

# The **LANDS** of **THE BIBLE**

Places that Shape Scripture



**John A. Beck**



*introduction*

# The Lands of the Bible

Places that Shape Scripture

**W**e all have real needs; and the Bible tells a story that meets them. This is a story about Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, David, and Jesus. It is also a story about Bethlehem, Shechem, Jericho, and Jerusalem. Does God expect us to pay attention to places like these as much as we pay attention to the people? Yes! These places

do much more than provide a stage for God's plan of salvation. Geography actively shapes the message of the Bible. If we ignore it, we will miss some of what God is anxious to share with us. If we engage it, we will discover new and exciting insights into stories we thought we already knew. For the story that addresses my deepest needs is a story intimately bound to place. That is why there is geography in the Bible.

*John Beck*

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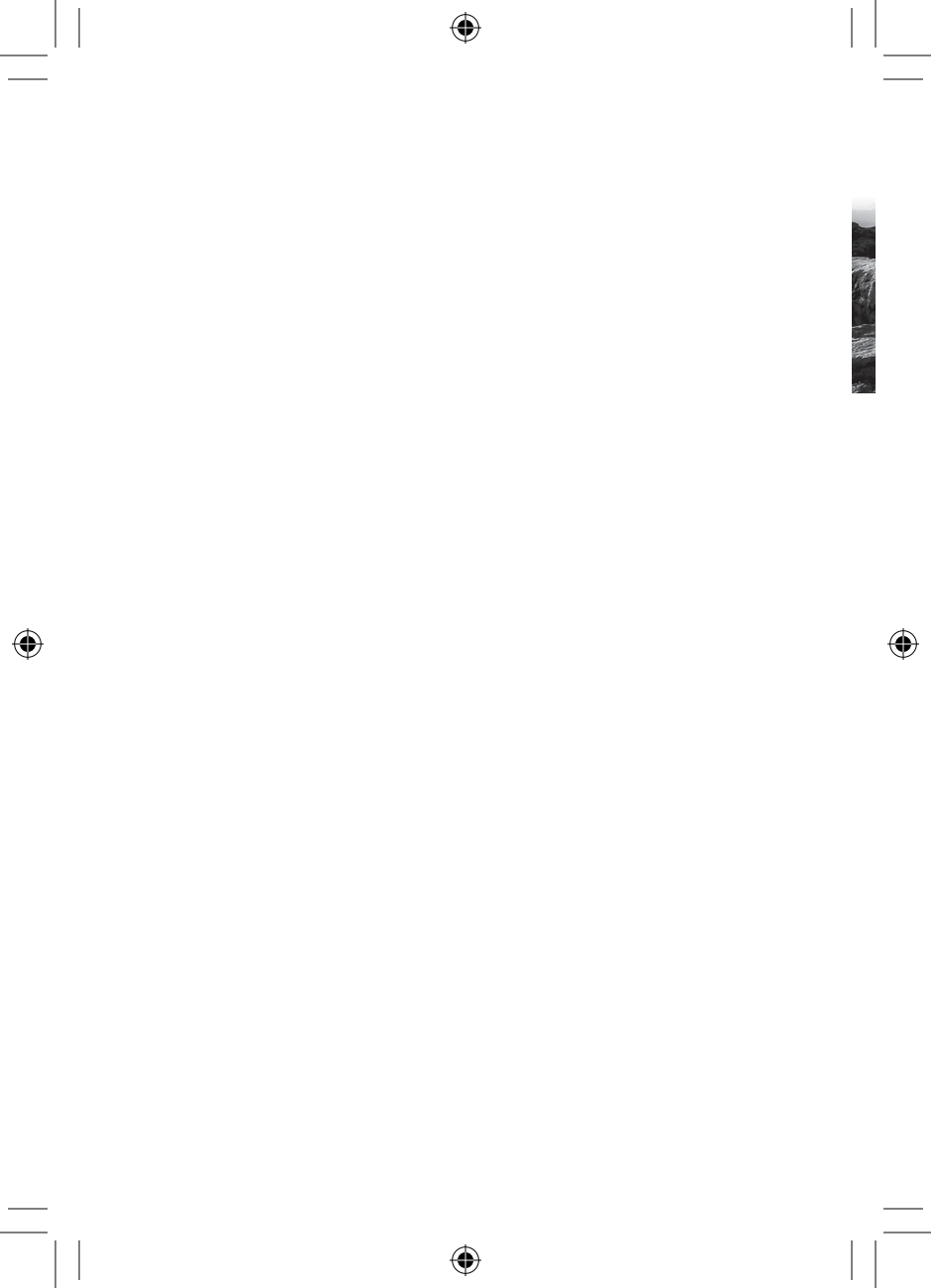
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*one*

## What Is Geography?

**A**t some level, I had always known it was there. I knew there was geography in the Bible. But truth be told, I became quite skilled at ignoring it. For those who know me now, this is surprising not only because Bible geography has become my passion but because they know me as a lover of the outdoors. As a child, I played outdoors more than indoors. I spent weekends working outside on my grandparents' dairy farm in Wisconsin. And during our summer vacations, my parents took us hiking for weeks at a time in the national parks of

the American west. I was and still am an outdoor adventurer who loves to camp, hike, and backpack.

How did someone like me become so skilled at ignoring the geography in his Bible? As a reader in this information-rich age, I quickly move past things I don't recognize or understand to things that I do.

The Bible is full of people we recognize and places we don't. It is full of stories we

love and places we skip. If the geography in the Bible was geography with which I was familiar, I would have had a harder time overlooking it. Of course, this is not the fault of the Bible's authors and poets. They simply spoke about things they knew well. But for me it was foreign territory. I did not know where Jerusalem was in contrast to Jericho. I did not know the difference between the Judean Wilderness and the Negev. I did not know what a threshing floor looked like or how it was used.

And I could not have told you about the habits and habitat of the Palestinian red fox to save my life. So I happily read past the Bible's mention of all these without realizing that I was paying a terrible price. God was still speaking when I stopped paying attention. I had been treating the geography in the Bible as if it were



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trivia. And if there is one thing I have come to understand, there is no trivia in the Bible. God is using every word to shape my understanding, attitude, and faith, even if that happens to be geography.

I am different now. The Lord had a plan to bring together my love of the outdoors and my love for the Bible. I came to see that although the Bible is not a geography book it is a book filled with geography. That realization brought me to a bit of a crisis. There is geography in the Bible! Now what? That is what this booklet is about. It is a product of a conversion, the geographical conversion of my Bible reading. Now I am a Bible reader who enthusiastically looks for the geography in Scripture and who does all he can to help others recognize and enjoy it as well. I hope to intrigue if not infect you with a similar passion to pursue the way in which the Lord speaks to us using geography.



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Ironically the very word, *geography*, might interrupt our path forward so let's make sure we understand it

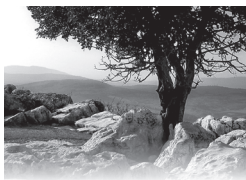
in the same way. We can divide geography into three categories: physical geography, human geography, and natural history. Physical geography includes the natural features on the surface of the earth and the raw forces which act upon them—subjects like geology, topography, and hydrology as well as forces like precipitation, wind, and earthquakes. In Psalm 125:1–2, the inspired poet mentions this type of 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.

Human geography (one dimension of cultural study) changes the focus slightly. It investigates how human beings interact with and respond to geography during the course of their lives. It is the story of how people grow and process their food, secure water, raise their livestock, build their homes, travel, and give familiar places their names. Because the Bible tells the story of real people, this dimension of geography shows up frequently. We encounter the names of towns and regional labels. We meet people who are digging wells, traveling, and plowing farm fields. Some of those experiences parallel our own. But more often than not, it is the differences that cause confusion. For example, consider Jesus's words which he expects us to understand how salt was used by his listeners. "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).

Then there is natural history. This takes into account the other life forms with which humans share the surface of the earth, particularly the plants, the trees, the insects, and the animals.



*Geography includes the features and forces on the surface of the earth, the many ways in which human beings use and adapt to those features and forces, and all the other living things on the surface of the earth.*

The Bible’s authors regularly crossed paths with other living things, living things that also inhabit the pages of our Bible. For example, the inspired poet compares the life of a believer to two types of trees. “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon” (PSALM 92:12). And when Jesus warns a would-be follower of the uncertainties that attend following him to the east side of the Sea of Galilee, he cautioned, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (MATTHEW 8:20). You see, geography is more than place names and certainly more than maps. Geography includes the features and forces on the surface of the earth (physical

geography), the many ways in which human beings use and adapt to those features and forces (human geography), and all the other living things with whom human share a place on the surface of the earth (natural history).



two

## Where Can I Find Geography in My Bible?

**W**hen you picked up this booklet, you might have thought it would be about the geographically overburdened pages of our Bible like those we find in the second half of Joshua. In such cases, little else seems to fit on the page except the place names. As Joshua describes the borders of each land parcel given to the tribes of Israel, we meet sentence after sentence that sounds like this. “Their southern boundary

started from the bay at the southern end of the Dead Sea, crossed south of Scorpion Pass, continued on to Zin and went over to the south of Kadesh Barnea. Then it ran past Hezron up to Addar and curved around to Karka. It then passed along to Azmon and joined the Wadi of Egypt, ending at the Mediterranean Sea” (JOSHUA 15:2-4). To be honest these are the kind of pages that challenge even the best biblical geographers.

But when I say there is geography in the Bible, I am not just talking about pages like this in Joshua. I am talking about the chapters and verses we know quite well or at least think we know quite well. Take for example the story of David and Goliath. Of all the Bible stories in the Old Testament, this is among the most familiar to Bible readers. They know about Saul, David, and Goliath. They know about Goliath’s armor and David’s sling. But when I ask how the story begins, they almost always get it wrong. Would you? Here are the opening words. “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



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Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them. A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp” (1 SAMUEL 17:1–4). That is a lot of geography! What is more, it has been placed at the very beginning of the story where writers put important information meant to influence our reading of all that follows. Have you included these verses in your study of this story?



***Ironically the very thing we have been ignoring is actually pretty difficult to miss.***

The same could be said of Psalm 23, the most well-known of the psalms, which is also filled with geography.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake (PSALM 23:1–3).

Perhaps you are beginning to feel the discomfort I felt years ago. When I take a close look at Scripture, it is hard to find a single page without the geography I had been disregarding. It appears

both in the Old and New Testaments. It is evident in every literary genre from story, to proverb, to epistle. Ironically the very thing we have been ignoring is actually pretty difficult to miss.

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## Why Is There Geography in My Bible?

**W**hen we begin to recognize the great amount of geography in our Bible, it naturally leads to the question of why it is there. The answer is found both in the way God chose to share his thoughts with us and the intimate link between the Bible's central message and land. Let's start with the process God used to get his thoughts to us. The Holy Spirit moved the thoughts of God through the minds and hands of human beings who put those thoughts into writing. That means there is a human side to the Bible. And

if there is one thing we know about human beings, we use a great deal of geography when we speak with one another. Who we are, how we think, and how we most naturally communicate is intimately connected to where we are from. I can easily spot it in my own life and communication. I have both a snowblower and a lawnmower in my garage. During the winter I talk about “lake effect snow,” and during the summer I enjoy “lake effect cooling.” All are a product of where I live near the Great Lakes.

The inspired authors and poets of the Bible lived, thought, and spoke like people rooted not only in a specific time but also in a given place. If we had the opportunity to hear them speaking during an everyday conversation, they would sound like where they were from. They would have spoken about places like Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They certainly spoke to their friends and family about salt and soil, mountains and rivers, winter rains and summer dewfall. When God used people like this to write down his thoughts, he did not ignore this dimension of their communication. He used their native languages, individual writing styles, and even their geography when speaking to us. During this process, God kept the Bible from human error, but not geography. When you think of it that way, it would actually be more surprising if geography *weren't* in the Bible.

But there is a more to it than that. There is also geography in the Bible because the promises of God given to Abram and the hope of forgiveness from sin

were intimately connected to place. The Lord visited Abram when he was 75 years old and told him it was time to move. The Lord relocated Abram and his family to Canaan because this family and this land were part of a divine plan to bring salvation to the world. Three promises live at the heart of the Old Testament (GENESIS 12:1–9): 1. Abram’s family would become a great nation. 2. This nation would be given a land of their own (later identified as Canaan). 3. And finally the Lord promised that he would restore the blessing lost in the Garden of Eden through one of his descendants who lived in this land. In the New Testament we meet this

descendant who lived and died in the Promised Land; his name was Jesus. However, before he was born, believers in the Old Testament paid particular attention to the parts of the threefold promise they could see and touch. They did not have the cross and empty tomb; but they did have family and land. These fulfilled promises were like a down payment on the third, the Savior from sin. That is why we see so much attention paid to these promises in the Old Testament. And that is why place plays such a



*There is also geography in the Bible because the promises of God given to Abram and the hope of forgiveness from sin were intimately connected to place.*

prominent role in the Bible. The story of salvation is a story of place.

There is one last place where geography plays a role in the Bible. In Acts 1, Jesus tells his disciples that after the Holy Spirit comes, they will “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (ACTS 1: 8). The actual location of the Promised Land (Israel) makes that mission possible. Geography expedites the spread of the gospel. That is because Israel is a land-bridge that connected the people of Asia, Africa, and Europe. From Israel the message of Jesus could easily spread to the corners of the earth.

So it is not just the natural tendency of human beings to include geography in their communication. The core message of the Bible demands that geography be part of this sacred text, a book whose focus is not just people but place.



*The core message of the Bible demands that geography be part of this sacred text, a book whose focus is not just people but place.*



*four*

## Now What?

**T**here is geography in the Bible. To the degree that I miss it or misunderstand it, I may miss or misunderstand something God is saying. That is a price I am unwilling to pay. And it compels every fully-engaged Bible reader to have a little geographer in them. Now what? What can I do to become that geographer who engages the geography of the Bible in more meaningful ways?

The first step is as easy as it is hard. *Notice* it. As you read your Bible, notice when geography appears on the page. This is difficult because it means changing a habit, and old habits can be hard to break. One way to break the habit of ignoring the geography is to actively look for and identify every element of geography

you meet during your Bible reading. Here you may consider marking the mention of geography in your Bible or creating a “geography sheet” for each chapter. Even if you cannot pronounce the name of a place, are puzzled by the mention of a tool, or cannot picture the animal, the first step is to notice. In the process, you will discipline yourself to see what had previously escaped your attention. Let me also encourage you to be patient with yourself and the process. Changing habits takes time, and the habit of how we read the Bible is no exception. It will take time. But I can assure you that with effort and a bit of time, you can become someone who notices the geography they had been missing. But noticing is just the first step.

Once you have begun to recognize the geography in the Bible, the next step is to learn more about what you are seeing. This is the place to put your Bible atlas and your Bible dictionary to work. Your goal is to step into the sandals of the biblical authors, poets, and those who first heard or read their words. You want to see the outdoor world of the Bible as they did. That means learning as much as you can about the geography you have discovered by asking questions like these. Where is Shechem located? What



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roads connect it to other places? Who lives there? What does a millstone look like? Who used it and how? What is a rock hyrax, where did it live, and what did it do all day?▮ That's a lot of questions and it may seem like a distraction from the meaning of the text. But don't become overwhelmed by the task and remember, the authors of the Bible used these places, animals, and things because it helped convey the message of God. There is a lot of outdoors in the Bible. So start with the things that interest you most and get ready to feel the reward. You will find that the Bible is very much at home in this land; and you will find yourself becoming increasingly at home in your Bible.

▮ *The value of **asking questions** is that it allows us to see more accurately what image or comparison the Bible author was making. Rather than inferring what a rock hyrax must have been like, we can know and knowing brings a new depth to the text. It's like being able to envision a location when someone mentions it because we have been there.*

Learning geography also means learning how people thought and felt about a place. We call these its connotations.▮ We know that places have such connotations from our own experience with language. Places like Gettysburg, the World Trade Center, or the Berlin Wall all evoke different memories and different feelings within us. It is the geographical backstory of places like this which allow phrases like "Remember the Alamo" to achieve their full power. Every culture has places that evoke strong memories and strong

feelings. The same is true for those living in Bible times. For example the mention of Babylon or Sodom evoked strong negative emotions. By contrast Jerusalem is a place associated with feelings and hope. The risk for us is that we flatten these place names, treating them as neutral elements in the text rather than as expressions with connotations that provoke powerful memories and emotions. We may not experience the same connections as the original readers of the Bible when places like these are mentioned. But our reading comes alive when we can at least know that the mention of a place would have raised strong emotions or mental images for the reader.

▶ A **connotation** is an idea or feeling that is brought up by a word or idea in addition to its primary meaning. July 4th is just a day on the calendar. But in the U.S. if someone mentions “the 4th,” (no need to even mention a month), many ideas immediately spring into the mind of the hearer—the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, fireworks, parades, and barbecues. That is connotation.

Once we have learned more about a place and the connotations linked to it, it is time to assess the role(s) being played by the geography mentioned in a particular verse or set of verses. It may be that the author is attempting to shed light on why events were evolving as they were. Place can have a powerful influence on events, and historical geographers make it their business to study this dimension of the geography. Consider again the first geography-

laden verses of the story about David and Goliath (1 SAMUEL 17:1–3). The geography of these verses transport us to the Elah Valley. This is no ordinary valley in Israel but a unique valley that had both economic and military value. At its mention, the historical geographer goes to work considering how control of this valley would have provoked a war between Israel and Philistia and why the battle was being waged in the way the story describes.

Another tool we can use to assess the role of geography is literary geography. While historical geography investigates the role of geography in shaping events, literary geography investigates the role geography plays in shaping readers. This is a particularly helpful way of thinking about geography when we are reading a non-event based portion of God's Word like proverbs, or psalms, or epistles. But it is also helpful in reading historical narrative as well. Consider the repeated mention of Bethlehem in the familiar Christmas stories of Matthew 2 and Luke 2. In these two chapters, Bethlehem (or the town of David) is mentioned nine times. If the point of the Holy Spirit was to help us recall that Micah had promised the Savior would be born in Bethlehem (5:2), then once or twice would



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have been enough. Literary geography asks the next question: How does the repeated mention of Bethlehem affect the reader of the Christmas story? The answer comes when we do a little digging into the mention of Bethlehem in the Old Testament. We will quickly find it to be a place associated with solutions. When the landless family of Naomi and Ruth faced the threat of hunger, the Lord offered a solution in the form of Boaz in Bethlehem. And when the troubled nation of Israel was struggling under the leadership of their first king, Saul, the Lord offered a solution in their second king, David, who lived in Bethlehem. And as the entire world struggled with sin, all eyes turned to Bethlehem for the biggest solution of all, the one offered in the birth of Jesus. By repeatedly mentioning Bethlehem in the story of Jesus's birth, both Matthew and Luke cast the story of Jesus in the warm glow of the rescue and solutions of the past, and invite their readers to understand Jesus's arrival as yet another in a series of solutions associated with this town.

No matter if geography was your favorite class in school or not, every fully-engaged Bible reader has to have a little geographer in them. What can you do to become that geographer? Notice the geography that appears in the verses you read, take steps to learn more about it, and then investigate what roles geography is playing. A stronger set of geographical skills is not the only tool you will need as a Bible reader, but it is an important one. And what is more, it is a skill that anyone can develop.



## *five* **Examples**

**L**et's explore the ways being a geographer changes our reading of two portions of God's Word, one from the Old Testament and one from the New, one a piece of poetry and the other a story from Jesus's life.

Psalm 125 speaks to believers who feel at risk. It offers them the assurance of the Lord's enduring presence and protection but communicates those assurances using geography. This psalm is one of the "Songs of Ascents." These are songs that God's people would sing as they traveled up and through the mountains to Jerusalem in order to worship

at the temple. The mountains through which they walked become a symbol for the Lord's enduring protection.

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 (PSALM 125:1–2).

The psalm likens those who trust in the Lord with the destination of the pious travelers. They are headed for Jerusalem, which is also known as Mount Zion. Just the mention of these names is comforting. By contrast to cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, which have negative connotations, Jerusalem is the city which God chose as his own, a place lavished with divine love (PSALM 132:13–14). How reassuring it is to hear that the Lord thinks of me like he thinks of his cherished Jerusalem!

But how are God's people like this city? First they are protected. In ancient as well as modern times, capital cities are not just seats of government but symbols of a country's independence. That is why an invading army would eventually target a nation's capital city. Its defeat spelled the end of that nation's autonomy. This is the reality that makes Jerusalem such a tempting target and that makes its natural defenses so cherished.

Ancient empires that came into the Promised Land did so using the most easily traveled road that was located on the coastal plain. Jerusalem



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Jerusalem!*

was about twenty miles east of that road within easy reach of enemy soldiers if it were not for the mountains. A mountain range with high summits, steeply sloped sides, and narrow valleys stood between Jerusalem and the coastal plain. These are the mountains that surround Jerusalem, mountains that were hard to penetrate and that protected the Holy City from harm. And this is the geographical reality integrated into the reassuring words of

Psalm 125, words pilgrims sang as they negotiated those very same mountains en route to the holy city. Just as Jerusalem is protected from harm by the mountains that surround it so the Lord's own are protected from those who wish to harm them by the Lord who surrounds them.

This beautiful image is reassuring, but only reassuring as long as the protective barrier holds up. Here the inspired poet of Psalm 125 references the geology of the Judean mountains to assure that the protection offered will never go away. The mountains that surround Jerusalem are mostly composed of a very hard limestone (Cenomanian) which erodes at the very leisurely rate of just one centimeter (.4 inches) every 1,000 years. When we think of that

in terms of those coming to Jerusalem to worship, they are traveling through mountains that never change in one's lifetime, little more in the lifetimes of the family members who had traveled the same trails for generations. That is powerfully reassuring. The protection that the Lord offers does not fade or tarnish but like the mountains that surround Jerusalem, it is a protection that will never expire.

Like a capital city, we are targets of the Lord's enemies. In times of trouble when we feel vulnerable to attack, our own limitations become all too apparent. It is at those moments in particular when the Lord invites us to look beyond ourselves to the One who is capable of doing so much more than we can ask or imagine. But how good is his protection? Will it hold up? The answers to those questions come to us from the dusty trails walked by those traveling to worship in Jerusalem. God's people are as precious to him as is the holy city of Zion. Just like the protective shield of mountains between Jerusalem and invading armies, so the Lord has placed himself between us and those who mean us harm. And just



*The protection that the Lord offers does not fade or tarnish but like the mountains that surround Jerusalem, it is a protection that will never expire.*

as those mountains along the trail never change, so the protection the Lord has promised us will endure long beyond the time we walk this earth. That is the comfort the Lord extends to us in this psalm—reassurance that takes on greater clarity when we understand the geography used to shape the message. Understanding not just the mountains but how they related to Jerusalem gives us a deeper understanding of the significance of what the psalmist says about the Lord's protection.

Now let's move to the New Testament and a story from the life of Jesus. In these few verses, we will see that both human geography and natural history play a role in understanding what Jesus is asking of his disciples:

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.

Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (MATTHEW 8:18–20).

Where people choose to live is one dimension of human geography. In this case, what Jesus is saying is related to where people chose to live around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is preparing to move from the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee to the east side of the Sea of Galilee, crossing over to the "other side." At just this moment, a man asks Jesus if he can come along. Jesus asks him to give it careful thought

because this move was different than others Jesus had made. The northwest side of the Sea of Galilee was home to people who resembled this teacher of the law. They were observant Jews with a background in the Old Testament. It was easier for Jesus to introduce himself to them, and he was more likely to receive the offer of accommodations and a meal on this side of the lake. The other side of the lake was settled primarily by Gentiles. Their background was in paganism, not the Old Testament. This would make it more difficult for Jesus to explain who he was. And it was less likely that these non-Jewish listeners would offer Jesus and his followers food and a place to stay.

So when the man asks to follow Jesus, he does not say, "No!" But he does want him to think carefully before making the commitment. To foster his thinking, Jesus compares his life to the life known by two members of the animal kingdom, birds and foxes. Both appear to have more secure living conditions than Jesus.

Birds build nests primarily as the home for raising their young. By locating a nest high above predators or disguising it carefully in the natural surroundings, the parent birds are offering their young security. This contrasts sharply with Jesus's life. While he has a town he calls his own (MATTHEW 9:1), he has not built a home of his own. He appears to have stayed in the homes of others when invited or slept outside when the offer did not come.

Foxes dig dens. Jesus is talking about the red fox

of Palestine, which employs multiple dens to create a secure store of food for its family. While the fox will dig a den in which to hide and raise its kits,



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they will dig a number of other dens near this residence in which to cache their food supply. If any one of their food storage dens is compromised, it does not mean the fox family does without food because the backup dens will be uncompromised. Jesus's food plan looks very different. He does not own land on which to grow his own grain, tend his own animals, or even work for a landowner to receive a share in the harvest. Instead Jesus relies upon the generosity of others to provide a meal for him. We can presume there are times he went without.

Jesus uses both of these pictures from the animal kingdom in order to help the man intending to follow him understand what he is in for if he follows Jesus to the other side of the lake. On the best of days among his own Jewish people, Jesus did without a home of his own or without knowing where dinner might come from that night. Now he was getting ready to cross

over to the other side where things would not get more certain only less.

When Jesus uses language like this, he is not saying that we his followers need to do without a place to live or a plan to provide food for our families. But he is asking us to adopt a perspective on life. He is asking us be ready to cross over into settings that are less friendly and familiar to us in order to share the news of forgiveness. And when we do, he is asking us to be ready, if necessary, to do without things that others may view as normal and even necessary for living. That is the lesson Jesus is teaching. And notice again that in doing so, he is teaching by using elements of human geography and natural history.

I have always known that there was geography in the Bible. I simply became quite skilled at ignoring it. I am different now. That conversion has forever shaped the way I read and study my Bible. I love looking for, learning about, and discovering the ways in which God has spoken using geography. As the trail divides here and we part company, I hope that this marks not the end but a new beginning for you as the reader of this sacred book. Just remember, the Bible may not be a geography book; but it is a book filled with geography. 🌿