

Sam Harris' Book "Letter To A Christian Nation" Facts Or Fiction?

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[The Berean Call Ministry: Sam Harris' "Letter to a Christian Nation" is one of the latest attempts to attack biblical Christianity. The book contains a number of zingers which are getting wide exposure. Here is one: "[M]ore than half the American population believes that the entire cosmos was created 6,000 years ago. This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue." Harris has a problem. His proof is based upon an assumption rather than hard science. It is instructive, however, to illustrate how quickly atheists abandon science if it suits their purpose. Consider the following remarks by Dr. Randall Price.]

Archaeology has demonstrated that the Sumerians, who lived in southern Mesopotamia (Sumer), existed during the third and early second millennia B.C. (i.e., 3,000 -2,500 B.C.). This date has been determined in part from the recovery of cuneiform tablets which shows that "Sumerian" was the earliest real writing system in the world (appearing around 3,200 B.C.). It was this writing system that half a century later was adapted to Semitic languages like Akkadian and eventually for many others (Elamite, Hurrian, Uratian, Hittite). The age of this writing system (cuneiform) was derived by epigraphists through a comparison with other writing systems which have revealed a dependent development of the alphabetic script. Based on this it was possible to construct a hierarchical (therefore chronological) relationship for the culture that produced them.

This date, however, is only about half that given by Sam Harris. He must be using some source that postulates the origin of the Sumerians as going back into the paleolithic times. It should be understood that the farther back in time we go with a civilization the less data we have for it. There are a number of reasons for this, but the chief one is that there simply has not been good preservation for the most ancient (paleolithic) remains. With respect to Sumer, which is thought to be the first great civilization in the Middle East, there is significant debate as to origins, and we do not have archaeological data, such as human remains, to provide such extreme dating.

For the sake of accuracy I have cited below the pertinent facts concerning the question of origins from the entry on the Sumerians in the standard reference: The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East (Oxford University Press, 1997) prepared under the auspices of the American Schools of Oriental Research and edited by Eric M. Meyers. The citation is from volume 5, page 96 under the subtitle "Origins":

The origins of the "Sumerians" have been widely debated, and there is little consensus on the issue. Much depends on how one phrases the question. Although evidence for human presence exists in western Asia far back into paleolithic times,

the first such evidence in southern Iraq is relatively late for there are no archaeological remains preceding the sixth millennium (5,000 B.C.) The earliest-known settlement in Sumer has been excavated at the small site Tell el-Oueili. The lowest levels of this hamlet are earlier than the hitherto attested phases of the Ubaid culture, which is attested in northern Mesopotamia, in Sumer, and on the shores of the Persian Gulf . . . however, those resemblances do not mean that these people migrated from other areas.

Although the earliest level at Oueili is unique, the later archaeological levels can be linked to developments at other southern sites such as Eridu and Ur and from this time on there is an unbroken series of related archaeological cultures in southern Mesopotamia. Archaeological cultures are modern constructs and cannot be easily linked with ethnic, linguistic, or political units; nonetheless, for almost a century scholars have attempted to find a break in this development attributable to a possible invasion of a new people -- the Sumerians. This search has largely been abandoned in recent times. Attempts to identify physical characteristics of the occupants of Sumer have not been successful because few skeletal remains of the early inhabitants have been found and subjected to modern morphological analysis. Even if such remains were found, we would learn little about the identity of these people as the very notion of race in the physical sense is an imaginary category.

(Randall Price, World of the Bible Ministries, 1/3/07)