

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

July 2009

The Sons of Shem

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Shem was one of the three sons of Noah, the brother of Ham and Japheth. His descendants, often referred to as Semites or Semitic people groups,¹ came through his five sons as described in Genesis 10:22—“The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram.” The Bible presents Noah, Shem, and their descendants as historical individuals. In fact, ancient records support the historical existence of Shem’s five sons and the people groups that descended from them. These Semitic groups shared similar linguistic and cultural patterns and settled primarily in the Middle East. “Semites are divided linguistically into Northwest Semitic (Aramaic, Phoenician, Ugaritic, Canaanite: Hebrew, Moabite), South Semitic (Arabic and Ethiopic), and East Semitic (Akkadian: Babylonian and Assyrian).”² The most prominent line of Semitic people, biblically speaking, is the Jewish race through which Jesus Christ entered the world. Therefore, it’s important to understand the historical reality of the five sons of Shem.

Elam

Daniel 8:2 refers to a geographical province called Elam that was the location of the city of Susa. Susa, also called Shushan, was one of the capitals of the Persian Empire (compare Nehemiah 1:1; Esther 3:8). Shem’s son Elam is consistently identified as the

ancestor of the tribal groups that settled in the region that eventually became known as Persia (compare Ezra 4:9; Acts 2:9).

Elam was the province east of the Tigris and north of the Persian Gulf. Elamites were a warlike people who frequently invaded the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and plundered the more highly civilized settlements there. The whole of Persia was frequently termed Elam. It is now known as Iran.³

The Elamites were involved in a variety of international conflicts in ancient times⁴ that included an attack on the Canaanites in Abraham’s day (Genesis 14:1-2), an attack on Judah in Isaiah’s day (Isaiah 22:6-8), and eventual defeat at the hand of the Lord (Jeremiah 49:34-39; Ezekiel 32:24-25).

Asshur

Asshur is consistently identified with the Assyrians throughout history. “They were Semites, and their language belongs to the eastern branch of the same Semitic family to which Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic and Phoenician belong in the west and Arabic and Ethiopic belong in the south. Asshur and Nineveh were founded by Hamites (Gen. 10:11), but Semites who early settled in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley finally conquered the whole country.”⁵ The Assyrians, the descendants of Asshur, would eventually control a major empire in the Middle East. It was during this stage of Assyrian dominance that the northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity (2 Kings 17:3-6).

Arphaxad and his Descendants

Arphaxad takes center stage in the genealogical record of Genesis because through him Abraham and the nation of Israel came into being. In addition, Arphaxad was the ancestor of thirteen tribes that inhabited the Arabian Peninsula.

Ptolemy, the Greek geographer, mentions an Arrapachitis on the Great Zab River, northeast of Nineveh, which some students identify with Biblical Arphaxad. Others consider the word a compound of Arpak and Chesed, i.e., Arpak of the Chesdim (Biblical Chaldeans). Kraeling prefers Arap of

Chesed, suggesting Arappa as a variant pronunciation for Arrapakha, modern Kirkuk in Iraq.⁶

According to Genesis 10:24, Arphaxad had a son named Shelah who in turn had a son named Eber. Eber's name may have been the source of the term "Hebrew," though this is not certain. Eber had two sons of his own, Peleg and Joktan.

Joktan was the father of thirteen sons whose tribal descendants settled in Arabia—Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab. Genesis 10:30 indicates that these tribes inhabited the region "from Mesha toward Sephar," that is, from the western to the eastern limits of the Arabian Peninsula. Little is known of these tribal ancestors. "Nearly all the names of the tribal descendants of Joktan are archaic, not having hitherto been found in the inscriptions of the first millennium from south Arabia."⁷ Sheba does stand out because of the queen of Sheba who visited Israel in the time of Solomon (1 Kings 10:1). Ophir settled in a land, now unidentified, that had a reputation for possessing mineral resources including gold (1 Kings 9:28; Job 22:24).

Eber's other son, Peleg, was the ancestor of Abraham. Genesis 10:25 says that the earth was divided during Peleg's lifetime, probably referring to the division of nations at the tower of Babel. Peleg became the father of Reu, Reu became the father of Serug, Serug became the father of Nahor, Nahor became the father of Terah, and Terah became the father of Abraham (Genesis 11:18-26). Thus Seth, the son of Noah, was the ancestor of God's chosen people.

Lud

Lud is identified with the ancient Lydians who eventually occupied western Asia Minor, although they may have originally lived in Mesopotamia. "Egyptian monuments locate the *Luden* near Mesopotamia. It has been conjectured that they were displaced by the Assyrians, after which they migrated to Asia Minor."⁸ The Lydians and their wealthy king, Croesus, were eventually conquered by Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia, around 540 B.C.⁹

Aram and his Sons

Aram was the ancestor of the Arameans, a pervasive people group in the ancient Middle East who occupied the region known today as Syria. The Arameans, with their capital at Damascus, engaged in ongoing conflicts with the Israelites during the monarchy period. "The Aramaic tongue eventually became the international language of trade and diplomacy,"¹⁰ and was the common language of Judea in the time of Jesus. Genesis 10:23 states that Aram's four sons were Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash (or Meshech: compare 1 Chronicles 1:17). The land of Uz was the home of Job (Job 1:1) and was apparently located near Edom, south of Canaan (Lamentations 4:21). "*Mash* is obscure, but evidently refers to some part of the great Syro-Arabian desert, as *mat* (country of) *Mash* is used in this sense in the Assyrian records."¹¹ Little is known about the other sons of Aram.

The sons of Shem (grandsons of Noah) were historical figures who left their mark in ancient times. Their actual existence and historical legacy affirm the reliability of the Bible both as a historically and spiritually accurate book, the Word of God.

¹ Pfeiffer, Charles F. *An Outline of Old Testament History*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1960, p. 28.

² Vos, Howard F. *Genesis*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982, p. 54.

³ Pfeiffer, p. 28.

⁴ Unger, Merrill F. "Elam" in *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 294.

⁵ Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954, p. 97.

⁶ Pfeiffer, Charles F. *Baker's Bible Atlas*, Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973, p. 43.

⁷ Unger. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, p. 98.

⁸ Pfeiffer. *Baker's Bible Atlas*, p. 44.

⁹ Pfeiffer, *Baker's Bible Atlas*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, p. 98.

¹¹ Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, p. 98.