

STORIES OF CHALDEA, CHAPTER II  
By Edith Ralph  
SODOM AND GOMORRAH—THE OVERTHROW OF THE ELAMITES

So firmly had the Elamites established themselves in Chaldea, that after a time they began to look around for further exploits and conquests, and when Khurdur-Lagamar, or Chedorlaomer, a warlike king, ascended the throne, he was determined to make the most of his opportunity.

Across the western desert lay the fertile Vale<sup>1</sup> of Siddim, part of the valley of the Jordan, and on this favored spot Chedorlaomer cast envious eyes.

Accompanied, therefore, by three tributary or allied kings, whose names were Amraphel, king of Shinar (Shumir<sup>2</sup>) Arioch, king of Ellasar (the Chaldean city of Larsam), and Tidal, king of nations<sup>3</sup> (wandering tribes); the great Elamite king started on the journey to Palestine, and in due time reached the vale of Siddim, where the kings of the five cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim, and Bela, came out to offer battle. As you know, however, they were so completely conquered that for twelve years they sent tribute to Chedorlaomer, thus acknowledging him as their master. But, finding that their foes did not return, the kings of Siddim concluded to pay it no longer, and in the thirteenth year sent nothing.

The result of this was a terrible war, for Chedorlamer and his friends appeared in the land of Canaan, and fought everyone who came in their way. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah suffered a thorough defeat, the conquerors entering the cities and carrying off everything on which they could lay their hands, in addition to leading away all the men, women, and children as slaves. Among these, you will remember, were Lot and his family, who had recently settled in Sodom.

On hearing the news, the patriarch Abraham, with three hundred and eighteen trained warriors “of his own house” and some Canaanite allies, set out to intercept the victorious kings, and overtook them near Damascus, at night. Taking advantage of the darkness to conceal their number, he divided his small forces, and attacking the enemy on two sides, routed them so effectually that he got possession of all the Sodomite prisoners, including Lot and his family, together with the spoil that had been taken, and brought all triumphantly home again.

The king of Sodom wished to reward Abraham for his timely help by giving him the goods; the great chieftain, however, refused with dignity, saying, “I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoe latchet, and that I will not take anything that is thine lest thou shouldest say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’” But he did not prevent his man accepting food, nor his allies from taking their share of the spoil.

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<sup>1</sup> Valley.

<sup>2</sup> Or Sumer.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 14:1.

The Hebrew connection with Chaldea closed for many centuries, when Laban bade farewell to Jacob, and returned home, leaving the patriarch to settle in his native land.

The long rule of the Elamites in the Euphrates and Tigris valley was now fast drawing to a close; for Babylon, which had never submitted to the foreigners<sup>4</sup>, and was destined to put an end to their dominion, had become an important city and state; indeed, later on, the country itself lost the name of Shumir and Accad, the northern part being called Babylonia, while the southern went by the name of Chaldea.

The principle temple in Babylon was dedicated to Bel, whose other name was Merodach, or Meri-dug, supposed, as you will remember, to be the son of the god Ea. Because, therefore, the great city was sacred to him, Merodach or Bel became the head-god of the whole land. It seems to have been the custom to give the name of the deity to any possessed of great wisdom; for in later Jewish history we find that King Nebuchadnezzar called Daniel<sup>5</sup> Bel-teshazzar because “the spirit of the holy gods was in him.”

Of course, the finest buildings of the city were temples, reared, as already said, on great platforms. The higher the shrine of the god could be raised, the better pleased it was thought he would be. This idea was not alone held by the Chaldeans, for how often we have heard of the people of Palestine worshipping “in high places”! There they had natural hills, but as there were none in Chaldea, the people felt obliged to make them, and for this work the large number of prisoners taken in war were most useful. It has been calculated that as many as ten thousand men must have been employed for twelve years in heaping together the great platform on which the palace of Nineveh stood, which will give you some idea of the size of these mounds. The conquerors of Chaldea often said they made “heaps of the cities,”<sup>6</sup> and we now see how easy that must have been, when the great soft walls had been thrown down and the rain soaked all into one huge mass.

At Borsip, near Babylon, there was a wonderful erection, called a Ziggurat, meaning a mountain peak, sacred to seven gods—the sun, moon, and five planets.

It was a great tower, built in seven stages. As this was created on the top of a platform, the height must have been enormous. Each stage was of the color supposed to belong to its own special god: thus, the lowest, intended for Saturn, was black; that of Jupiter, which came next, orange; then Mars, red; the sun, gold; the fifth was pale yellow, to represent Venus; the sixth blue, for Mercury, whose Chaldean name was Nebo; while the top stage was silver, to represent the moon.

The manner of procuring some of the colors was by using red or yellowish clay for making the bricks. The black stage was covered with pitch (bitumen), those

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<sup>4</sup> The Akkadians.

<sup>5</sup> Dan. 4:8.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 1:26.

dedicated to the sun and moon with plates of pure gold and silver, while the stage dedicated to Mercury was blue slag, made by subjecting the bricks to intense heat after they were in place. The tower must have looked very magnificent from a distance—like an upright rainbow. On the summit of all was the shrine.

You will wonder that the moon was placed higher than the sun; the Semitic race, indeed, held the sun in great honor, but the Accadians dreaded his burning rays, and preferred the moon. The great tower had fallen into decay in Nebuchadnezzar's time, but was rebuilt by him, and properly drained during his reign in Babylon, and no doubt was one of the buildings of which he was so proud. The walls of the city were so broad that two chariots could pass one another on them, and they were pierced by a hundred gates made of bronze.

It was one of the kings of this great city who was powerful enough to turn out the Elamite intruders, of which you have heard so much; he was the son of the king of Shinar, who went with Chedorlaomer to Sodom, and his name was Hammurabi.

Having freed his country, he wisely devoted his energies rather to improving it than increasing its size by conquests; for there happened to be a great flood in his time, and he embanked the river Tigris to prevent its overflowing again, and dug also a gigantic canal, having many branches, so as to fertilize the country. This king says in an inscription, "I have given unfailing waters to the people. I have changed desert plains into well-watered lands. I have given them fertility and plenty, and made them the abodes of happiness." This sounds a little boastful; but it is scarcely beyond the truth, though it is difficult for us, with our moist English climate, to realize what a dearth of water means.

Hammurabi, like all great kings, built many temples and repaired those that needed it. He was the last great king of Chaldea; for although he had expelled the Elamites, other nations came against the land, and the throne was once more held by strangers. In the meantime, too, a people in the north, the Assyrians, were growing in power, and threatening to carry everything before them.

It is curious that no graves have been found in the more northerly cities of the country, the ancient places, like the ancient language, seeming to have been held sacred; for the largest cemetery in the world is around Erech. The platform of that city, except where the ruins are, is a mass of sepulchers, and in the desert around are "piles upon piles of human remains,"<sup>7</sup> the coffins not only being close together, but one over the other, to a depth of from thirty to sixty feet. It is a most desolate region, too; for, except from November to March, it is an island surrounded with swamps. The quantity of coffins of different periods found there makes it seem probable that those who could afford it had their remains carried from the north to their ancestral home. And even in our day caravans of pilgrims from Persia bring hundreds of dead bodies to be buried near Babylon, showing that this cradle of great nations is still considered holy ground.

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<sup>7</sup> Loftus.

