

SUMER CUM LAUDE

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Prologue

"Scorpions!" I yelled into the receiver, "Mac, I hate scorpions!" I shuddered, remembering an interminable ride in the back of a pickup truck with cages of angry scorpions when I had hitched a ride with an arachnidologist after some mildly illegal excavating in Arizona's Canyon de Chelly as a teenager. Mildly amused, Mac added, "there are, of course flying snakes as well, but they don't really fly. They leap rather dramatically when workmen upset their domestic tranquility of course, but the bite isn't fatal - very often." "Look," he added, "if you want to come as the doctor for our excavation, there really aren't a lot of health problems, other than what 130 degrees of sunlight can do to a man, a little dysentery, sandflies- - -" "Mac," I concluded, "I really want to

do this, so I'll be ready for every damn disease and disorder ever described there."

Mac, Dr. McGuire Gibson of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, has gained renown as the leader of the American excavation at Nippur. He reassured me that his team would undoubtedly survive my tenure as physician to the upcoming dig but suggested that a little Arabic study be added to my perusal of tropical medicine texts. I felt anxious but exhilarated as I prepared to live out a dream of many years.

What madness lay behind the desire to travel to such an inhospitable environment? The title of a book by the great University of Pennsylvania Sumeriologist Samuel Noah Kramer explains it most succinctly: "History Begins at Sumer." Nippur was the holiest city of Sumeria because Enlil, god of the air and chief among the Sumerian gods, was memorialized here by a great ziggurat or stepped platform rediscovered thousands of years later. And where is this obscure place? Sumeria, along with the kingdom of Akkad just to its north, occupied roughly the lower half of Iraq, embodying a collection of city states near, on, or between the Euphrates River on the west and the Tigris on the east, extending from north of modern Baghdad to the Persian, or Arabian, Gulf. This hot, dry land was once rich, farmland, flat with river-made soil, no minerals, almost no trees nor stone. And in the early fourth millennium before the common era (B.C.E. in modern archeologic parlance), an extraordinary people who had migrated over the Zagros Mountains to the east, were producing a quality of human organization and relationship never seen before.

Here first appeared the institutions which are the foundation of our civilization: the first law codes, the first cities, kingship, bicameral, legislature, an economic system of highly developed record keeping

which evolved into the first writing. Here we find the first glass, the first use of the arch, wall mosaic, the first pharmacopeia, the first epic writing. Today's politician, architect, physician, lawyer, and businessman can find his archetype in the city-states of Sumeria. And in the faint echoes of the buildings, the epics, the laws and other writings of Sumeria we can find remarkable parallels with, and perhaps the origins of, some of the fragments of the Holy Book we call the Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament.

And, when you sneak furtive, if not anguished glances at your watches as the minute hand creeps past zero tonight, you will be checking a Sumerian sexagesimal system. Stay tuned!

The rediscovery of the Sumerian civilization did not occur until the middle of the nineteenth century, while Babylonia and Assyria to the north were initially excavated almost a century earlier. An Italian nobleman, Pietro della Valle, was probably the first westerner to visit this site in the mid-seventeenth century and did suggest that there must be ruins there, given the fragments of baked brick and stone with strange wedge-shaped markings upon them. The problem was that in the decipherment of the wedge-shaped writing of the ancient Near East, cuneiform, the name "Sumer" had never appeared. In translating the ancient Semitic languages of the second millennium B.C.E., there arose clear evidence for an earlier non-Semitic language as a precursor to what had been found in inscriptions in the eighteenth century. Finally, in 1869, titles involving "the King of Sumer" were correctly translated and associated with a relatively untouched but daunting region of southern Iraq somewhat larger than Massachusetts. Two excavations were subsequently undertaken here, in 1877 by the French, and in 1889 by the University of Pennsylvania. The Germans arrived in 1902, and the University of Chicago began its dominant role in the area a year later.

At Biblical Erech, Uruk to the Sumerians, excavations laid bare Sumeria's earliest buildings dating from about 3000 B.C.E. Popular imagination was captured by the excavations and imaginative writings of the British C. Leonard Woolley, a former theology student of William A. Spooner at Oxford, famed for Spoonerisms (e.g. it's raining dats and cogs!). Leonard Woolley, who had gained valuable earlier experience working in Nubia and Italy, and had studied Sumerian material at the University of Pennsylvania, had also spent two years as a Turkish prisoner of war after his ship had been sunk in 1916. He helped bring together the University of Pennsylvania with the British Museum to initiate excavations at Ur, slightly south of Mac Gibson's Nippur and 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. Just four miles from Ur was the earliest prehistoric site in Sumeria, a small mound called al-Ubaid, whose characteristic monochrome painted ware and tools of flint and obsidian became markets of this pre-Sumerian culture.

Ur, called the Mound of Pitch by the natives, rises 20 meters above the desert and contains a strange 60 meter elevated structure within what proved to be a city extending over a site 1200 by 800 meters. This "first high rise" was called, in the Sumerian tongue, a ziggurat and has been known since 1834. In 1922 there was a very practical reason for concentrating on Ur. All other Sumerian sites, including the great city of Nippur excavated by the University of Pennsylvania 1889-1900, were still under Turkish control or outside the protected zone of the British Army. Woolley had had enough of Turkish prisons.

One of the first trenches Woolley cut ran across a spectacular find, which he did not recognize for five years, despite the tantalizing clue of a few gold beads, which he unearthed there. He later wrote, rather self-defensively, "Our object was to get history, not to fill museum cases with miscellaneous curios, and history could not be got unless both we and our men were duly trained." So he used the excuse of

lack of trained workers to explain why he did not return to the trench where his greatest finds would be made, since he had overlooked the clue of the gold beads initially and pushed on elsewhere in the site. Instead he pursued the findings of more coherent archeologic remains in his second trench, as well as further uncovering the mound at pre-Sumerian al Ubaid.

Back where he started at Ur five years later Woolley made the discovery which put him on a par with Howard Carter, whose spectacular findings at the tomb of King Tutenkhamen in 1922 had quickly caught the imagination of the world. Woolley had found the Royal Tombs of Ur among about 1850 burial sites he uncovered during three seasons between 1927-1930. When he spotted the first glint of gold objects, he sent all the workmen away, and Woolley, with his wife Kathleen, then completed the detailed digging themselves.

There he found tomb chambers of stone containing skeletons with magnificent adornments of gold and silver, lapis lazuli and carnelian, golden cups and ribbons, bracelets and headdresses. He was stunned to discover dozens of attendants and animals surrounding the remains of the seventeen personages he inferred were the most important because of their jewelry, pottery, stone and metal vessels, weapons, and even makeup paints. Woolley believed that there had been mass sacrifices to the gods of a whole retinue at the time of the death of the royal personage. In some of the tombs, built of stone and brick vaulting, were found copper and silver models of boats of the same type as are used by the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq today. He excitedly announced his findings to the sponsoring institutions in code, the translation of which is "I found the intact tomb, stone built and vaulted over with bricks, of Queen Shubad adorned with a dress in which gems, flower crowns and animal figures are woven - tomb magnificent with jewels and golden cups." The natives never broke the code, to no one's surprise, since there could not have been many Latin scholars among them!

Dignitaries were anxious to visit the site. Agatha Christie came on the Oriental Express to spend sufficient time on the site to fall in love and marry his assistant, Max Mallowan. She described Woolley as one who "saw with the eye of imagination. The place was as real to him as it had been in 1500 B.C. or a few thousand years earlier." Christie had less kind words for Kathleen Woolley whom she noted as "poisonous, dangerous, ruthless, and calculating." Here she wrote "Murder in Mesopotamia," set amid the excavation sites of Iraq. In "Murder in Mesopotamia" she killed off a character suspiciously resembling Kathleen Woolley well before Hercule Poirot could find the murderer. In another area Woolley decided, purely by chance, to dig deeper in one of his trenches and came to a thick layer of water-laid clay, below which were the familiar prehistoric pottery and stone tools of the earliest pre-Sumerian, al Ubaid culture. This led Woolley, son of a clergyman, to announce to the world that he had found the evidence of Noah's flood. He further rhapsodized about "Father Abraham," who, as we learn in Genesis 11:26-28, had as the land of his nativity "Ur of the Chaldees." The New York Times of March 17, 1929 headlined, "Bible Figure Not Nomad But Founder of Urban Community, Says Professor Woolley. Hagar's Expulsion Legal." In one of his popular books of the 1930's, "Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins" based on no archeological data whatsoever, Woolley describes Abraham as bringing from Ur the pride in his city, the stories of Creation and the Flood, the latter "memorialized by his descendants to have been as history or as a parable by half the world for four thousand years." Woolley's twelfth and final season ended on February 25, 1934, in large part because of the Great Depression. By that time his fame had given him his own series on the BBC. Sir Leonard's knighthood was announced in the Birthday Honors List of June 1935.

The tantalizing potential for more magnificent findings in Sumer had fascinated me for years, and now I was to go there, ready for scorpions, snakes or a

much despised despot there named Saddam. There was another reason for my excitement. In Sumeria Biblical scholars have found numerous tantalizing translations emerging from cuneiform tablets over the whole span of Sumerian civilization, from about 3200-1750 B.C.E. with enormous implications for Biblical studies, and, in fact for the very origin of writing itself.

For in Sumeria man may have first learned to write. Cuneus is Latin for wedge, and the wedge shape of the Sumerian written characters led Thomas Hyde, a scholar of ancient religion, to name the writing "cuneiform" in 1700. Its shape arises from the use of a reed stylus the end of which did not come to a point so much as a right angle.

There persists some rivalry between Sumeriologists and Egyptologists as to the true site of origin of writing, but the Sumer-boosters point out that tablets bearing cuneiform can be found in excavations of early dynastic Egypt but not vice versa. Recent radiocarbon data gives a date of approximately 3450 B.C.E. for the Sumerian Uruk tablets and 3320 B.C.E. for markings on small bone and ivory objects found in Abydos in Upper Egypt. By the way, a very old system of writing in the Indus Valley at Harappa raise the question of when pottery markings become the signs of writing; these date from 3500-3300 B.C.E. The three systems of writing are all dissimilar despite their chronologic proximity. But Sumeria probably led the way. Symbolic thinking had to evolve first, and there is now good evidence that this occurred with Sumerian clay tokens of varied shapes, which signified different objects such as grain or animals. The number of objects probably indicated a quantity of goods. In fourth millennium Sumer these objects were found baked inside clay spheres, which bore crude markings of their contents. It appears that eventually these spheres or bullae gave way to direct impressions of a stylus on clay tablets representing the objects.

In the first stage of the development of cuneiform there are pictographs from the early to mid-fourth millennium, based on recognizable images of real objects but with a script that cannot be truly read. These ideographs or logographs are found on clay or gypsum as signs standing for a whole word and expressing an object or idea. About 700 early Sumerian cuneiform signs are known. In the next stage the signs come to have fewer and straighter lines and the arrangement of signs on the tablet is more complex. In this stage of writing in early dynastic Sumeria (2900-2300 B.C.E.) symbols come to stand for syllables, and the content of writing expands from merely economic records (lists of livestock, place names) so that by the middle of the third millennium we find prayers and the first epics. Symbols, and their sounds, could now be read for their phonetic values as well as for the object for which they stood, for example, as in the golf "tee" versus the letter "t". With this new flexibility, cuneiform persisted as a method of writing in the Near East long after Sumerian civilization ended about 1750 B.C.E. down to Canaanite writing about a thousand years later.

Now that we have followed the rediscovery of Sumeria and the invention of writing there, we must ask what these Sumerian writings mean to us today? Can we really find fragments of Sumerian thought impacting on our own religious traditions? Brethren, verily I suggest that we can, in fact, find Sumerian influences on the content of the Bible in many areas.

1. First, of course, must be a consideration of Creation myths. In Sumeria a primeval sea was believed to have come into existence at the time of the Creation. The air god Enlil, whom we met at Nippur, separated heaven and earth from this sea. Recall Genesis 1:7-8, "And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.

2. Where do we come from and how did God put us here? Genesis 2:7 reminds us that "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground." The Sumerians were firmly convinced that the Gods had fashioned man of dirt or clay also, but only to serve them - no free will here. Genesis 1:26 follows the formulaic Creation declarations: "And God said, Let us make man in our own image. . ." When God made such a declaration "it was so", i.e., it occurred. Over a thousand years earlier Sumerian philosophers developed the doctrine of the creative power of the Divine Word, and this became dogma throughout the Near East. All the creating deity needed to do was to utter the words to realize the deity's plan, and it was so. And does not the Gospel of St. John leap to mind, Chapter 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This concept of the creative power of the divine word could well have arisen from the analogy of the human king who achieved much of what he wanted by command, by no more than the words of his mouth.

3. Now that man, and woman, have been created, where do they live? Genesis 2:8 tells us, "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden. Mesopotamia is certainly east of the ancient Kingdom of Israel across the Syrian Desert, and this is where some scholars believe Eden was believed to exist. After all, the Tigris and the Euphrates are noted in Genesis 2:14 to be two of four rivers watering the Garden of Eden. There is also a Sumerian paradise called Dilmun, a land described in Sumerian poems and epics as "pure", "clean", "bright" a "land of the living" which knows neither sickness nor death nor the pain of childbirth. There was no knowledge of these in Eden either until consumption of the forbidden fruit. In Sumerian myth, the water god, Enki plucks and eats the forbidden plants, which were the favored veggies of the great mother goddess Ninhursag. For this she curses him with the curse of death. Unlike the wrath of the God of Israel, which demanded expulsion from the Garden of

Eden and immortality, Ninhursag later relents and agrees to heal Enki.

4. Why does God use one of Adam's ribs to fashion Eve? In the story of the Sumerian god Enki, cursed with death for eating forbidden plants in the paradise of Dilmun, one of the several organs of Enki which become diseased as he faces death is a rib. The Sumerian word for "rib" is ti (pronounced "tee") and among the special goddesses created to repair the organs of the dying Enki is one whose task is to heal his rib. The name of this goddess in Sumerian was Nin-ti, "the Lady of the rib". But the word ti in Sumerian also means "to make live". The meaning of Eve's name Chavah in Hebrew comes from the word chai, life and means "something of all living" or "she who makes live". In Sumerian literature the "Lady of the rib" came to be identified with the concept of the "Lady who makes live", a Sumerian play on words. The duality of this redoubtable lady may well have been carried over into the Biblical paradise story of Eve, the first mother, "she who makes live" and who was created from a rib.

5. Sir Leonard Woolley, whose seminal excavations we have followed, was certain he had found evidence of Noah's Flood at Ur, but the Sumerian city states were built on a flood plain and evidence of many great floods at different times have been unearthed. However there is a Flood myth in Sumerian literature. A divine council of gods has decided that mankind is evil and should be destroyed. Plans for a devouring flood are laid, but one helpful god, warns a pious god-fearing king named Ziusudra, the Sumerian counterpart of Noah. The God of Genesis 6:5-8 also decides, in anger, to destroy mankind, as do the Sumerian gods. The violent Sumerian flood rages on earth for seven days and seven nights, at which point the sun god, Utu, drives out the world. In the last part of the Sumerian myth Ziusudra is deified. Noah and his family are, of course not deified, but their salvation is the next thing to it, as they have been singled out as the only family on earth worthy of survival by God Almighty.

6. A Sumerian scholar has traced the derivation of the name of Noah's eldest son, Shem, to the name Shumer, Sumer itself. Since the Sumerian language was non-Semitic, one must believe that the Hebrews might have seen some of their cultural heritage as Sumerian.

7. In this same myth is another Biblical parallel, for we learn that to the antediluvian kings of the cities of Sumeria are attributed incredibly long lifespans, very reminiscent of the list of the eight generations between Adam and Noah. The most famous of these Biblical descendants, thanks to George Gershwin, is Methuselah (969 years), although his grandfather Jared clearly had longevity genes to pass on, with a lifespan of 962 years (Genesis 5:18-19). In the Sumerian king list, however, we find out what longevity really means, with eight kings averaging 31,500 years each.

8. "And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground" (Genesis 4:2). Their lethal dispute recalls what is called the "Dispute between Cattle and Grain" in the Sumerian wisdom literature, where the cattle goddess and the grain goddess argue over the achievements of each. Unlike Genesis 4:4 the Sumerian gods come down on the side of the protagonist for farming (Cain was the "tiller of the ground", Genesis 4:2), but the tension between the two agrarian professions was well delineated over a thousand years before the tragedy of Cain and Abel was written.

9. Many scholars believe that the famous Tower of Babel, Genesis 11:4-9, was an attempt to explain the existence of the ruined Mesopotamian temples with towers rising up to 60 meters in the air, built on layered platforms, that we have referred to as ziggurats. The best known of these is at Ur, built in 2150 B.C.E. as part of a temple to the moon goddess, Nanna. In the stark flatness of the Sumerian plain these were one of man's first attempts to reach symbolically to the heavens, to approach the gods more closely when they prayed. The concept of a golden era

of mankind when all spoke the same language, which was brought to an end by an irate deity, is also part of a Sumerian epic tale. The ancient Hebrews, and/or their Canaanite predecessors in the hill country of Israel, also built "high places" where cultis altars have been found. We also are reminded of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and even the Greek gods' residence on Mt. Olympus. The ziggurat symbolized man's physical attempts to approach their gods.

10. The Sumerian had his personal god, a sort of good angel or divine father of the family, to whom prayers were directed for his safety, good fortune, health, based on what the tablets suggest was a personal agreement between the deity and its Sumerian patron. This relationship reminds us of Abraham accepting the commands of his Deity, one of many he knew of at that time, as part of the covenant between the two, and hence with the Jewish people. The Sumerian relationship with his own personal god was never extended to involve the whole community, but here we have the first extra-Biblical reference to such a relationship.

11. Abraham, father of all Jews through the descendants of his union with Sarah, and all Moslems through Hagar, was born in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:28). Are the Patriarchs descended from Sumerians? This is certainly what the Tanakh, the Old Testament, tells us, but of course there are skeptics who trace Abraham's journey to Haran with Terah, his father, and point out that this site is almost 1000 miles from Ur in Turkey, just north of the Syrian border. Why and how would such a long and round about journey take place? There are other towns with similar names in northern Syria or southern Turkey, such as Urfa and Ura. However Ur of the Chaldees is specified, and it is known that the Chaldeans, were in south Mesopotamia after the thirteenth century B.C.E.

12. Another very specific Sumerian link appears in Ezekiel 8:14. In this chapter God shows Ezekiel

some of Israel's abominations, among which is a scene of pagan-worshiping "women weeping for Tammuz", a name corresponding to the Sumerian Dumuzi, a personification of the spark of life in the animal and vegetable kingdoms.

13. The very first poem to deal with theodicy, the problem of the presence of evil and suffering in a world created by immortal gods, comes to us not in the Book of Job but over a thousand years earlier from Sumeria. The stricken Sumerian Job cries, "My God the day shines bright over the land, but for me the day is black. . ." and later, as the anguish of the Sumerian Job is relieved, we learn that "his lamentations and wailing soothed the heart of his god."

In the case of suffering and adversity then, the Sumerian Job, like his Biblical counterpart, has no choice but to suffer and submit, to glorify his God and hope for the best.

14. The Sumerian wisdom literature contains prophesy, oracles, myths, psalms, proverbs, lamentations, and essays on morality and law, which are unexpectedly familiar. We have time to look at just a few of these.

In a tablet called "The Abomination of Ninurta", a Sumerian deity, we read:

"A judge who perverts justice,
A curse which falls on a righteous party,
A (first born) heir who drives the younger
(son) out of his patrimony -
These are the abominations of Ninurta"

Compare this with Proverbs, 6:16-19:

"Six things the Lord hates, seven are an
abomination unto him: A haughty bearing, a lying
tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

A mind that hatches evil plots, feet swift to run
to evil,
A false witness that speaks lies, and one who
incites others to quarrels."

Next, compare Ecclesiastes 4:12, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken", with the quote from the epic of Gilgamesh, "the three-ply rope will not (easily) be cut."

The Biblical laws and the law code of Hammurabi have significant relationships in content, terminology and even arrangement, according to Sumerian and Biblical scholars. The code of Hammurabi appears to be an Akkadian compilation of laws based on Sumerian prototypes. Both the reform code of Urukagina, King of Lagash in 2350 B.C.E. and the code of Ur-Nammu of about 2040 B.C.E. lay down rules of behavior and punishment for crimes which have parallels in the Tanakh as well. These were often placed in casuistic form, a conditional sentence of the form "if---then---". For example compare the Sumerian, "If a man proceeded by force and deflowered the virgin slave-woman of another man, then that man must pay five shekels of silver" to, Exodus 22:15, "If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must make her his wife—he must still weigh out silver in proportion to the bride price for virgins."

Divorce was relatively simple among the ancient Hebrews, with Hosea (2:4) indicating that the man simply had to say, "She is not my wife; neither am I her husband." This comes from an almost identical Sumerian formula.

In a Sumerian Farmer's Almanac, a tablet of agricultural instruction dating from the late third millennium, we already find the injunction to leave the gleanings of the harvest for the destitute, as in Deuteronomy 24:19.

In religious poetry we find a woman compared to a garden in the Song of Songs 4:12-15:

"A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
A fountain locked, a sealed up spring.
Your limbs are as an orchard of pomegranates,
and of all luscious fruits. . ."

A Sumerian poet tells us of his beloved that she is,

"A garden of delight, full of joy,
A watered pine, adorned with pine cones
A spring flower, a first fruit. . ."

In one of David's psalms we find, "The Lord has become King. Righteousness and justice are at the base of his throne." In the coronation hymn of King Ur-Nammu one finds, "He (the divine Enlil) has made the foundation of my throne for me."

This same king declares, "I did not divert the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty." In Deuteronomy 10:18 Moses reminds his people that the Lord "upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow."

15. Finally we have the parallel explanations of national catastrophe in terms of divine retribution, usually from the devastation caused by some warlike nation, most obviously Assyria (732 B.C.E.) and Babylon (586 B.C.E.) for the ancient Hebrews. To this theme we should compare a historiographic document called "The Curse of Agade" in which Enlil, the leading Sumerian deity, is infuriated by the blasphemy of a ruler of the city of Agade and brings down upon the city the barbarous Gutian tribe which destroyed almost all Sumer.

A few of you have been spotted looking at your chronometers, as I feared. Well, the whole sexagesimal numerical system, obviously based on the number six,

was invented in Sumeria five thousand years ago and underlies our divisions of the hour into sixty minutes, each containing sixty seconds, as well as the related degrees of longitude and latitude.

"Scorpions, snakes, Saddam," I mused over coffee at the faculty club of the University of Chicago. I'd be ready if we were allowed to go back to Iraq. Then I listened more carefully to what Mac Gibson was saying. "Mac, this is crazy," I almost shouted, displaying somewhat less decorum than the dining room of the faculty club demanded. "You mean Saddam Hussein will let you - us - come back to Nippur, but our own government won't?" He nodded in assent, "It's part of the State Department's cultural boycott, except that we, the Americans, are suffering from it." Ironically the Iraqi archeologists have invited all their colleagues back with the approval of Saddam Hussein. Workers from Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Belgium, and Austria are taking the bone-jarring, ten hour trip over the Syrian desert from Jordan to get to Baghdad. Nippur appears relatively unscathed although there has been some looting, and the University of Chicago housing on site was burned. Just one U.S. jet strafing run during the Gulf War put 400 holes in the ziggurat of Ur. Iraq has tried to protect its artifacts but there have been many illegal digs, and undocumented artifacts are appearing on the markets of London and Paris. Even greater damage to the field is occurring with the loss of scholars, archeologists and philologists who have had to put aside their Sumerian studies and move to other sites where they could pursue their careers. Once involved in another site it is often impossible to turn back. The Iraq Directorate of Antiquities and the Department of Archeology at the University of Baghdad will take years to reconstitute, and these provided the greatest resources, and many of the scholars, for Sumerian studies.

It is ironic that the greatest contributions in Sumerian studies have come from British and American archeologists who are not yet allowed to return to

these remarkable sites, dedicated men and women who truly deserve the praise, "Sumer cum laude."

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