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NT110 | Lesson 03

## Biblical Geography Basics

Basics Course

### Now What?

If you are a Bible reader who wants to give attention to every detail, it will be necessary to find a way to engage the Bible's geography. In this session, we will present a three-step plan to help you integrate the Bible's geography into your Bible study.

## Introduction

There is geography in my Bible. So far in our sessions together we've had a chance to figure out what geography is and explore why geography appears in our Bible. And maybe during all of that, you've begun to feel yourself coming to this moment—what I call your moment of decision. And that's what this session is about. Now what? What are you going to do now that you know there is geography in your Bible?

Well, one option—and it's not the one that I'm going to advocate or encourage you to pursue—is you could just continue to ignore it. After all, there is a lot of Bible to study and a lot of different ways to study the Bible without engaging the geography. But I suspect you've already begun to realize that comes with a price. You see, there's a risk for ignoring the geography. To the degree that we miss or misunderstand the geography in our Bibles, we may miss or misunderstand a part of what the Lord wants to share with us. Wow, that's a price I am not willing to pay. And so I feel compelled to do something about this. To take the geography God is using to talk to me and to come to a better understanding of it.

That's what this session is about. *It's the Now what do I do?* We're going to have several different suggestions for you here on how you might more effectively integrate geography into your Bible reading.

## Notice It

The first step you may not have expected. It's this: Notice it. Notice it. You know, we get into habits when we read. And part of our reading habit has to do with what we pay attention to. Let me illustrate. Here's a portion of Scripture that I suspect all of you have read before, Genesis 1:1–5, the very first words that

## Notice It

## Notice It

In **the** beginning God created **the** heavens and **the** earth. Now **the** earth was formless and empty, darkness was over **the** surface of **the** deep, and **the** Spirit of God was hovering over **the** waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that **the** light was good, and he separated **the** light from **the** darkness. God called **the** light "day," and **the** darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—**the** first day.  
Genesis 1:1-5

God shares with us. But I suspect you've never noticed how often the word *the* occurs in these verses. Well, let me help you. I've highlighted them now. And suddenly you're able to pay attention to something. You're able to notice something that had escaped your grasp before. If reading is a habit, we can change our habit. And we can begin to notice things that we hadn't seen before. And I'm not suggesting that you go through your Bible and identify all the places the word *the* occurs. But I am suggesting that one of the ways you might notice the geography in your Bible is to mark it.

You may choose to take your Bible and highlight or with different colored pens mark the different kinds of geography as you encounter them. Or you may choose to simply make a list, write down the different elements of geography that occur in a portion of your daily Bible reading.

## Notice It

So Joseph **went up** from **the town** of **Nazareth** in **Galilee** to **Judea**, to **Bethlehem** **the town** of **David**, because he **belonged** to the house and line of David.  
Luke 2:4

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Why is all that geography there?  
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But the first step is to notice what you've been missing even in familiar Bible passages like Luke 2:4: "So Joseph [also] went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David" (NIV). If I highlight the geography, look at what happens to that verse. The entire thing lights up. Joseph went up. That's human geography—travel, town of Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, town of David. I know you're beginning to ask questions. Why is all of that geography there? We'll get there in a moment. But the first step...the first step in integrating geography more effectively into your Bible reading is noticing its presence in the text.

## Learn About It

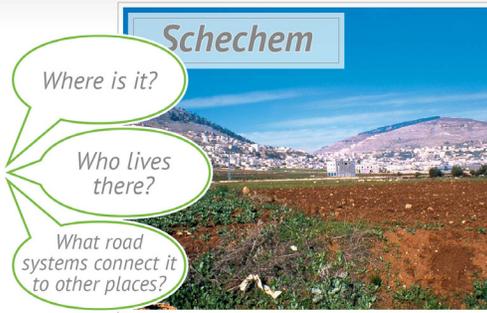


## Learn About It

Second step, learn about what you've highlighted or marked or noticed. While we may be familiar with geography in our local areas, and it's second nature for us to think about where cities are, what they're like, where roads go, this is not native knowledge to most of us as Bible readers. And this is the time to pull out the assistance I trust all of you have in your personal Bible reading library: your Bible atlas, your Bible dictionary, your Bible encyclopedia. All of these tools will help you.

Let me illustrate. So if you come to a place like Shechem, which is mentioned again and again and again in the Old Testament, you can begin to answer a set of questions about that place. Questions like *Where is it? Who lives there? What road systems connect it to other places?* When you run into the name of an animal like the

Learn About It



Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### A word about Bible trivia ...



TRIVIA TOPICS
Name That Book
Biblical Facts & Figures
Promised Land Geography
Judges & Kings
Historical Events
Blessings & Curses
Who Said It
Objects & Treasures
The Begats
Greek & Hebrew Words
Old Testament Laws
Prophecies & Promises

Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### Historical Geography

*"How does geography shape an event?"*

### Literary Geography

wild goat or Nubian ibex, you can make an effort to learn more about that creature. Questions like *Where does it live? What does it eat? How does it protect itself from predators?* And when you run into the idea of the plow, the scratch plow, you can begin to ask and answer critical questions like *What does it look like? How did it work? What special techniques were required in order to make sure that this tool was used effectively?* And little by little by little you will begin to build a deepening understanding of the geography that you find in your Bible. First two steps: number one notice it; second step learn about it. Third step, consider the roles geography can play.

## Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

Now, perhaps this is the time to say just a brief word about Bible trivia. I think Bible trivia games are great. They are fun and entertaining. But they also have a risk associated with them. They may begin to suggest to you that there are certain parts of God's Word that are less important than others. And geography can easily get lumped into that category of Bible trivia. If there is geography in my Bible, it's there to shape how I think and how I believe and how I hope. I don't want to ignore it or treat it as something unimportant. So I'm going to consider what roles it might be playing in communicating the truth of God to me.

Let me get you started in answering the question about what roles does geography play with maybe two new terms for you: historical geography and literary geography. These are ways in which people have created a link between Bible and place. Historical geography studies the influence of geography in shaping events. It answers the question, how does geography shape an event? Major urban centers are built where they are, capital cities are built where they are, often for geographical reasons near a coast, near transportation arteries. Battles are fought in one location rather than another for geographical reasons. And the Holy Spirit might be including reference to geography in the Bible to help us better understand a Bible event. That's putting historical geography to work. That's answering the question, how does geography shape an event?

Now let's take a look at an example in 1 Samuel 17:1–2. This is a familiar story that many people don't recognize when they read these verses, because they're so full of unrecognizable geography. "Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled

Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### Historical Geography

"How does geography shape an event?"

#### The Valley of Elah *David versus Goliath*



at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah." I could ask the historical geography question: How do those places impact the way the event is occurring? And if you join me in looking into this picture, you're going to be seeing the landscape in which this contest between David and Goliath occurred. That's what that geography introduces. This location has incredible strategic value. It has incredible economic value because of the agri-economy that's possible here. It's a place you did not want to lose if you were the Israelites who were living up in the mountains in the background. The reason that Saul and the Israelites are down fighting the Philistines in that battle that will eventually end with the contest with David and Goliath. It is fought where it is for geographical reasons.

Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### Historical Geography

"How does geography shape an event?"

### Literary Geography

But there's another side to this story. And that is the side of the story of literary geography. Historical geography has had a long history in addressing the relationship between Bible communication and place. But for all of its advantages, there's one great limitation. And that is by its very definition it's limited to event-based parts of the Bible: story form, narration, historical narrative. As soon as we leave that category of literature and get into the Psalms or the Proverbs or the Epistles, we've suddenly moved into an area of literature that historical geography doesn't work quite so well. And that's why we've added another category of inquiry.

We call it literary geography. Literary geography identifies the presence of geography in literature and considers its influence on readers. It answers the question, how does geography shape readers? That's a slightly different question than historical geography answers, but it can be used on exactly the same text. Let's go back to the story of David and Goliath and those verses that introduce it one more time. We're not going to change the setting. We're not going to change the geographical language. But we're going to look at it differently. Remember, historical geography was looking at the question, how does this place shape the event? Now literary geography is going to use that same data and come in and ask the question, how is this information being shared at the start of the story changing how I as a reader meet the event in story form?

And I think we can point to a couple of things right off the bat. One is that it deeply increases the tension we feel as a reader entering the story. This is a very serious moment in Israel's history, where a vital piece of landscape is at risk. What's more, it makes us

Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### Historical Geography

"How does geography shape an event?"

Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. 1 Samuel 17:1-2



### Literary Geography

"How does geography shape a reader?"

Consider the Roles Geography Can Play

### Historical Geography

"How does geography shape an event?"

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How is this information changing how I meet the event in story form?

### Literary Geography

"How does geography shape a reader?"

think much less of Saul. Saul is the individual who has been very unsuccessful in reversing the situation that is played out in the geography, and it makes us feel very good about David, because you see the geographical picture that's so awful from the Israelite perspective at the start of the story is completely reversed at the end of the story when the entire valley filled of Philistines is emptied of all but those Philistines who have died in battle.

Historical geography and literary geography—I'm not suggesting that you make a choice between the two. I'm suggesting that you consider the role of both. Is the Holy Spirit mentioning geography in a text in order for us to better understand the event but also how is the geography at work in this text shaping me as a reader? Historical geography, literary geography—both go to work on exactly the same text.

## Conclusion

So here's the answer to our question, now what? What do I do now that I notice that I have a holy book that's full of place? Well, first of all I can notice it rather than ignore it. Secondly, I can learn about it. And thirdly, I consider the roles that it might be playing in the text particularly using historical geography and literary geography as a form of inquiry.

That ends this session. In our next session we'd like to take you into three more ways in which you can engage the geography of the text. However, are you ready? There are going to be three advanced steps.