

What is Geography?

John Beck, Ph.D.

*Experience: Writer and permanent adjunct
faculty at Jerusalem University College, Israel.*



NT110 | Lesson 01

Biblical Geography Basics Basics Course

What Is Geography?

Although the Bible is not a geography book, it is a book filled with geography. This course is designed to introduce you to the geography that appears on the pages of our Bible. In this session, we will define geography.

© 2017 Christian University. All rights reserved.

Introduction

What an incredible treasure you and I have in this book! Between its covers, God has chosen to pull back the curtain of eternity and share some things about Himself and how He thinks. What a tremendous treasure it is! It's full of news about who God is, it's full of news about our forgiveness, and it's full of geography. Does that surprise you? I have to tell you it surprised me—and that despite the fact that I'm an outdoor person who loves to hike and backpack and mountain climb. For a long time my Bible reading lived in a very separate place from my outdoor life.

Well, I can tell you God had a plan to change that, and He did. He completely changed my perspective on integrating Bible and geography. And now this is how I feel: although the Bible is not a geography book, it is a book filled with geography. And my days are spent studying the geography of the Holy Land, speaking about it, writing about it, to make sure that I do all I can for myself and others to help them understand there is geography in my Bible.

And that's what this course is all about. It's designed to explore what I consider the absolutely vital relationship between what the Almighty has to say to me and the place from which He says it. In this course we're going to answer questions for you, like the following: What is geography? How did it become part of my Bible? And, most importantly, how can I integrate the geography of the Holy Land into my Bible reading? In this first session, we need to ask the question, though: What is geography? Because I want to make sure that all of us understand the term *geography* in the same way.

What Is Geography?

You see, for me, it's more than topography. It's more than city

What Is Geography?

Physical Geography

The **natural features** on the surface of the earth and the natural forces that affect them.



names. It's more than places on a map. Geography falls into three separate categories, which I'd like to define and illustrate for you. They are physical geography, human geography, and natural history. Each one is related, but different, to its neighbors. And the Bible has examples of all three within it. God uses examples of all three to communicate with us.

Physical Geography

Let's start with the concept of physical geography. Physical geography studies the natural features on the surface of the earth and the natural forces that affect them. There are a whole lot of things in this category of physical geography. Just look into this picture with me. In this photograph, you can see a whole bunch of the earth's surface, and you see mountains and canyons and plains and a lake, and it's all within the same view. That's physical geography.

But remember, it's not just the features on the surface of the earth. It's also the forces that affect it. These forces include things like lightning and rain and wind, and even the sort of event that took place recorded in this photograph—a tremendous destruction by an earthquake that occurred in the land of Israel. Physical geography involves the study of the natural features on the surface of the earth and the natural forces that impact them.

What Is Geography?

Human Geography

The way in which **human beings interact with and respond to** geography.

Growing food
Processing food
Securing water
Building homes
Traveling
Labeling locations
Burying family

Human Geography

Secondly, human geography: Human geography takes the human perspective on physical geography, and it studies the ways in which human beings interact with and respond to their geography. Take a look at this list, and this is an abbreviated list of some of the different ways human beings are shaped and react to their physical setting. The way we grow our food, the way we process our food, the way we secure our water, the way we build our homes, how and where we travel, the labels that we attach to locations, and at the close of life, even the way we bury our family members are all part of human geography.

Again, let's illustrate with some photos from the Holy Land. In the lands of the Bible, the way in which people built their homes varies from one region to the next—not just from one time period to the next, but from one region to the next, because the local

What Is Geography?

Human GeographyThe way in which **human beings interact with** and **respond to** geography.

What Is Geography?

Natural HistoryThe **plants, insects, trees, and animals** that inhabit a region.

What Is Geography?

Natural HistoryThe **plants, insects, trees, and animals** that inhabit a region.

resources and climate dictate there will be changes. I look at the way people process their food, and that means looking at some things archaeologists have uncovered for us, like this illustration of a saddle quern at work. A saddle quern is a very simple device that's been extracted from the earth in order to make sure that the wheat that's harvested can be ground into flour to bake the daily bread.

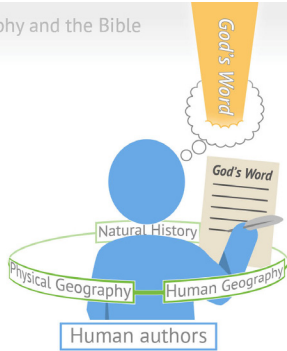
And then you've got large mechanisms like this olive crushing press, which is used to take the freshly harvested olives, smash their skin so the process of extracting their oil can begin, and then that oil that goes—among other places—into a lamp like this so that when evening comes, and all of that other activity of the family is complete, they can go into their home after sunset and extend their time together by lighting the oil lamp. So to physical geography we add human geography. Human geography is the ways in which human beings interact with and respond to geography.

Natural History

The third category of geography, by my definition, is natural history. And this takes us into the other living things with which we share the surface of the earth—the plants, the insects, the trees, the animals that inhabit a region. And if there's one thing that the Bible lands are full of, it's beautiful natural history. Some, like the Persian cyclamen, add a burst of springtime color to the landscape. The pomegranate tree has not only a beautiful flower but has this wonderful fruit that it offers in fall to those who harvest it. Look above the trees, and there you'll see soaring some of the most amazing raptors of the biblical world, like this griffon vulture, who has a wing span that is more than six feet from wing tip to wing tip. And there are other animals that occupy places human beings can't go because of their vertical steepness and difficulty, like the Nubian ibex that makes the mountainsides its home. And then there are some folks like this guy, the rock hyrax, who can just be cantankerous any place that it wants to be.

That, for me, is what geography is, and it might be more than you first imagined it to be. So I wanted to be sure that you understood that geography includes both physical geography, human geography, and natural history. That's the science side of this conversation, but let's go to the Bible side of this conversation.

Geography and the Bible



Geography and the Bible

You see, as the Lord set about sharing His thoughts with us and bringing Him into this treasured document we have, He used human beings whose lifestyle and thinking and vocabulary were shaped by where they lived. And I'd like to just give you a handful of examples of places where physical geography, natural history, and human geography come together to share God's Word with us.

Here are words from Psalm 125. Psalm 125 is a travel psalm, and it was used by those traveling the hills and ridges on their way to the temple at Jerusalem. Listen for the physical geography: "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."

Remember, physical geography isn't just the natural features on the surface of the earth, but the forces as well. When Mark talks about an experience that Jesus had with the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, he talks about one of those forces. Mark 4:37: "A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped."

To physical geography we add human geography. Remember, human geography is about how people interact with, adapt to, and relate to geography. One of the things that they do is till the soil, and the tool that they've used to do that is called a scratch plow. Jesus made reference to the use of that as He was teaching a young man who wanted to come and follow Him. Jesus wanted to urge this person to think very carefully, to think as carefully about following Jesus as someone had to think when they used this tool called the scratch plow. Luke 9:62: "Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'" What can I know about this tool—how it looked, how it was used—that might help me better understand what Jesus was saying?

And then we come to Luke 14:34 and what I think is one of the most puzzling statements of Jesus. Again, He's using human geography. Luke 14:34 and 35. Jesus said, "Salt is good." So far, so good. "Salt is good, but if salt loses its saltiness"—now I'm starting to scratch my head—"how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it's to be thrown out." And what do we do with a statement about salt like that, except

Geography and the Bible

Human Geography

The way in which **human beings interact with and respond to** geography.

Jesus replied, "No one who puts a **hand to the plow** and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62



Geography and the Bible

Human Geography

The way in which **human beings interact with and respond to** geography.

"**Salt** is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the **soil** nor for the **manure pile**; it is thrown out." Luke 14:34-35



Geography and the Bible

Natural History*The plants, insects, trees, and animals that inhabit a region.*

The righteous
will flourish
like a **palm tree**,
they will grow
like a **cedar of
Lebanon**.
Psalm 92:12



ask the questions: How did people in Jesus' day use salt, and what relationship did it have to a manure pile? Jesus' expectation is that our understanding of what He's saying will grow out of that soil of human geography.

And then there's natural history. Remember, natural history is the plants and the insects and the trees and the animals. And there are lots of mentions of those in Scripture as well. Psalm 92:12: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon." What could I know about the palm tree? What could I know about the cedar of Lebanon that might help me better understand what that psalm is talking about?

When Jesus was teaching, again, He very often involved landscape in His communication. And sometimes He talked about animals. In Matthew 8:20, "Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'" What do I have to understand about the habitat and the habits of the Palestinian red fox, or of some of the songbirds that inhabit the land of Palestine, that would help me understand what Jesus is saying about the challenges anyone who follows Him would face? Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but that's not like me; and Jesus says that's not going to be like you if you choose to follow Me. What I need to know has to do with natural history.

Conclusion

Again and again and again, page after page after page after page, the Lord has chosen to share His thoughts with us using geography. Here it is by way of review one more time. We'll find it on every page when we broaden our definition of geography to include physical geography, which again are the natural features on the surface of the earth and the natural forces that affect them. Human geography is the ways in which human beings interact with and respond to geography. And natural history: the plants, the trees, the insects, and the animals that inhabit a region.

I know that when you begin to look for geography in that way, you will find it on virtually every page of the Bible. There is geography in my Bible. This session is about certifying that reality. In the next session when we meet together, we're going to investigate why it is that geography makes such frequent appearances on the pages of the book in which God has revealed Himself to us.