

◀ The Nile River provided fresh water and fertile land for those living along its banks.

Geography and the Early Settlement of Egypt, Kush, and Canaan

7.1 Introduction

In Unit 1, you learned about early hominids and the empires of Mesopotamia. In this unit, you will explore three civilizations that arose in Africa and southwestern Asia. They were the **Egyptian, Kush, and Hebrew civilizations**.

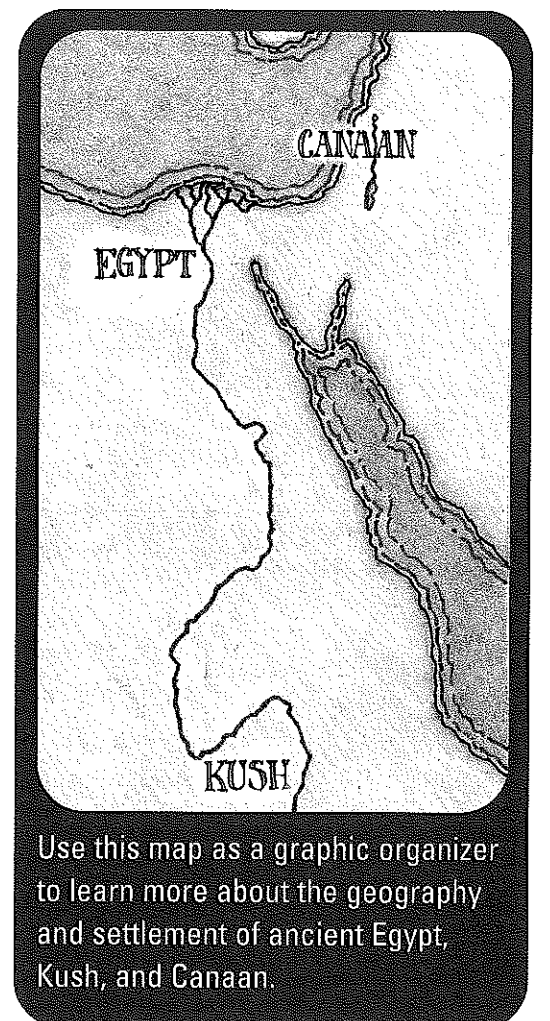
The Egyptians settled along the Nile River, in the northeast corner of Africa. Their civilization lasted from around 3100 B.C.E. to 350 C.E.

The Kushites settled to the south of Egypt, along the southern part of the Nile. Their civilization began around 2000 B.C.E. and lasted until 350 C.E.

The Hebrews settled northeast of Egypt, in Canaan, in about 1800 B.C.E. Over time, they developed a unique civilization that thrived until their capital city was destroyed in 70 C.E.

Why did these people settle where they did? Their choices were greatly affected by **environmental factors**. Three important environmental factors were water, topography (the shape of the land), and vegetation (plant life). These factors depended upon physical features that were part of each area's **geography**. Physical features include such things as rivers, mountains, valleys, deserts, climate, and the fertility of the soil.

In this chapter, you will learn why water, topography, and vegetation were so important to early human settlement. Then you'll explore the geography of ancient Egypt, Kush, and Canaan. You'll find out how environmental factors in these places affected where people chose to live.



topography the surface features of a place or region, such as mountains or deserts
vegetation the plants of a place or region

7.2 Environmental Factors and Early Human Settlement

Environmental factors influenced where people chose to settle in ancient times. Three important environmental factors were water, **topography**, and **vegetation**.

Water

The most important environmental factor in early human settlement was water. Physical features like rivers, lakes, and inland seas are good sources of fresh water.

Water is important for many reasons. People need fresh drinking water to live. They also bathe and wash things in fresh water. Bathing and washing help to prevent disease.

Water is also a source of food. People catch the fish that live in rivers, lakes, and seas. They hunt water birds and other animals that gather near water. In addition, farmers need water to grow their crops. For this reason, farmers often settled near rivers. The river's natural flooding could help to irrigate their farms. Farmers could also dig canals or trenches to direct the river's water to their crops. As you've learned, farmers in Mesopotamia dug canals for this purpose.

Water can also be used for transportation. Cities and towns often used rivers as "highways." People traveled in boats to visit relatives and trade goods. Towns near the sea could trade goods with countries far away.

Topography

A second environmental factor was topography. Topography refers to the shape of the land. It includes features like mountains, hills, plains, and deserts.

The topography of an area was important for early human settlement. Farmers usually settled in flat, open areas such as plains and valleys. Large, flat spaces gave them room to grow crops. Also, the rich soil in coastal plains and river valleys was excellent for growing crops.

Mountains and deserts were less friendly to human settlement. Steep mountains were hard to cross. Their jagged peaks and rocky land made farming difficult. Deserts were hot and dry. They contained very little water for farming. The intense heat and lack of water made travel difficult. People who settled in mountains and deserts faced many challenges.

Vegetation

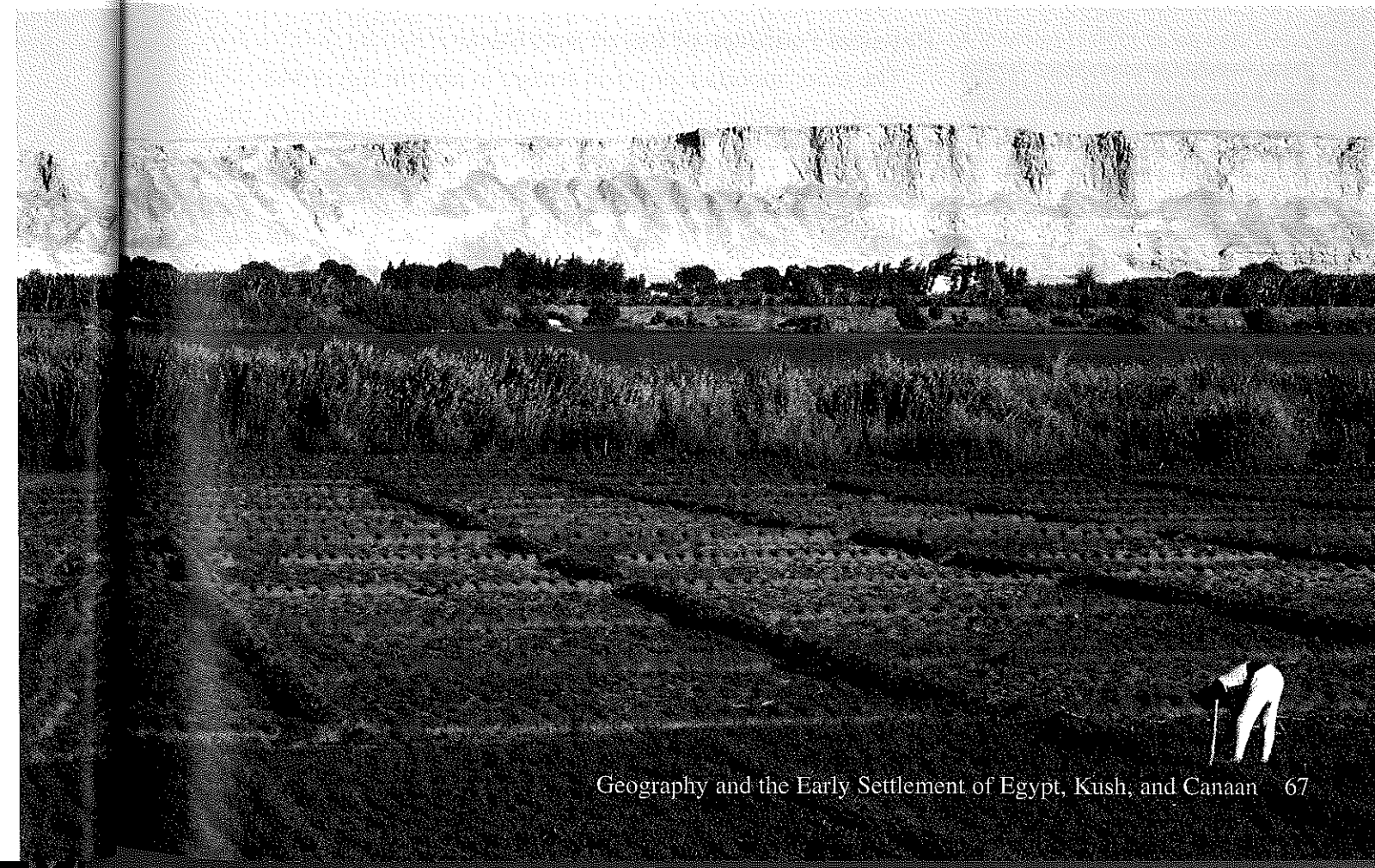
A third environmental factor was vegetation, or plant life. There are many kinds of vegetation, such as trees, bushes, flowers, grass, and reeds. The crops people grow are also a type of vegetation.

Many physical features affect vegetation. Mild weather, regular rain, and fresh water are good for plant life. The areas around rivers and lakes are usually green and lush. Mountains are often covered with thick groves of trees. Deserts, being dry and hot, have very little vegetation.

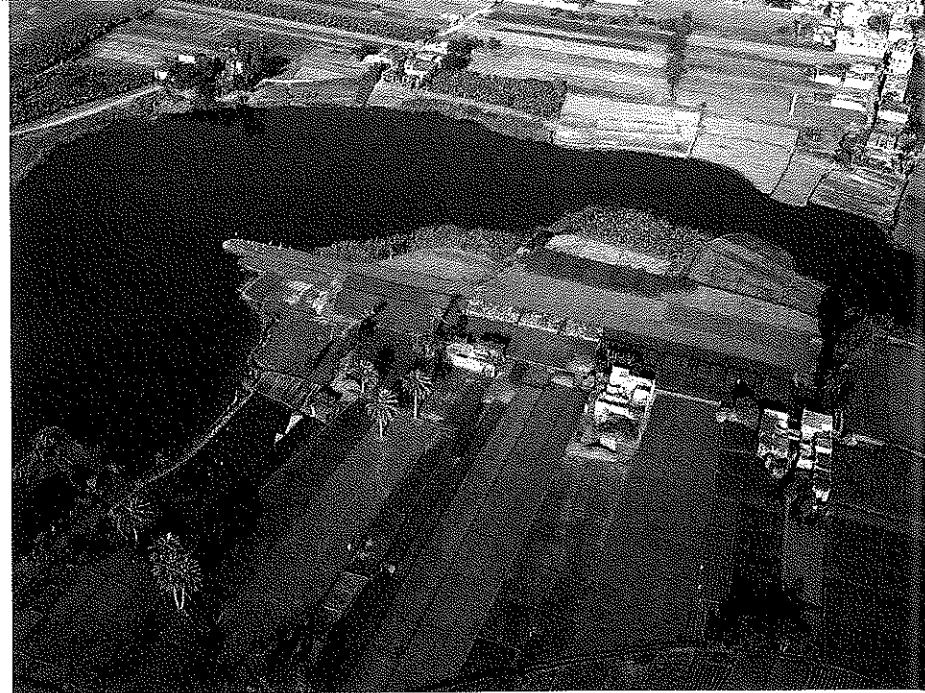
The vegetation in an area influenced early human settlement in several ways. Most important, plants were a source of food. People ate both wild plants and crops they had planted. But vegetation had other uses as well. People learned to make many useful products out of plants, including medicine, baskets, rope, tools, and even paper. Trees provided shade from the hot sun. And plants and flowers helped to make a place beautiful.

Water, topography, and vegetation were important wherever people settled in the ancient world. Let's look now at how these environmental factors influenced the early settlements of Egypt, Kush, and Canaan.

Can you identify three environmental factors in this photograph? Why might they be important to the people living in this place?

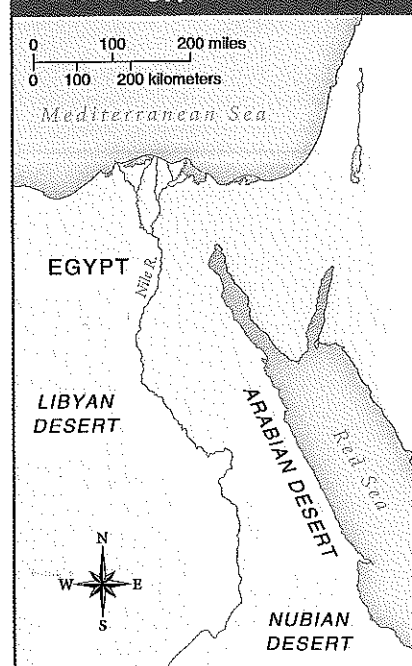


Africa's Nile River is the longest river in the world. It is more than 4,100 miles long and flows from south to north, draining into the Mediterranean Sea.



delta an area of sediment deposited at the mouth of a river

Key Physical Features of Ancient Egypt and Kush



7.3 Environmental Factors and the Early Settlement of Egypt and Kush

The Egyptians and Kushites both settled near the Nile River. The Egyptians lived along the northern part of the river. The Kushites lived to the south.

Why did settlements in these areas cluster around the Nile? Let's look at the physical features of Egypt and Kush and then see how environmental factors favored settlement near the Nile.

Physical Features of Egypt and Kush

The most important physical feature in ancient Egypt and Kush was the Nile River. Flowing north from deep in Africa, the Nile created a long, fertile valley that ended in a marshy **delta** by the Mediterranean Sea.

The Nile River valley was surrounded by the Libyan Desert, the Arabian Desert, and the Nubian Desert. These sandy deserts were extremely hot and dry. Most people avoided them, yet the deserts did play one important role in the settlement of Egypt and Kush. They formed a natural barrier that helped protect people living in the Nile River valley. The deserts did not support large settlements, and few invaders wanted to cross them.

On the north, Egypt was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea. Settlers could not drink its sparkling salt water, but the sea was rich in fish and other kinds of life. It was also a waterway that linked ancient Egypt to other civilizations.

To the east of Egypt and Kush was a long, thin channel of very salty water called the Red Sea. The climate in this area was hot and dry. Much of the land near the Red Sea was desert.

Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Egypt and Kush

Environmental factors in ancient Egypt and Kush greatly favored settlement near the Nile River. Most important, the Nile was a source of fresh water in an area that was mostly desert.

The lack of water in the deserts made them useless for farming. But in the Nile River valley, the river provided natural irrigation and **fertilization**. Every summer, the river overflowed its banks. The floodwaters soaked the dry ground. After several weeks, the waters went down. A thin ribbon of silt (rich soil) was left behind. This soil was perfect for farming.

Where there is fresh water, there are usually fish to catch and animals to hunt. The abundant wildlife in the Nile region included fish, ducks, geese, hippos, crocodiles, giraffes, and ostriches.

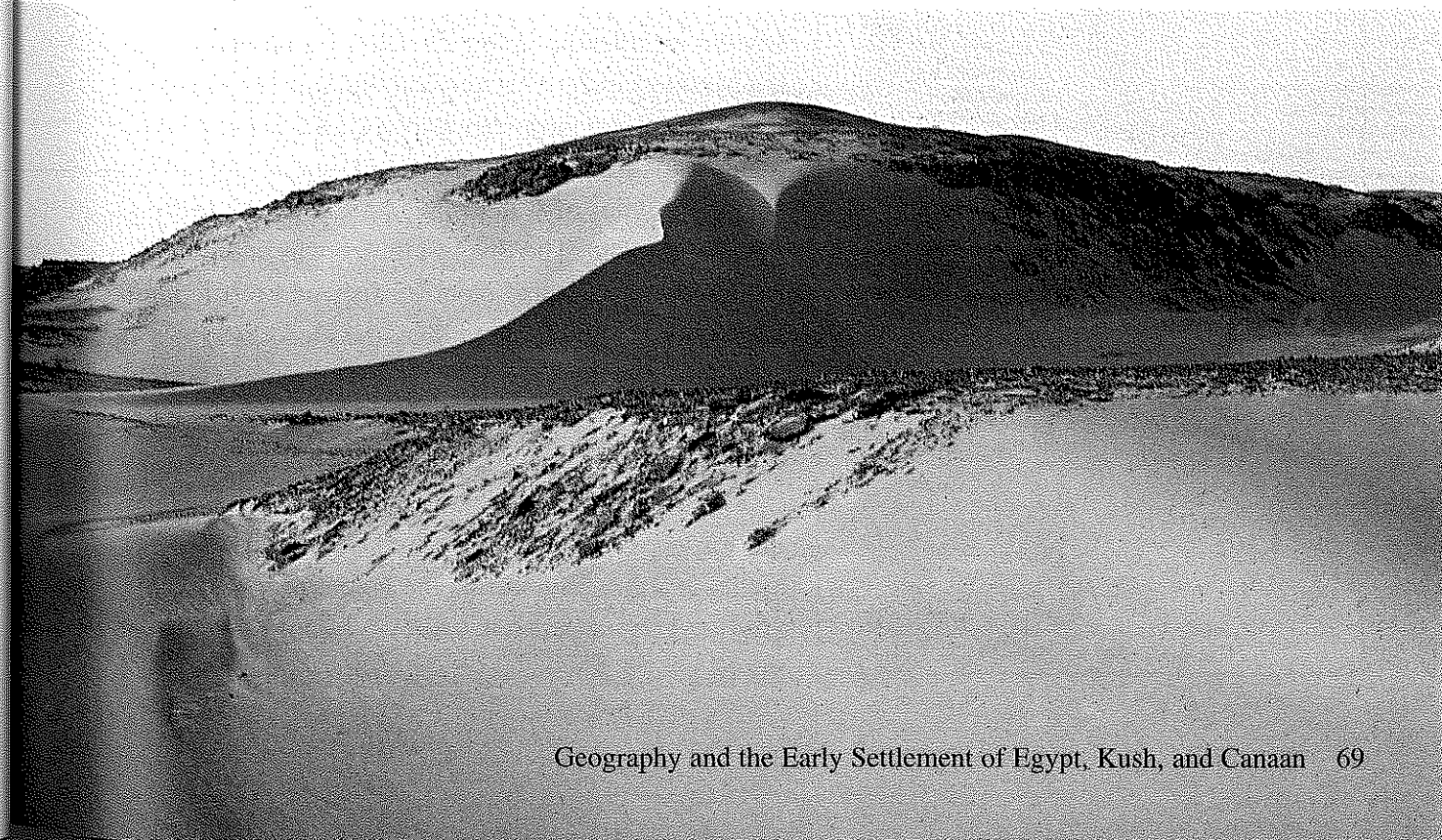
The topography of the river valley also encouraged human settlement. In the south, parts of the Nile ran through narrow valleys and hills. But there were also wide areas of flat land around deep bends in the river. These flat areas were good for farming. In the north, wide plains were watered by the Nile's annual flooding.

Vegetation was rare in the dry deserts, but it was plentiful in the Nile River valley. Useful plants included reeds and a tough water plant called **papyrus**. People wove reeds into baskets and roofs for their huts. They used papyrus to make rope and paper. And the rich farmland made it easy to grow crops like wheat and barley.

fertilization the process of adding fertilizer, or plant food, to soil

papyrus a tough water plant used to make paper and rope in ancient times

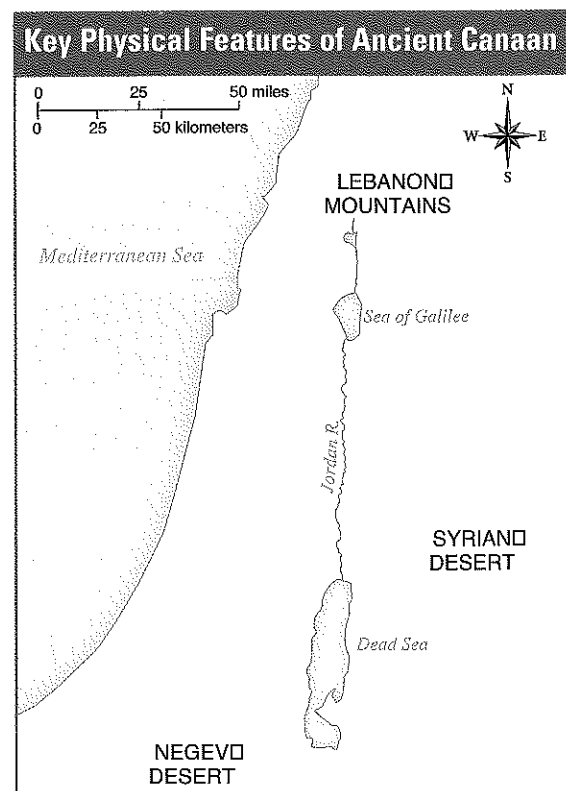
Deserts are natural barriers against invaders. Would you want to walk for days across this hot, dry desert to fight those who live on the other side?





While parts of the Jordan River valley were lush, the area was not as fertile as the Nile River valley.

The Jordan River flowed down from a mountain range through the middle of Canaan, heading south through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. The land around the narrow river valley included hills, grassy slopes, and mountains. To the east was the hot, dry Syrian Desert. In southwestern Canaan was the Negev Desert. Rain soaked this area during the winter months, giving the Negev more water than most deserts.



7.4 Environmental Factors and the Early Settlement of Canaan

Canaan, where the ancient Hebrews settled, was a diverse land. Canaan's physical features and environmental factors made settlement easier in some areas than in others.

Physical Features of Canaan

Canaan's physical features included plains and valleys, hills and mountains, deserts, and bodies of water.

In the west, coastal plains bordered the Mediterranean Sea. To the north, the Lebanon Mountains rose steeply from the coast. The southern part of this range gave way to the lower hills of Galilee.



Canaan's varied topography greatly influenced patterns of settlement. Farmers found it easiest to live in the coastal plains and near the Jordan River. But in many areas, the hilly land and dry soil made growing crops difficult. As a result, many people, including the ancient Hebrews, became herders rather than farmers. Herders tended flocks of sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys, and camels. Unlike farmers, herders were **nomads**, wandering from place to place in search of good land for their animals to graze.

The Negev is not as dry as most deserts. After the winter rains, colorful flowers bloom there every spring.

nomad a person who moves from place to place with no permanent home

Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Canaan

In Canaan, just as in Egypt and Kush, water was a key environmental factor. The wet, fertile plains near the Mediterranean Sea were farmed in very ancient times. The Mediterranean also allowed traders from many lands to visit Canaan.

Other bodies of water played a role in the settlement of Canaan. The Sea of Galilee was actually a freshwater lake. It had plentiful fish, and fertile land was nearby. Another large lake, the Dead Sea, was so salty that nothing grew in it, not even plants. The area near the Dead Sea was hot, dry, and not very good for farming.

The most important source of fresh water was the Jordan River. People hunted, fished, and farmed along its banks. But unlike the Nile, the Jordan did not flood regularly, so its valley was not as fertile as the Nile's.

The mountains and deserts were the hardest areas to settle. Mountainous land was difficult to farm, and the deserts were too dry for farming. Still, some people did settle in these areas. Nomads sometimes herded cattle and camels in the Negev and Syrian Deserts.

In general, Canaan's hot, dry climate discouraged abundant plant life. Vegetation was most plentiful near the Jordan River. Some places had light forests. Others had only short, scrubby plants. Grasslands were common, though, and herders made good use of them to feed their animals.

7.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about three environmental factors that influenced the settlement of ancient Egypt, Kush, and Canaan. In Egypt and Kush, most people farmed in the fertile Nile River valley. In Canaan, many people, including the ancient Hebrews, were nomads. They followed their herds in search of good grazing land. In the next chapter, you will learn more about ancient Egypt and meet some of its rulers.