

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Sumer and the Land of Shinar**

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Civilization as we know it began in the ancient land of Sumer. Sumer was located in the southeastern portion of the Fertile Crescent in the land of Mesopotamia. Together with the region of Akkad bordering it on the north, Sumer became the seedbed of writing, law, formal education, and government. It's legacy is still evident today. It was the Sumerians who introduced the idea of measuring circles and angles by degrees. They also take credit for the use of the wheel. Many of the religious myths from Sumer sound remarkably similar to the Old Testament, including the creation of the world, the creation of man, and the worldwide Flood. However, the Bible never mentions ancient Sumer. Or does it?

### ***The Land of Shinar***

Eight times the Old Testament refers to a place called Shinar. Shinar was a region that later became known as Babylonia, and the New International Version translates Shinar as "Babylonia" in four out of its eight occurrences. Joshua 7:21 says that Israel's army suffered defeat at Ai because Achan had stolen a garment from Shinar in the battle of Jericho. Isaiah 11:11 says that God would bring His people back from captivity in the land of Shinar. Daniel 1:2 relates how Nebuchadnezzar carried off plunder from Jerusalem to his temple in Shinar.

Zechariah 5:10-11 presents in symbolic language a picture of sin and idolatry as being removed from the land of Israel and taken in a basket to the land of Shinar. These references point clearly to the land of Babylonia, and the city of Babylon was located in the ancient lands of Sumer and Akkad.

Genesis refers to the land of Shinar four times. The most descriptive passage is the first reference, Genesis 10:8-10. According to these verses, Nimrod established a kingdom among the cities of Shinar. These cities were Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh. Some of these cities are known to have been centers of Sumerian culture and civilization as well. Erech is the Sumerian city of Uruk<sup>1</sup>, and Akkad is the Sumerian city of Agade, founded by Sargon the Great.<sup>2</sup> These geographical connections make it possible to identify ancient Sumer with biblical Shinar. "Hebrew sin'ar . . . appears to represent the Sumerian term for 'Sumer-Akkad' and thus refers to the area that includes the homeland of the Sumerians."<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 11:2 describes Shinar as the focal point of civilization following the Flood. This was the place where the descendants of Noah attempted to build a tower in defiance of God, and where God confused their languages. This place took on the name Babel, or Babylon.

In Genesis 14:1 and 14:9 we read about Amraphel, one of the kings of Shinar, who participated in the capture of Abraham's nephew Lot and who were defeated by Abraham's servants. Though some scholars had attempted to identify Amraphel with the Babylonian king Hamurrabi, this connection is not longer seen as valid.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the biblical references, it is apparent that the biblical land of Shinar parallels the ancient land of Sumer which later became known as Babylonia.

### ***Nimrod the Mighty Hunter***

Nimrod appears in Genesis 10:8-12. There he is identified with the cities of the land of Shinar. Nimrod was a descendant of Noah through Ham. He was apparently one of the

earliest empire builders. These verses describe him as a mighty hunter, probably referring more to his military prowess than his hunting abilities. “The simple meaning of this statement is that Nimrod was the exact opposite of the divine ideal of a king – that of a shepherd . . . . Whereas a hunter gratifies himself at the expense of his victim, the shepherd expends himself for the good of the subjects of his care.”<sup>5</sup>

Nimrod stands out as an dominating, evil tyrant in ancient times. The fact that Babylon was the first city listed in his kingdom indicates that Nimrod stood in opposition to God. “Nimrod, however, is specially associated with the founding of Babel, or Babylon, and this first mention of a word which is so familiar elsewhere should be specially noted. Babylon henceforward stands for everything that is godless, and for the great opponent of the people of God.”<sup>6</sup> Even though the Bible describes Nimrod as a mighty hunter “before the Lord” he was not recognized by the Lord in a positive way. “The expression ‘before the Lord,’ or ‘in the sight of the Lord,’ expresses neither approval nor disapproval; it expresses only that what Nimrod did was significant.”<sup>7</sup>

Is it possible to identify Nimrod with any historical figure? The ancient Sumerians recorded the names of many of their founding rulers in what has come to be known as the Sumerian King List. According to that record, Enmerkar was the king who built the city of Erech.<sup>8</sup> Genesis 10:10 says that Erech was among the cities that Nimrod conquered, but it does not say that he built Erech (compare verse 11, which says that he built Nineveh and other cities). So it is unlikely that Nimrod is identical with Enmerkar. Some have attempted to identify Nimrod with Gilgamesh, a legendary successor to Enmerkar at Erech. But this identification is far from certain. For now, we must simply accept the biblical facts as stated. Nimrod was one of the earliest despotic empire builders in ancient Sumer.

### ***Parallels between Sumerian Literature and the Bible***

The ancient Sumerians passed on a rich literary heritage through their system of cuneiform writing. This heritage includes a number of similarities with the biblical record. Both describe

the creation of the world out of a primeval sea. Both describe the creation of man out of clay. Both describe a universal Flood and the preservation of life by means of a large boat. However, do these parallels demand that the Bible contains “traces of Sumerian influence”?<sup>9</sup>

Since the Bible describes civilization as flowing from the multiplication of one family after the Flood, it is preferable to understand that creation, the Flood, and any other parallels between the Bible and ancient civilizations comes from the truthfulness of these events. The Bible did not rely on Sumerian sources for these accounts. The Bible, instead, accurately records these events as they occurred historically. The Sumerian accounts likewise pass on these stories, though in a corrupted form. However, the very fact that these events appear in Sumerian literature highlights the accuracy and authority of the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer, Samuel Noah. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Kramer, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Bodine, Walter R. “Sumerians” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, editors. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Unger, pp. 794-795.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, W. H. Griffith. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, John J. *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Kramer, p. 329.

<sup>9</sup> Kramer, p. 292.