

THE

Sunday School

MAGAZINE

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superintendent apologized for any inconvenience the Sunday School had caused the day school. After the prize-giving the caretaker received an appropriate present, the children gave him three cheers, and the Mayor thanked him for the service he was rendering the town by helping the Sunday School. Whenever an outing was arranged the

caretaker and his wife were invited. Thus the strained relations of the early days of the Sunday School were replaced by mutual respect and consideration and the Sunday School became the accepted thing.

Next month : Expansion and its Problems.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE BIBLE STORY

Modern knowledge of the Ancient East is summarised by

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"The Fertile Crescent"

IF we take a map of what we used to call the Near East, and are nowadays taught to call the "Middle East," and draw a line from Egypt northwards through Palestine and Syria to the Upper Euphrates Valley and then southwards to the Persian Gulf, we should have a line roughly semi-circular in shape, running through territory which is frequently called "The Fertile Crescent." The land to the north of the "Crescent" is mountainous, and the land to the south is desert. This fact in itself would attract people to the fertile territory, and make it politically important. To this must be added the fact that it is a region of the greatest strategic importance, for it is situated at the junction of the two great continents of Africa and Asia. We know the important rôle played in politics and strategy in our own days by Egypt, Suez, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Persia ; and these lands have played this rôle in one form or another since the early days of human history recorded in Genesis. At either extremity of the Fertile Crescent lay the centre of a powerful empire, and the Crescent formed the road between them, and on this road they often met and fought out their battles for supremacy. Syria and Palestine therefore witnessed many conflicts between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires.

The most important road in the World

The road which runs through this Crescent is perhaps the most important road in the world. From Egypt it runs north along the coast of Palestine as far as it can. When farther progress in that direction



is blocked by the central Palestinian mountain-range running out into the Mediterranean Sea at Mount Carmel, the road turns east, through the Plain of Megiddo and the Valley of Jezreel, or Esdraelon, as the Greeks called it, crosses the Jordan south of the Sea of Galilee, and then turns north again by Damascus till it reaches the Upper Euphrates, when it turns south-east down the Euphrates-Tigris valley to the Persian Gulf.

This Fertile Crescent is the setting of the Book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters and chapters 29 to 31 are concerned with its eastern end in Mesopotamia ; chapters 12 to 28, 32 to 36, and chapter 38

with the Palestinian portion of its middle territories ; and chapter 37 and 39 to 50 with its western extremity, Egypt. (Part of chapter 12 is also set in Egypt, and part of chapter 24 in Mesopotamia). It will be convenient, therefore, to look at the geographical and historical background of Genesis in three parts : (1) Mesopotamia ; (2) Palestine ; (3) Egypt.

I. MESOPOTAMIA. The Garden of Eden

If we cannot determine the precise latitude and longitude of the Garden of Eden, we at least know in what part of the world it lay. For of the four rivers into which the river of Eden parted, two are immediately identifiable—the Euphrates and the Hiddekel, the latter being the Hebrew name of the Tigris (cf. Daniel 10. 4). These two great rivers carried down great quantities of silt, which was deposited at their mouths, and when it was drained provided most fertile soil, capable of yielding from eighty to a hundred-fold return on the seed sown in it. This

depositing of silt has gone on continuously to our own day. In our modern maps we see the two rivers uniting to form the Shatt el-Arab before they reach the Persian Gulf; but in Biblical times they flowed separately into the Gulf at points much farther to the north-west. This fertile area at their mouths was called the land of Sumer, or, to use the Biblical term, Shinar. The Sumerian language, which the inhabitants of this territory spoke, was perhaps the first language ever to be reduced to writing; the name "Eden" itself is probably a Sumerian word.

As far back as archaeological research can penetrate, Sumer was the site of a flourishing civilization. The people of the land lived in small city-states, each organized around its temple. Brick for building the houses and walls was readily obtainable from the mud deposited by the rivers. The same material provided them with the clay tablets on which they wrote in their "cuneiform" or wedge-shaped script.

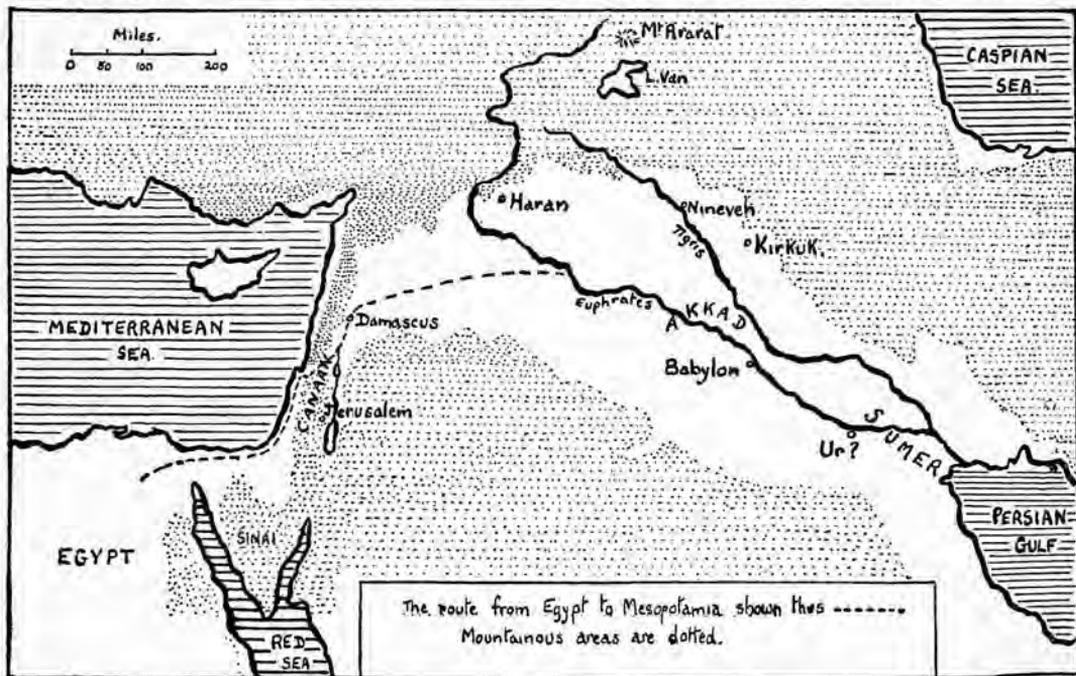
A little later the same type of civilization is found in the region immediately north of Sumer, the region called Akkad, in which later the city of Babylon was situated. When at last the whole territory of the Southern Euphrates-Tigris valley was politically unified under the leadership of Babylon, it continued to be known by the double name of "Sumer and Akkad," the official designation of the land of Babylonia.

The Flood

The records of these city-states look back to the Flood as an event which made a definite break in the

continuity of their dynasties. They distinguish "the kings before the Flood" from "the kings after the Flood." The Genesis narrative of the Flood describes how Noah and his family emerged from the Ark in the land of Ararat (Gen. 8. 4), that is, the country surrounding Lake Van. We are then told how the descendants of Noah spread out south, west, and east. The tenth chapter of Genesis is a historical document of great value, tabulating the geographical and political relations of the Middle Eastern nations at a very early date. The eleventh chapter tells of the founding of Babylon ("Babel" in Hebrew) and the building of its great tower. The tower was known in the Sumerian tongue as *Etemenanki*, "House of the Foundation Platform of Heaven and Earth"; it took the form of a *ziggurat* or stepped platform surmounted by a temple. It was begun in the third millennium B.C., but was not finished until the time of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562, B.C.), who made it one of the wonders of the ancient world.

At times one of the city-states of Sumer and Akkad would attain a position of supremacy over some of the others, and the city which finally succeeded in doing this in a permanent fashion was Babylon, about 1700 B.C. About this time Babylon was governed by a great and wise king named Hammurabi, whose chief claim to honour is the code of laws which he promulgated and which became a pattern for other legal codes in Western Asia. In several points it resembles the later Mosaic law-code,



but in others it differs from it, notably in the greater severity of the penalties imposed in Hammurabi's code, and the bias which it shows in favour of the rich.

It used to be thought that Hammurabi was the "Amraphel king of Shinar" mentioned in Gen. 14. 1. This identification is now generally given up. The Elamite overlordship of Babylonia, which is implied in the narrative of Gen. 14, was somewhat earlier in time than the reign of Hammurabi.

Abraham's City

One of the city-states of Sumer was Ur, which attained a high level of civilization earlier than Babylon. The unveiling of the ancient civilization of Ur has been told in popular language for the general reader by Sir Leonard Woolley in his Pelican book, *Ur of the Chaldees*. The main interest which this city has for the reader of the Bible, of course, is that Abraham originally came from "Ur of the Chaldees" (Gen. 11. 28, 31). But really it is very doubtful if the Sumerian Ur was the Ur of which Genesis speaks. There is good ground for holding that Abraham's "Ur of the Chaldees" was much farther north, in the upper Euphrates-Tigris valley, and that the family from which Abraham came (traced in Gen. 11. 10-26) never moved very far from the district in which Noah and his sons left the Ark. There was a people called Chaldeans in those parts as well as in Southern Babylonia. And there were several places in the upper Euphrates valley called after names of Abraham's ancestors and relatives, such as Peleg, Serug, Nahor and Terah, as well as the city of Haran, which is very similar to the name of Abraham's brother Haran. Haran was the principal town of the district called Paddan-Aram ("Field of Aram") or Aram-Naharaim ("Aram of the two rivers"). Wherever Abraham's Ur lay, north or south, it was to Haran that he and his family made their first move; and when Abraham moved on into Canaan after the death of his father Terah, he and his family maintained contact with their relatives there, and maintained the customs of those parts. Many of these customs have been discovered as a result of excavation at a place called Nuzi, east of the Tigris (the modern Kirkuk). These discoveries explain, for example, Abraham's regarding his servant Eliezer as his heir when he himself was childless (Gen. 15. 2), Jacob's complicated relations with his uncle and father-in-law Laban (Gen. 29. 15 ff.) and Rachel's theft of her father's *teraphim* (Gen. 31. 19). The *teraphim* were the household gods—what the Romans later would have called the Lares and Penates—and possession of these carried with it the right to be regarded as head of the family. "These and other Nuzi parallels to Genesis," says Professor G. Ernest Wright, "show that the description of Patriarchal society is not distorted, but actually reflects the age which the stories purport to describe" (*Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, p. 30).

Next month—*The Land of Canaan.*



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