Chapter 7: The Geography and Settlement of Egypt, Kush, and Canaan

**Learning Target:** I can explain how geography affected early settlement in Egypt, Kush, and Canaan.

**Ancient Egypt and the Middle East**

Can you use one word to describe the geographic setting of an entire region? If that region is North Africa and the Middle East, you can. That one word would be **desert**. Locate both the northern part of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula on the map *Africa and the Middle East*. Then look at the smaller map *Vegetation Zones of Africa and the Middle East*. The vegetation for most of the region is desert or desert scrub. Overall, few plants grow in the desert. Small trees, bushes, and other
plants that have adapted to a dry climate makeup desert scrub.

Look again at the vegetation map, and locate the narrow band of broadleaf evergreen forest that extends through Egypt. How can trees that remain green all year survive in such a dry area? The answer is the Nile River. This vegetation zone follows the path of the Nile River in Egypt.

The Nile River has long been an essential source of life-giving water in a dry land. For thousands of years, the Nile flooded the land along its banks, leaving deposits of rich soil in the Nile River valley. The ancient Egyptians grew plentiful harvests of wheat and barley there, making it possible for them to develop one of the world's greatest ancient civilizations.

Additionally, two other ancient civilizations developed in this region. Located south of Egypt was the ancient civilization of Kush, which developed close ties with Egypt. Northeast of Egypt is an area that borders the Mediterranean Sea. This is the land of ancient Canaan, where the Israelites settled. These people, sometimes called Hebrews, were the ancestors of the Jews. They gave the world one of its major religions—Judaism—and founded the Kingdom of Israel in Canaan.

The mostly dry and hot geographic setting of North Africa and the Middle East was home to three civilizations you will learn about in this unit. First, you will learn more about geography and its effect on where and how these civilizations thrived. Then, you will explore each civilization, beginning with the ancient Egyptians.

**Introduction**

Geography largely affected three civilizations that arose in northern Africa and southwestern Asia. These were the civilizations of the ancient

![Vegetation Zones of Africa and the Middle East](image)

![Ancient Egypt, Kush, and Israel](image)
Egyptian, Kushite (KUH-shite), and Israelite peoples.

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 River. Their civilization began around 2000 B.C.E. and lasted until 350 C.E. The Israelites, later called Jews, settled northeast of Egypt, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, in about 1800 B.C.E. They were forced from their homeland in 70 C.E., but their civilization still thrives today.

Environmental factors also greatly affected where people settled. Three important factors were water, topography (the shape and elevation of the surface features of the land), and vegetation (plant life). These three factors were determined by each area's physical geography.

As you read this lesson, you will learn why water, topography, and vegetation were important to early human settlement. You will explore the physical geography of the lands of the ancient Egyptians, Kushites, and Israelites. You'll discover how environmental factors in these places affected where people chose to live.

**Section 1 - Environmental Factors and Early Human Settlement**

In ancient times, environmental factors influenced people's choices of where to settle. 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 were good sources of fresh water.

Water was important for many reasons. People needed fresh drinking water to live. They also bathed and washed things in fresh water to prevent disease.

Water was also a source of food. People caught fish from rivers, lakes, and seas. They hunted water birds and other animals that gathered near water.

In addition, farmers often settled near rivers because they used it to grow their crops. A river's natural flooding could help irrigate their farms. Farmers could also dig canals or trenches to direct river water to their crops. For example, farmers in Mesopotamia dug canals for this purpose.

Water was also used for transportation. Cities and towns often used rivers as “highways,” allowing people to travel 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, which refers to the shape and elevation of the land. It includes features like mountains, hills, plains, valleys, and deserts.

The topography of an area was important for early human settlement. Farmers preferred to settle in flat, open areas such as plains and valleys. Large, flat spaces gave farmers room to plant crops. Additionally, the rich soil in coastal plains and river valleys was ideal for growing these crops.

Mountains, however, were less friendly to human settlement. Steep mountains were tough to cross. Their jagged peaks, cold temperatures, and rocky land made farming difficult.

Deserts further discouraged settlement because they were hot and dry, so they contained very little water for farming. Sandstorms occurred when strong winds carried dense clouds of sand that could block out the sun. Due to the intense heat, lack of water, and sandstorms, traveling and living in the desert presented 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 aspects of physical geography affect vegetation. A climate with mild weather and regular rain is ideal for plant life. Fresh water supports the growth of vegetation. The areas around rivers and lakes are usually green and lush. Mountains are often covered with thick groves of trees. Dry and hot deserts 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 could eat the wild plants available as well as the crops they planted. Vegetation had other uses as well. People learned to make many useful products out of plants, including baskets, tools, medicine, rope, and even paper. Trees provided shade from the hot sun, while plants and flowers added natural beauty to a place.

Wherever people settled in the ancient world, water, topography, and vegetation were important factors. Let's look at how these environmental factors influenced the early settlements of the Egyptians, Kushites, and Israelites.
Section 2 - 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, while the Kushites lived to the south.

Why did settlements in these areas cluster around the Nile River? Let's look at the physical features of Egypt and Kush to 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 east Africa, the Nile created along, fertile valley that ended in a marshy delta where the river emptied into the Mediterranean Sea.

The Libyan Desert borders the Nile River Valley on the west, while the Nubian Desert borders it on the east. These sandy deserts were extremely hot and dry. Most people avoided these areas, although the deserts did play one significant 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 risk crossing these harsh places.

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

To the east of Egypt and Kush was a long 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 importantly, the Nile was a source of fresh water in an area that was mostly desert.

The lack of water in the deserts made them unfit for farming, but the Nile River provided the valley with natural irrigation and fertilization. Every summer, the river overflowed its banks, soaking the dry ground for several weeks. As the water level decreased, a thin layer of silt (very fine particles of rock perfect for farming) was left behind.
Additionally, where there was fresh water, people were more likely to find 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 between steep hills. But there were also wide, flat areas of land around deep bends in the river. These flat areas were good for farming. In the north, the Nile's annual flooding watered the wide plains.

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. Papyrus was used to make rope and paper. And the rich farmland was good for growing crops like wheat and barley.

Section 3 - Environmental Factors of and the Early Settlement of Canaan

The ancient Israelites settled in Canaan (KAY-nen), a diverse land along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Canaan's physical features and environmental factors made settlement easier in some parts of the region 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.

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 lay the hot, dry Syrian Desert. In southwestern Canaan was the Negev (NEH-gehv) Desert. Rain soaked this area during the winter months, supplying the Negev with more water than most deserts receive.

Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Canaan

In Canaan, as in Egypt and Kush, water was a key environmental factor. In very ancient times, the wet, fertile plains near the Mediterranean Sea were farmed. The Mediterranean also enabled traders from many lands to visit Canaan.
Other bodies of water also 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 too salty for anything to grow in it, even plants. The area near the Dead Sea was hot and dry, making it unsuitable for farming.

The main source of fresh water was the Jordan River. People living near the river hunted, fished, and farmed along its banks. However, unlike the Nile River, the Jordan River did not flood regularly, so its valley was not as fertile as the Nile's.

Canaan's varied topography greatly influenced patterns of settlement. Farmers found it easiest to live on the Mediterranean's coastal plains and near the Jordan River. In other areas, the hilly land and dry soil made growing crops problematic. As a result, many people, including the ancient Israelites, 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.

People found it hardest to settle in the mountains and deserts. Mountainous as well as dry desert lands were both difficult to farm. Still, some people did live 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 areas had small forests, while others had only short, scrubby plants. Grasslands were common, though, and herders made good use of them to feed their animals.

**Lesson Summary**

**In this lesson, you learned how three environmental factors influenced the early settlement of ancient Egypt, Kush, and Canaan.**

**Environmental Factors** Three important environmental factors are water, topography, and vegetation. These factors greatly affected where ancient people settled.

**Early Settlement of Egypt and Kush** In Egypt and Kush, most people farmed in the fertile Nile River valley. The Nile River provided fresh water in an area that was mostly desert. The topography of the Nile River valley made the land good for farming. The valley also supported useful vegetation like reeds and papyrus.

**Early Settlement of Canaan** In Canaan, the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee were important sources of fresh water. Much of the land, however, was too hot, dry, or hilly for farming. As a result, many people, including the ancient Israelites, were herders rather than farmers. Herders were nomads who moved from place to place to find grasslands where their animals could graze.