Iraq and the Bible

Iraq is about the size of California. It ancient name is Mesopotamia – Greek for 'in the middle of the rivers'. These rivers – the Tigris and the Euphrates – played a key role in the development of civilisation in this region. The easternmost river, the Tigris, has its headwaters in eastern Turkey and flows past Mosul (ancient Nineveh), Tikrit, Baghdad, Kut and Basra and into what is now called the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates begins in east-central Turkey and then flows past Karbala, ancient Babylon and Nasiriyah.

Iraq is called the cradle of civilisation as evidence has been found there for the earliest writing system, urban centres, literature, metallurgy science, medicine and business as reflected in the Bible (Genesis 2:14; 4:1-22; 10:10-11; 11:1-5). So our modern culture has its roots in ancient Iraq.

Biblical names for the southern part of ancient Mesopotamia include Shinar (ancient Sumer), Chaldea and Babylon. For the northern area they include Assyria. The ancient language of the region is called Akkadian – named after the city of Akkad one of the cities founded by Nimrod in Shinar. (Gen. 10:10) The language was written in cuneiform or 'wedge-shaped' characters impressed into clay tablets with a wedge-shaped stylus.

Starting in the south, places that have Biblical connections cluster around two time periods:

- The time of the patriarchs – the early Bronze Age and the first part of the Middle Bronze Age
- The time of the divided monarchy – i.e. the Iron Age

Ur

Located 10 miles south-west of Nasiriyah, Ur is most famous as the home town of Abraham. He migrated from Ur to Haran in southern Turkey – the actual home of the patriarchs – and then to Canaan. (Gen. 11:31; 12:1-5)

Evidence for a very advanced culture from Abraham's area has been unearthed at Ur. Its restored ziggurat to temple tower is often shown on Iraqi TV. A temple to the moon God Nanna or 'sin' was situated on the top of the tower. The name of the Babylonian king Belshazzar (Daniel 5) appeared for the first time in a text in a foundation deposit of the temple.

Scholars once said the Bible was wrong in naming Belshazzar as king since the known records indicated that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon. Along with other subsequently found texts, the foundation deposit tablet revealed that Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus and co-regent with his father. While Nabonidus was away campaigning – which he loved to do – Belshazzar was left to run the country from Babylon. Thus Belshazzar offered Daniel the position of third-highest ruler in the kingdom if he would decipher the handwriting on the wall. (Dan. 5:16) This was the highest position available in the kingdom, since Nabonidus was No. 1 and his son Belshazzar was No. 2. Instead of being in error, the Bible precisely reflected the political situation that existed in ancient Babylon at the time of its fall to the Medes and the Persians.

Babylon

The expansive ruins of Babylon are located a few miles north of Hilah and about 53 miles south of Baghdad. Founded by Nimrod, (Gen. 10:10) it was one of the most famous cities in the ancient world. The Babylonian Empire ruled that world from 612 BC to 539 BC. Five of its kings are named in the Bible: Merodach-Baladan (2 Kings 20:12), Nebuchadnezzar II – the destroyer of Jerusalem in 586 BC; Evil-Merodach, (2 Kings 25:27-30; Jer. 52:31-34) Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar (Jer. 39:3, 13) and Belshazzar. (Dan. 5)

Many important finds have been made in Babylon. These include the foundations of the 'Tower of Babel' (Gen. 11-1-8); the Royal Palace built by Nebuchadnezzar where God pronounced judgement on the Babylonian Empire by means of the handwriting on the wall (Dan. 5); records detailing rations

given to King Jehoiachin and his family who had been taken to Babylon as captives (2 Kings 24:15); the Babylonian Chronicle recording the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar March 16, 597 B.C. and the Cyrus cylinder describing the fall of Babylon – in fulfilment of Biblical prophecy – in 539 B.C. and the subsequent freeing of captives so they could return to their native lands as was the case with the Judeans. (2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2-4, 6:3-5)

Baghdad

One of the great tragedies of the recent war in Iraq and perhaps one of the greatest archaeological tragedies of all time was the looting of the National Museum following the capture of Baghdad by US forces. Local mobs ransacked the museum, grabbing treasures dating back to the dawn of civilisation in Mesopotamia. The mob looted or destroyed 170,000 items of antiquity worth billions of US dollars. Some of the world's most important ancient finds chronicling the great achievements of the Uruk, Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and early Islamic civilisations were there. Included were mankind's earliest written documents, ancient mathematical texts, ancient sculptures and other works of art. Also there were the riches from the royal death pits at Ur from the third millennium B.C. and tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh – an epic detailing very great flood with many of the same elements as Noah's flood – building an ark, taking animals on board and releasing birds.

Nuzi

Located 8 miles south-west of Kirkuk, it was the old capital of the north. Nuzi was a centre of the Hurrian culture. Hurrians are called Horites, Hivites and Jebusites in the Bible. About 3500 tablets were found there dating from 1600 BC to 1400 B.C. Many of the tablets deal with laws and customs and provide some of the best available evidence for the common social, economic and legal practices in the ancient world. They deal with issues such as a childless couple adopting a slave to be their heir, (Gen. 15:2-3) having children by proxy, (Gen. 16:1-2) deathbed blessings (Gen. 21:48-49) and the importance of household gods (Gen. 31:19, 30) are illuminated in the texts.

Calah

Is situated 20 miles south-east of Mosul. It is one of three cities referred to as the "Assyrian Triangle". Along with Nineveh and Khorsabad, Calah was an important centre of the Assyrian Empire between 900 and 612 B.C. Nimrod built it when he went from Shinar to Assyria. (Gen. 10:10-11) Two Assyrian kings mentioned in the Bible ruled from Calah. They were Tiglath-Pilesar III who was also called 'Pul' (2 Kings 15:19, 29; 16:7,10) and Shalmaneser V. (2 Kings 17:3-6, 24; 18:9) The ruins of the palace of Tiglath-Pilesar III have been found including his annals recording his campaign to Israel mentioned in 2 Kings 15:19-20 (740 B.C.) and 2 Kings 15:239 (732 B.C.). In addition, three Israelite kings who paid him tribute are named – Menahem, Pekah and Hoshea, as well as one king of Judah – Ahaz. A prize find was made in the palace of Shalmaneser III – the so-called 'Black Obelisk' that depicts Jehu, King of Israel, bowing before Shalmaneser III as he presents tribute.

Tell Al-Rimah

In 1967 a stela (carved slab) of the Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III was found at Tell Al-Rimah 40 miles west of Mosul. It depicts a campaign to the west in which Adad-Nirari received tribute from Jehoash, King of Israel.

Nineveh

Located at Mosul, Nineveh was also founded by Nimrod. (Gen. 10:11) It had walls nearly 8 miles long and enclosed an area of 1700 acres. There were outlying suburbs as well so that when Jonah went there the early 8th century B.C. it took him three days to cross the city. (Jonah 3:3) Although Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching, (Jonah 3:5) the revival was short-lived. The Assyrians were soon back to their cruel practices and God ultimately brought the empire to an end as predicted by the prophets Nahum and Zephaniah.

Nineveh was most famous as the capital city of Sennacharib the greatest of the neo-Assyrian kings. Portions of his fabulous palace covering the area of three cities have been excavated. Painted

sculptured reliefs depicting his exploits lined the walls. The Bible tells of Sennacharib's campaign against Judah 701 B.C. (2 Kings 18:18 – 19:36) In the Assyrian version Sennacharib states that he shut Hezekiah in Jerusalem, "like a bird in a cage". He could not boast of capturing Jerusalem because an angel of the Lord decimated his army and he was forced to return to Nineveh. (2 Kings 19:35-36)

His most significant accomplishment in 701 B.C. was the defeat of Lachish. (2 Kings 18:14, 17 and 19:8) One entire room in Sennacharib's palace was devoted to this event. The walls were lined with reliefs depicting the city and the battle. Sennacharib is seen seated on a throne reviewing a procession of captives and booty being brought out of the city. These are now in the British Museum in London.

The next two kings – Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal – are also referred to in the Bible in 2 Kings 19:3 and Ezra 4:10. Their records mention Manasseh, King of Judah. He supplied building materials for Esarhaddon's palace at Nineveh and troops for Ashurbanipal's invasion of Egypt. One of the most significant finds at Nineveh was the library of Ashurbanipal which comprised about 1500 different texts – some with multiple copies – including archival, literary, magical, medical, divinatory and ritual tablets. It was here that the famous Epic of Gilgamesh with its flood story was first discovered.

Khorsabad

At Khorsabad, 15 miles north-east of Mosul, is the site of Dur Sharrukin "Fortress of Sargon" ruler of the Assyrian Empire 721-705 B.C. Prior to 1847 Sargon was only known from Isaiah 20:1 where it says, ***"In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon King of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked it and captured it …."*** Since his name did not appear in classical sources, scholars concluded that in the Bible Sargon was not a bone fide king, but rather an alias for some other Assyrian ruler. Ironically, Sargon was the first name of an Assyrian inscription when in 1847 his vast palace of more than 200 rooms and 30 courtyards with sculptured reliefs and written records was excavated in Khorsabad.

Sargon campaigned in the Palestinian region three times – in 720 B.C., 716-715 B.C. and 712-711 B.C. turning Israel into an Assyrian province and Judah into a vassal state in the process. In 720 B.C., following the initial defeat of Samaria by his predecessor Shalmaneser V, Sargon boasted of deporting 27,280 Israelites to Assyria. In 712-711 B.C. he turned his attention to Ashdod and the area of Philistia. According to Isaiah 20:1, he sent his commander-in-chief to capture the city. Assyrian records verify that Sargon remained in his capital at Khorsabad. They state that he stayed "in the land", no doubt to supervise the construction of his palace.

The Future of Iraq

What lies ahead for Iraq now that we are in 2020 A.D.? In Iraq today there is still war and hostility. We need to pray for a quick end to the fighting and for peace, stability and prosperity for the Iraqi people.

In the long-term, God has said through the prophet Isaiah, ***"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship (the Lord) together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria – a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people, Assyria My handiwork and Israel My inheritance'."*** (Is. 19:23-25)