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NEW TESTAMENT GEOGRAPHY

I

To begin with, try to picture the whole map that needs to be spread out before the Bible reader. How small it is compared with our globe to-day! Though, by the way, St. Paul probably never owned a map, and our Lord may never have seen one at all. Our Bible's westmost limit is Tarshish, probably in Spain, furthest point to which Jonah thought he could flee. The eastmost limit is India, mentioned only in Esther as the bound of the Persian Kingdom, and to O.T. folk all but unknown. Even Parthia and Media, parts of Persia itself, were dim to them, though Jews from thence were met at Passover time. The northmost points referred to in the Bible are Scythia, north shore of the Black Sea—Scythian then the very climax of a rude barbarian—and Illyricum, which does not mean north of Venice, indeed not so far. To the south the Bible reader is never taken further than the land of the Ethiopian eunuch, the Soudan, hardly as far south as Khartoum. There was also the queendom of Sheba, probably the Yemen of to-day, or Arabia beyond Aden. Gold of Ophir may have come from further south still, away down the east coast of Africa. We really do not know.

We do not dwell on these points, for our theme is only N.T. Geography. Here let us begin by considering what space of our wide earth was actually trod by our Lord's holy feet. It does give food for reflection to think how small a fragment of this globe was ever seen by the Saviour of the World in the days of His flesh. God's ways and God's plans are not ours. What we call the Holy Land is a very little land, no bigger than Wales, with greatest ease traversable in a day, by a motor car, from south to north, if roads be decent. In breadth, east to west, it is barely half as much. Out of this little garden plot Jesus practically never travelled. True, and it is often forgot, He was once in Egypt, but only as a refugee baby. The visit is referred to by St. Matthew alone, very briefly, in connection with what he counted a fulfilment of prophecy in *Hosea*. The

visit is mentioned by no other early historian and Christ never, in any way, refers to it Himself; though the Apocryphal Gospels are full of strange tales; the Gospel of the Infancy, e.g., telling how the idol in his Egyptian temple falls prostrate before the Babe in Mary's lap.

We never hear of our Lord going south of His own birthplace, Bethlehem, very little south of Jerusalem. He never seems even to have gone to the sacred tombs of Abram, Isaac and Jacob at Hebron. He did go to Dan, but never south to Beersheba. For thirty years He was practically tied to Nazareth. But Nazareth was a very central spot of Galilee, which from its heights gave wondrous vistas, north, south, east and west. Moreover, though Nazareth had no history of its own, it was on the highway of great traffic. Roman Legions went tramping by, "and the sandals of the Herods buzzed up and down these roads" (G. A. Smith). Jesus of Nazareth could learn a great deal about the world and its trade even in His carpenter's shop in that little town; and in spring yonder, we are told, you "simply wade in flowers", the fair lilies of the field. For Jesus a river meant, the Jordan, of His baptizing, and a lake meant the Sea of Galilee, with its toiling fishermen and, at times, fearsome squalls rushing down from the wadies on either side.

II

We do not know if Jesus ever looked upon the silent Dead Sea; and, as for the Mediterranean, strange to think on, He never once mentions it. Our Lord, as a man, was a true son of the ancient world. To Him, as to His servant St. Paul, scenery, even the grandest, was nothing at all. And yet, oft and oft, must He have gazed upon the cedared slopes of commanding Lebanon, and on snowy Hermon, over 9,000 ft. high, which towers over all the north of Palestine, Hermon ever rich in dew.

Our Lord was a great pedestrian. Only once, in His brief hour of earthly triumph, do we read of Him riding on an ass. And never was He over grudging to pick and choose His steps. Gladly did He escape across Jordan into freer Perea, away from the bitterness of Judean Jews. He was quite willing, too, to take boat over to the further side of the Sea of Galilee into the region of Decapolis, quite a Gentile district, N.B., where great herds of swine did feed. If He did not go as Evangelist for the Father unto the Gentiles, He kept hovering near them.

Away He and His twelve trudged up to Cæsarea Philippi, in the far north, at the very source of the Jordan, whose name betokens that it was more Roman than Jewish. And then, who can forget that He also traversed the "coasts" (*μέρη*) of Tyre and Sidon, and did wondrously for a poor Syrophoenician woman? We wish we knew if He ever actually walked the streets of Tyre, for, if so, that was the mightiest city He ever saw, with its great harbour, huge temple of Melkarth and lovely gardens. Was it some memory of all this stateliness which led our Lord to say: "It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment than for my own Capernaum?"

Moreover, we must never forget, that even the Palestinian, who never left the Holy Land, was, in the days of Jesus, much more of a cosmopolitan than we always think. Figure to yourself what a motley crowd of pilgrim Jews every pious keeper of the Passover in Jerusalem must have rubbed shoulders with, year after year. As he listened to their Babel of tongues he, our blessed Lord among the rest, must have somehow realized to what a wide and varied world he belonged. Who does not recall that wonderful list in Acts ii—"Parthians and Medes and Elamites" (i.e. the three divisions of Persia), "dwellers in Mesopotamia" (the men of Iraq, though as yet Bagdad and Mosul were not), "in Cappadocia and Pontus", the south shores of the Black Sea, "in Asia", i.e. Asia Minor, "in Phrygia and Pamphylia", the south part of what we now call Asia Minor, "in Egypt", "in the parts of Libya about Cyrene", whence came Simon who helped to carry the cross, the land where Mussolini is now dictator, "strangers of Rome, Cretans and Arabians".

Our Lord's twelve Apostles would for the most part, have the same geography in their minds' eye as Christ Jesus. Yet think how far St. Peter travelled ere he finished his course on a cross at Rome. His 1st epistle speaks of him at Babylon, which was perhaps the great city on the Euphrates, and not a concealed name for Rome; whilst this encyclical letter is addressed to the saints in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. But we have no proof that Peter ever visited in person the churches in these provinces, which covered the whole of modern Turkey's Asian empire. John, "the beloved disciple", was not such a traveller as impetuous Peter; and some hold that St. John the Divine, who wrote Revelation, was not the same as St. John Boanerges. But evidence is strong that the latter did dwell long

in the very great city of Ephesus, now no longer a seaport on the Ægean. The harbour has been so silted up that it is a long way inland. We like to think, too, that it was this same St. John, who, in days of persecution, dwelt in "The isle called Patmos for the word of God's sake"—Patmos only sixteen miles square, away out to the south-east of Ephesus. From this Ephesus, chief seat of goddess Diana, old John no doubt journeyed to episcopize in all the seven Churches of Asia, some of them a long way inland, especially Philemon's Colosse and lukewarm Laodicea.

The only other of the twelve apostles, known to us as a foreign missionary, on good evidence, is Thomas the doubter, who by and by, it is said, braved so many perils of land and water, that he might tell his Saviour's story as far as India. Our latest historians of India admit, there is fair ground for holding that Thomas did travel away through Afghanistan down near to Madras. This is certain, that in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., trade between the Roman empire and southern India was quite extensive. Very interesting is it to think, it may have been, not the heroic St. Francis Xavier but St. Thomas the Twin, who was first to preach Christ in our great Indian empire. Here we must also refer to St. Mark, the evangelist, John Mark, cousin of Barnabas, who deserted Paul in Pamphylia, but was eagerly sought for again by Paul ere he died. There is evidence for holding that Mark was one of the first to found the Christian Church in Egypt, at Alexandria; though doubtless that Jew "mighty in the Scriptures, named Apollos", may have helped to sow the first good seed in his own busy, splendid and learned native city.

III

So now come we on to St. Paul, greatest traveller of the bunch. His travels are a hackneyed, a much-laboured theme. But it is wonderful how much fresh light and interest H. V. Morton has contrived to pour upon the well-known tale. He is no exegete and no linguist, but he has taken immense pains to get up his facts, first by reading of them in all the best books, and then—where few have been able to imitate him—he has gone to see all the places himself, with his own curiously prying eyes. He who can read Morton's *Steps of St. Paul* and not find himself imbued with a strong sense of the value of N.T. Geography, must be a somewhat peculiar and very stolid individual.

As all know, Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, who knew Jerusalem, the Holy City, right well. But he was not a Jerusalem Jew, he was himself born of the Dispersion. Much, much has it meant for Christianity in all time that Saul was born in that no mean city called Tarsus, in Cilicia, once a busy port close to the Levant. But now its boasted river Cydnus, swift and cold, has quite changed its course. Now here all is marsh, and proud Tarsus has sunk to utter insignificance; though it still has a railway station of its own. Of course it was once a university city, where young Saul could, I do not say would, learn all about Stoic philosophy and the peerless literature of Greece. Tarsus was headquarters of a Roman governor, too, and Paul's father a Roman citizen there, rare prize for a Jew; much did it mean afterwards to this most travelled of all Roman citizens in his much-chequered career.

Nobody can understand St. Paul, his vast and widespread labours, who has not grasped how much it meant for him that he lived in the flourishing days of Rome's Empire. In some out of the way regions of central Asia Minor he did have "perils of robbers". But, for the most part, the presence and rule of Rome meant, in those days, law, order and justice, absolute security of person. It meant, also, good, well-paved roads almost everywhere, along which ran regular official posts. Even to-day not a few parts of the old Roman Empire have not as good roads as in the days when St. Paul tramped along, always on foot, so far as we know—hard tramps they must oft have been, for this little man with bandy legs—so says the ancient tale of St. Paul and Thecla in Iconium—through cold snow and burning sun. We should fain hope that a kindly driver did sometimes give him and Barnabas a lift. Another great advantage in those days was, that Greek—not Latin—would take a man almost anywhere; and Paul could speak Greek full well.

For Paul his first, for him his ever most memorable journey, was to Damascus, oldest city in our world, and queen city of Syria, with its rivers Abana and Pharpar, of which Naaman was so proud, a lovely sight for long travellers over the barren desert. Before Paul went any further he had to retire to meditate in Arabia, probably no further than the valleys round much-storied Sinai. Then away he went north to Antioch of Syria, one of the most magnificent and most wicked cities of the ancient East. There would he learn at first hand what vice and

sensuality could mean. Then he crossed the sea to Cyprus—not his first voyage, for probably, going from his Tarsus to Jerusalem, he had oft sailed the Levant before—Cyprus, to which comrade Barnabas belonged, with its Salamis and Paphos, and its wide seascapes, beckoning Paul on to his own native regions, Cyprus, now under the British flag, and with so much in it worth a Briton's seeing, as Morton reminds us. Across he soon went to the other Antioch, in Pisidia, and to Iconium, to-day the busy town of Konia, and on to Derbe and Lystra, only rediscovered a little over fifty years ago, now desolate ruins, hardly even ruins, only acres of marble chips. This is South Galatia; and it seems unlikely that Paul ever visited Galatia proper, in the heart of Asia Minor, with its capital Ancyra, now Ankara, to-day exclusive Turkey's new-born metropolis.

From Iconium and Antioch good roads would take Paul, ever eager to break new ground, away to Ephesus and to Smyrna. But we never hear of Paul in Smyrna, now Turkey's chief Ægean seaport, though sore damaged by war's disasters, of which St. John wrote: "I know thy works and tribulation and poverty, but Thou art rich". I myself have seen sadly little of Bible lands, but I have followed a little in the steps of St. Paul, and so perhaps may be pardoned for a few lines of personal reminiscence. I have sailed from the Hellespont down past the site of Troas, where Paul had his inescapable vision and call over to Europe,¹ and in eyeshot of what once was Troy, of whose siege Homer sung his deathless song. It was September, and harvest was long over, and what struck me most was, how bare the whole coastline looked, hardly a green spot in sight, and very rarely even a house, nothing but brown, barren, sunsmitten rock.

We put in for a day at what is now called the island of Mitylene, in Paul's time that was the name of the capital, while the little isle itself was Lesbos, isle of songstress Sappho. All the cars in the isle were waiting to meet us, and if the roads of Mitylene can be taken as fair specimen of what Paul would have to plod over sometimes, for Paul I am sorry indeed. The first thing one saw on landing was a signboard *Αι Τραπεζαι*, meaning of course "The bank". Money-changers have always sat at Tables. All the signboards were in Greek, easily interpretable if you knew any Greek. I seemed about the only one

¹ A name for our own continent never used or thought of in the N.T.

in the company who did know any, so was kept fairly busy. The names of butcher and baker were probably spelt just as Paul would see them. But, all over what is now the Turkish empire—part of Paul's travels, Turkish is the compulsory language for all notices, and that brings most of us to a dead stand.

Our steamer had just been sailing round the grim Gallipoli peninsula with its many clearly visible war graves, and while we sailed along to fateful Suvla Bay, and imagined the *Queen Elizabeth* pitching her big shells right over the peninsula to shell Chanak, if we turned round, then, away west, we could make out the shape of Samothracia, by which Paul sailed on his eventful visit to Macedonia, with its cities, Philippi and Thessalonica, now Salonica, a weary halting place for many in the Great War, and Berea, where they loved their Bibles so well.

IV

I have never set foot in Macedonia, but I have set foot where Paul now went on, to thrilling Athens, with its matchless Acropolis and Parthenon—a little like the modern Athens, Edinburgh, but not very. The forum of Athens, its chief gossip centre, where one heard what babblers chose to say, strikes one to-day as strangely small, and Mars Hill, where Paul spellbound his hearers, looks even smaller. One is puzzled to know where all his audience could have found a footing. From Athens we sailed through the many-isled, sunny Ægean, with Corinth away to the right, round Cape Matapan, to Malta, another of Britain's jealously guarded possessions, with its very striking naval harbour right in the middle—a little isle, but carefully cultivated on every square inch. Three crops of potatoes they often get in a year, and grapes abound. We had no time to visit St. Paul's Bay, where he and his ship were cast ashore; but from afar we saw the waves beating up on its sands.

I also had just a little experience of what it meant to be "driven up and down in Adria", and to have fear, like Paul, "lest we should fall into the Quicksands". But what a difference between all the comforts of a P. & O. cruiser and the rough hold of a corn-ship, and the gyves on prisoner Paul's wrists! The Quicksands of Acts means, the big bay at head of which stands Tripoli. Our boat had halted at Messina under the shadow of Mount Etna, and we watched the big railway ferry boats

crossing over to there from Reggio, the Rhegium where Paul's ship touched, a short crossing this, less than Granton to Burnt-island. Then we sailed south through the Straits, past Syracuse, and made for Tripoli. Morning light showed that city with its pillars and minarets about three miles off, with the waves leaping and lashing right over its long breakwater. We were warned from shore not to attempt to land, and after sailing up and down a rough sea, in vain endeavour, for half a day, we had to steam away to Algiers, never having got to land at all. Remember St. Paul had three other shipwrecks besides that Malta. We are sorry we cannot plot them out on our maps: 2 Cor. xi. 25.

I was also able to picture St. Paul and his kindly centurion sailing into the noble bay of Naples, with smoking Vesuvius behind, soon to overwhelm Pompeii just beneath it. Puteoli, now Pozzuoli, where they landed, is seen a little north of Naples itself. Then away they trudged on their last lap, past the Pontine Marshes up the far-famed Appian Way, which, as it approaches Rome, becomes thick with monuments on either side. On they went, with cheering greetings at Tres Tabernae and Appii Forum, and up the road hard by the Catacombs, where fleeing Peter, according to the early story, met his Lord, and anxiously asked, "Domine, quo vadis"? Who can help being thrilled, who has been privileged to travel that hallowed Appian way? In Rome itself you can still visit Paul's Mamertine prison beside the Capitol, now with electric light to guide you down into its dreary depths. And, just outside the walls, you are shown the very spot, hard by the magnificent church of S. Paolo fuvrile Mura, where, it is said, Paul was executed.

Rome was Paul's darling wish, his journeyings' most longed-for goal. And yet he would fain have gone further away, West to Spain. He would have gone by sea, not the long overland route by which Hannibal's host wended their slow way. Alas, neither Paul, not any other N.T. saint we know of, ever reached Spain. But, on the other side of Italy, Paul could boast that "even round about unto Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ". What a journey that boast must have cost him, away up into the hills, perhaps as far as Ragusa (Dubrovnik), coming away across all the way from Macedonia by the well-known Via Egnatia. But all details of that tour are unknown to us.

We can only add that, further down the east side of the Adriatic, the gospel was carried by Paul's fine helper Titus. Titus, he tells us, is "departed to Dalmatia", that narrow strip so full of rocky bays and charming creeks, now the paradise of Mediterranean cruisers. Titus too was bishop of Crete, that big, east Mediterranean island, whose intensely interesting remains have only been dug into light in quite recent years.

In 2 Timothy iv. 10: "Crescens is departed unto Galatia", **N C & Vulg.** read "into Gallia". This would bring Gaul or old France into the N.T. map also. But it is nearly certain Gaul did not get the Gospel so early; and "Galatia" is the reading much the most probable.

How proud we should have been, if we could have included our own Britain in N.T. Geography! To that we can scarce attain. Pudens and Claudia, mentioned in the same chapter of 2 Timothy as Dalmatia, have more than once been claimed as British, and there was a Claudia there, a British lady of high rank. But any connection with St. Paul or the Christian faith is highly doubtful. The legends about Joseph of Arimathea planting the Holy Thorn at Glastonbury are now all exploded. And, so far as we can tell, in the very dim light which history gives, Christ's Gospel did not reach England till well on in the second century.

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