

The basic geography of Jesus' ministry (J. C. Laney)

1. Study Matthew 4:25. What do you know about the geographical areas mentioned in this passage?

Galilee is the name applied to the northern district of Israel that was surrounded on three sides by foreign nations. The term literally means "circle" or "district," the fuller expression of which is "district of the Gentiles (Isa. 9:1). According to Josephus' description of Galilee, the territory was divided into upper and lower regions. (1) Upper Galilee, being mountainous and isolated, does not enter much into biblical history. Lower Galilee served as the location for most of Christ's ministry as recorded in the synoptic gospels. The region is divided into a series of east-west valleys and basins. Galilee's fertility is highly praised by Josephus, who states that no part of the land was left uncultivated. (2)

Judea is the name used to refer to the southern region of Palestine. Since most of the exiles returning from the Babylonian captivity were of the tribe of Judah, they came to be called Jews and their land, Yehud. The name "Judea" (the Graeco-Latin form of Judah) was used in the Hellenistic period to describe the area where the Jews of the land of Israel lived. Judea is made up of a massive upwarp of Cenomanian limestone rising from the coastal plain on the west and bending down towards the wilderness and Dead Sea on the east. The region also encompasses the Negev ("desert-land") to the south, the Shephelah ("lowland"), and a transitional region between the coastal plain and the hill country. Judea provides the geographical background for the greater part of John's gospel.

Samaria was the name of the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that Omri built on a hill purchased from Shemer (1 Kings 16:24). Samaria eventually became synonymous with the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 13:32) and in Roman times was applied to the administrative region situated between Galilee and Judea. Samaria is more open and accessible than the hill country to the south. According to Josephus, "Its character differs in no wise from that of Judea." (3) Both regions have fertile soil and are well watered. Josephus writes that these areas are "well wooded and abound in fruits, both wild and cultivated." Jesus' travels between Galilee and Judea sometimes took Him through Samaria (John 4:4-5; cf. Luke 9:52-53; 17:11).

Perea, a term used regularly by Josephus to refer to Transjordan, is not found in the Bible except in a variant of Luke 6:17. The term is used to describe both the political district administered by Herod Antipas and the land beyond the Jordan in general. Perea was a long, narrow territory (about thirteen miles wide) encompassing the area between the Rift Valley and the Syrian Desert. The territory extends from the River Arnon in the south to the borders of Pella in the north. Perea was less densely populated in the first century than Galilee or Judea and figures less in the life of Christ than these regions (cf. Matt. 19:1). Though he admits to exceptions, Josephus regards Perea as generally "rugged and too wild to bring tender fruits to maturity." (4)

Decapolis (lit., "ten city") refers to the region in southern Syria and northeastern Palestine composed of territories of certain Hellenistic cities. The traditional view that Decapolis was a federation of cities has been recently challenged. A study of the ancient sources reveals no evidence of any political, military, or commercial arrangements among the members. (5) As indicated by the name, the number of cities was originally ten, but the number and members varied from time to time. These cities were all Greco-Roman and shared a common religious and cultural identity. Jesus attracted followers from Decapolis and ministered in this region (Matt. 4:25; Mark 5:1-20; 7:31).

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From a study of the geography of the gospels, one gains several strong impressions:

1. The gospel writers had a definite geographical perspective and emphasis, but they were not obsessed by this interest. They were not writing a geography of the life of Christ, but they used selective geographical notices to elucidate His life and ministry.
2. The general framework of the life of Christ is clear. The places of His birth, childhood, and death are known. The major portion of His ministry was in Galilee, and the center of His Galilean ministry was at Capernaum.
3. Relatively few of the places where Jesus ministered are definitely named and identified by the gospel writers. The writers were more interested in Christ's message than the place He delivered it. They used geography only where it furthered that objective.
4. Jesus' ministry was confined almost entirely to Jewish centers free from Gentile influence. His ministry was primarily to the Jews. He had little to do with the Hellenistic centers such as Sepphoris, Scythopolis, and Tiberias.
5. The gospels reflect not only a geographical perspective and emphasis, they are topographically accurate. Satisfactory explanations are available that refute the arguments of the critics and vindicate the accuracy of the gospels.

References

1. Josephus *The Jewish War* 3.35-40.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.42-43.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.48-50.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.44-45.
5. S. Thomas Parker, "The Decapolis Reviewed," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (September 1975):440.

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