

The Old Testament Stories and the Assyrian and Babylonian Archaeological Discoveries

Fred Aprim
Feb 12, 2022

Paul Emile Botta's, French consulate in Mosul, made his spectacular discovery of the huge stone bull-colossi (winged bull) at the palace of King Sargon II in Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad). He sent it down the Tigris by raft and then shipped it to Paris in 1844.

Henry Rawlinson was a scholar, a member of the British intelligence dept., a military advisor to the brother of Persia's Shah and an officer in the East India Company. He was appointed as British Resident in Baghdad replacing Colonel Tayler. After the discoveries by the French in Dur Sharrukin, Rawlinson was anxious that some British excavation should be made as well. He pushed the idea to Henry Austen Layard. Layard was able to convince Sir Stratford Canning, British Ambassador in Istanbul (Constantinople) and the patron of antiquarianism, to permit him to travel to Mosul. Ambassador Canning accepted to support him, but dictated some conditions upon Layard, including that:

- a) he must be informed by all the operations and objects found in details, and
- b) he keep clear of political and religious issues and as much as possible of missionaries and native chiefs within tribes.

Layard discoveries in Nineveh were magnificent. The Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian writing and literature that included the Assyrian Royal inscriptions, letters, laws, myths, epics, astrological reports, oracles, etc. glorified archeology.

But, the impact of the amazing archaeological finds in Assyria and Babylonia was biblical. The impact of religion has been adverse on most pious people. A friend of Layard wrote to him once stating: "If you can ... attach a Biblical importance to your discoveries you will come the complete dodge over this world of fools and dreamers: you can get some religious fellow to inspire you with the necessary cant, for which I won't think a bit the worse of you."¹

Up to the middle of the 19th Century, the students of ancient history had little or no knowledge of the Assyrians except what the Old Testament and the Greek historians could give him. These Old Testament presented Nineveh for example as the capital of a cruel and powerful nation used to punish Israel for her idolatry and disobedience.² What were the consequences of the Biblical narratives on glorious Assyria and Babylonia?

Nineveh was damned and cursed and Babylon was stamped as the adulteress.
Then Bible's inspired Byron to write his poem:
The Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.

Were would the world be without Mesopotamian inventions? Instead of glorifying Assyria and Babylonia the world today glorified Jerusalem. One could ask, why Jerusalem? How did Jerusalem contribute to the world's science? Sadly, even today after all the new discoveries, ancient

1 Saggs, H.W.F. "The Might That Was Assyria". Sidgwick & Jackson, London. p. 306

2 E. Raymond Capt, Missing Links Discovered in Assyrian Tablets, Artisan Sales, 1985.

Mesopotamian stories are used less to bolster fundamentalism, more to provide comparative material for Biblical and early Greek traditions or wider studies in the cultural development of mankind.³

The fundamental assumption that the evolution of religious ideas went on in an orderly sequence in Israel, an assumption used to date the documents, is rudely shaken by the reflection that many ideas may have been adopted from Mesopotamia and that the order of these development was not a synchronous order. Much of that is older than Abraham.⁴ In his vision, Ezekiel saw God enter on a living chariot formed of four winged creatures with the face of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, and on the heads of these cherubim he saw a crystal surface supporting a sapphire throne on which God was seated in the likeness of a man, bathed in the most resplendent radiance.⁵ There is a striking resemblance of Ezekiel's vision in the presentation of god that is found on a very ancient Babylonian cylinder-seal that reflects all the pieces Ezekiel is describing.⁶ In addition, the concept of God Yahveh was not born among the Israelites. There are 3 little clay tablets in the British Museum that were made during the time of Hammurabi and his father Sin-muballit that contain three names which are of the very greatest significance from the point of view of the history of religion. They are the words: Yahveh is God. It was this Yahveh that constituted the primordial patrimony of those Canaanite tribes that settled in Babylonia from which centuries afterward the 12 tribes of Israel sprang.⁷

We have all to take pains, or pain. Either we must learn, research, investigate, deduce, conclude, or, if we will not take such pains, we are liable at any time to suffer pain from finding some cherished belief perish, without our being able to defend it, or even give it decent obsequies.⁸

The Babylonian Akkadian language was the official language of diplomatic intercourse from the Euphrates to the Nile. This Babylonian influence in literature exercised on the ancient world from the year 2200 until 1400 BC. When the 12 tribes of Israel invaded the land of Canaan, they entered a country that was under the domain of the Babylonian civilization. Industry, commerce and law the customs and the science of Babylon were standards of the land. Knowing this, we comprehend at once why the systems of measures, weights, and coins used in the Old Testament, and the external form of their laws (if a man do this or that, he will be punished after this manner or that) are Babylonian throughout. So also the sacerdotal customs and methods of offering sacrifices were profoundly influenced by Babylonian models; and it is a remarkable fact that Israelitic traditions are altogether at variance in their accounts of the origin of the Sabbath,-- as will be rendered apparent by the comparison of Exodus xx. 11 and Deuteronomy v. 15. But now the matter is clearer.

The Babylonians also had their Sabbath day (Shabattu), and a calendar of feasts and sacrifices has been unearthed according to which the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days of every month were set apart as days on which no work should be done, on which the king should not change his robes, nor mount his chariot, nor offer sacrifices, nor render legal decisions, nor eat of boiled or roasted meats, on which not even a physician should lay hands on the sick.⁹

3 Stephanie Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

4 Delitzsch, Friedrich, *Babel and Bible; Two lectures Delivered Before the Members of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft in the Presence of the German Emperor*. 1903. Introduction by C. H. W. Johns. Williams and Norgate.

5 The Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 1.

6 Delitzsch, Friedrich, *Babel and Bible, A Lecture on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion*. Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1902. p. 64-65.

7 Ibid, p. 61-62

8 C. H. W. Johns, *Queens' College Cambridge*. April 6, 1903.

9 Delitzsch, Friedrich, *Babel and Bible; Two lectures Delivered Before the Members of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft in the Presence of the German Emperor*. 1903.

Thus, we are indebted to the ancient nations on the Tigris and Euphrates for the plenitude of blessings that flows from our day of Sabbath or Sunday rest.

We then come to the story of the Babylonian Flood inscribed on the famous Flood tablet written 2000 years before Christ and found at Ashurbanipal Library in Nineveh. The Babylonians divided their history into two great periods: that before the Flood and that after the Flood. Babylonia was the true sense of the word the land of deluge. Like all alluvial lowlands bordering on great streams that flow into the sea, it was exposed to floods of the direst and most unique characters.

Xisuthros, the Babylonian Noah, receives from the god of the watery deep the command to build a ship of certain dimensions, to coat it thoroughly with pitch, and to put on board of it his entire family together with the seed of all living things. The ship is entered, its doors are closed, it is cast adrift upon the devastating waves, and is finally stranded upon a mountain bearing the name of Nizir. Then follows the famous passage: "On the seventh day I took forth a dove and released it; the dove flew hither and thither, but finding no resting place returned." We then read that a swallow was sent forth; it also found no resting place and returned. Finally a raven was sent forth, which, noticing that the waters had subsided, did not return. Xisuthros then abandoned his ship and offers sacrifices on the summit of the mountain.

This entire story, precisely as it is written on the Flood Tablet of the Ashurbanipal Library afterwards traveled to Canaan, but owing to the totally different conformation of the land in Canaan, it was forgotten that the sea had played the principle role, and we accordingly find in the Bible two distinct versions of the Flood, which are not only absolutely impossible from the point of view of natural science, but are also at diametrical variance with each other, the one giving as the duration of the Flood a period of 365 days and the other a period of 40+(3X7), or 61 days. We owe the discovery that two fundamentally different versions of the story of the Flood were welded together into one in the Bible. Furthermore, the 10 Babylonian kings who reigned before the Flood have also been accepted in the Bible as the 10 antediluvian patriarchs, and the agreement is perfect in all details.

In addition to the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, the 11th tablet of which contains the story of the Flood, we possess another beautiful Babylonian poem, the Epic of the Creation. According to the epic, down in the gloomy chaos, surged and raged the primeval waters, the name of which was Tiamat. When the gods declared their intention of forming an orderly cosmos out of the chaos, Tiamat arose and made ready for combat to the death. Monsters of all descriptions she spawned from her mighty depths, specially gigantic venom-blown serpents; and in their company she set forth bellowing and snorting to her conflict with the gods. The Celestials quaked with terror when they saw their direful foe. The god Marduk alone, the god of light, of dawn, and of the vernal sun, came forward to do battle with her, his sole stipulation being that sovereign rank among the gods should be accorded him. Here, god Marduk fastened a gigantic net to the east and the south, to the north and the west, lest any part of Tiamat should escape. He then mounted in shining armor and radiant with majesty his celestial chariot, which was drawn by four spirited steeds, the admired cynosure of the eyes of all the surrounding gods. Straightway he made for the dragon and her dread embattled train, sending sending forth his challenge for the contest. Then Tiamat shrieked loudly and fiercely, till her deep most foundation, but before she could shut her lips Marduk made enter into her belly the evil hurricane. He seized his lance and pierced her heart. He cast her carcass down and placed himself upon it, whilst her helpers were taken captive and placed in closed confinement. Then Marduk cut Tiamat in twain, as cleanly as one would sever a fish, and of the one half he made the roof of heaven and of the other he made the earth; and the heaven he inlaid with the moon, and the sun, and the stars, and the earth he covered with plants and animals,

until finally the first man and the first woman, made of mingled clay and celestial blood, came forth from the hand of their creator.^{10 11}

Since Marduk was the city-god of Babel (Babylon), it is quite intelligible that this story found widespread diffusion in Canaan. Read Psalms lxxiv. 13 et seq.; lxxxix. 10, Job ix. 13, Isaiah li. 9, Job xxvi. 12 where it becomes so obvious that the poets and prophets of the Old Testament attributed to Yehveh the heroic deeds of Marduk.

Lastly, but not least, it was the importance of the Assyrian and Babylonian methods of reckoning time, which were based on accurate astronomical observations of solar eclipses, etc., enabled us to determine the chronology of the events narrated in the Book of Kings, – a circumstance that was doubly gratifying owing to the discovery of Robertson Smith and Wellhausen that the chronology of the Old Testament had been forcibly made to conform to a system of sacred numbers, which counted 480 years from the end of the Exile back to the founding of the temple of Solomon, and again 480 years backward from that date to the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt.¹²

Yet another example involves the birth story of the Akkadian King Sargon I and that of Moses of the Old Testament.

We read the following from archaeological finds in connection to King Sargon I:

“Sargon, strong king, king of Agade [Akkad], am I. My mother was a high priestess, my father I do not know. My paternal kin inhabit the mountain region. My city (of birth) is Azupiranu, which lies on the bank of the Euphrates. My mother, a high priestess, conceived me, in secret she bore me. She placed me in a reed basket, with bitumen she caulked my hatch. She abandoned me to the river from which I could not escape. The river carried me along: to Aqqi, the water drawer, it brought me. Aqqi, the water drawer, when immersing his bucket lifted me up. Aqqi, the water drawer, raised me as his adopted son. Aqqi, the water drawer, set me to his garden work. During my garden work, Ishtar loved me (so that) 55 years I ruled as king.”

Does the story of the birth of Moses recorded in Exodus of the Old Testament borrow from that of King Sargon I of Akkad? We know that King Sargon I was known between the 24th - 23rd Centuries B.C. Moses of the Old Testament is known to have existed between the 14th - 13th Centuries B.C. earlier. Thus, King Sargon I existed about 1000 years before Moses. Case closed.

If the theologians are in the future to deal successfully with attacks on cherished positions, they must learn, and make provision for the teaching of Assyriology. They must include it in their curriculum.¹³ It is very clear that the foundation of the Old Testament and the Hebrew antiquity is linked from beginning to end with Babylonia and Assyria.¹⁴ Since that is true, shouldn't Assyrians honor their ancient beliefs? Many Assyrians find solace in modern religions, but such comfort must not be at the expense of the Assyrian identity. Why do Assyrians pray daily and strictly for the prosperity, safety and advancement of Israel when, today, Assyria needs those prayers desperately as their existence on their ancestral lands stands at risk of being lost forever?

10 Delitzsch, Friedrich, Babel and Bible, A Lecture on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion. Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1902. p. 38-42

11 Heidel, Alexander, The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels, The University of Chicago Press, 1949.

12 Read also, Alexander Heidel, The Babylonian Genesis, The University of Chicago Press, 1942, 1951

13 C. H. W. Johns, Queens' College Cambridge. April 6, 1903

14 Delitzsch, Friedrich, Babel and Bible, A Lecture on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion. Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1902. p. 3

