

Using Bible Atlases

1. Why use a Bible atlas? Few students of the Bible get to visit Palestine. Even if they do, they usually move so quickly through their scheduled stops at major sites and shrines (and tourist shops) that their first-hand impressions of the land are also superficial impressions. Even these can be wonderfully helpful, but they do not give us what we need to understand clearly how the land itself related to and influenced biblical events and teaching. Both for those who visit and for those who don't, a good Bible atlas helps fill the gap.

Bible atlases try to provide geographical, topographical, historical, archaeological, and cultural perspectives on the Bible. Do you want to know where the Battle of Armageddon will be fought? Get your Bible atlas. Where did Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount? How did Jerusalem develop from the time of David to Jesus' day? How did the lay of the land affect troop movements and trade? What natural resources were available in "the land of milk and honey?" Was the climate of the land in biblical times like it is today? Bible atlases answer these and many other questions.

2. Types of maps. Atlases use a variety of maps to give us different types of information. While all maps are "geographic" (showing a particular piece of the earth -- **geo**), they may each have a different emphasis. **Topographical** maps describe the lay of the land. They show mountains, rivers, plains, and lowlands in ways that help us feel the shape of the terrain. This can help us understand trade routes, battle plans, the strategic placement of cities, settlement patterns, and more. Newer methods in map-making have produced some particularly vivid three-dimensional maps and artist's renditions. Related types of maps depict vegetation, rainfall, and geological features. **Political** maps show the relative position of political and social groups in any particular period. The geographical boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel; the territories of the Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites; the kingdoms of Israel, Judah, Babylon, and Egypt can all be discovered on political maps. **Economic** maps describe the concentration of agricultural and other products as well as the location of natural resources and industrial facilities. **Archaeological** maps show the location of major archaeological sites and important finds. They try to identify places mentioned in the Bible with modern locations. **Historical** maps add geographical perspective on specific biblical events. They may show, for example, the route the Israelites took in the Exodus, the stages in the conquest of Canaan, the movements in specific military campaigns or battles, or the missionary journeys of Paul.

3. Other useful features. Besides a variety of maps, some atlases include a wealth of other helpful features. A **Gazeteer**, for example, provides an alphabetical list of places, names and other information as well as showing how to locate each place on one or more of the maps. Some gazeteers are simply lists with map coordinates. Others also include definitions, historical and biblical references, and archaeological information. Most English atlases are keyed to a particular Bible translation (NIV, RSV, KJV, etc.), so you may have to adjust somewhat to locate the term you are interested in. An **Index of Modern Place Names** gives the assumed biblical name for modern sites and can be helpful in identifying scholarly references in various publications. These features complete the basic atlas format: maps, sites, and information to help you locate them.

Some atlases have even more helpful features. For example, they might attempt to provide historical perspective by including a summary of biblical and Ancient Near Eastern history along with the maps. Others include discussions of archaeological method and results with their application to biblical studies. Many include abundant historical charts, city plans, drawings and photographs, and other useful visual and textual materials. Altogether, the effect and usefulness of a particular atlas depends greatly on how well it combines all of these elements.

4. Considerations in using a Bible atlas.

Viewpoint and market. Atlases are edited and produced by people with a point of view and they are designed for and sold to a particular audience. Any atlas will reflect the biases and concerns of its editors, producers, and intended audience. You can see that especially in controversial issues of history and theology. You can compensate for this in your study by consulting several atlases, atlases which together will represent the full range of opinion, especially on difficult issues.

Quality of production. Atlases vary greatly in the quality of production -- the kind of paper used, the attractiveness and effectiveness of design, the clarity of reproduction of photographs and other visuals, and more. Frankly, some atlases are just plain ugly. The design is klunky. The pictures are fuzzy. The maps don't tell you much. With the advances of modern printing as well as cartography, ugly atlases are inexcusable. Use the good ones. There are several, of which probably the most elegant is *The Harper Atlas of the Bible*.

Date of publication. Atlases are based on the most recent information and theories available at the time they went to press. Because of the continuing changes in archaeological discovery and historical reconstruction, the more recent atlases generally have more reliable information. In other words, use the most up-to-date atlases you can and realize even then that much of the information you find is subject to change.

Some Bible Atlases in MLRC

Blaiklock, E. M. *Pictorial Bible Atlas* (Zondervan, 1969) [REF/BS/630/.264]

Frank, Harry Thomas. *Hammond's Atlas of Bible Lands* (Hammond, 1977) [at the Reserve Desk]

Kraeling, Emil G. *Bible Atlas* (Rand McNally, 1952) [REF/BS/630/.K7]

May, Herbert G. *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1984)
[REF/BS/630/.O96/1984]

Pfeiffer, Charles F. *Baker Bible Atlas* (Baker, 1979) [REF/BS/630/.P45]

Pritchard, James B. *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (Harper and Row, 1987) [ATLAS]

Rasmussen, Carl G. *NIV Atlas of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1989) [REF/BS/630/.R37/1989]

Rogerson, John. *Atlas of the Bible* (Facts on File, 1988) [REF/BS/630/.R6/1988]