. Jesus talked about "living water" while at Jacob's well (John 4:10); He called himself the "bread of life" while at Capernaum, where basaltic grain mills were manufactured (John 6:48); he declared Peter to be the "rock" against which "the gates of Hades will not prevail" while in Caesarea Philippi, a site otherwise known in the classical world for the Eleusian Oracles and the daughter of Demeter being carried off by Hades, god of the underworld (Matt. 16:18); and he spoke about faith that can move a mountain while on the road to Bethphage, from which his disciples could easily have looked southward and seen evidence of a mountain that had been physically "moved" by Herod the Great in order to construct his palace/fortress site of Herodium (Matt. 21:21-22).

In a few instances Jesus appeared to go out of his way in order to teach a lesson at a particular location. On one such occasion he told a parable about a certain nobleman who journeyed to a distant country in order to obtain royal power. However, his appointment was opposed by a delegation of local citizens, who had sent an embassy to state their objections to his reign. So, when he returned with his newfound authority, this nobleman ruthlessly attacked those who had opposed him and had been disloyal to him (Luke 19:11-27). This "parable" is eerily reminiscent of real-life events surrounding the eldest son of Herod the Great—Archelaus. After Herod's death in 4 B.c., Archelaus traveled from Judea to Rome to obtain an "ethnarchy"—an official

sanction to rule over a province. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us Archelaus was awarded the title over the protest of more than 8,000 Jews in Rome, including a delegation that had also traveled from Judea.¹² After returning to Judea with his new power, Archelaus wasted no time in ruthlessly extracting vengeance on his detractors. Josephus also wrote that Archelaus focused much time and attention on the New Testament city of Jericho and its immediate environs: he rebuilt the Herodian palace at Jericho in splendid fashion, he built a town near Jericho that he named for himself, and he diverted irrigation waters to his date-palm plantations located only two miles from Jericho."

It is of interest to note that Jesus told his parable as he was departing Jericho en route to Jerusalem, which means that his listeners would have been on the Roman road bordering the recently reconstructed Herodian palace and adjacent to the irrigation channels that carried water out of the Judean hill country to Jericho and its environs. Indeed, many of Jesus' teachings are arguably related to his distinctive geographical surroundings. He talked about various kinds of soil, the east wind, the flowers of the field, and branches abiding in vines. One later observes a geographical correlation between the uniquely centrifugal form of Jesus' Great Commission in Acts 1:8 ("[from] Jerusalem, [then] in all Judea and Samaria, and [finally] to the ends of the earth") and that book's presentation of the expansion of the early apostolic movement.

And for Christian faith as well—not only for Jewish faith—many crucially important aspects of biblical history have transpired in *very precise places on earth*—not just in empty space nor in heaven (e.g., the location of the birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ; the flow of the early apostolic missionary journeys; etc.). If the Christian gospel were simply a matter of otherworldliness or concerned only with spiritual or moral values, gaining an appreciation

of the spatial dimension of the Bible would hardly matter, and seminal events in the New Testament would hardly have been geographically located in the text by the biblical writers. But it is neither of these! Central to the kerygma of the New Testament is the foundational claim that God became human at a definite moment in time and at a precise point in space. To be unaware of or to neglect the geographical DNA of the Bible or the biblical world will therefore often mean

that one may run afoul of the biblical argument or that reality may dissolve into sentimentalism.

Armed with a geographical knowledge of the Bible, one is better able to understand references such as "the former and latter rains," "the strong east wind:" or "a land flowing with milk and honey!" Similarly, one can better appreciate the scorching effect of Israel's hot sun; the implications of "no rainfall" and the importance of dew for crop survival; the prevalence of fertility (Baal) worship; the nature of Egyptian, Canaanite, and Mesopotamian deities; the migrations of Abraham, Moses, and Nehemiah; the terrain Joshua's forces could conquer but over which the Philistines could not run their chariots; the astounding success of David in eluding Saul's manhunt; the social psychology of the ministry of John the Baptist; the motivation(s) behind Jesus' astute move from Nazareth to Capernaum; and the staggering distances traveled by the apostle Paul. In addition, the pronouncements of the prophets make more sense as they predicted a stunning day to come when valleys will be lifted, mountains will be lowered, uneven and rough ground will be made level and smooth, and even when the water of the Dead Sea will become crystal clear and nourish abundant sea life.

Cultivating a spatial awareness is a necessary and valuable component in any serious study of the Bible. Like the Bible itself, faith is formulated from within the spatial and temporal context of which it was a part. Hence, the geographical discipline should become both the object and the vehicle of some of the most rewarding and enlightening Bible study; it is clearly worthy of a detailed investigation.

Old Testament Jericho sits adjacent to the most prolific spring in eastern Canaan (above site in picture). The scars of archaeological excavation are apparent on the tell

