בס"ד

נפלאות הבריאה

maps produced from the 15th to 19th century

Editor: Sam. Eisikovits

Eisikovits1@gmail.com

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As Iran tries to wipe Israel off the map, a museum charts those who first put it on

Now reopened with war on hold, Israel Museum exhibition explores maps produced from the 15th to 19th century that blended geography with biblical beliefs and contemporary politics

By **ROSSELLA TERCATIN**

In 1483, Bernhard von Breydenbach, a dean from the German city of Mainz, embarked on a months-long pilgrimage to the Holy Land. During the journey, von Breydenbach and his group, which included Dutch artist Erhard Reuwich from Utrecht, visited Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, several sites in the Galilee, and concluded their pilgrimage at the Saint Catherine Monastery in the Sinai desert.

The trip was recorded in a richly illustrated journal published a few years later, marking the first such mass-produced travelogue, and the first to include a largely accurate panoramic map of the Holy Land. Drawn by Reuwich, the illustrated graphic shows much of the area traversed by the group, spanning from Mecca to Damascus, with Jerusalem and the crimson-topped Dome of the Rock at its center.

A sensation when it was first printed, the map is once again in the spotlight, this time at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where it is featured prominently in the exhibition “Fact, Faith, and Fantasy — Maps of the Holy Land from the Chinn Collection.” The show opened in January and is once again open to visitors after the museum was closed for several weeks due to the war with Iran.

British philanthropists Sir Trevor and Lady Susan Chinn began collecting ancient maps after receiving one as a wedding gift in 1965. They donated their still-expanding collection to the Israel Museum around 10 years ago.

The Breydenbach/Reuwich map unfurls to the length of several pages to capture the breadth of the region. Jerusalem alone occupies about one-third of the graphic, with the city displayed larger and more detailed than any other location.

“Maps make many manipulations, even modern or topographic maps,” said the exhibition’s curator, Ariel Tishby, who is the emeritus curator of the Holy Land Maps section at the museum. “[Maps] are means of communication, and they are also used for propaganda, including religious propaganda.”

The exhibition features dozens of maps spanning from the 15th to the 19th centuries, depicting the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

Though informed by accounts from travelers and rudimentary cartography, many of the artifacts are heavily influenced by stories from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the Breydenbach/Reuwich map, the Muslim holy shrine of the Dome of the Rock us labeled “Templum Salomonis,” or Solomon’s Temple.

“This is how the Crusaders called the Dome of the Rock,” Tishby told The Times of Israel during a visit to the exhibition. “Likely the Crusaders did not really think that [the shrine] was the [Jewish] temple, but they saw this beautiful architecture exactly in the place [where the Temple stood].”

On the map, the facade of the Holy Sepulchre is also rotated by about 90 degrees to face the viewer.

“Things are mixed up, historically, and religiously,” Tishby added.

The exhibition traces a number of “families” of ancient maps, groupings in which the structure of an earlier map is copied and reused as a basis for a later map, often without even crediting its predecessor.

“In those days, there was no copyright legislation,” Tishby noted.

One of the "families" of maps is believed by experts to date back to the 2nd-century geographer Claudius Ptolemy and his treatise "Geography," which listed thousands of locations worldwide by their latitude and longitude. (While the latitudes were calculated correctly, the longitudes were not, due to ancient scholars being unaware of the circumference of the planet.)

The maps included in the treatise got lost over the centuries, but the text survived and gained new fame in the Renaissance, inspiring a new generation of cartographers.

"Ptolemy was forgotten during the Middle Ages, but during the 13th and 14th centuries, many manuscripts were brought from Alexandria [in Egypt] to Rome and translated into Latin," Tishby said.

While many old maps were oriented with the east at the top, Ptolemaic maps, like modern maps, point north.

One of the maps on display, by 15th-century Florentine geographer Francesco di Nicolo Berlinghieri, appears to be one of the closest to a modern map. The atlas shows the geographical features of the region, including the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea, while cities are marked as names next to small circles, with no particular emphasis on Jerusalem or any other biblical location.

Sacred geography

The vast majority of maps from the period, though, adhered to a genre that modern scholars refer to as "sacred geography," blending science and devotion.

“These maps mostly served as a tool for religious meditation and contemplation about the Bible,” noted Tishby.

Most of the cartographers behind the pieces in the exhibit did not visit the Holy Land in person, and their works were not intended as a road map to guide those making the perilous journey. Instead, the maps were meant to help transport readers’ minds to a place revered as holy, but too distant and dangerous for them to actually reach.

“In case you want to travel through the Promised Land and stay in your everyday peace, comfortable at home, we shall please you with this map to your own insight and show you what would otherwise cause you much suffering and inconvenience with exhausted limbs,” reads the text featured on a fragment of a Dutch map printed around 1600, according to a translation provided by the curator.

One of the most important artifacts on exhibit, the fragment comes from a map produced by Herman van Borculo from the Dutch city of Utrecht, which was considered lost for centuries before three of its parts resurfaced in recent decades.

The map consisted of several sheets intended to be glued together to create a much larger work, likely measuring 140 x 80 centimeters (50 x 31.5 inches). The part on display at the Israel Museum depicts the port of Jaffa and two ships, a Venetian galley and an Ottoman galley, which experts interpret as reflecting the Christian yearning to reconquer the Holy Land.

“In real life, you see just ruins of old cities and savage places where one shows you many things that the eye cannot see,” the text adds. “When you contemplate this map from town to town, the Old Testament and the Gospels, both are shown here in the large, also accurately mapped.”

The Dutch 'Exodus'

The Dutch were among the medieval world's best and most respected mapmakers, and much of what they produced was influenced by the connection they saw with ancient Israel.

"What is referred to as 'the golden age of Holland' occurred after their war of independence, the Eighty Years' War with the Spanish [1568-1648], which was also a religious war between Protestants and the Catholics," Tishby explained.

"The Dutch were mainly Protestant and identified themselves with the story of the Israelites in the Bible," he added.

This sympathy emerged in some of the maps. Tishby pointed to a map that preceded the Gospels section in the 1648 Dutch States-General Bible, which was widely disseminated to every family that had at least one member who could read.

The map bears the words *Daat Ioodtsche Lant*, which translates to "The Jewish Land," to describe the region, a term not common in early modern Europe.
"In a way, this is very Zionist," Tishby joked.

The map that opens the exhibit also dates back to the Dutch Golden Age, a monumental map oriented to the East, titled "A New Description of the Holy Land or the Promised Land."

Originally designed in 1619 and printed in 1670 on ten sheets of paper bound together, the artifact portrays the land of Israel divided into the portions assigned to the biblical Twelve Tribes after they entered the land following 40 years of wandering in Egypt.

The map also features some 800 references to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the 1st-century CE Jewish-Roman author Flavius Josephus.

“[This map] actually encompasses the whole sacred history,” said Tishby. “It is a very clear combination of art, science, geography, religion, and politics.”

The exhibition includes several maps that present a bird’s-eye view of Jerusalem and its main monuments, including the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulchre, and its surroundings.

Tishby noted that what is considered a map has changed over the years. Academics used to have what he described as a “very narrow-minded” view, in which maps were defined “as a schematic, graphic representation of a geographical region.”

Today, according to the expert, a map is understood to be a representation of the milieu or cultural environment, a definition that can encompass both a road atlas and the types of medieval illustrations included in the exhibit.

“It is everything that goes into the cultural world of a person,” Tishby explained.

The exhibit will be open until June 6, 2026.