

THE BIBLE IN ITS ENVIRONMENT

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Much of man's physical environment is of his own making. As Cicero makes Balbus say in his discourse: "We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation. We confine the rivers and straighten their courses. By means of our hands we try to create as it were a second world within the world of nature."

Few areas of the earth have borne more human impact, for good and ill, than the lands of the Bible. In this pivotal land-bridge connecting the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe, early man first learned the rudiments of agriculture between about 12,000 B.C. and 8,000 B.C., and domesticated some of man's most useful animals. Here too the first irrigation systems were developed and the first towns were created some time during the 5th and 4th millennia B.C. But here man has also destroyed the vegetation cover, induced soil erosion, and possibly even climatic deterioration. Here then, where the oldest civilizations of the world first developed, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the inter-relations of man, culture and physical environment have been most ancient and most complex.

The Environment and Man's View of the World

The great idolatrous cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia closely reflected their physical environment. Their religion, like that of their neighbors the Hittites and Canaanites, focused on nature. They had no real concept of a single, all-powerful Creator-God. And so they accounted for the vagaries of climate, agricultural events and the geography of the world around them by means of a whole array of gods. The distinctive geography of Egypt and Mesopotamia – particularly the great river-systems of the Nile and Tigris/Euphrates – to a large extent determined their contrasting ways of life.

Rainfall and Religion

The Euphrates and the Tigris rise in the Armenian mountains and flow some 1,400 miles down to the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates is the longer, gentler river. But the Steep course of the Tigris leads to rapid floods. High water in lower Mesopotamia is in May and June, when melting snows combine with the maximum spring rainfall. The two do not always coincide, so flooding is variable and unpredictable. Mesopotamian rulers, in consequence, were unable to claim the power of prediction and were therefore never acclaimed as gods by their peoples.

By contrast, Egypt has only one river, the Nile. The great lake reservoirs of East Africa regulate its flow, and monsoon rains in the Ethiopian highlands provide a regular, predictable flow in the Blue Nile. There were three fixed seasons in the annual calendar of the lower Nile: "Inundation", from mid-July to November; "Coming Forth" (when the land emerged from the water and the seed grew), from mid-November to mid-March; and "The Drought". It may have been the regular rhythm of the Nile which gave the pharaohs a greater sense of confidence, raising them to the status of gods in the minds of the people. To his subjects it certainly seemed that the pharaoh possessed a power of control no Mesopotamian ruler ever felt he had over nature.

From the beginning of Egypt's first dynasty of kings, annual records of the height of the Nile were kept and yearly estimates made of the flood and probable yield of grain. The story of Joseph indicates that he understood the secrets of Egypt's river-science, but attributed his success, nonetheless, to the one God.

Nature and Belief

The mixture of cultures has tended to mask the contrasts between the two great river-civilizations. Whereas Mesopotamia was exposed to invasion from both mountain peoples and desert nomads, Egypt was more secure in its greater isolation. The lower plain of Mesopotamia was also threatened by unpredictable floods, through climatic caprice and the occasional landslides which dammed up the major tributaries of the Tigris. The pent-up waters would then burst through, releasing an immense volume of water. The threat of

salinity, making the soil infertile, may help to explain the general migration northwards to the middle Mesopotamian plain after the fall of the Sumerian civilization.

No wonder then that man felt Mesopotamia's destiny was decided year by year by the gods – no one god having absolute power. It was a society that needed the stability of laws and covenant-agreements. In contrast, Egypt considered her world to be the outcome of a single creative process, as the Nile was the sole factor in her economy. The king's rule was, in theory, absolute, as he was sole official intermediary between the gods and the people. Theoretically, therefore, law was issued as the will of the pharaoh, although in practice a body of law and usage was built up. Royal edicts could supplement this. History was measured against two standards: the distant golden age when the sun-god had ruled the earth, and *maat*, the ideal of the stable, just world-order to which gods, king and people should all conform. So "progress" for the ancient Egyptians was a return to ancient norms.

The God of Nature

While these world-views were being evolved, there was general unrest in western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. By the middle of the second millennium the Harappan civilization in the Indus valley and the Minoan civilization in the Aegean had both collapsed. A general desiccation of climate was the background to the movements of people in south-west Asia and resultant pressure on western Semitic tribes. Among these *Habiru* or *Apiru* ("displaced persons") was Abraham, "a wandering Aramean." The later migration and rise to power of Joseph's family in Egypt reflects the period after the 12th dynasty (ended about 1786 B.C.), when related Hyksos (Asiatic) groups held control over Palestine and Egypt.

From Nomads to Managers of the Land

The presence of the Israelites in Palestine by the 13th century B.C. and the arrival of the "Sea Peoples" (of whom the Philistines are the best known) on the coast of Palestine, with their use of iron, are also significant events of the period. The transition of the Israelites from a semi-nomadic to a settled way of life in Palestine has often been recognized as a crucial event in the land. But the training that lay behind all this – weaning Abraham from the Mesopotamian world-view and emancipating Moses from the ways of Egypt – is even more crucial.

Man's view of nature determines his use of it. The Israelites' knowledge of God their Creator gave them a very different attitude to nature and the management of the land. "the land to which you are entering to take possession of is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11:10-12).

God in Nature – and Above It

Thus the Hebrews had no word for nature other than the activity of God Himself. It was God who spoke in the thunderstorm. He blessed in the rainfall; He cursed in the drought. God breathed in the wind as he judged in the earthquake and manifested His glory in the heavens.

The Hebrew faith which saw God working in the activity and mysteries of nature understood that he was also above and beyond it. God was not limited by the environment, as the pagan Syrians thought. Israel's understanding of God and nature was not philosophical but born of faith and experience.

The sub-steppe climate of Palestine with its uncertain rainfall remained a vital challenge to the moral life of Israel. The Ras Shamra tablets have shown how Baal, god fertility and rain, dominated the Canaanite pantheon. In this context, Elijah's victory against the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel was a triumphant vindication of God. As a later prophet said, "Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring

rain? Do the skies themselves send down showers? No, it is You, O Lord our God. Therefore our hope is in You, for You are the one who does all this” (Jeremiah 14:22). There was also the temptation to trust in the material provision of water-storage cisterns, carved out of the limestone. The invention of a waterproof mortar during the Bronze Age made such storage possible. This helps to explain the rapid expansion of Israelite settlement in the hills of Judea and Samaria, colonizing clearances in the woodland which formerly had not been settled. Jeremiah declared: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” The broken cisterns were no doubt the result of local seismic shocks which shattered the limestone so that the water stored for the emergency of summer drought leaked out.

Conserving Land and Resources

If God cared for their land, His people as good stewards of His gifts should also have this sense of ecological responsibility. The Mediterranean climate, its flora and soils are delicately balanced. War places this whole balance in jeopardy. So at the conquest of the land God told the Israelites: “I will not drive them out (i.e. the Canaanites) from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, unless you are increased and possess the land.”

Deforestation and removal of plant cover leads to soil erosion, possibly alluded to in Job 14:18-19; and the “slippery paths” so frequently mentioned in the Old Testament testify to the rapid dissection and sharp relief of the semi-arid highlands. By the first century A.D. there were Jewish laws against the raising of sheep and goats because of overgrazing and soil erosion. For example, Rabbi Akiba said, “Those who raise small cattle and cut down good trees...will see no sign of blessing.” The oppressor of the poor is likened in Proverbs 28:3 to “a beating rain that leaves no food” and the destruction of the mountain terraces which offset erosion is described by Ezekiel as a terrible calamity. “The mountains shall be thrown down and the cliffs (terraces) shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground.”

Alongside careful use of the land went the democratic community of small landowners. The Jubilee Year was intended to preserve the system. The prophets resisted the formation of big estates, although even in David’s time there were crown-domains and forced labor. Conquest by powers such as the Assyrians was disastrous to the delicate balance of Israel’s environment.

The Geography of Bible Lands

The Bible’s references to the geography of the land are accurate and reliable. But the allusions are incidental, not central to the narrative. However, if we put together the data on plant-distribution, allusions to climate and other material in the Old Testament, we find the description fits. Indeed, the evidence is reliable enough to show that throughout Biblical times, climate has been stable, and the ecological zones we depict today are the same as in Old Testament times, the only differences being woodland cover, location of settlements and other such variables of human occupation.

The Main Geographical Regions

Geographical features which influenced the course of political events in Old Testament times will be highlighted. The most striking distinctions are between the “desert and the sown”, the mountains and the coastal plains. South of a line from Aleppo to Hasetche in Syria the rainfall diminishes and turns the steppe into a “desert, in a series of undulating plateau” between 300 and 1,000 feet/90 and 300 meters. The southern part of Palestine is also desert, the triangle-shaped Negev. The western part is a level or slightly undulating plain; the eastern sector is hilly, badly eroded, and stony hammada desert. The Negev and Sinai to the south were the scenes of Israel’s wanderings before their settlement in “the land.”

The central backbone of folded limestone north of the Negev forms various low mountain chains from Judea through Samaria to lower Galilee. Upper Galilee consists of recent basalt lavas that break through the limestone cover. It is overlooked by Mt. Lebanon with its peaks rising over 3,300 ft/1,005 m and continued northwards into the Ansariye mountains. This hilly backbone was the nucleus of Israelite

territory. East of these chains is the system of rift valleys, laced together by the Jordan Valley between the Lake of Galilee and the Dead Sea in the south, while the Orontes-Hama-Ghab depressions continue the geological fracture north into Syria.

The coast north of Gaza consists of a broad belt of shifting sand dunes that narrows progressively. From Jaffa/Tel Aviv northwards there is sufficient moisture to provide a vegetation cover that inhibits the further spread of dunes, and this stretch as far as the Yarkon River was Philistine territory. The Plain of Sharon between the Yarkon Crocodile rivers was swampy, or heavily forested, and formed a buffer zone between Philistia and Phoenicia, in whose sparsely settled area the tribe of Ephraim obtained a foothold. North of Mt. Carmel the coast is more rocky and indented, and here the Phoenicians established their power in the natural harbors of Tyre and Sidon.

The Influence of Geography on Events

The ecological transition between “the land” and “the wilderness” was of great significance in the Bible. The contrast between the mountain “spine” and the coastal plain was more widely important. The mountains had the slight advantage in higher rainfall, better drainage and in being more suitable for tree crops. There was a strong demand from Egypt and elsewhere for the oil, wine, raisins and dried figs this region produced. More important, the difficult terrain enabled every village to be a fortress and plenty of stone was available for building elaborate walled defenses. But on the coastal plain there was no stone, the settlements were difficult to defend, and the international highway of Via Maris built by the Egyptians remained a long time under Egyptian control. The plain was indeed the eastern border of the Mediterranean world, rather than the western fringe of Asia and its steppe people.

The Philistines settled on the southern part of the coast with Egyptian consent, and they were the guardians of the maritime highway. But the Phoenician realm began when the road left the coast to cross the Carmel range into the Plain of Jezreel. The Phoenicians appear to have respected the Philistine-Egyptian sphere of influence and did not expand further south. When Egypt’s influence waned, David and his generals deprived the Philistines of their conquests in the “Shephelah” or foothill zone beyond the coast, and confined them to the southern coastal plain. Philistia never recovered her former power. But Israel respected the Phoenician sphere of influence, since their trade was vital. Solomon was not equipped to rival the Mediterranean power of the Phoenician merchants, though he did benefit from the direct opportunities of trade in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, via his port at Ezion-Geber on the Gulf of Aqaba.

But the penetration of the Indian Ocean by Israel, and through her the Phoenician traders, threatened a monopoly Egypt had closely guarded. So Egypt became a center of intrigues against Solomon, later instigating the revolt of Edom on the trade-route. Later again Egypt backed Jeroboam’s revolt which put an end to the united kingdom and terminated the menace of Judean trade in the Red Sea.

Greece, Rome and the New Testament

The rise of the Greek world in the conquests of Alexander the Great introduced a new factor. The thousand year old-rule of Phoenicia was ruthlessly broken. To maintain its maritime interest, Alexander guaranteed all inland peoples their positions and rights. Greek settlers, Greek language and Greek civilization were now introduced in the Palestinian coast, and remained – slightly modified by the Romans – for a thousand years. With the fall of the Carthaginian Empire in the west, roman rule struck a final blow at the Phoenician civilization, and the Roman occupation of Palestine followed.

In the New Testament we sense a contrast in atmosphere between the Judean interior with its rural village life (portrayed in the Gospels), and the civic atmosphere of Roman city life on the coast and beyond the Mediterranean Sea (depicted in the letters). The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 saw the intensive occupation of the hill lands too, with a Roman road network and Roman camps in the interior grafted on to the Hellenized world of the coastlands.

