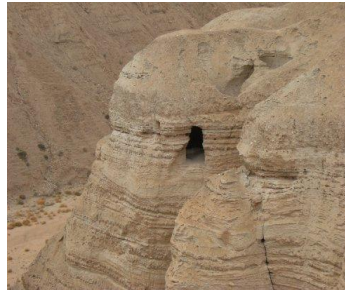


What It Was Like: Geography and Culture Make a Difference

Jim Elliff

I recently returned from a trip to Israel. The purpose for the trip was to create mental images in the minds of my students of that part of the world where so much Bible history took place. As we hiked down Judean hills, traversed the barren wilderness rises like David, searched for villages in the Jezreel Valley where Elisha and Jesus walked, and stood by the seaside of Galilee smelling the sea air, we tried to allow the scenes to impact our thinking, inform our Bible reading, and elevate our understanding. Our expert instructor, Dr. Jack Beck, helped to paint the picture in full color.



Geography and culture are important. We had already been reading our Bible with our maps in hand, but this was a step further. When Jesus or other Bible authors wrote, they did so in a context of the everyday life around them. This often changes the meaning of texts. If nothing else, such knowledge gives words a texture not discovered by the mere black and white on a page. Let me explain.

- When we read of Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman at the foot of Mt. Gerizim, the mountain of blessing first visited by the incoming Israelites years before, we should “see” the Samaritan men dressed in white robes streaming down the mountainside when Jesus said, “Lift up your eyes and look. The fields are white already unto harvest.”
- When we hear Jesus pronounce “woes” on Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, it will have much more meaning when we can visualize these three towns all clustered around the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. It was here, in just a 30 square mile triangle, that Jesus did most of his miracles and teaching. Yet, close to this corridor of Israel ran what we now call “the International Highway” turning those simple towns into information centers for travelers from Europe, Asia and Africa to hear about Jesus.
- When the man who had “legion” demons was set free, and those demons entered pigs and ran into the Sea, what should be in our minds? The side of the Sea of Galilee where this took place was a Gentile area to the east

of the Sea, the Decapolis, where raising pigs was not forbidden. The man being freed from demons brought on the anger of the people, but later Jesus would perform one of his greatest miracles there, with thousands involved, due to the witness of the formerly demon-possessed man.

- When Jesus asked his disciples to secure a donkey for him at Beth-page on the ridge on the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem, it was the only time Jesus is said to have ridden an animal. Strangely, he walked up the eastern side of the mountain, the hard part, but chose to ride down and around the Kidron Valley into Jerusalem. The people waved palm branches and cried out, “Hosanna,” or “Save us, Son of David!” What did these people think when Jesus rode the animal? Down that mountainside, just beyond the valley, in the old City of David below the Temple site, was the Gihon Springs. Do you remember the story? When David was old, Adonijah sought to be king and was being anointed as such below the city. When David heard this, he quickly commanded that Solomon be put on his mule and ridden to Gihon Springs where he would be anointed king. The people of Beth-page knew this story, looked at this spring, and associated Jesus’ actions with the historical and geographical context. Jesus is riding in like a king!

You see what I mean, I’m sure. The simple point is this: Do all you can to understand the culture and the geography of the story you are reading. As our instructor told us repeatedly, God included the details only when they were important. They are there to help you interpret the meaning God intended. He makes no mistakes in what He includes in His Word. It is up to you to do your best to try to find out what lies behind the Bible narrative.

When I was a boy, there was a relic of an earlier generation found in most of the Bible study rooms in church buildings everywhere. Almost without exception each room had a large set of maps on an easel ready for the teacher’s use. By then, the practice of searching out the location of Bible events was already out of vogue. Correspondingly, Bible literacy had been going down as well.

Reverse the trend by buying a suitable Bible atlas, or at least, by using the maps in the back of your Bible. Also, obtain a Bible tool to help you understand some of the background information. Try to imagine what the scene was like and just why God ordained to include locations and interesting cultural aspects to his Word. Trust me. These are there for a purpose. They may well unlock certain passages for you.

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