

Teaching with Bible Maps ~ Theory, Ideas, Examples

An article from Neil MacQueen at www.rotation.org

I originally wrote this article for my software website back when we had some good Bible atlas programs. Below is the updated version with more example scattered throughout it. I've taught with Bible maps using many different techniques, from software to drawing our own, even baking our own. This article explains some of the insights I've gained about how and why to use maps with kids. For more insights, ideas, video clips, and resources go to <https://www.rotation.org/topic/maps>

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1. Intro

I have always loved to look at Bible maps and teach with them. And over the course of many years I've learned that maps are far more than Bible geography lessons, they can help **organize** the story, help students **identify and remember** "who, what, and where," and map can even be used to **promote reflection**.

Pulling out a large map as part of your Bible study helps illustrate important information in a memorable way. They can be as a "quick references" used during your Bible study, or as the centerpiece of your storytelling and student activity. Below in this article I've provided numerous examples of all of these. A colorful map can also improve student attention by giving them a visual to focus on.

One reason to use maps in Bible study is that **physical locations in scripture often have a history that needs to be explained**. Samaria and the Samaritans, for example, or where Zarephath is located. And sometimes, the location has visuals attached to it that are important to understanding the story – Jesus in Gethsemane right next to the looming Temple, for example.

Almost every story in the Bible has a geographic component to it that can be mentioned and may be really important to the meaning of the story -- even if "location" isn't apparent in the text. For example, the story of Jesus in Gethsemane doesn't mention that the garden is literally in the shadow of the Jerusalem Temple (the source of his problems) and Jesus could very easily see it while he was in anguish. The location of Zarephath "outside" of Israel. What you can see from the top of Mt. Carmel. How Jericho is located at a major crossroads of cultures. How far Jesus walked from town to town, or his mother traveled to get to Bethlehem. Nowadays we have a lot of choices when it comes to buying Bible maps, and you'll probably want to buy different sets for different purposes and stories. Look at the maps recommended at www.rotation.org/topic/maps and do search on Google. In general, you want KID-FRIENDLY maps that are colorful, large, and include some graphics. The old-fashioned maps from Abingdon that a lot of us have used (and still use) are nice for some stories, but can look imposing to children. Some curriculum publishers sell maps as accessories to their curriculum. Check around. TIP: Buy yourself some a clear sheet of plexiglass (with rounded edges) to give yourself and your students a way to draw on your maps without damaging them.

Don't forget that kids can also CREATE maps. There's the old "salt" map idea, but you can also use modeling clay or cookie dough. See the resources and ideas at www.rotation.org/topic/maps The key to all these "make your map" ideas, however, is to make sure the "making" doesn't each up all the lesson time.

In addition to maps, it's a good idea to have photos or illustrations of what various locations looked like. The

shoreline and hill where Jesus preached the Beatitudes, the looming Temple, the desolation of Sinai. Here again the internet is a great source of images you can print and illustrate your lesson with.

2. Why teach with maps

We call maps “visual teaching aids” and that they are, but they are more. **Maps are “visual user interfaces” for information.** They visually organize story event and can provide story context, and aspects of locations on maps can suggest meaning.

The prime example of how maps are “visual interfaces” is the Exodus story. Tracing the Exodus route creates a visual sequence of the story, and it also visualizes the journey of faith from captivity, through the wilderness, and towards promise. In the same way, the colors and symbols of a good Exodus map not only help retell the story, they can become metaphors to reflect on. For example, Egypt on the map is green but has illustrations of Pharaoh and pyramids that remind us that we were slaves. The Sinai desert is brown and mountainous (faithful following can be difficult, perseverance required). And the Promised Land is green (what do you hope for? What is your faith supposed to be leading you to?). If your maps don’t help visually tell this story, then you either need better maps, or you need to add your own colors and illustrations as part of your discussion and reflection.

ILLUSTRATING THE MAP

Being able to draw on a map is a real plus for the teacher, as well as the students. Just the simple act of doodling on a location or adding a key word/concept will draw student attention. Let them help you. (Remember to have a clear sheet of plastic so you can draw on your maps without damaging them).

When you teach with a map you end up creating three maps: the one we start with, the map we and the students create by drawing on it, and the one our minds create as we interact with the map and story. For example, when I teach Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem, we’ll trace and mark the locations of key events, describe them, and add illustrations to emphasize key points and supplement what the printed map didn’t give us. We’ll trace Jesus’ route from the Temple court where the soldiers beat him all the way to Golgotha. Along the “Way of Sorrows,” we’ll see and hear in our mind’s eye the crowds jeering Jesus and add some illustrations and color to that section. When we get to “the place of the skull” we’ll certainly add more there too. **Colors** are great ways to “emotionally code” what happened where in a story. Adding simple **illustrations** provide another way to code your map’s visual interface. Together they function as a sort of **visual “short-hand”** that our students read and remember. And when you ask them to “decode” the color or illustration or route on a map, much more information comes flowing out with it. This is called “associative memory” -- “one memory triggers another memory.” The brain loves to associate important information to visuals like colors and illustrations. The heart  symbol is a great example of the power of associative memory. It means much more than visually meets the eye. When you put a heart on Golgotha map and explain it, your students will get the message and remember it.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE of HOW TO TEACH and REFLECT with a MAP

Here is a lesson “walk through” describing how you could lead students through a map of Abraham and Sarah’s Journey from Ur to Canaan after you’ve read the scripture about his call and journey. I’ve added some explanatory notes.

1. Where is the Land of UR on our map? (A poor teacher points it out. A good teacher asks them to find it – turning the map into a kind of scavenger hunt.)
2. Who lived in UR? (Their brain will search their memory of the scripture you just read for this info. Either you or their memory will reward them with the correct answer: “Abraham and Sarah.” Their minds

will now associate that information with that name and visual location on the map. Ask them “what’s near” that location. Does it look like a nice place to live? Why would you want to leave it and cross a desert? What does that say about Abraham’s faith that he left this “fertile crescent”?

3. What modern day country is UR located in today? (The name “Iraq” will open up all sorts of information and feelings to discuss, as in, we just fought a war there.)
4. So God called an IRAQI to go to Israel? (Kind of a startling claim in today’s world, and if they don’t know that, tell them! This opens up the struggle of what this says about God and who is called. Surprising info always gets remembered!)
5. How far and difficult was the journey from here to here, Ur to Canaan? (Pretty far, looks brown and rocky on the map. Ask them to consult the legend and come up with a comparable distance, such as, “that’s from our town to Disney World.” This distance tells them something about Abraham’s faith.)
6. What do you think Abraham’s wife Sarah said to him when he announced the journey? His friends? His kids? What would your MOM say? Your sister? (getting personal is a great way to get things remembered, and it also interjects life application)
7. WHO ELSE in the Bible traveled a long distance to complete a mission? (accessing, accessing.... Moses! Paul!) Ever been on a long hard journey? What was that like for you and fellow travelers? (The phrase “long journey” or “long car ride” will evoke some emotional twinge to your lesson content, and we know that memories are strengthened by emotional content.)
8. What does God’s call to make a long journey tell you about what God expects out of us? (the map colors tell you it’s brown and rocky, hard and far. I would ask a follow up about what you need for a long journey with others, such as patience. Ask them to tell a few vacation stories!)
9. Why did God call Abraham to live in Canaan? What’s around Canaan? (I would point out how people traveled through there to get from Africa to Europe From Arabia to Turkey. They will begin to see the ‘shape’ of the region as a crossroads, and seeing that shape on future maps, will remind them of the crossroads concept.)
10. Etc etc.

AN ABRAHAM & SARAH JOURNEY MAP REFLECTION ACTIVITY:

- ☑ Draw a map of your life, and locate important people and places on it.
- ☑ Place a goal out on one edge of your map, and yourself on the other side of your map.
- ☑ Label the side you’re on describing what kind of “country” you are living in. COLOR IN parts of your map representing good and difficult things in your life. What color is school or family or church?
- ☑ Now add an area beyond your map which “God may be calling you to” (not an actual location, but a figurative one.) Now add a barrier between your land and the land God might be calling you to.
- ☑ Label the things that are ‘in the way’ of you reaching your goal. Now draw some trails to get to that goal. What is the ‘name’ of that trail?
- ☑ Make a list of things you’re going to need to travel with to reach your goal.
- ☑ Share the story of your map.

What about stories where nobody moves?

Let's take the **Wedding at Cana**, for example, Here's an abbreviated talk using a Bible map where Jesus seems to stay at one location.

To the kids: So where's Cana? Come find it on the map. How far is it from Nazareth? Come measure it. How did Jesus get there? How long did it take he and his family? Where were some of the people at the wedding probably from...point to places on the map. After he did the miracle, where did they go to? Thus, what was the REACH of that miracle? What nearby towns might the story have spread into? Where did he go next? How fast would his reputation have spread? How do we spread his reputation? Who do you tell? How do you tell? where do you tell?

Here's a lesson sketch for beginning a lesson about the crucifixion with a Map.

As I use the map, I'm moving my hand across it, inviting kids to touch the map and trace the route with me on their own map copy. (The eye is built to track whatever moves, and drawing imprints visual memory to the info they are hearing.)

Pictured right: a thumbnail graphic of a map of Jerusalem during Jesus' Last Two Days. I've erased the location names and "what happened here" so that the children can fill it in as we do our Bible study.



Can you find Golgotha on the map? Where is it near? Were their people near it? Why? (They were coming into Jerusalem at the nearby gate.) Was he crucified within or outside of the walls? Why? How do we preach Christ crucified in a prominent location for all to see? Who walks by you or church saying bad things about us or our beliefs? What was Peter and Mary's location there that day? How close would you have stood? How would you have been feeling? How close are you standing NOW ...believing or not believing? What's causing you to stand back from Christ? Are you afraid the crowd might start insulting you and not just him? How can you get closer to Christ?

Next, I have them draw a map of Golgotha and ask kids "mark how close or far away they feel from Christ at the cross." (Distance on a map can be a metaphor!)

Can you find the tomb on the map? How prominent was this area to Jerusalem? Given the close proximity of the tomb to Jerusalem, how quickly might the story of Jesus' resurrection have spread in the city? Where will you go from here now that you know Christ has died for you? How will you spread the story?

Here's an example of sequencing the story of Jesus' last two days in Jerusalem.

Students are asked to come up to the map and point out where the Last Supper was, the Garden, how he went from the Garden to the High Priest's House, then to Herod's, and then to Pilate in the Antonia Fortress, then on to Golgotha. Add photos of Jerusalem locations with your map and your visual memories increase substantially because you are adding more visual memories upon which to hang your lesson content. In our Life of Christ CD, there's a narrated map tour of Jesus' last two days in Jerusalem. I created a worksheet that has that map on it, ...but with all the locations blanked out. The kids had to go to those locations, and fill in the places, and what happened there. You can see that "Last Two Days" free lesson resource linked on my Life of Christ CD webpage.

4. Young Children and Maps

I used to worry that YOUNG CHILDREN couldn't developmentally understand that a MAP represented a real location, and indeed, it's a hard leap for young children to understand that the piece of paper you are showing them represents a real place. But then, I came to understand that to a young child (and even the rest of us) a **map is a "picture book" –albeit, with quite different looking illustrations.** In a book, the pictures depict the characters and action. On a map, symbols and colors represent parts of the story, like blue for the Jordan river

and yellow for the desert Elijah and Elisha walked into. I'm going to place two blue objects on the river along with a tiny piece of rolled up cloth and use the cloth to "part" the river in the Elijah story. If I'm talking about Jesus and the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, we're going to draw big waves and a storm on the map of the Sea as we talk about the story. (In one lesson about Jesus calming the storm, I even had the kids help me "rock" the map back and forth on the table to dramatize the storm and boat.) In other words, we create MENTAL ILLUSTRATIONS tied to the locations on a map. I've also been known to bring out props and place them on a map, anything that will remind them of a key part of the story and help illustrate it.

5. 15 TIPS FOR TEACHING WITH MAPS

I'm sure there are many more but here are some of my "go to" tips:

1. **Use colorful maps.** Colors stick in the brain and represent information.
2. **Use BIG maps.** Occupy the student's attention by occupying their field of vision.
3. **Leave your maps out where the students can see them later.** Memories need reinforcement and triggering. Don't put them away.
4. **Let your kids put their hands on the map.** Ask them to walk forward and point to certain locations or trace routes. This invokes their 'manual' learning, and kids, in particular, learn by touching.
5. **Identify types of terrain,** in part because 'terrain' is a visual metaphor that can help enhance the emotion of a story, such as "difficulty and perseverance."
6. **Identify distances on the map.** When Elijah left Mt Carmel to escape to Mt Horeb, the distance traveled tells you something about his desperation and state of mind. Distance is a metaphor too! How much faith did very pregnant Mary NEED to have as she traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem?
7. **Use photos of biblical landscapes** to enrich visual memories of the content. Content loves to hang on visuals. The internet is a great source of Bible Land photos.
8. **Play "fill in the blank" games** with maps that have kids referencing other maps and materials.
9. **Play location scrambles with maps.** For example, if you're teaching about the Good Samaritan, have six or seven place names written on placards that can be attached to a large map of Israel you have drawn. In a lesson about the Good Samaritan, for example, this could be the visual pretext for you sharing why the Jews didn't like the Samaritans –because the Assyrian army was settled there in the 8th C BC and mixed with the people who were thus considered "mongrels" by the Jerusalem leaders. Jesus, however, brought them back in the fold. Samaria was also one of the capitals of the northern Kingdom, which fell out of disfavor. Jesus was a "northerner" too, from Nazareth. WHY do people despise others because of WHERE THEY ARE FROM? Or how they talk? Or how they look? Or what skin color they have?
10. **Print maps and color them in, add routes and name places and symbols.** Younger kids love to do this. They are helping create their own graphic user interface.
11. **Have a detailed TEACHER's map or Bible Atlas handy** to locate certain locations not found on your more kid-friendly colorful map.
12. **Have a set of POST-IT NOTE tags and arrows ready to let kids mark locations.** (Arrow post-its are the kind they sometimes use in legal documents to mark where signatures are required). This saves you from using PINS in the map and destroying it.
13. **Have student draw "Personal Reflection Maps" of the story's meaning or reflection.** For example, in lesson about the Beatitudes and/or Sermon on the Mount, draw the Sea and a hillside where Jesus is

standing. Draw a boat on the shore. Label them “Out to sea,” “Coming to shore,” and “Close to Jesus.” Now have the students draw themselves on the map – explaining that the three locations represent where they are in relationship to their faith in Jesus. You can also have them draw “where they were two years ago, and “where you want to be in your faith in two years.” You can also do something similar in a lesson about the Ten Commandments – having them draw Mt. Sinai and where they are in relationship to obeying God’s commands. The locations where they put themselves are the reflection that you follow up on. “How can you get from here to there?”

14. Make your own imagined “LOCALIZED” version map of a Story Location. For example, in the story of the man let down through the roof, draw a large map of Capernaum and the surrounding area, including the Sea of Galilee. **Draw HOUSES and LABEL the houses** as such: the paralyzed man’s home, Peter’s house, the synagogue, the local Roman soldier’s post, the ‘friends’ house, the disciples on a boat, a nearby village where people heard about Jesus, etc. Create discussion questions for each location and have kids roll a die to pick a location question they must answer. Example: *What did the paralyzed man’s family think about him before and after the miracle?*

15. Play “Board Games” with your maps. For example, place numbered post-it notes over key location on your map, roll dice, and answer a question for that location. Or, draw your own version of a location, such as, the locations in the Zaccheus story (Jericho, Zaccheus house, his tax office, the rich young man’s mansion) and post questions to each of those locations. You can also play board games with your imagined “local” maps and Personal Reflection Maps mentioned above.

6. Tips on Displaying Your Maps

- a. It’s really important to display as many maps as you can in your classroom and not keep them locked in a closet. Why? Because your maps are visual reminders of previous lessons and that means whenever they gaze upon them, their memories can be reinforced.
- b. Mount your favorite maps in poster frames to protect them, or on posterboard or foamboard so that they can be hung on hooks on the wall and easily brought to the table but won’t suffer wear and tear.
- c. You can also frame your maps, or slide under a plexiglass sheet you have mounted to a wall.
- d. **How to MARK ON YOUR MAPS** without destroying them
If you’re putting your maps under plexiglass, you can use dry erase markers on them. If you are hanging them, then **purchase large CLEAR “dry erase” vinyl sheets** to place over your maps so you can MARK THEM UP with a dry erase marker. Google the term “clear dry erase vinyl sheet”, or look at the topvinylfilms.com website.

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