

# **Biblical Iraq**

## **History, Heritage, and Roots of Faith**

### **Cradle of Civilization**

Modern Iraq is the “Cradle of Civilization,” containing more than 10,000 archaeological sites which weave a fascinating story.

- *In Biblical history, Iraq is also known as Shinar, Sumer, Sumeria, Assyria, Elam, Babylonia, Chaldea, and was also part of the Medo-Persian Empire.*
- *Formerly also known as “Mesopotamia,” or “land between two rivers,” the modern name of “Iraq” is sometimes translated “country with deep roots.”*
- *A thousand centuries ago, a fertile Mesopotamian plain had formed where waters from the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, drew game, fish, and vegetation.*
- *By 6,000 BCE there existed permanent villages in which inhabitants formed basic industries, organized governments, and were freed up to pursue artistic and other forms of expressions, including writing and the recording of their histories.*

### **“In the beginning . . .”**

- *Genesis 2:8-14 describes the location of the Garden of Eden as in the area of four rivers, two of them named as the Tigris and Euphrates. Tradition has located Eden south of Ur at a site in Iraq known as Eridu.*
- *Archaeologists place the birthplace of Noah at Fara, which is due east of Najaf. It is known that waters from the two rivers have swelled over to cover the entire land mass in that area. These Biblical stories are in Genesis Chapters 6-10.*
- *The Tower of Babel would likely be one of the many built in the land of Shinar during the time of Nimrod as described in Genesis 11:1-9.*
- *Approximately ten generations after Noah, Abram (later called Abraham) was called out of the modern Chaldean city of Ur (possibly the capital) and told to go to the land of Canaan in Genesis Chapter 12.*
- *After moving into Canaan, Abraham sent his servants back to his home in Mesopotamia to find a wife (Rebecca) for his son Isaac (Genesis Chapter 24).*

- *Jacob (whose name was later changed to Israel), son of Isaac and Rebecca, also returned to Sumeria (in Iraq) to take his wives (Genesis Chapters 27 and 28).*

## Jonah and the Story of Nineveh

- *The book of Nahum prophesies the coming destruction of the great city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian World Empire. Nineveh remains a province in Northwest Iraq.*
- *The book of Jonah tells about his resistance but ultimate compliance with God's commandment to warn the people of Nineveh of the coming destruction of the city.*

## Jewish History in Iraq

- *The book of Jeremiah prophesies about Judah falling into the hands of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah Chapter 21).*
- *The book of Lamentations describes Jeremiah's weeping over the destruction of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 BCE.*
- *The book of Daniel tells about the sacking of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and the taking of 10,000 Jews as captives to Babylon.*
  - *Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego soon distinguish themselves in King Nebuchadnezzar's palace by resolving not to eat the kings' rich food (Daniel Chapter 1).*
  - *Daniel interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in Daniel Chapters 2 and 4.*
  - *Daniel's friends survive the fiery furnace in Daniel Chapter 5. King Nebuchadnezzar declares that "there is no other God (than the God of the Jews) who is able to deliver in this way."*
  - *Daniel survives being thrown into the lions' den in Daniel Chapter 6.*
  - *Daniel also prospers in the Medo-Persian Empire after the fall of the Babylonian Rule in 539 BCE (Daniel Chapters 6-12). He prospers under the rule of four great monarchs, rising to the position of third in command under Persian Rule. (Daniel is said to be buried in Desfil, (in Western Iran) where a mosque has been built around his tomb).*
- *The book of Ezekiel was written while Ezekiel was in Babylonian captivity. He is buried in Kifi, Iraq, where his tomb is guarded by Shi'ite Muslims. Until the mid-*

1940's, his tomb was a popular pilgrimage destination, attracting Jews from as far away as Calcutta.

- *The books of Jeremiah, Ezra, Nahum, Amos, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Hezekiah all have stories of the Jews during the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires.*
- *The book of Esther tells of the young Jewish girl who married the Persian King Artaxerxes and saved her people from a plot by Haman to slay all the Jews. The Jewish "Feast of Purim" is a remembrance of this event. Esther, whose name in Persian means "Little Star," is buried in the Kurdish area of Hamadan in Iran.*

## The Long History of the Jews in Iraq

Bernard Lewis in The Multiple Identities of the Middle East writes:

*"The major centers of Jewish life and thought were in Iraq ... particularly under the Persian rule." (Again): "The oldest and most creative of the Arab-Jewish communities, the most fully identified with the country and people of which they were a part, were the Jews of Iraq. They were profoundly rooted in the soil."*

## Christians in Iraq

*The Christians in Iraq are among the oldest communities of Christians in the world.*

- *They are among the heirs of Pentecost (Acts Chapter 2). People were "... gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost from many lands, each hearing the gospel in their own native tongues." These first generation Christians carried the messages back to their own lands throughout the Middle East.*
- *Both tradition and history claim that the Apostle Thomas preached to the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites, and throughout all Mesopotamia, even into India. Later Thaddeus and Bartholomew preached throughout that region.*
- *These early congregations formed around family and tribal bonds and included converted Jews who were well-settled in the region at that time.*
- *Since early times, Arab Jews and Christians have shared in the Arabic culture, history, and language ... their fates being intertwined and inseparable.*
- *The early Christian Church was one unified body which grew rapidly over a large area; it was divided into geographical units called "patriarchates:" Antioch; Alexandria; Rome; and later, Constantinople (381 CE); and Jerusalem (the Mother Church).*

- *There were seven Ecumenical Councils which met in C.E. 325, 381, 431, 451, 533, 680, and 787. These councils served to guide these early Christians as to how they would conduct their liturgies and serve their communities.*
- *By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, there were splits between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking, largely due to language and cultural differences. The Eastern Christians held mostly to their Greek and Pentecostal Day liturgies while the Western Christians turned to the Latin. Many churches in the Middle East, however, hold to the original Aramaic language of Jesus as well as to other languages of origin.*
- *Most Christians in Iraq today are ethnically Assyrians. Mosul (in Northern Iraq) is the home of most Assyrians and has the largest number of Christian churches and communities.*
- *The Assyrian Christians refused to accept the appointment of a young Patriarch of the Church of the East and around 1550 CE sent a monk, Youhanna Sulaqa, to Rome where he was appointed Patriarch of Babylon and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Tarik Aziz (imprisoned since 2003) is a member of the Christian Chaldean Catholic Church, which includes nearly 2/3 of all Christians in Iraq today.*
- *Other Christian groups in Iraq include: The Ancient Assyrian Church of the East (in the Kurdish area); the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic Church; the Syriac Catholic Church; the Church of Antioch (Nestorian); and a sprinkling of Western Evangelical churches.*

## The Muslim Conquest

- *Muslim Arabs came into the Mesopotamia area during the 7<sup>th</sup> Century C.E., soon after the death of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Within one hundred years, the Arab Islamic Empire, ruled by Sunni Caliphs, extended from Spain, across Central Asia, and all the way to parts of India. Fourteen hundred years later, most of these regions are still largely Islamic.*
- *Within Iraq, the two factions of Islam, Sunni and Shi'ite, emerged and currently dominate the struggle for the future of Iraq. With the overthrow of the Iraqi government by the United States in 2003, new struggles between two factions of Islam resurfaced. About sixty percent of Iraqi Muslims follow the Shi'ite Branch of Islam who venerate the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali as the rightful successor to Muhammad.*
- *Following Ali, eleven other successors were recognized by the Shi'ite community. Several of these Imams (including Ali and his adored son, Hussein) are buried in Iraq; these sites have become sacred pilgrimages to all Shi'ites. The twelfth and last of*

*these Imams was a very young boy who went into hiding (known as the “occultation”) in the caves underneath the famous 9<sup>th</sup> century Shi’ite mosque in Samarra, Iraq around 873 C.E.*

- *On February 22, 2006, the Sunnis (thought to be members of Al-Qaeda) bombed the Samarra mosque. The Shi’ites responded in like fervor against Sunni mosques, resulting in a civil uprising throughout Iraq during which more than 180 mosques were destroyed and thousands of people killed. The future of Iraq may well be determined by the outcome of this Shi’ite-Sunni struggle which continues to this day.*

*Good to remember:* *Iraq was primarily a Christian area when the Muslims arrived in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. Many Jews, including descendents from the Babylonian captivity of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E were also prosperous members of this community. For the most part, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have lived in relative harmony in Iraq until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.*

### *In Iraq Today...*

- *The community of Jews in Baghdad have all but vanished today in a land where their pre-Jewish heritage goes back to the days of Abraham. Fifty years ago, Iraq’s Jews numbered more than 130,000, but now it is hard to find ten Jewish men required to perform some of the most important rituals of their faith. The Meir Tweig Synagogue, which was Baghdad’s last in the city, was closed in 2003 after it became too dangerous to gather openly.*
- *For more than 2000 years, Iraqi Christians had been part of the vibrant cultures and religious diversity which existed in Mesopotamia, then later Iraq. Hundreds (some say thousands) of Iraqi Christians have been murdered, imprisoned, bribed, bought out and sold during the years since the U.S. invasion, thus unleashing chaos resulting in religious violence.*

*Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, leader of the largest group of Chaldean Catholics in Iraq, was kidnapped in February, 2008; his body was found two weeks later in a shallow grave outside Mosul, the Biblical city of Ninevah. Surviving Iraqi Christians now make up a large share of Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan, Europe, the United States, and around the world.*

- *Old hostilities among the Sunni and Shi’a Muslims in Iraq have also been revived. Thousands of both Shi’ites and Sunnis have died as a result of bombings, targeted assassinations, and all out fighting among militia groups. Hundreds of mosques have been bombed out and more than 2,000,000 Muslims have been dislocated as a result of these attacks.*

***Johnnie Hicks – 03/24/14***