

## Translation and Geography

Of all the world religions Christianity is the one that is most closely tied to specific historical events that are grounded in real time and that occurred at real places.

That is one reason archaeology is so important as an aid to Bible translation. An understanding of the objects and the events that fill the biblical accounts provides the translator and the reader with a clearer understanding of the recorded events. The many ways in which archaeology has contributed to more accurate translations in the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV) were discussed in a previous article (See FAQ 16). Here we will mention just one example in passing. The EHV provides more consistent, more objective translations of the musical instruments in the Bible, because our translations are based on the best archaeological information about those instruments. The EHV, for example, distinguishes metal trumpets from ram's horns more clearly and more consistently than most recent translations. On the basis of archaeological evidence the EHV believes that the "tambourines" which appear in many recent translations were more likely "hand drums."

Biblical geography has the same importance in clarifying translations of biblical events and helping readers understand those events.

One reason that we have a combined April/May newsletter is that during the month of April both the general editor and the pastor who maintains our website were in Israel getting another close look at the geography of Israel. One of the things that became very apparent on this trip is that the golden era for studying the geography of biblical Israel, which was opened up in 1967 by Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank, has come to an end. Contributing factors to this development are the return of Sinai to Egypt, the less stable security situation in Sinai, and the less friendly situation for travelers in the West Bank. But the biggest factor in this change is the increasing urban sprawl in all areas of the country and the great increase in modern four-lane (or more) highways in all parts of the country.

This summer the general editor of the EHV will be teaching a twenty-hour course on biblical geography. He will have to rely very heavily on landscape pictures from thirty to fifty years ago. The geographical experiences available to travelers in those decades can no longer be duplicated.

The old roads are gone (or at least replaced). Travelers entering Jerusalem from the east no longer approach Jerusalem by the old two-lane road over the Mount of Olives, a road on which the view of the Temple Mount dramatically appears as travelers comes over the crest of the Mount of Olives. Today travelers from the east enter Jerusalem through a tunnel under the Mount of Olives.

The Jerusalem/Jericho road until relatively recently was a narrow, up-and-down road with little development along it. It is now a modern, cut-down-the hills, raise-up-the valleys highway that serves extensive high-rise settlements. A traditional site of the shepherds' field east of Bethlehem is surrounded by high-rise apartments. The mound of Old Testament Jericho is hemmed in by urban development. A McDonalds sits on part of ruins of New Testament Beth Shan (Scythopolis).

The study of the geography of biblical Israel will never quite be the same. Fortunately, the golden age for biblical geography produced a lot of research and large collections of color pictures of the landscape of Israel before the current development. The results of this research are an important resource for the production of the EHV.

The full utilization of a lot of this information will have to wait for the Study Bible phase of our work (for example, footnotes that tell how far Paul walked or sailed on the various stages of his journeys). But there are many passages in which knowledge of the geography helps a translator provide clearer renderings of specific passages. This is especially true of passages concerning military campaigns. We will provide a few examples from 1 Samuel.

The retreat of the Philistines after the death of Goliath is described in 1 Samuel 17:52: “Fallen Philistines lined the road of Shaaraim and to Gath and to Ekron.” But does “road of Shaaraim” mean “the road to Shaaraim” or “the road from Shaaraim”? The recent identification of the ruins at Khirbet Qeiyafa, which are located above the west end of the David and Goliath battlefield, as Shaaraim suggests the translation “along the road from Shaaraim, all the way to Gath and Ekron.” Shaaraim was located at the east end of the pursuit and slaughter, and Ekron and Gath, near the mouth of the Elah Valley, were at the west end.

A source of many problems is that biblical geographical terms do not always allow a one-for-one matchup with English terms.

The default translation for the Hebrew word *har* is *mountain*. The default translation for the Hebrew words *geba* and *gibeah* is *hill*. The problem is that many of the elevations which the Bible labels as *har* look more like hills than mountains to us. What makes one elevation a hill and another a mountain? Dictionaries say a hill is a promontory smaller than a mountain, and, you guessed it, a mountain is a promontory larger than a hill. But where is the dividing line? One rule of thumb is anything less than 1000 feet high is a hill, but there is no official dividing line, even for the U.S. Geological Survey. The difference is in the eye of the beholder. That being the case, we believe that in most cases the person who should make the decision about which locations in Israel are *hills* and which are *mountain* should generally be the biblical author. He had the option to call something a *mountain* (*har*) or a *hill* (*geba*) and presumably had good reasons to choose one or the other. So in most cases we will preserve the distinctions made by the biblical authors, with occasional footnotes to clarify the issue and with occasional exceptions based on tradition.

In 1 Samuel 17 the “mountains” on which the Philistines and Israelites take their stand are not very big hills, but the inspired author called them *mountains*. We accept his judgment and call them *mountains*. The site of the Sermon on the Mount is not much more than a good-sized hill, but we are not going to refer to the Sermon on a Hill. The Sea of Galilee is really a lake, not a sea, but we accept the tradition of calling it a *sea*, except for cases in which the New Testament text uses a Greek word that means *lake*. The Old Testament calls the highland regions of Holy Land *the Mountain* (*ha-har*). We follow the long-established tradition of calling it *the Hill Country*.

A *nahal* is a *seasonal stream*, that is, a stream bed that has water in it only part of the year. Depending on the context, a *nahal* may be a *stream*, a *stream bed*, a *gully*, a *ravine*, a *valley*, a *canyon*, or a *torrent*. An awareness of the geography helps the translator make the appropriate choice in each case.

The Hebrew word *midbar*, which we usually translate *wilderness*, refers to arid and semi-arid regions where agriculture is not possible, but grazing is. The word *midbar* is wider than the English word *desert* and narrower than the English word *wilderness*, which includes forested areas. In some contexts *midbar* can be *grazing land* or *open range*. In other contexts *desert* may be appropriate. *‘Arabah* may also be *desert*, but in some contexts it refers to a *valley* or *plain*. *Jeshimon* may be *Jeshimon*, *wasteland*, or *badlands*. *Emeq* is a *deep valley*, but sometimes it is a *plain* or *lowland*, since certain *emeqs* have a mountain on only one side.

*Sadeh* is usually translated *field*, but it does not always refer to planted fields. It is often *open countryside* or *the territory around a city*. *Animals of the field* may be *wild animals* but may sometimes include range cattle and sheep. *Trees of the field* sometimes are *cultivated trees*. Sometimes *sadeh* is *farmland*. Sometimes it is a *region* or *territory*.

In all of these and in many other cases, knowledge of the geography is necessary to make appropriate choices.

Another problem is the relationship between ancient and modern place names. In general we use the modern name for familiar places like the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, but provide footnotes referring to the ancient names. An exception occurs when the text explains one ancient name in terms of another. Then the ancient names must be in the text, and the modern name must be in the note (example: *the Sea of the Arabah is the Salt Sea*. <sup>Footnote</sup> *That is, the Dead Sea*). The EHV also acquaints readers with common proper names for geographic areas in Israel such as *Shepelah* and *Arabah*, usually with the aid of footnotes.

Sometimes a problem is complicated enough to require consulting technical studies. An example is the frequent textual confusion of the place names *Gibeon*, *Geba*, and *Gibeah*, which look very similar in Hebrew, and all mean *Hill City*. For a technical study of the issue see *Excavating a Battle: The Intersection of Textual Criticism, Archaeology, and Geography* in the resources section of our web site.

In producing the EHV we utilize not only linguistic resources but also the best available archaeological, historical, and geographical resources.