

THE

Vol. 1

No. 2

FEBRUARY, 1947

*Sunday School*  
MAGAZINE

*This Month's  
Features Include:*

	page
What Age is that Child ?	52
•	
Peoples and Politics of Ancient Palestine . . .	54
•	
The Challenge of the New Housing Estates	57
•	
The Six Days of Creation	59
•	
Can you tell an effective story ? . . . . .	60
•	
For Superintendents Only . . . . .	61
•	
Primary Lesson Outlines	63
•	
Junior Lesson Outlines	69
•	
Senior Lesson Outlines	73
•	
Is This Your Problem ?	89
•	
Think on These Things	90
•	
Some Useful Books . . .	91
•	
Are the Scriptures what they claim to be ? . . .	92

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# THE BACKGROUND OF THE BIBLE STORY

*Modern knowledge of the Ancient East is summarised by*

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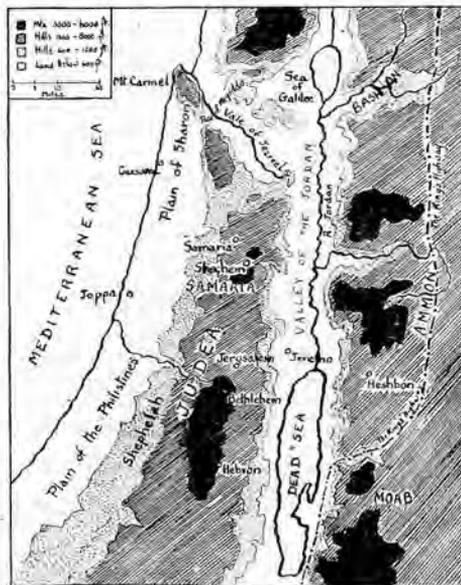
## II. CANAAN

ON leaving Haran for the Promised Land, Abraham must have made his way south along the ancient road that leads through Aleppo and Damascus. Both these cities were there in Abraham's time ; Muslim tradition connects him with Aleppo, and Josephus quotes a historian to the effect that " Abraham reigned in Damascus." At any rate, we know that his chief servant, Eliezer, came from there (Gen. 15. 2). But he did not stay in these ancient cities, but continued his journey across the Jordan into Canaan, where he travelled from north to south.

### The Land

The map of Canaan or Palestine is an easy one to remember. It consists roughly of four parallel belts running north and south. The western belt is the plain of Sharon, lying along the sea-coast, then comes a high table-land, approached from the west by the foot-hills called in the Bible the Shephelah. This table-land runs north until it runs out into the Mediterranean at Mount Carmel, cutting off the western plain on the north, and forcing the main road to turn eastwards and inland via the Pass of Megiddo and Vale of Jezreel. On the east this high table-land runs steeply down to the third belt, the Jordan valley, which lies in the Great Rift which continues southwards via the Dead Sea and the Arabah (the low country south of the Dead Sea), and then the Red Sea and so on into Africa. The Jordan valley reaches a depth of 685 feet below sea-level at the Lake of Galilee, and 1,275 feet at the Dead Sea, the lowest-lying body of water on the surface of the earth. The vegetation in the Jordan valley is therefore luxuriant ; the dense

growth on either side the river is the " Jungle of Jordan " where lions roamed in Old Testament times—the " swelling of Jordan " in the Authorized Version of Jer. 12. 5 ; 49. 19 ; 50. 44 (where the Revised Version has " the pride of Jordan "). The Dead Sea, into which the Jordan flows, has been extending southwards throughout the centuries. Under its waters lie the ruins of the " Cities of the Plain "—Sodom and Gomorrah and the rest—which lay in a fair and fertile land until they were overthrown in the convulsion of which we read in Gen. 19. The fourth belt is the high country of Transjordan. Here, at a somewhat later date than Abraham's, were situated the



kingdoms of Bashan, Heshbon, Ammon, Moab and Edom. From north to south through Transjordan ran the ancient road called in Numbers 20. 17 "the king's high way," along which marched the four kings of Gen. 14. 1,<sup>1</sup> until, having reached its southern limit, they turned north and attacked the Cities of the Plain, carrying away Lot, Abraham's nephew, among their prisoners.

### The People

In Abraham's time Canaan was populated by a large variety of races. The earliest of these, the Canaanites, perhaps received this name because they had discovered the purple dye obtainable from the murex shellfish: "Canaan" seems to mean "purple." For the same reason the Greeks at a much later time called the people the Phœnicians, which also means "the people of the purple." Then, shortly before Abraham's time, Canaan, in

<sup>1</sup> Archaeology has revealed that an early Bronze Age civilization, located along the route marked by the places mentioned in Gen. 14. 5, 6, was violently destroyed about 1900 B.C.—no doubt through the operations recorded in these verses.



Photo, American Colony in Jerusalem.  
An aerial view of the lower portion of the Jordan and its entry into the Dead Sea.

common with several other lands of Western Asia, was invaded by a people from the Arabian desert, called Amorites. A little later people called the Hittites began to infiltrate from Asia Minor in the north through Syria. By Abraham's time we find some of them as far south as Hebron, for it was there that Abraham bought from "Ephron the Hittite" the field of Machpelah containing the cave where he buried Sarah his wife (Gen. 23.). Jerusalem, twenty miles farther north, which appears as Salem in Gen. 14, was a joint foundation of Amorites and Hittites, according to Ezekiel 16.3.

The modern name of Canaan, Palestine, is derived from later immigrants, the Philistines, who settled in the southern portion of the western maritime plain.

### Politics

In patriarchal times Canaan was not politically unified, but was inhabited by a medley of races who were organized in independent tribes and city-states. One of these city-states, Shechem, was seized by Simeon and Levi, two of the sons of Jacob, even in patriarchal times (Gen. 34), and it is interesting to notice that when we come to the later story of the conquest of Canaan in the Books of Joshua and Judges, Shechem appears as a central meeting-point for the Israelites (Josh. 24. 1), although there is no word of their having conquered it at this later time. Probably they found their own relatives still in possession of the city.

Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, Canaan had no great rivers to water it. The Jordan was too low-lying to be of any use for irrigating the country. The land depended for its fertility on regular rainfall. All over the country large cisterns or reservoirs were dug to receive the rain when it fell. These served to supplement the natural springs and fountains. The difference between an artificial cistern and a natural fountain is emphasized in God's protest against His people in Jer. 2. 13: "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

### Religion

The geographical character of the country dictated the religion of its inhabitants. Baal,



*Photo, American Colony in Jerusalem.*

The slime pits in the neighbourhood of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. Consisting of clay, these strange hillocks are exceedingly slippery in the rainy season. It was here that Abraham outwitted the four kings.

the chief god of the Canaanites, was the god of rain and vegetation. Their nature-worship became so degraded and demoralizing that when at last the Israelites conquered the land, its continued presence could not be tolerated, as it formed a perpetual threat to the purity of the monotheistic faith of Israel. But in Abraham's time the state of religion in Canaan—or

at least in some parts of it—seems to have been higher; we find him living on terms of mutual respect with some of the people of the land, and in particular we find a pure monotheistic worship practised in Jerusalem, whose king, Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High," is cited in the Epistle to the Hebrews as a type of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Challenge of the New Housing Estates**

*(continued from page 58.)*

Sunday Schools where before October, 1939, there was not any Bible teaching, and the men and women returning from the forces are taking up the work.

#### **Lessons we have learned**

*Firstly.* If Christian people are prepared to run Sunday School classes in their homes, where no other buildings are available, a small but good work can be done. If the rooms are so small that only six or seven children can be invited it is worth while, for it often happens that others will follow a good example and open their homes for a similar work.

*Secondly.* Where only day schools are available these can be obtained on the following conditions. The sympathies of the headmaster or mistress must be won, and this can only be done if they have sufficient confidence in the superintendent. The caretaker's interest must be won and maintained at all costs. Where there is a willingness to do, a desire to learn how to do, and faith to adapt oneself and one's methods to changing circumstances, prayer can open up a way, and with God's help the apparently impossible can be accomplished.

*The two boys pictured on p. 58 have very different outlooks. Do you treat them differently?*