Book Review


Barry J. Beitzel is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has a special interest in Near Eastern geography. He also has authored *The New Moody Atlas of the Bible* (Moody Press, 2009). The present work with its interest in geography falls into a similar category. This volume deals with the locations mentioned in the four canonical gospels and partially feels almost like a travel guide to Israel. It makes the life of Jesus visual and enables the reader to experience the footsteps of Jesus.

Fourteen experienced scholars have been asked to contribute 48 chapters to the book. In the introduction, the editor himself describes the main philosophy of the volume as: “The conceptual premise of this commentary holds that geography (space) is a legitimate, if commonly overlooked, hermeneutical category” (p. xiii). Since geography is often not considered of primary importance in commentaries, Beitzel hopes to make a lasting contribution that will deepen the understanding of the Gospel message. He observes Jesus making a connection between his message and the surrounding space, so the question “Where?” needs to be examined. Additionally, this volume makes note of the clear difference in Jesus’ words and teaching in Galilee, as opposed to Jerusalem and Judea. Thus, a “sensitivity to how Jesus tailored his message to particular geographical regions” (p. xv) is one of the expected contributions of the book.

This volume follows Jesus chronologically in the gospels from his birth to his crucifixion and resurrection. At least one textual reference from the gospels is connected to each chapter, and parallel texts by the Synoptics are provided. Introductory chapters deal with Bethlehem and birth narratives. Besides the geography of Bethlehem, authors deal with guest houses in the 1st century AD, shepherds, magi, the census of Augustus, king Herod and
Other textual details related to the gospel locations. Thus, it becomes obvious, that social, cultural, archeological and historical data inform and enrich this book. Chapters follow on Nazareth, wilderness, Cana, Capernaum, Sychar, Bethesda, hill of Moreh, Sea of Galilee, harbors, gentile territories, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, Jerusalem, pool of Siloam, Temple mount, Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Besides chapters dealing with locations, the following subjects are covered in separate chapters: crowds, fishing, storms, pig husbandry, feedings of multitudes, forgiveness, weather, feast of Tabernacles, Passover, metaphors, oil, wine and grain. All these subjects help to visualize locations in the context of the gospels and to deepen the knowledge of the various gospel scenes. It is clear that by including these issues, this book goes beyond a pure geographical interest, and combines it with the real life of the 1st century AD. Chapter 15 situates Jesus’ teaching in the context of Galilee, while chapter 34 deals with the different situation in Judea. Interested readers will benefit from the richness of issues covered in the volume. A subject index and a thorough Scripture index enhance the book. Every chapter ends with its own bibliography for further reading.

Even though the book mentions space in the context of geography, today’s literary theory deals with space on a level that goes far beyond geography, culture or history. Literary criticism has taught us to imagine space like a stage in a theater, which gives us access to the specific living space of acting figures with all its contrasts and boundaries. Currently, probably the most complete exegetical methodology for the exploration of space is provided by Sönke Finnern and Jan Rüggemeier in their book Methoden der neutestamentlichen Exegese (Tübingen: Francke, 2016, see esp. pp. 228–235). For the purpose of analyzing space in biblical narratives they suggest exploring its intensity, order of presentation, connections to other spaces, changes in space, actions in space, overstepping of space boundaries, relations of time and space, as well as compatibility with the world of the original readers.

Such deeper literary exploration of a given space opens a new dimension to the gospel locations in their specific context. On the other hand, in Beitzel’s book nuances and distinctions of the separate gospel accounts are blurred and lost. His final product is a kind of harmonization in which different writings are brought together. Thus, locations and their spaces are not utilized for the purpose of providing the distinctive theological profile of each gospel and
their specific messages to their contemporaries, which is a pity in a commentary on the gospels.

Overall, it is a recommended book for pastors and preachers who need some geographical and cultural information. Interested travelers to the Holy Land, as well as lay people wishing to collect some foundational knowledge of the places mentioned in the gospels will benefit from reading Beitzel’s new volume. This book could also be useful for beginning theology students entering into the field of gospel explorations.

For deeper studies on space issues in the gospels, the book would need to be supplemented with additional sources based on literary criticism, as well with theological works presenting the distinctiveness of the messages of the each gospel author. More maps and photos from the localities could have enriched the book, but it is actually not intended to replace an atlas. Finally, this volume should not be judged according to what it is not bringing, but what it actually achieves. It wishes to be a supplement to the geographical information often missing in the major commentaries, and that purpose is achieved.

Igor Lorencin, Ph.D. (USA), is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Theologische Hochschule Friedensau.
Email: igor.lorencin@thh-friedensau.de