

# *ALONG* *the ROAD*

HOW JESUS USED GEOGRAPHY  
TO TELL GOD'S STORY

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*Along the Road: How Jesus Used Geography to Tell God's Story*

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## ORGANIZING THE BIBLE LIKE A WALKER

WHETHER I AM BACKPACKING WILDERNESS trails of the American West or strolling the streets of our hometown after dinner with my wife, I love to walk. That carries over into my professional life as a Bible teacher in Israel.

I walk ancient roads with my students, discussing the geography of the Promised Land and the Bible verses that connect to it. This is how I started organizing my Bible geographically, and it is a story I will tell in this chapter.

But I also want to show that this idea—of organizing the Bible while walking along the road—did not start with me. It has roots reaching deeply into the way people have always “read their Bible” in the Promised Land. This chapter will tell that story too.

Finally, I want you to know that even if you cannot join me for a walk in Israel, you can walk along the road with Jesus, organizing your Bible geographically, without leaving the comforts of your home. This chapter will help you get started.

### My Walks in the Promised Land

Let me start with my story. I am a professor at Jerusalem University College in Israel. I meet Bible readers from around the world, people who have come to Israel to learn about the geography of this special land. While I spend a short time discussing geography in a classroom, most of the course is taught outdoors. And by design, we learn the land by walking the land.

Over two weeks—hour after hour, day after day, one foot ahead of the other—we walk more than one hundred miles. We walk in sunshine, under cloudy skies, in the rain, and even in the rare

snow storm! We move from one geographical setting to the next and from one ecosystem to another, collecting impressions of this land that the Lord called his own.

During the course of a day, I pick out specific locations to stop, not only so we can rest but because the view captures the unique qualities of the subregion we are studying that day. I speak about geology, topography, water resources, climate, plants, and animals. I discuss how each place shaped the lives of the people who lived there, what I call its “human geography.” We talk about how these people got water, the food they grew, how they built their homes, and how they traveled in this segment of the land. And before we move on to the next teaching location, we enjoy a conversation about the key Bible stories and passages linked to the place.

After years of doing this, I realized that I was organizing my Bible geographically. Think about that for a moment: as I take my students to a certain location, I am often in a place that hosted more than one event or element of biblical communication. Take Shechem as an example. There are significant stories that occurred here at the times of Abraham, Jacob, Joshua, Rehoboam, and Jesus. If I were teaching the course chronologically, I would have to return to Shechem five times! I think you can see the problem with that way of organizing the course. So instead, I teach all five stories on the same visit.

This way of thinking about the Bible created connections between stories and passages that in my previous study had long lived apart. I began to connect stories like Israel’s extended stay in the wilderness with Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness; Solomon’s coronation as king in the Kidron Valley with Jesus’s Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem; and Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount with the Great Commission. You see, it didn’t matter where those passages resided on the timeline or how many pages separated them in my Bible—if the land brought them together, so did I. And that became the fertile soil in which new insights grew, insights I will share in the remaining chapters of this book.

My love for the outdoors, for walking, and for teaching the Bible joined forces to give me a new tool for Bible study. I was organizing my Bible like a walker.

### Ancient Walks in the Promised Land

The idea of organizing the Bible while walking along the road is particularly the story of those who walked this land in Bible times. To better understand that, we need to consider how their travel experiences and their Bible reading differ from our own.

People then walked everywhere. While I walk to exercise or relax, people in Bible times walked out of necessity. They did not have cars, trains, or even bicycles; donkeys and camels were available, but used more as pack animals than for transporting people. So with rare exception, people traveling from place to place in Bible times did so by foot.

When a severe famine imperiled the Promised Land, Jacob walked to Egypt. When there was a festival in Jerusalem, believers walked to the holy city. When there was an extended family wedding in Cana, Jesus and the disciples walked there from Nazareth. And when Paul took the good news about Jesus from Iconium to Lystra, he walked. Walking was simply how you got where you needed to go.

I like to walk alone, sometimes over long distances. But solo travel was never advisable for those living in Bible times, because walking for them was filled with dangers I don't have to face. Read Psalm 121, a travel psalm, and you begin to get a sense for that. Their risks included falls on steep terrain, injury during robbery, being swept away by a flooding river, and the ever-present possibility of attack by large predators. People in Bible times typically traveled in the company of others to minimize the risks they faced when walking.

As these people walked in groups, they passed the time by talking with one another. Certainly, there were times when the only sound heard was the scuffing of sandals on the dirt path. But

more typically, traveling time was passed in conversation, talks that ranged across the horizon of human experience just as ours do. People would have spoken about funny things the kids had done, the failing health of a family member, even the weather they expected to encounter the next day. But walking also provided time to reflect on and talk about the more important questions of life: Who is God? How does he think about human beings? What does he expect of us?

Today, what we think about such matters is largely guided by a Book that was not available to them in the way it is to us. Even though the first books of the Bible were put into writing as early as the fifteenth century before Christ, few copies existed. The printing press was not invented until the fifteenth century after Christ. The first photocopier did not reach the market until 1959. In Bible times, those fortunate enough to own a portion of God's Word had a document that had been copied by hand. As you can imagine, this made any written document rare and very expensive. The king of Israel stood out in that he had his own copy of God's Word (Deuteronomy 17:18)—the average person did not.

Another complication, as if one were needed, is associated with literacy. Reading skills as we know them today were not a feature of the ancient world. Ancient evidence indicates that average workers may have had a lower level of functional literacy. But the higher skills required for more complex reading tasks, like those required to understand Scripture, were enjoyed by at most only 10 percent of those in Bible times.

### Walking, Organizing, and Teaching the Bible in Bible Times

Despite these obstacles, people living in this era were not without a "Bible." They learned and reflected on what God said while walking the land of the Bible. When they hiked through their homeland, they did not just see rivers, mountains, and wilderness—they saw biblical events, directions God had given, and

promises the Lord had made, all of which were intimately linked to the land.

When Old Testament believers walked past Shechem, they thought about the Lord appearing to Abram in that location, making a set of promises that linked the land of Canaan with the patriarch's family and the promise to redeem the world from sin (Genesis 12:1–7). When they walked past Mount Tabor, they recalled the story of Deborah and Barak as the Lord provided unexpected victory over the Canaanites, with their iron chariots (Judges 4–5). When believers walked past Bethlehem, they thought of Micah's prophecy that promised this town would be the birthplace of the long-awaited Messiah (5:2).

People of Bible times may not have had the written Bible that we do (or even the skill to read one), but they navigated a place filled with Bible content. For them, walking the land was the equivalent of our reading the Bible.

And they were organizing the content of God's revelation geographically. They linked God's first appearance to Abram in the Promised Land (Genesis 12:6–7) and the services of rededication which Joshua held for Israel seven centuries later (Joshua 8:30–35; 24:1–28)—because they shared a common location in the valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal near ancient Shechem. They linked the story of Gideon's great victory over the invading eastern peoples (Judges 7:1–22) and Saul's great defeat at the hands of the Philistines (1 Samuel 31)—both stories are based near springs which are just a little over a mile apart at the base of Mount Gilboa. They connected two attempts of Satan to derail the ministry of Jesus at Mount Hermon—here Satan tempted Jesus to abandon his mission, both at the start of his earthly ministry (Matthew 4:8–11) and again as he made the final turn to Jerusalem (Matthew 16:22–23).

This notion of engaging and teaching God's thoughts by walking the land is mentioned by Moses. The book of Deuteronomy summarizes God's teachings for Israel as the people prepare to

enter the Promised Land, and Moses told parents to teach these things to their children. Notice where that instruction is to occur: “Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home, *and when you walk along the road*, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 11:19, emphasis mine).

Parents spent time with their children walking to family functions or to festivals in Jerusalem. This walking time was teaching time, and the land was the textbook that suggested topics for discussion.

We do something similar when we take our children to places with deep roots in our own history. A drive through Washington, DC, my national capital, is a good example of this. In one afternoon, we can teach our children about the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the famous “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Jr. Layers of history build vertically on one location, and we can pick one event from the column to study it in isolation from the others, or we can compare and contrast events brought together in this place. We can also explore the influence of one event on subsequent events that occurred here. This is exactly what Moses urged parents to do as they walked the land with their sons and daughters.

So what I do with my students in Israel really isn’t unique—it has very deep roots in the history of God’s people in the Promised Land. As they walked, they engaged the thoughts and promises of God that were linked to places. They organized the revelation of God geographically, learning and teaching lessons from the land.

### Reading Our Bible like a Walker

Now I invite you to do the same thing, to think how your reading and study might change if you organized the contents of the Bible geographically. That is, you read it like a walker would.

You do not need to be on a study program with me in Israel. You don’t even need to be walking. You can read and organize your Bible like a walker even if you’re sitting in your home.

This will, however, take an adjustment to your usual mode of thinking about the Bible. Most of us, and I include myself in this statement, were never taught to read our Bibles this way. We have organized our Bible readings chronologically and thematically, but not geographically. It will take some effort on our part to make the change. So as this chapter concludes, let me suggest a plan for adding this new form of Bible study to the helpful things you already do.

First, acknowledge that all Bible stories (and most other forms of Bible communication) have a physical setting that aids in our comprehension. Yet for many western Bible readers who have not been to the Holy Land, the content floats above the land rather than interacting with it intimately. If that describes you, the first step is acknowledging the intentional grounding of the Bible's message in place.

Second, actively look for clues within a Bible passage that indicate *where* the events or teaching occur. Even if you are in the habit of reading past them, I can assure you that the clues are there. This step calls for us to slow our reading down, to be intentional about seeking the clues. They may be the name of a city or region, the mention of a geographic feature (such as “a high mountain”), or the signal of a specific ecosystem like the wilderness.

Third, look for other stories or elements of Bible communication that share these spaces. This will take some work, as you use your experience with the Bible, your concordance, and an atlas to create a list of passages that belong in the same geographical context. When you begin to organize the Bible in this way, you'll discover that there are Jerusalem stories, wilderness stories, and Caesarea Maritima stories—they share settings and deserve to be read and interpreted together.

Now it's time to unleash your creative, spiritual energy on the list. Your goal is to see if and how those stories or passages, all sharing a physical setting, might interact with one another to enhance our understanding of God's communication with us. Here are some questions that can help you toward that end:

- Other than place, what do the passages have in common? Think in terms of people, events, and the words and phrases that make up the text. In the stories of Gideon and Saul at the base of Mount Gilboa, we have different people of different eras, facing the same experience—an overwhelming military invasion—in the same place.
- Do the passages that share a place also share a theme? In the case of Gideon and Saul again, the stories revolve around the faith (or lack of faith) shown by a leader in the face of a military invasion.
- Do the geographically linked passages of the Bible build on one another, teaching a lesson God wants us to learn? The lesson could be taught by repeating and reinforcing, by way of contrast, or by supporting or defeating an expectation. For example, Shechem was a powerful center of worship in the Old Testament, a place to think and speak carefully about the revelation of God. It makes sense that Solomon's son, Rehoboam, would go there for his coronation, but we are struck by how secularized the process sounds, completely out of step with what we would expect at this sacred site.

This chapter has been long on background and short on Bible study. That will change as we begin to look more closely at stories from Jesus's life. But before you turn to the next chapter, I invite you to anchor this idea of reading the Bible like a walker more firmly in place, by considering the questions that follow.

————— Questions for Reflection and Discussion —————

1. How much do you enjoy walking? What do you think about when you walk?
2. During your Bible reading and study time, in which way (or ways) do you typically organize the content? In your own words, explain the phrase “organizing your Bible like a walker.”
3. In which Bible story or stories have you seen geography playing an important role?
4. For practice, read Luke 10:38–42 and John 11:17–44, two stories linked geographically to Bethany, and answer the following questions:
  - Other than geography, what do the two passages have in common?
  - Do these stories share a common theme?
  - How does reading these stories together change the way you understand them?