Chapter Fifteen

Geography and Cosmography in Talmudic Literature

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The ancient Greeks and Romans pursued the study of geography and maintained a literature devoted to this discipline. Strabo, Pliny, Pausanias, Ptolemy and others devoted works or studies to this field. The sages of ancient Palestine were not so inclined. The Greco-Roman geographer was also wont to travel the world in order to get to know it, but in talmudic literature we do not find this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the literature of the sages contains many passages reflective of a comparable interest in geography, especially concerning the Land of Israel, that are worthy of study. The geographic traditions of the sages are not only helpful for understanding the geography of their own times, but also of the biblical period. They often preserve names and traditions from the biblical world which did not survive in other types of sources and thus span a chronological gap between that world and our times. To that extent, studying the traditions of the sages is relevant for ancient historical geography.

The Byzantine period saw the development of a new type of geographic literature: pilgrims' literature. This literature is basically a journey into the past, while mentioning holy sites of both the past and the present. The relationship of the sages to holy sites was somewhat mixed. Jewish law dictates a blessing to be recited at the site of a miracle, while there are different opinions

1 For example, Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*; idem, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*; Notley and Safrai, *Onomasticon*.

2 mBer 9:1. This halakha may well explain the discussions regarding the identification of sites mentioned in the Bible.
regarding the sanctity of holy graves. In any event, there does not seem to have developed a Jewish pilgrim literature or guides to the ‘holy sites’ during the Mishna and Talmud periods. In fact, our sources do not indicate a very developed independent pursuit of geography for its own sake on the part of the sages.

**Rabbinic Literature as a Source for Geography**

We possess hundreds of geographic statements in rabbinic literature, but most appear embedded in traditions devoted to various realms of law or legend. An exception may be the rabbinic interest in ‘cosmography’ – a discipline located somewhere between the fields of geography and natural sciences. Even this subject, however, did not merit more independent treatment than that found in some rabbinic attempts at a description of the universe. Most of our geographic material, therefore, must be culled from various non-geographic tradition units. We can divide these into direct geographical statements, made either in the course of a narrative, or in a halakhic discussion, or in an aggadic discourse, and into statements made by way of commenting on the Bible, or midrash. The second type is a little more complicated and will be discussed in the following section.

In the first place, there is geographical information may be contained in narrative reports. Talmudic literature contains hundreds of traditions regarding various events of an assorted nature. These often contain information regarding the site of the event and other important details. Thus, for instance, a tradition describes sages travelling from Achzib to Acco who on their journey met a non-Jew who lived in one of the *burgi* in the area. The location of the events described may be of secondary importance for the purposes of the tradition, but in any event, it provides us with important information regarding this region, the forms of settlement in it and its inhabitants. Traditions such as this appear very often in talmudic literature and serve as sources of great importance in our understanding of the historical geography of Roman Palestine. It should be added, however, that although most sources in talmudic literature are generally trustworthy, each source should of course be examined individually and carefully.

In the second place, we find geographical information in halakhic discussions. The sages often explain a halakhic principle with the aid of geographic material. Thus, in a discussion of the laws of interest the sages mention ‘Kefar Hanania and its environs’ and, ‘Kefar Sihin and its environs’ as having many

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3 There are many traditions on this issue. See, for example, bSot 34b, bTaan 16a. Cf yTaan 1, 65a. The New Testament relates that Jesus expressed opposition to the cult of holy sites. See Luke 1:47; Matt 23:29. See Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places*.

4 tPes 1:15. Most sources of this type were collected by Klein, *Sefer Ha-Yishuv*.

5 Klein, *On the History*.

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