

STORY OF CHALDEA, CHAPTER III ARRIVAL OF OTHER PEOPLES—THE LEARNING OF THE PRIESTS



“OANNES”-THE FISH GOD

Such a fertile country as Chaldea was not likely to be passed unnoticed by the great tribes who wandered about, in the early days of the world's history; and although it is impossible to know exactly when, it is certain that many people made a halting-place in the Euphrates Valley on their way westward, not a few remaining for good. As we have only to do with Chaldea just now, I will speak of the latter.

The descendants of Cush, the son of Ham (Gen. 10:6), are thought to have lived for many years in some islands in the Persian Gulf, where having little to do, they appear to have led a life of reflection, their great joy and occupation being to watch the stars. They were even so advanced as to have colleges for priests, who spent their time in studying astronomy and science, in religious thought, and in making laws for the people.

As years went by, however, the islands became too small for them, and many, consequently, made their way across to Chaldea (Gen. 10:8-11), where they quickly took the lead, as superior culture always does. In course of time they intermarried with the Sumerians, and gradually introduced their own

language¹ among them.

In after-years, the Chaldeans told a story of how their higher civilization was taught them by a god, “Oannes,” who came over the sea, and was half man, half-fish. The origin of this myth is, no doubt, the coming of the Cushites; but the idea of the fish-god was not forgotten from age to age; for, you may remember, the Philistines kept it up by representing their god Dagon as half-man, half fish.

Yet another tribe wandered into Chaldea, a people called the Semites, descendants of Shem (Gen. 10:11,22), who, thought at the time not so advanced as the Cushites, quickly learned the higher civilization of Chaldea, adopting also the religion of the country, now very much improved. The great difference between this religion and that of the earlier inhabitants was that while the early Sumerians sent their thoughts

¹ Accadian/Akkadian.

so largely to a lower world where evil spirits lived, the later people raised their eyes to the starry heavens, and thought more of the kind of spirits who ruled there.

Indeed, it was a Semetic tribe to whom was revealed the purist form of worship, that of one indivisible Divine Being, the Creator of the world. The head of this tribe was Eber, his descendants were called Hebrews, and their home was “Ur of the Chaldees,” of which we shall hear more further on.

You may be sure that by this time some better means of building has been devised than that of the early Turanian settlers. When there is no stone in a land, people build with brick, and so they did then, as may be seen from Genesis 11:3. At first, they made their bricks of all shapes and sizes, and only dried them in the sun; but they soon found out that they lasted much longer if thoroughly heated in an oven.

To build on the flat, muddy land, however, would have been useless, as the moisture from the ground, as well as the rain, would gradually soak into the soft walls, which bulging out with the wet, would sink down and be washed away. They thought of a plan, however, which preserved their buildings very much longer, though repairs often seemed to have been necessary. With huge labor, they heaped together earth and rubbish to form a great platform, walling it outside with bricks, and on this they built a temple, with a tower for looking at the stars, and a college for the priesthood. Pilgrims and worshippers would encamp in the neighborhood, for wandering tribes still roamed through the country, and in time houses grew up round it, and so gradually cities were formed. The first building, however, in every town was the temple, erected not only as a place of worship, but also as a castle of defense in time of war, like the great temple at Jerusalem.

The Chaldean priests thought they could foretell events by looking at the stars. This is called “astrology,” and the people considered it so important that learned men should have leisure to study such subjects, that they gladly supported them in colleges, by which we see that our custom of “scholarships” at the university is by no means a new one.

But the lower classes took little interest in the deep studies of these learned men, and still consulted magicians, who were now looked upon as inferior priests, though their power was great. You can understand how it came about that when Nebuchadnezzar and other great kings wished their dreams explained, they called together “the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers,” as were told in the Bible (Dan. 2:27).

Now, although all the people worshipped the various gods of whom you have heard, yet each city had a god or goddess as its favorite. Erech, the City of Books, one of the oldest towns, worshipped the head-god Ana, and the goddess Anat; at Ur, the moon-god was adored; at another old town, Ea, represented as a fish-god, presided; yet another, farther north, was the headquarters of the sun-god; and so on throughout the land, now divided into a number of little sister states, each with its city, temple, college and head-priest as ruler.

You must not think, however, that these priests only wrote books and studied the stars; for they made many useful inventions, such, for instance, as the sun-dial, for telling the time of day. They noticed, too, how long a moon lasted before there was a new one, and called that length of time a "month," further dividing this period into weeks of seven days, that the sun, moon, and five planets might have a day for their own special worship. We still call the first two days by their Chaldean names, of sun-day and moon-day.

The priests also settled that the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th of each month should be a Sabbath, or, as they call it, "Sabattu." On these days, even the king might neither ride in his chariot, make a speech, perform any public duty, nor take means to be cured, if ill, as it was a day when the affairs of the soul were to be considered.

The Hebrews in Ur, like the rest of the people, were well acquainted with these rules, and when, long, long after, their tribes in the desert of Sinai were told to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy, they knew quite well what the Sabbath was, for such knowledge gets handed down from father to son for many generations; but from that time the sacred day was to be kept regularly once a week and not at odd intervals, as with the Chaldeans.

Among the many stories written on the tablets by the priests, some are especially interesting to us as they are very like the accounts we have in the Bible of the early history of the world. They say, for instance, that a king dreamed there would be a great deluge of waters, and a god told him to build a ship, to store it with food and drink, and take his family and friends into it, with animals and birds of every kind. After describing the awful storm that came, and how frightened the king was, the tablets go on to say, "On the mount Nazir the ship stood still. Then I took a dove, and let her fly. The dove flew here and there, but finding no resting place, returned to the ship." A raven, too, is mentioned as having been let fly, and altogether it is easy to see that the event recorded is the same as that of which we read in Genesis, both accounts being probably taken from one older still. These tablets thus form another instance among many, of the way modern discoveries are constantly proving the truth of the Bible.