

Most believers, whether scholars or laypeople, profess to some acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God. They trust and believe that God is ruling in the world, whether in visible ways or quietly behind the scenes. This leads inevitably to the embracing of the doctrine of God's providence. Henry Thiessen defines providence as, "the continuous activity of God whereby He makes all the events of the physical, mental, and moral realms work out His purpose, and this purpose is nothing short of the original design of God in creation."¹ Yet it is interesting that although many of these same people who profess His providence in all these areas, fail to also acknowledge that it is this same providence which ordained the people of Israel to live in a land located at the crossroads of three continents. A land which has a variety of climactic, geological, topographical, and geographic peculiarities. Are all these simply a matter of happenstance or does providence contribute to the intentionality of the shaping of the land as well? Speaking about this exact motif, Barry Beitzel writes,

"namely, that God prepared the Promised Land for His chosen people to the same degree that He prepared His chosen people for the promised land...it was a *certain kind of land* that was selected and prepared by God, positioned at a *particular spot*, and designed to elicit a *specific and appropriate response*... He [God] has been at work in both history and geography."²

Acknowledging that God is at work in both history and geography, it is quite logical to proceed to the question of whether geography played a critical role in the history of Jesus' earthly ministry as transmitted to us in the gospel narratives. Do we assume that Jesus, who we recognize as the creator of this world, did not seek to take advantage of the

¹ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 122.

² Beitzel, *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands (MABL)*, p. 27.

exact landscapes He created? To be consistent, we must respond with an unequivocal negative. This paper will seek to elucidate the ways in which Jesus used or deliberately exploited his environmental surroundings for the sake of illuminating His teachings. After a brief restatement of the omissions in this area, I will begin highlighting these illuminations in the chronological gospel of John and then proceed to a few in the Synoptic gospels.

It is paramount that we must again highlight that there are still many scholars that minimize or completely ignore the role that geography plays in the interpretation of Scripture. To demonstrate this, we must ask ourselves what we find when perusing the Biblical commentaries available. We will find quite readily those commentaries labeled as: theological, philological, expository, application, and even archaeological. There has been a negligible attempt to bring the geographical dimension to the Scripture that is certainly warranted. Why are we so soon to dismiss or diminish the fact that God operates in time and *space*? Further, one might agree to the premise that geographical considerations are necessary when dealing with the plethora of place names mentioned in the Old Testament, but will quietly disregard any contribution geography might play in understanding the New Testament teachings. Not to say that there hasn't been writings that highlight or give the history of archaeological place names in the New Testament, but this is missing the point. We must understand that Jesus journeyed hundreds if not thousands of miles in His itinerant ministry throughout the land of Israel. Yet we see that Jesus at times travels scores of miles in seemingly inefficient ways just to give a teaching at a particular geographical location. We see this exact thing at Caesarea Philippi which

will be discussed later. New Testament Scholar Sean Freyne comments on the paucity of material when he writes,

“The obvious explanation for these omissions in the past is that Biblical scholarship was mainly concerned with the divine-human message of the Biblical books. Salvation history was the dominant focus for various theologies of both the Old and New Testaments, produced by Christian scholars, and the natural world was of no particular interest or importance within the dominant European theological paradigms of the twentieth century...more recently the various social scientific models employed by Biblical scholars for understanding the world of Jesus have largely concentrated on economic and social factors, failing to take account of human connectivity with the eco- and bio-spheres.”³

I will grant that Freyne’s main thrust here is his belief that Jesus was seeking to portray a more environmentally-minded consciousness through His teachings. Freyne’s focus is on Jesus’ respect for the natural environment. His point is still well made in that there hasn’t been much emphasis in any form (even Freyne’s particular belief) on the geographical contributions to exegetical or hermeneutical studies. Beitzel agrees on its importance when he writes, “At the outset, it is imperative for one to see geography not as a superfluity that can be arbitrarily divorced from Biblical interpretation.”⁴ It is my goal in this paper to follow through with this imperative. Namely, to highlight interpretive elucidations from a study of the geographical environment (including geographical location) of Jesus’ teachings.

³ Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean*, p. 25.

⁴ Beitzel, *MABL*, p. 3.

Let's begin in the gospel of John. Scholars note that apart from the feasts (Passover, Tabernacles, and Dedication) mentioned in the gospel of John, the time period of Jesus' earthly ministry might continue to remain elusive. Another dimension given by John is a *somewhat* straightforward presentation of Jesus' geographical travels. It is well known that that John is not interested in providing just another gospel, but instead has chosen 7 pre-resurrection signs and one post-resurrection sign (miraculous catch of fish in 21:6-11) to persuade his readers to "believe that Jesus is the Christ." He makes use of hyperbole when he mentions that Jesus had done numerous signs that, if written down, the whole world wouldn't be able to contain them.

Our geographical study of John begins in his gospel where he writes stating that John the Baptist was baptizing in Bethany beyond the Jordan (1:28). Although John doesn't record the actual baptism of Jesus, he records the baptist's recounting of the event. He also tells us that Jesus was present at this location beyond the Jordan. Most scholars today universally reject the location of the baptism as Bethbara as being a fabricated description by Origen. R. Steven Notely writes that the proper term Βηθανία (*Bethania*) should be equated with the Old Testament region of Bashan in the Transjordan. He quotes Conder as confirming this interpretation with the Targumim as well as the phrase "beyond the Jordan" occurring in the LXX equivalent when speaking of Bashan (Deut. 4:47; Josh 9:10). One final comment by Notely mentions that even in the Rabbinic writings, the waters *above* the Sea of Galilee were preferable for ritual cleansing since the waters of the Yarmuk and Jordan had questionable purity due to them being "mixed waters."⁵ What's interesting about these comments is that it places the baptism of Jesus northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Could this also be why Jesus found

⁵ Notely, *The Sacred Bridge*, pp. 350-51.

Philip, who was from the NE city of Bethsaida so close? It is possible if this theory holds true, but other scholars still maintain a southern location. Either location really is insignificant in highlighting the geographical illumination to Jesus' first public miracle. For the sake of this paper I am not going to differentiate greatly between a miracle and public teaching. We know that Jesus used his miracles as instruments of teaching as well as his public discourses (cf. John 11:15). Jesus' first miracle happens in Cana where Jesus turns the water into wine. If we assume a southern or even southeastern (of Lake Chinnereth) view, we envisage Jesus departing the baptismal site most likely skirting the city of Scythopolis, proceeding through Nazareth and Sepphoris up to Cana. Scythopolis is well known for being one of the Decapolis cities with pagan temples. It is known to have at least three monuments high on the central acropolis dedicated to Zeus, Dionysus, and Asclepius.⁶ Whether Jesus and his disciples passed through Scythopolis the day before the miracle at Cana misses the main point of its proximity and importance in the Galilee. The cult of Dionysus was well known throughout the Hellenistic cities of the Bible lands. It is quite interesting to mention that the more devout followers made claims that on his feast day, water turned into wine at his temple in the west.⁷ The potential for a poignant lesson was learned that day at a wedding in the Galilean town of Cana. So close to the pagan Hellenistic cities surrounding the area was the miracle that Jesus used to show Himself as superior to the pagan gods. It was evident that the miracle performed began to produce immediate fruit. Jesus manifested His glory and the disciples believed in Him (2:11).

⁶ BAR 16:04 [1990].

⁷ Schein, *Following the Way*, 31.

Our next geographical illumination in John has Jesus traveling from Jerusalem on His way back to the Galilee (John 4) through the region of Samaria. We are told that Jesus spent time in the region of Aenon near Salim where the Baptist ministered. After this brief stay, Jesus then departed to the city of Sychar where he has His interaction with the woman at the well. After their discussion concerning living water the disciples return as she heads to the city to tell of her meeting with Jesus. She returns with those she has recruited to come see first-hand the “prophet who told me all I ever did”. As this group of people are approaching the city, Jesus speaks to His disciples that “behold the fields, for they are already white for harvest” (4:35). It is interesting that the chronology would put this soon after the Passover (early May) when “in the heat of May afternoon fields are white from drying wheat, and flowers and grass wither on the hills.”⁸ The lesson is clear. Just as the farmers crops are readying themselves for harvest, so too are the people of Sychar ready for harvest. It is also important to note that the spiritual sowing that the Baptist has been doing just east of here (surely to include Samaritans) is now ready to be harvested by others who did not participate in the planting.

Jesus continues on his trip through Samaria back to Cana where the water was turned to wine. John tells us that a royal official from Capernum has heard that Jesus has returned from Judea. He also heard about the signs and wonders that He did while in Judea. The official’s son is sick and so he decides to make the hike up through the plain of Gennesaret through Arbel to Cana and speak to the healer. Jesus shares His frustration that people are only after signs and wonders, but that indeed his son will live. Again, we might ask ourselves why John has included this particular miracle. I am sure there are many theological implications, but again the miracle location demonstrates its proximity

⁸ Ibid., 68.

to the pagan gods in the Hellenized cities of the Galilee. As was mentioned before, the city of Scythopolis has monuments related to many pagan deities. One of these is Asclepius, the god of healing. Can we imagine that this royal official thought of taking on offering south to the Asclepius shrine at Scythopolis instead of heading west to Cana? There is no explicit mention of this, but I think in moments of desperation, we would try anything to save one of our children. Jesus again shows Himself, while in the Galilean town of Cana, to be superior to those pagan gods which have intruded themselves into the True God's land of promise.

Soon after this Jesus travels to the feast of Tabernacles in the fall. After healing a man who had an infirmity for 38 years, Jesus begins an acrimonious discussion with Jerusalem leaders in the temple. During the discussion Jesus mentions that all who are in the graves will come forth unto resurrection. What graves is he talking about? It is obvious that Jesus is referring to the resurrection of all graves at some point in the future, but the teaching is more affecting in that Jerusalem is surrounded with thousands of graves. Just east of the temple in the Kidron valley is the supposed tomb of Absalom, Zechariah and many others. There are hundreds of tombs on the western slope of the Mount of Olives that beckon travelers to ponder their own deaths at some time in the future. As Jesus is teaching about the resurrection it would not be unreasonable to believe that he could have pointed to all the surrounding graves to press home his point. Jesus chose this location as opposed to the shores of Galilee to give His teaching on the resurrection.

We must remember that this discussion was during the Feast of Tabernacles. During this time four large lamps are set up in the court of women (also called the

treasury in 8:20). These lamps were set up and illuminated the entire temple complex. This is the first of 2 Feasts of Tabernacles that we are told that Jesus attended (the other is John 7-8). At this one Jesus is teaching in the temple and describes John the Baptist as “the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light” (John 5:35). As Jesus was standing in the temple area, Jesus begins to describe John the Baptist in terms of light! The light was given at this feast as representative of the light of God and Jesus uses this imagery to help authenticate the light of John the Baptist and his message. It’s a message that affirmed Jesus’ authority, for the Baptist testified of Jesus’ arrival and ministry. The fact that Jesus brings John up at this time and this location is in direct relation to four giant lamps standing at the temple.

After the feast He then returns sometime before the following Passover to the Galilee. He crosses over the lake, performs the miracle of feeding the 5000 and then proceeds to the city of Capernum. It is here in this city that Jesus proclaims to them that He is the bread of life. This is a city that was located in what we would call one of the breadbaskets of the land of promise. It was in what is known as the Galilee-Beth-shan Basin. Rainfall here is sufficient for farming without irrigation though it is also watered by springs. In this area almost every kind of Palestinian crop is to be found.⁹ It’s important to note that Jesus didn’t give this teaching in the temple area, but instead deliberately chose to teach this in a geographical location that was conducive to his audience. His audience would have been quite familiar with not only their own agricultural blessings, but also all the grain (bread) that would be coming from across the Sea of Galilee from the region of Bashan which is known for its fruitfulness. Bread was the staple of life and what better audience would there be in Israel then for Jesus to

⁹ Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, p. 196.

choose at this place a teaching on the true Bread? The Bread from heaven which will provide not just daily sustenance, but instead eternal life.

The next chronological sequence we have in the book of John tells us that Jesus' brothers tried to goad Jesus to go back to the Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles that fall. Their intent was for Jesus to declare Himself openly, but He told them that His time was not yet. Later Jesus journeyed to the feast and again began one of his discussions with the leadership. Another tradition at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles that began in the few centuries before Jesus was that of a golden container filled with water from the pool of Siloam being carried in procession by the High-Priest back to temple. As the procession came to the Watergate on the S side of the inner temple court, three trumpet blasts were made to mark the joy of the occasion. The priests would march around the altar and then offer the water as a sacrifice to God symbolizing the blessing of adequate rainfall and the receiving of life.¹⁰ It was on the last day of the feast that Jesus stood up and said He was the one who would offer *living water*. The intentionality on Jesus' part here is unmistakable. This tradition of the sacrifice of water that pointed to the extension of physical life was used as a platform for Jesus to offer the water of eternal life. The location and timing of Jesus shows how the environment was exploited to illuminate Jesus' message.

It was mentioned earlier that there were four large lamps also during this feast which sought to provide a traditional motif for the remembrance of God's goodness to His people. It was at a time and location where the 4 large lamps were shining brightly that Jesus chose to declare to the people, "I am the light of the world" (8:12). The lamps were representative of the light or shekinah that spoke of God as the light of His people.

¹⁰ MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible*, p.1596.

Yet we see here that Jesus is declaring Himself to supersede all previous light and that He Himself will be the one who now provides light to God's people. We can see here that Jesus chose this geographical location and environment to present Himself as the light of the world. It is becoming increasingly axiomatic that Jesus was deliberate in the choice of His *geography* in presenting His teachings.

There is much more to glean from the gospel of John, but the scope of this paper cannot be limited to this gospel alone. We will now proceed to highlight just a few of the contributions to Jesus' teaching that geography brings to bear. We will begin our brief synoptic journey in the gospel of Matthew. We are told in 4:23 that Jesus was teaching throughout Galilee in their synagogues. Beginning in 5:1 Jesus settles on a mountain where he proceeds to give His sermon on the mount discourse. Most scholars believe the sermon took place on the NW shore of the Sea of Galilee possibly south of Tabgha. It's important to remember that even though Galilee is filled with many Jews it also has its foreigners as well as their culture. In Matthew 6:5, 16 Jesus uses the Greek word ὑποκριταί which denotes someone who is an actor in theater. Whether Jesus actually spoke the Greek word or its Aramaic equivalent is irrelevant. The text uses the word for actor and the people sitting there would have known exactly what Jesus meant. There were many Roman theaters in the land of promise. We have archaeological evidence of theaters found in Sepphoris, Jerusalem, Sebaste, Jericho, Caesarea, Sidon, Decapolis and Tiberias. Three of these cities are found within a days journey of the exact location the sermon is being given in. Jesus' uses the cultural term of actor as one who pretends. This is illustrative of those who for their own images "pretend" or act out their prayers in

a grandiose performance. Jesus' teaching on prayers precludes all such ostentatious displays of false piety.

In Matthew 5:14 Jesus is describing the goal of vibrant and contagious faith. He teaches that we are the light of the world and that a city on a hill cannot be hidden. Just west of the sea of Galilee was the city known as Sepphoris. It sat on a ridge just north of Nazareth. It was at one time rebuilt by Herod Antipas and made the capital of Galilee. Yet later its distinction was lost when he made Tiberias the new capital. At the time of Jesus it was still a bustling city with palaces and much light. The imagery of a city on a hill would certainly of brought to mind Sepphoris. Jesus uses the Greek word πόλις (city) as opposed to κώμη (village). Luke 8:1 uses both of these words together and so it most likely implies that they were not always used as synonyms.

One of the most striking examples of Jesus' use of geography to illuminate His teachings is that of Matthew 16:13-20 (Mark 8:27-30). This is the only time in the biblical record where Jesus visits the site of Casarea Philippi. This was a region in the far NE of the land of Israel beyond the Sea of Galilee at the base of Mount Hermon. It is at this region where the headwaters of the Jordan river begin. Also located here was a pagan city with temples dedicated to the god Pan. It was at this place where there was a large rock face that had a cave with a spring in it. It was here that the pagans believed was a gate to Hades or the underworld. It was at this specific location that Jesus chose to ask His disciples who they thought He was. They replied that some thought He was Elijah, or John the Baptist brought back to life. It was at this point that Jesus directly asked them who do *you* say that I am. This is one of the greatest moments for the disciple Peter who boldly claimed that he believed the Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of

the living God. It was at this time that Jesus honored Peter by telling him that he has blessed with this revelation from His father in heaven. He says, “*And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*” Jesus is making a play on words here *geographically* and *culturally*. First is that very near them was this huge 100 foot tall *rock* face. It was here that Jesus begins to describe His intent on building His church. The play on words involves Peter’s name (Πέτρος) and that which he is going to build His church on (πέτρα). Without getting into all the theological discussions, it is obvious that Jesus is seeking to instill in them a vision of conquering false pagan gods. Also, here is the cave which was thought of as gates to the underworld. Jesus is saying that even these “gates of Hades” will not be able to conquer His building of His church. We see quite clearly that Jesus chosen this particular location to bring about the revelation of the success and victory of the church over all pagan forces, including hell itself.

The final example to be used in this paper is that of Luke 19:11-16. We are told that Jesus entered and passed through Jericho on His final ascent to the city of Jerusalem where He would be crucified. As Jesus was leaving Jericho He told a parable for the sake of those who thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Jesus’ intent in the parable was for His followers to understand that Jesus would not be inaugurating a physical political kingdom at this time, but that there would be a delay in realizing this aspect of His mission. He tells the parable of a nobleman who went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then to return. But there were citizens who hated this nobleman and sent a delegation after him declaring that they would not have this man rule over them. After this nobleman received his kingdom he returned, met with his

stewards, and then slayed those did not want him to rule over them. What is interesting about this story is this is exactly what happened with Herod's son Archelaus. After his father Herod's death, he journeyed to Rome to receive his kingdom. We know from Josephus that a Jewish embassy also came to protest him becoming king.¹¹ Nevertheless, he was awarded an ethnarchy and subsequently proved himself to be a ruthless ruler and was later deposed by Rome to be replaced by procurators. The location of this is important because we know from Josephus that,

“When Archelaus had entered into his ethnarchy, and was come into Judea, he accused Joazar, the son of Boethus, of assisting the seditious, and took away the high priesthood from him, and put Eleazar his brother in his place. He also magnificently rebuilt the royal palace that had been at Jericho.”¹²

Here again we have a geographical contribution to a parable told by Jesus. He deliberately told this parable as He was leaving Jericho. As He was speaking it, His listeners would have been able to see the royal palace built by Archelaus himself and hearkened back to the story surrounding his rise and fall from power. His listeners would have had a geographical and historical backdrop to understanding Jesus' departure from this world to receive His kingdom and then to return to exact vengeance on His enemies.

It has been my attempt to highlight succinctly how there has been a great omission in interpreting scripture without focusing on a geographical contact. It seems quite evident that the providence of God must truly be allowed to demonstrate itself in recognizing that God has been at work in both history and geography. It is my desire that more people will dig into the Scriptures looking for the ways in which Jesus intentionally

¹¹ Ant. 17:300

¹² Ant. 17:339-340

arranged for a deeper and more elucidating understanding of the environment and His teachings.

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