

September 7, 2008
The Sunday Before Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Take a map of the Middle East and place your finger on the northwest corner of the Persian Gulf. Then slide along toward the northwest at an angle about 45 degrees, in a sweeping motion, generally, stopping when you have finished approximately one half of an arc. At this point you should observe two things:

First, your finger has traversed the large land area through which the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flow southeasterly, joining at last to descend into the Persian Gulf. Because these two massive rivers and their dozens of tributaries dominate this extensive region, the Greeks called it Mesopotamia, translated loosely as "the land in the middle of the rivers."

Second, your finger, finishing its half-arc to the northwest, has arrived just above the southern border of Turkey, at a point about 23'51" N x 39'02" E. Here you will notice the presence of a city, which was founded about 2000 B.C., during the Third Dynasty of Ur. Thus, it was just over two hundred years old, when Abraham arrived there in the 18th century before Christ (Genesis 11:31; Acts 7:4). The name of that city is Harran, and we will come back to it presently.

Next, starting there at Harran, drag your finger down toward the southwest, tracing the arc's other half, but tending a bit more sharply to south, brushing the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and ending in Egypt. You will observe that this second area, too, is dominated by river systems: the Orontes, the Barada, the Bekaa, the Jordan, and the Nile.

This double complex of many river valleys, which form a rough semicircle from the Persian Gulf--up, over, and then down--to Egypt, takes on the shape of an uneven crescent. Because this rich, fruitful, and prosperous area arches out above the bleak Arabian Desert, it has long been known as the Fertile Crescent.

Justly, too, has this region been called "the Cradle of Civilization." Not too far from the top of its western half sits Damascus, the world's oldest continually existing city. At the bottom of its eastern half is Sumer, where writing was invented toward the end of the fourth millennium before Christ.

Let us return, though, to the pivotal city of Harran, which, as we have seen, sits at the top of the arch, joining the two halves of the Fertile Crescent. Merchants across this area, because they were reluctant to trek through the Arabian Desert, made their trade routes through the Fertile Crescent, thus tying the whole Middle East into a unified economic world. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Harran very early became a prosperous commercial city, through which passed the wealth of many nations far away (cf. Ezekiel 27:23).

This was the city where Abraham's servant came and met Rebekah, thence bringing her westward to be the bride of Isaac (Genesis 24). In the following generation, their younger son, Jacob, journeyed to Harran to test his fortune, eventually returning to the Holy Land with a large, prosperous family (Genesis 27-31).

Invaders also arrived in ancient days, chiefly from the east, to conquer and dominate the other half of the Crescent. Some of them came as far back as Abraham (Genesis 14:1-6). Later came the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. The Assyrians laid Harran waste in the late eighth century (cf. Isaiah 37:12). One century later, when the remnants of the Assyrian army fled to Harran after the downfall of Nineveh, Nabopolassar followed and defeated them there.

In later history, an invader came through from the west--Alexander the Macedonian, who not only subdued the whole Fertile Crescent, but also tied it, economically and culturally, to the Mediterranean world.

In brief, ancient Harran stood as the gateway between two political worlds. To the west was the Mediterranean Basin, ultimately dominated by Rome. To the east were the Medes, the Persians, and eventually the Parthians, these last remaining a constant threat on the eastern border of the Roman Empire (cf. Revelation 9:14; 16:12). They defeated the Roman army under Crassus at Harran in 53 B.C.

Harran's pivotal place in geography was matched by a pivotal place also in history. It was there, in that ancient city of crossroads and transitions, that the Lord spoke to Abraham and pointed history in a radically new direction (Genesis 12:4; Hebrews 11:8). It was at Harran that mankind heard the voice, turned around, and started the pilgrimage back to God.

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