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Fuller's Pisgah Sight of Palestine: A Seventeenth-Century Bible Atlas

by Ian W. J. Hopkins

Dr. Hopkin's survey of modern 'Maps and Plans of Bible Lands' appeared in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY 40 (1968), 28-33. We are glad to have this further article from his pen which takes us back to the first British Bible atlas.

A very popular and useful aid to the study of the Scriptures is the Bible atlas and today there is quite a wide choice of these on the market. However, although maps of the Holy Land have been produced for many centuries, the concept of a bound set of maps with an explanatory text is more recent and, at least as far as this country is concerned, is of seventeenth century origin. The man responsible for making this type of work popular was Thomas Fuller.

Fuller was born in 1608 and his best known works are histories and sets of sermons which abound in a concise style and wit which was very characteristic of this man. Coleridge described him as 'incomparably the most sensible, the least prejudiced, great man of an age that boasted a galaxy of great men'. His most significant work, however, may in retrospect be the lesser known *Pisgah Sight of Palestine*¹ which was an attempt to write a geographical description of the lands of the Bible together with a series of maps. Published in 1650, five years before his Church History of Britain, the *Pisgah Sight* became popular at that time as an English equivalent of the *Theatrum Terrae Sanctae* by Christian Adrichem² and represents probably the first Bible atlas written in English.

There are a number of parallels between Fuller's work and that of Adrichem and other contemporaries especially in the design and details of the maps. The question arises, however, as to whether Fuller was really attempting an accurate portrayal of Biblical geography or whether his work at least cartographically, was mainly interesting illustration and more of art than science. He certainly sought to impress in all he did and Coleridge again remarked that 'wit was the stuff and substance of Fuller's intellect'. His maps contain imaginary coats of arms of the twelve tribes as well as the arms of his patrons and numerous pictures, as was the custom of the time. Skelton reminds us that maps at that time tended to sell more on appearance than on accuracy and this would no doubt apply equally to Fuller's work.³ Was accuracy, however, of no importance to Fuller?

¹ Originally published in 1650, but reprinted with facsimiles of the original maps by William Tegg, London in 1869.

² H. M. Z. Meyer, *Eretz Israel BeMaphot Atikot* (Jerusalem, 1965) 27.

³ R. A. Skelton, *Decorative Printed Maps of the 15th to 18th Centuries* (London, 1952) 17.

His stated intention was certainly to be informative. In justifying the writing of the book he maintains that no other authors have 'presented us with distinct maps and descriptions together'⁴ and he considered the geographical background of the Bible a vital part of theological studies. He discusses the disagreement between geographers on detail and is insistent that from the sources available, only the best should be used.

In fact as far as the text is concerned, Fuller's main source of information is the Bible itself. The tribal boundaries and the nature of the land are described in detail based largely on the Scriptural evidence with proof texts and references. A good example is the discussion on Jericho:

Afterwards it was in the possession of the kings of Judah because in the reign of Ahaz the captives of Judah are said to be 'brought back to Jericho unto their brethren' (2 Chron. XXVIII.15). When carried into Babylon, no more than three hundred and forty-five of his city returned home (Ezra ii.34), whose zeal was very forward in repairing the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. iii.2).⁵

170 There are also references to classical and medieval writers such as Strabo and Pliny and some discussion of differences of opinion. There is also, however, a thorough going Biblical approach as would be expected from a seventeenth century divine. He argues strongly for the Biblical statements on the fertility of Palestine quoting Strabo and St. Jerome at length in support of this. His knowledge of the country is, however, mixed. He defends the fertility of the land at one point by claiming that the wilderness areas were 'no more than a woody retiredness from public habitation',⁶ a statement which would be impossible from anyone who had actually been to the wilderness east of the Mount of Olives. There are, on the other hand, some detailed investigations of geographical features such as the Dead Sea using ancient writers as well as the Scriptures. It is noticeable that while Fuller clearly attempts to be detailed and accurate the work is not based on contemporary first-hand accounts. He is either not aware of, or chooses not to use, the pilgrim accounts of the Middle Ages even of Felix Fabri, or the Arab geographers such as Mukaddasi and seems to consider the land entirely as it was in ancient times.

Apart from the text, however, the *Pisgah Sight* is illustrated by a number of maps. Fuller in fact writes very highly of these, pronouncing that 'the eye will learn more in an hour from a map, than the ear can learn in a day from discourse.'⁷ As was usual with maps of the Holy

⁴ Fuller, *Pisgah Sight of Palestine*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Land up to the present century, the details of ancient Palestine were considered more important than the data available of the contemporary scene.⁸ Nevertheless there was a clear attempt to present them with a clarity and an accuracy which would make them useful.

One important feature of the maps in the *Pisgah Sight* was that they have a uniformity of style despite the fact that three named engravers were used and there were in addition five anonymous maps. The engravers used were John Goddard, Robert Vaughan and W. Marshall, in addition to the More and Speed map of Canaan which is attached as a sort of frontispiece. There is some variation in the pictorial detail used to depict the cities but certain consistent symbols were used by all engravers to such effect that it becomes very difficult to decide which, if any, of them were responsible for the anonymous maps. Clearly there was a master hand controlling the process and this was almost certainly Fuller himself. His attention to detail and accuracy was such that he even had a specific symbol (a banner) for any site whose location was uncertain.

Despite this care over uniformity there are some differences between the maps. The more detailed tribal maps are on the whole simply more detailed versions of Goddard's general map but there are considerable differences between them and the frontispiece map by More and Speed. John Speed was one of the leading English cartographers in the early 17th century, having completed an atlas, the *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* and following it up with the *Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World*.⁹ The map of Canaan is dated 1611 and clearly Fuller is here using an existing, generally accepted map as part of his 'atlas' because the discrepancies between it and his own maps are very pronounced.

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In order to answer the question as to how accurate Fuller attempted to be we need to undertake a detailed comparison between his cartographic products and those of other contemporaries and of the present time. Some of the obvious discrepancies come about in relation to the coasts, the line of the rivers and mountains, and other features of physical geography. In this respect we can see how Fuller's knowledge of the Holy Land was less than precise. The Mediterranean coast is a continuous series of capes and bays as if he could not accept that it could be smooth! Similarly the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee have exaggerated coastal features. The River Kishon, according to Fuller, flows from the Sea of Galilee to the Mediterranean which it enters via the tip of the Carmel headland and the Jordan takes a pronounced eastward course before entering the Sea of Galilee.

⁸ I. W. J. Hopkins, Nineteenth Century Maps of Palestine, *Imago Mundi* 22 (1968).

⁹ R. A. Skelton, *op. cit.*, 54-5.

On the other hand, the shapes of the Dead Sea and of the Sea of Galilee are more accurate than in most other contemporary maps. Both approximate to their true shape in general outline compared with Speed's map which has a crescent shaped Dead Sea and a very irregularly shaped Galilee. Ortelius in his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of 1584 had both seas far less accurately portrayed than is the case with Fuller, although Ortelius was somewhat better than Speed. William Blaeuw's *Terra Sancta* (1629) shows both seas very erroneously and Tilemann Stella (1579) depicts a Dead Sea curved like a new moon! This seems to have been a common misconception because Humphrey Cole's map (1572) has an almost identical error. In this respect Fuller's cartography was a distinct improvement.

172 However, it is when we come to investigate the location of places on the maps that we become able to make a precise assessment of accuracy. Cartometric testing is a means by which we can make numerical comparisons between maps by measuring locations in terms of grid references of latitude and longitude and then to compare them. For various reasons, older maps cannot be so easily tested using such co-ordinates but measurements of distance or direction can be made. In order to test Fuller's accuracy, a total of twenty distance between towns was measured on the general map (Goddard's) in the *Pisgah Sight* and compared with a modern Survey of Israel map and with the map of Canaan by More and Speed.

The results of this testing can be tabulated as follows:

Fuller compared with Survey of Israel

Mean difference (20 observations)	7.85 miles	Mean percentage: 58.7%
Mean difference (18 observations)	5.60 miles	Mean percentage: 22.01%

Speed compared with Survey of Israel

Mean difference (20 observations)	11.47 miles	Mean percentage: 67.8%
Mean difference (18 observations)	9.06 miles	Mean percentage: 44.8%

In terms of actual distances over the twenty measured lengths, Fuller's general map is significantly better than that of More and Speed. This is especially so if we exclude in each case, the two largest discrepancies which are due to major errors in locating an actual site, rather than in cartographic error. One consistent example of this was the location of Bethsaida west of the Jordan's mouth into the Sea of Galilee instead of east of it. The result is a mean distance error of 5.6 miles for Fuller when compared with a modern Survey of Israel map and 9.06 for More and Speed. However, the figures become more meaningful if we

transform them into a percentage of error compared with the modern maps. In this case, for eighteen measured distances, Fuller has 22.01% error and More and Speed 44.8%. This means that Fuller has half the cartographic error of More and Speed.

We cannot conclude by ascribing to Fuller's *Pisgah Sight* a scientific exactitude which would have been untypical of his age and which would in any case have made his work impossible to sell commercially. However, while the maps have the usual cartouches, embellishments and fancies, they appear to be a genuine attempt to obtain some sort of precision. In the text also, Fuller's intention is to convey accurate information based on the Biblical text and classical authors. Today we regard the *Pisgah Sight* as a decorative and quaint product of a pious age but it is significant as the first genuine attempt in English to convey, in both textual and cartographic form, the geography of the Holy Land and as such can justly be regarded as our first modern Bible atlas.