

Gateway Seminary

Arizona Campus

A Look at the *Holman Bible Atlas*

Book Review

Submitted To

Dr. Paul Smith

In Partial Fulfillment Of

The Requirements For

Old Testament Introduction II

S1113-52

by

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February 29, 2024

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Thomas Brisco's *Holman Bible Atlas* is a historical and cartographic walk through the ancient Near East and the world of the early church through the third century AD. This is my review of it after seven months of using it for seminary study, personal study, and teaching preparation. All references to page numbers are from the 1998 hardcover edition, ISBN 978-0-8054-9760-1.

The organization of the book provides an obvious path for the reader to follow to learn the information within. The introductory chapters give a good overview of the geography, climate, and cultural aspects of the ancient Near East, especially Palestine. Maps overlaying historical places with modern ones help make the locations real for a reader new to biblical history. The chronological ordering of the rest of the book is straightforward and easy to digest. The divisions are logical. Chapter divisions coincide with changes in the nature of God's relationship with humanity or with His people, or changes in the political structure under which God's people live. Subdivisions within a chapter focus on specific elements of that period. Most of these are also chronological, though geographic subsections are employed where they make more sense, such as the sections for Israel and Judah in the chapter about the divided kingdom or the communities in Judah, Babylon, and Egypt for the period of the exile.

Information is for the most part clearly presented and easily consumed. Maps have good contrast and legible text. Isometric views of three-dimensional cutaway slices help bring topographical understanding of regions, battles, and routes of travel. Scripture

references are generously sprinkled throughout the historical narrative. Where Scripture is silent, additional sources are cited. The almost two dozen charts deliver the information that is best understood in tabular form. The parallel timelines for different nations included in the “Period at a Glance” charts help us see how significant events align across history. Sidebars cover topics that either span multiple timeframes or require a deeper dive.

Despite the value of the information within the sidebars, they are not always easily consumed. Smaller sidebars are usually given half a page or less and are printed on a background that simulates old parchment. This background makes the text harder to read, and the information contained would be much more accessible without it. The larger sidebars can be a full page or more of text, often accompanied by a map, resulting in the rest of the text having a continuation that jumps across two page turns. One example of this is the transition from page 89 to page 92 in the middle of “The Days of the Judges.” This jump skips past map 41 on page 90 and the sidebar “Canaanite Religion” on page 91 to resume the introductory text for period of the judges. A gap this wide is like a print newspaper sending the reader from the front page to the middle of the section to finish a story. The awkwardness of this jump is compounded by the text on page 92 referring back to the map on page 90, which now drives the reader to bounce back and forth between two pages that do not face each other, one of which had been jumped over in order to continue reading the other. The jump over the sidebar “The Arameans and the Kingdom of Aram-Damascus” (pages 124-125) is similarly awkward, breaking in the middle of a sentence on page 123. The sidebar takes the whole of page 124 and the top of

125. The continuation text from page 123 follows right after the sidebar and consists of only the four words “with only occasional respites” and then a reference to the sidebar that interrupted the sentence. Surely this odd pagination was avoidable.

The index of maps, containing all the personal and place names that appear on maps, is located at the end of the book, where an index would be expected. Unfortunately, it uses map numbers as its reference locators, rather than page numbers. This results in having to find the page for the target map either by flipping through the book, starting at a page number approximately equal to twice the map number, or by keeping a finger on the list of maps in the contents section at the beginning of the book. This exercise should not be required. No maps share a page, so a page number would have been a unique locator in this index as much as a map number is. This complexity could be mitigated in the electronic version of the book, but the hardcover print edition has no such conveniences.

Despite these few impediments to its otherwise clear presentation, the *Holman Bible Atlas* is a rich repository of information, both geographical and historical. It is for me a handy reference to supplement my personal study as well as my preparation for the Sunday school class I teach, and I occasionally bring it out while teaching to help the class better see the setting of the passage we are studying when my larger wall maps are not specific enough. While there is no mapping directly from Scripture to a page of the book, such a mapping would significantly add to the size of the book. I am able to find the relevant chapter, section, or map fairly easily by applying a little knowledge and the table of contents.