CHAPTER 2: FERTILE CRESCENT – Cradle of Civilization

I. 2.1: THE LAND OF BEGINNINGS

A. To begin our study of history we have to go back to the beginning of time with creation, the garden of Eden, and the first civilizations.

B. There is a long curved strip of land in Asia known for its rich soil and historic past. It’s combination of fertile soil and it crescent shape (like a moon) gave the area its name, the Fertile Crescent.

C. Because some of earth’s earliest civilizations lived there, it is often called the “Cradle of Civilization” meaning a place where civilization started.

D. THE TWO RIVERS

1. Two important rivers in the Fertile Crescent are the Tigris and Euphrates. They begin high in the mountains of modern Turkey and Armenia, where melting snows flood down in streams. The name Tigris means arrow because the river runs straight. Euphrates means fruitful. It is a winding river that waters the land around it. The rivers carry rich soil from the mountains and deposits it in the plains, making excellent farmland.

E. THE LAND BETWEEN RIVERS

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Why is the area called a crescent? A cradle?
1. The part of the Fertile Crescent between the two Rivers was called **Mesopotamia** [mess-oh-poe-tay-me-uh] which means the land “between the rivers”. The Bible names the four rivers that came together at the **Garden of Eden** (Gen. 2:10-14) one of which is the **Euphrates**.

2. The Garden of Eden was probably located in Mesopotamia where the modern country of **Iraq** is today. Much of the story of the Bible, especially **Genesis**, takes place in the Fertile Crescent.

**COMPREHENSION CHECK 2A:**

**DIRECTIONS:** Use your notes (and textbook if needed) to answer the following questions.

1. **Why is this area called the fertile crescent? The cradle of civilization?**
   
   *It is called the fertile crescent because it is a piece of land rich in soil and crescent in shape. It is called the cradle of civilization because some of the world’s first civilizations were located there.*

2. **What two important rivers flow through this area?**

   *The Tigris and Euphrates*

3. **What does Tigris mean? Euphrates?**

   *Tigris mean arrow because the river runs straight. Euphrates means fruitful.*

4. **What does Mesopotamia mean?**

   *Mesopotamia means the land “between the rivers”.

5. **What country is Mesopotamia located in today? Why is the land of Mesopotamia important to the Bible?**

   *Mesopotamia is located in the country of Iraq. Because the Garden of Eden was probably there and much of the story of the Bible, especially Genesis takes place here and in the fertile crescent.*
II.2.2: **SUMER** — A CIVILIZATION OF **SOUTHERN** MESOPOTAMIA

A. **SURROUNDINGS** - To the north of Mesopotamia are mountains, the most famous of which is Mount Ararat and its surrounding mountains. This area is where Noah’s ark came to rest after the flood. Directly south of Mesopotamia is the Persian Gulf.

A. **THE LAND**
1. In northern Mesopotamia the mountains are high, there is some rain, and the weather is cool. In southern Mesopotamia the land is flat and dry, there is little rain, and the temperatures reaching as high as 120-140°F. Some of the earliest known civilizations were in southern Mesopotamia.

2. A civilization is a country or a people who have developed to a great extent the natural abilities that God has given to humans. These abilities include talking, thinking, reading, writing, inventing, discovering, treating each other kindly, enjoying art and music, and worshiping. One of these civilizations was in the land of Sumer.

B. THE SUMERIANS AND THEIR WORK

1. The people of Sumer were called Sumerians. The tower of Babel was probably located in Sumer (Shinar in the Bible) and the important city Babylon shares a similar name.

MAPPING ACTIVITY:
Label the modern countries of the fertile crescent.
1) Egypt, 2) Israel, 3) Lebanon, 4) Jordan, 5) Syria, 6) Turkey, 7) Iraq, 8) Kuwait
2. **Noah** was also probably a **Sumerian**. Ancient Sumerian history and stories call Noah by the name of **Ziusudra** and says he lived in the city of **Shuruppak**. It also mentions the **great flood**.

3. The Sumerians worked hard and created a very **wealthy** and **prosperous** way of life.

   a) **Farmers** – The **main work** in Sumer was farming. Farmers in Sumer grew **wheat**, **barley**, vegetables, **dates** and **figs**. Since the land is **hot** and **dry**, farmers used **Irrigation** to water their crops.

   **Irrigation** is supplying land with **water** by means of **ditches**, **channels**, or **sprinklers**.

   b) The Sumerians dug a system of **ditches** (or **canals**) from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to make the water flow from the rivers to their **croplands**. This allowed them to have **lots** of food even in a dry **wasteland**. The wealth brought by their farming also brought **wars** as people fought over the right to **build** and use certain **canals**.

   c) **Herdsmen or Shepherds** – Some Sumerians cared for large groups of **animals**, such as **sheep**, **goats**, **donkeys**, and some oxen that could survive in the hot, dry climate. The animals provided **wool** for clothes, **meat**, **milk**, and beasts of **burden** to help carry **loads** and work the **fields**.

   d) **Skilled workers** – Many Sumerians used different kinds of skills for work. Some made **cloth** from wool, others made **weaponry** like armor, spears, swords, and chariots for **soldiers**.
e) There were specialists in astronomy, medicine, and law. Others were craftsmen, such as sculptors, people who make statues, priests who led the people in the worship of their religion, and metalsmiths who worked with gold, silver, copper, and bronze, as well as soldiers.

C. INVENTIONS FROM SUMER

1. Writing – The Sumerians were one of the first people to develop and use writing. Their writing at first looked more like pictures of what the writer was trying to represent. We call these pictographs.

2. Eventually the writing became wedge-shaped with each mark standing for a syllable of a word. This form of writing is known as cuneiform which means wedge shaped writing. With a reed or sharp instrument, the writers made their marks on a smooth piece of soft clay. Then they baked the clay until it was hard.

3. In this way records were kept for thousands of years and many have been found by archaeologists, people who dig up and study the remains of ancient civilizations. In the writings we find bills, tax records, records of work, poems, and stories. Many of the stories have similarities with Bible stories, but they also contain legends which are not true.
4. **The Wheel** – The Sumerians were the **first** known people to use the wheel. While we see the wheel all the time today, it was a huge **innovation** at the time. It allowed them to build **war chariots**, which were like the **battle tanks** of the ancient world. It also allowed people like builders and farmers to transport much **heavier** loads and helped with **work** and **trade**.

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**COMPREHENSION CHECK 2B:**

**DIRECTIONS:** Use your notes (and textbook if needed) to answer the following questions.

1. **What is a civilization?**
   
   **A country or a people who have developed to a great extent the natural abilities that God has given to them. This especially has to do with the development of cities and complex culture.**

2. **Name at least two important biblical events that happened in Mesopotamia?**
   
   *The Garden of Eden, the story of Noah, and the Tower of Babel*

3. **What is irrigation and why was it important to the Sumerians?**
   
   *Irrigation is supplying land with water by means of ditches, channels, or sprinklers*

4. **What was the early form of Sumerian writing called?** The later form?
   
   *Pictographs and Cuneiform. Pictographs were basically writing using pictures. Cuneiform was writing with wedge shaped symbols.*

5. **What do archaeologists do?**
   
   *They are people who dig up and study the remains of ancient civilizations*
D. RELIGION IN SUMER

1. The Sumerians were an intelligent people with an impressive culture, but they did not worship the true God.

2. The Bible says that people often choose to worship created things instead of the one creator. In Romans 1: 21-25 it says, “They knew God. But they didn't honor him as God. They didn’t thank him. Their thinking became worthless. Their foolish hearts became dark. They claimed to be wise. But they made fools of themselves. They would rather have statues of gods than the glorious God who lives forever. Their statues of gods are made to look like people, birds, animals and reptiles... They chose a lie instead of the truth about God. They worshiped and served created things. They didn’t worship the Creator...” (NIrV)

3. Another word for a false belief is a Superstition, which is a belief that is based on fear and ignorance rather than on the truth.

4. Ziggurats – The Sumerians built tall temples called ziggurats for worshipping their gods. The ziggurats built with large steps with each layer being smaller than the other. The top and smallest layer often had an altar to offer sacrifices to their gods. They felt that the taller the ziggurat, the better the community’s connection with their god. This helps us understand what the Sumerians were trying to do in the story of the Tower of Babel.

E. Education in Sumer

Figure 9: The Zigurrat at Ur probably looked similar to this.
1. Education was important. Schools were held in temples and taught by priests. Usually only wealthy boys were educated. They studied reading, writing, arithmetic, and trade. They sat on flat stone benches and used soft clay tablets for writing. Many cities even had libraries.

F. **Homes in Sumer**

1. The Sumerians were skillful builders and were the first to build the arch and the dome. Prosperous (wealthy) families lived in two story homes built around a courtyard. Most people lived in one story homes. Most of these homes were made of bricks made of clay. Flat roofs allowed families to enjoy the cool of the day on top of their houses or to sleep on the roof when the night was hot.

G. **The Importance of the Seal**

1. The seal was an instrument used to stamp an article or document. Nearly everyone had and used his own individual seal as a mark of identification since it was different from everyone else’s.

2. Seals came in different forms. Some used rings and many used cylinders which was the most common type of seal. Each seal had a picture.

3. When you rolled the seal over the wet clay it left a raised picture. This picture was the same as someone signing his name to a piece of paper today.
4. They often carried their seals with them, often by wearing them around their necks. Tablets with the seal of a king or official were recognized as very important.

H. War in Sumer

1. Because of the wealth that was generated by the fertile land, trade, and cities wars became bigger and a more important part of history.

Often cities would fight wars over land, property, and water rights. Also nomads, people who live a mobile life outside of cities, would often attack the settled cities to take their wealth.

2. **Sargon of Akkad** – One of the first empires in history was created by Sargon of Akkad also know as Sargon the Great.

Sargon used his army to conquer surrounding city states and eventually controlled much of Mesopotamia. His empire fell apart shortly after his death, but he is regarded as one of the first empire builders in history.
III. 2.3: Ur of the Chaldees

A. The southern part of Sumer was called Chaldea. Ur, the most important Sumerian city, was in Chaldea. It was the largest and wealthiest city on the west bank of the Euphrates River. You can still see the ziggurat of Ur today.

B. Life in Ur

COMPREHENSION CHECK 2C:

DIRECTIONS: Use your notes (and textbook if needed) to answer the following questions.

1. What was a ziggurat? What famous building in the Bible was probably a ziggurat?
   A ziggurat is a tall stepped temple used for worshipping Sumerian gods. 
   The Tower of Babel.

2. What was a seal in Sumer? What were they used for? What were the most common types?
   A seal was an instrument used to stamp an article or document. They were used as a mark of identification. The most common types were cylinder seals or rings.

3. What were some features of a typical Sumerian home?
   Most were one story dwellings but some were two story. They were made of mud bricks with flat roofs. The Sumerians also invented the dome and the arch.

4. Why were wars fought in Sumer? Who was Sargon of Akkad and why was he important?
   Often for land, water rights, or property. Sargon was one of the first empire builders and he built a big Mesopotamian empire by conquering other cities.
1. **Archaeologists** have found many clues of what life in Sumer was like based on their study of Ur. The **king** who built the ziggurat was **Ur Nammu**. He ruled Ur about **2100 B.C.** just before the time of **Abraham** and over 2,000 years **before** Jesus lived. It is estimated that about **24,000** people lived in Ur. The entire city was enclosed with a great **wall**. Ur was divided into two sections, the **residential area** and the **sacred area**.

![Figure 16: An artist's impression of the city of Ur. (Add Copyright)](image)

**C. The Residential Area**

1. The residential area is where people **lived**. **Shops**, **schools**, and **libraries** were also here. Because Ur was a wealthy city, many people had beautiful **homes** with **gardens** and man-made fish ponds.

**D. The Sacred Area**

1. The sacred area was about **one fourth** of the city and enclosed by another strong **wall**. This was a sacred area reserved for the worship and service of **Nanna**, the moon god. Inside this area were rooms for **weapons**, magnificent stone **temples**, the **ziggurat**, as well as a **marketplace** where people could buy **offerings** and gifts for the **gods**. Archaeologists have found many tablets recording offerings made by the people of Ur.
E. A Famous Citizen of Ur

1. While the people of Ur were idolators, idol worshipping people who do not worship God, God called one famous biblical figure out of Ur, Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Even though Abraham and his family were probably idol worshippers who did not follow God, God called Abraham to believe in him and told him to leave Ur and travel to the land of Canaan, where God promised he would one day give him and his descendants that land, bless them, and that they would become a great nation.

Figure 17: A picture of the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Abraham was a citizen of the city of Ur until God called him to a new home.

Figure 18: A map of Abraham’s journey from Ur to Canaan, the land of promise.

COMPREHENSION CHECK 2D:
DIRECTIONS: Use your notes (and textbook if needed) to answer the following questions.

1. What were the two areas of the city of Ur. What were they used for?
   The residential area was for homes, shops, and libraries. The sacred area housed the temples, ziggurat, and other important buildings.

2. Who was the famous citizen of Ur we talked about in this Chapter? What did God tell Abraham to do?
   Abraham. God told him to leave his home in Ur and travel to the land of Canaan where he would make him a great nation and bless him.

3. Draw and label the route Abraham traveled on the map on page 3.