

Historical Geography of the Gospels

This article pressed together geographical, archeological and scriptural evidence to shine a light on certain New Testament events beginning with the birth of Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke agree that the birthplace of Jesus was Bethlehem and that was also the ancestral home of King David. Joseph and Mary initially came from Nazareth but there seems to be little known about the town of Nazareth. Joseph and Mary fled back to Nazareth when Herod threatened to murder the young male children and that is where Jesus spent his childhood as documented in the Gospel of Matthew.¹

The next geographic designation is the wilderness but other than the designation wilderness, little else is known to define the region or identify its' location. This is where Jesus begins his ministry with his baptism by John the Baptist and the Bible depicts the site of the baptism of Jesus as Bethany. However, no other documentation exists to support that location. The author notes that the area of Bashan fits with Jesus' continued journey to Bethsaida following the baptism and would have been near the location of the baptism.² There is also support in rabbinic literature as to the location of the upper Jordan River, which is in the area near Bashan, as a desirable place for baptism as opposed to the lower Jordan. This was all new to me.

The article documents Jesus' travel between Nazareth and Capernaum with remarkable specificity as well as various cities around the Sea of Galilee which he travelled to during his ministry. I did not know that much of what we know about Jewish settlements in that region is first mentioned in the Bible such as the city of Tiberias. Tiberias is only mentioned in one gospel

¹ The Gospel of Matthew is the only documentation as to Herod's threat to murder young male children.

² Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*, (Jerusalem, Carta the Israel Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 2007), 224.

which may be due to the fact that it was built on a cemetery and was considered ritually defiled until it was purified later and became the location for the Jerusalem Talmud.³

Jesus spent time in Capernaum which is mentioned repeatedly in the Gospels. There has been extensive excavation in Capernaum with some ruins identified as the church built on the site of the house of Peter. What I found most remarkable was that some of the evidence supported the coexistence of Christians and Jews contradicting the “well-know” animosity believed to exist during this time.

While the author performs a thorough examination as to where Jesus encountered the demoniac eliminating the cities thought to have been the location, his conclusion that the name of the actual location may have been exchanged with better know cities makes literary sense and a logical conclusion since there is evidence of this type of literary device used in other parts of Scripture. It is also interesting that the region of Decapolis seems unknown in Jesus’ day but is used in one Gospel which may be evidence of the use of a designation more familiar in later times to describe the earlier location.

In reading the discussion of the last days of Jesus and how archeology has helped define where Jesus was during that time, some might say that Scripture is incorrect in describing when Jesus was taken to Pilate who was residing at the Praetorium, long thought to be the Antonia Fortress. But excavation has eliminated that site and evidence now points to Herod’s castle which was also known as the Praetorium and was the residence of the governor. Such relatively current discoveries emphasize how important archeology is not only for verification but to encourage study of the history of that time to complete a more accurate picture.

³ Rainey and Notley, *Carta’s New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*, 228.

The Gospels do not necessarily complement each other in their descriptions of who condemned Jesus. However, this can be understood to be the result of literary license common in that time. As seen in the Jewish Midrash as well as other intertestamental literature, the mention of an event or location is then expanded by another author.⁴ This would explain the differentiation in who took part in the condemnation and who did not. Since the Jews continue to be condemned for the death of Jesus, this kind of analysis is critical in uncovering how events unfolded in this important time in history.

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Bibliography

Rainey, Anson F. and Notley, R. Steven, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*, Jerusalem, Carta the Israel Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 2007.

⁴ Rainey and Notley, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*, 238.