

The Bible and the Assyrians It Kept their Memory Alive

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Ancient Assyrians rediscovered

It was in 1843 when the French Consular agent at Mosul, Paul Emile Botta, began his diggings in Khorsabad--about 12 miles north of Mosul--and uncovered the ruins of the magnificent palace of Sargon II, King of Assyria (722-705 B.C.). That same year the British excavations, under Austin Henry Layard, discovered the majestic palace of Shalmaneser I (ca. 884-860 B.C.) with its winged bulls, followed later by that of Ashurbanipal (668-ca. 626 B.C.), with his library's vast collection of cuneiform tablets.¹ These and other splendid collections would soon adorn the museums of London, Paris, and Berlin and, most important of all, a lost chapter in the history of civilization would be rediscovered.

Before too long, in one of the greatest triumphs of human ingenuity, the cuneiform writing, impressed on clay tablets or chiseled in stone, was deciphered. Assyrian texts, in the Akkadian language, were soon read with the same certainty as Hebrew and Aramaic. In 1860, the great corpus *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* was published by Sir Edward Rawlinson with the help of Edwin Norris and George Smith. (Earlier, about 1835, Rawlinson had been able to decipher the Persian portion of the trilingual inscription of Behistun.)

What especially fascinated the Christian West by these archaeological excavations was that a few of these Assyrian monuments, starting with the reign of King Shalmaneser III, dealt at some length with the history of the same events narrated in the Bible. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah from Jehu onward were mentioned in the annals of the Assyrian kings. One of the two most dramatic finds was the "Black Obelisk," excavated by Layard at Nimrud in 1846, now one of the most popular treasures of the British Museum in London. The obelisk, a four sided, 6-1/2 foot-high stela carved with five registers of relief sculptures, displays 190 lines of text. There King Shalmaneser describes 31 of his military campaigns, including his battles in Asia Minor, Media, Babylonia,

¹ The palace library's 22,000 clay tablets covered subjects in history, medicine, astronomy, astrology and recorded information on the movement of planets and signs of the zodiac. For the fascinating story of these early excavations and their translation, see C. Wade Meade, *Road to Babylon, Development of U.S. Assyriology* (Leiden, 1974). After World War II the excavations at Nimrud were re-opened (1949) by Max Mallowan on behalf of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. The team worked there until 1963, under the direction of David Oates. Since 1963 several teams have excavated at Nimrud, including an expedition from the British Museum in 1989. For a summary article, see John Curtis, "Nimrud: Ancient and Modern," *The Illustrated London News*, 280 (Summer 1992), 75-77.

and the Persian Gulf. One of the registers portrays the Israelite King Jehu, or one of his emissaries, paying tribute to Shalmaneser, a rare reference to a Biblical king in a contemporary extra-biblical source.²

The Bible-reading public was well familiar with these Assyrian names and events; they had been part of British and American cultural consciousness, wrote Assyriologist H.W.F. Saggs.³ To the Jews and Western Christians of the nineteenth century, the most important thing about the newly-discovered tablets and monuments was that they had proven the Hebrew Bible to be right. The general public in England viewed the Assyrian sources as a weapon to be used primarily against Biblical “Higher Criticism” as then applied to the Old Testament.⁴

The Bible kept memory of Assyrians alive.

For at least 1,200 years before the Assyrian excavations of the nineteenth

² For biblical references to Jehu, see 2K 9:14, 10:4. An article in a recent issue of the journal *Biblical Archaeology Review* entitled “Did King Jehu Kill His Own Family?” attempts to reconcile the Biblical text with that of the Black Obelisk. The Assyriologist author remarks that modern Biblical scholarship generally concludes that Assyrian information is reliable within certain parameters. The Hebrew Bible, writes Tammi Schneider, “does not refute the Assyrian information, it simply does not mention it.” 21 (January-February 1995), 26-33, 80-82.

³ H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London, 1984), pp.290, 305-6, and his booklet, published by the University of Wales Press in 1969 entitled *Assyriology and the Study of the Old Testament*, an inaugural lecture delivered at University College, Cardiff.

⁴ D.J. Wiseman, *The Expansion of Assyrian Studies* (London, 1962), p. 11. If some cuneiform tablets corroborated parts of the historical books of the Bible, others seemed to challenge their originality. In the 1870s George Smith stirred England with the announcement of his discovery of a tablet containing a parallel to the legend of the deluge in Genesis. Other tablets he deciphered contained, he claimed, accounts of the origin of the world, the creation of animals and man, and the fall of man from a sinless state. These reports fueled Biblical criticism adding to the secular challenges to revealed religion that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discoveries in geology, anthropology and biology had already produced. The Assyrian documents, it was argued, now proved that the ancient Hebrews, like other peoples, had simply added to what they had borrowed from much older neighboring cultures; that it was Christian bias which placed Israel/Palestine at center stage. See George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (New York, 1876), p. 17. See also Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia, Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 7 seq. Consult also Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, published in 1859 when the excitement of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian excavations was reaching its peak. For a fascinating account of these challenges, read Naomi Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders, The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (London, 1987); see also Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament since the Reformation* (New York, 1955) pp. 91 seq.; S.J. Barrows, “Assyriology and the Bible,” *Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine*, 12 (1879), seq. 46, and George Sarton, *History of Science* (Baltimore, 1927-1949), vol. 1, p. 246.

century, the *only common folk* who had some knowledge of the ancient Assyrians--their history, empire, names of some of their kings, etc.--were the Jews and, long after them, the Christians--those people who read the Bible or listened to its stories and histories being read or narrated. For over 2000 years before the Assyrian cuneiform tablets were discovered, the Jewish people had been reading or hearing about the Assyrians. While Assyrian documents of stone and clay lay buried under the dust and debris of over two milleniums--written in a language forgotten long before they were deciphered during the 1850s--some of the books of the Old Testament during those same long centuries were carefully copied on parchment, leather or papyrus, and reverently transmitted by hand from one generation to the next, their stories read or listened to throughout those ages; the Book of Isaiah, a major source on the ancient Assyrians, was one of those texts transmitted.⁵

There was nothing "Assyrian" left to be read and remembered. As pointed out in the previous issue of this journal,⁶ the language of the cuneiform documents, Akkadian, had ceased to exist as carrier of ancient Assyrian culture even before the fall of the Assyrian empire. Aramaic had displaced Akkadian even as the language of everyday speech within Assyria itself. The time came, writes Georges Roux, when the Akkadian inscriptions on clay were meaningless to the great majority of the population in Mesopotamia.⁷

Because of the centrality of the subject in Jewish history, the Bible dwelt at some length on Assyrian and Babylonian kings, religion, geography and history. The destruction of the kingdom of Israel by Assyria, and of Judah by Babylon, had resulted in a national trauma for the Jews. Jewish history, fatally entangled

⁵ The text of the Book of Isaiah, translated into Greek in the third century B.C., was "preserved complete" in many Syriac manuscripts from the fifth century A.D. on. See *Isaiah*, Part III, fascicle 1 of *The Old Testament According to the Peshitta Version*, ed. by the Peshitta Institute of Leiden, prepared by Sebastian Brock (Leiden 1987), pp. viii, x, xi, xiii, xx, xxii. See also "Text History and Text Division in Peshitta Isaiah," in P.B. Dirksen and N.J. Mulder, eds., *The Peshitta: Its Early Text and History*, (Leiden, 1988). The books of the Pshitta Old Testament were translated at different times by Jews for Aramaic-speaking Jews of Mesopotamia; they were adopted as their own by the early Aramaic-speaking Christians, many of them formerly Jews. The origins of the various components of the Pshitta Old Testament, writes Sebastian Brock, "remain extremely obscure" (1992), p. 225). See also Han J.W. Drijvers, "Early Syriac Christianity: Some Recent Publications," in *Vigilae Christianae*, 50, no.2 (1996), 174.

⁶ See the author's article "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms?" in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, xi, no. 2 (1997), pp. 37-43; the article is a commentary on the article by Richard N. Frye, "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms," reproduced in the same issue of JAAS, pp.30-36.

⁷ See his *Ancient Iraq* (1992 edition), pp.411-412, 419-420, 423-424; H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might that Was Assyria*, pp. 125 seq.; Toynbee, *A Study of History* (1954), viii, pp. 440-442.

with that of the imperial powers of Mesopotamia, was mourned and reflected upon in the various prophetic works; it was always remembered, keeping at the same time, the memory of ancient Assyria alive. The historical books of the Hebrew Bible recorded the danger to Israel that emanated from Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. The imperial expansion of the two Mesopotamian empires westward toward Palestine and Egypt had naturally attracted the attention of the prophets. Assyrian power and cultural influence were at their height in the time of the prophet Isaiah, the prophet who showed the keenest interest in the affairs of the Assyrians.⁸

It is important to bear in mind that the Christians had been reading or hearing about the Assyrians for over 1,200 years before the cuneiform documents were excavated and deciphered. The cultural and religious life of the Christians, in both the East and West, was reshaped by the prayers, proverbs, lamentations, and poetry of the Old Testament. Its stories, histories, and legends became favorite folktales, the source of their folklore and legends for centuries to come. "The history of the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah," wrote Saggs, "was a living thing, as generally known as British history."⁹ The Hebrew Bible that the Christians inherited gave them not only a sacred book but also a vision of the past and of its peoples; it provided them with a new and distinct identity.¹⁰ In time, the only past that these Christians knew came from the Old Testament--what Oxford scholar Fergus Millar calls "the historical inheritance of the Bible."¹¹

Modern Assyrian writers, eager to establish a link between themselves and the ancient Assyrian, conclude that such a link is confirmed whenever they come across a reference to the name Assyrians during the early Christian period. They often refer to Tatian's statement that he was "born in the land of the Assyrians"--

⁸ The various chapters of the book of Isaiah deal with a number of crises and alliances in the region, including negotiations in 727 between Assyria and Egypt, the Assyrian suppression of a Babylonian rebellion in 731-729, and the Assyrian King Sargon's new anti-Egyptian policy. Consult John R. Bartlett, *The Bible, Faith and Evidence, a critical enquiry into the nature of biblical history* (London, 1990), pp. 61, 103,-6, 115. See also Is. 5:26-30.

⁹ Loc. cit.

¹⁰ *Rome and the East 31BC-AD337* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 227, 487-88.

¹¹ Ibid.

usually mistranslated into “I am an Assyrian”; or they cite the *Acts of Mar Qardagh* which traces the martyr’s ancestry to ancient Assyrian kings.¹²

It should come as no surprise that “in the lands of the Assyrians,” especially well known to the readers of the Bible, one encounters an occasional legend that traces the ancestry of an outstanding local cleric or king to an ancient royalty--history is replete with such legends. Michael G. Morony speaks of villagers of Aramean descent who, assimilated with the Persians, claimed to be of Royal Persian descent -- “from Kisra, son of Qubadh.”¹³ This writer has heard Persians begging on the streets of Kermanshah, loudly claiming that they were the lineal descendants of Imam Husayn--grandson of the Prophet Muhammad--who lived over 1,300 years before them. The story of Mar Qardagh, himself a semi-legendary figure, is such a myth--it traces the ancestry of his father to the family of Nimrud and that of his mother to the family of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), a geneology that goes back over a thousand years. But the *Acts* also inform us that young Qardagh, before his conversion to Christianity, was a Zoroastrian, his father bearing the Persian name of Gushnavi. When Qardagh became a Christian he was serving Shapur II as a military governor. After his conversion he, like other martyrs, performed miracles; when faced with Satan in human form, we read, he cursed him and made the sign of the cross, turning Satan into a snake.¹⁴

¹² Tatian not only did not claim to be an Assyrian, but scholars point out that he was not even born in lands to the east of the Euphrates. Tatian (Greek Tatianos), writes Fergus Millar, no more came from geographical Assyria than did that other ‘Assyrian’ with a Latin name, Lucian (Greek Lucianos) of Samosata. Millar explains simply that the terms Assyria and Assyrians were common terms then for geographical Syria and its inhabitants. See his *Rome and the East*, pp. 227, 454-455, 460. Consult also *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (Oxford 1992), under “Tatian,” and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge 1977), p.197n.163.

¹³ See his *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), p. 173.

¹⁴ See Mar Aprim, *The Nestorian Fathers*. See also *Hagarism*, p. 190 n.71, where, in accordance with their methodology, authors Crone and Cook accept Qardagh’s descendance from Assyrian kings only as a believed fact by his contemporaries. In a letter to the author, dated June 11, 1997, Patricia Crone wrote that she and Cook “do not argue that the Nestorians of pre-Islamic Iraq saw themselves as Assyrians or that this is what they called themselves.” In their prefatory remarks Crone and Cook, who warn the non-specialist not to expect a ‘guided tour’ but a pioneering expedition through some very rough country, also anticipate “the raised eyebrows” of the specialists. For reviews of *Hagarism* by a few specialists, see Oleg Grabar, in *Speculum*, 53 (October 1978), pp. 795-799; Michael G. Morony, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 41, no. 2, (1982), 159; Joseph Van Ess, “The Making of Islam,” in *Times Literary Supplement* (September 8, 1978), pp.997-998. For references to *Hagarism* by modern Assyrian authors, misreading the book, see Odisho Bet Ashur (pen-name), “The Continuity of Assyrian History,” *Nineveh*, v.17, no.3(1994),pp.16-17,notes19,20,24; Edward Y. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)*(Wiesbaden 1988), pp. 10,15-16.

Jesus and the Assyrians

While the Assyrians are associated in the Old Testament with war and violence, they are also remembered there as a special people. One of the books of the Old Testament, albeit a brief one, is wholly devoted to the Assyrians: the story of Jonah, one of the great favorites of the Bible. God bids Jonah to journey on a special mission to the capital of the Assyrians, Nineveh. Through the mouth of Jonah, God warned the Assyrians that should they not give up their wicked ways, “in forty days Nineveh will be overthrown.” The Ninevites “took to heart this warning from God; they declared a public fast, and high and low alike put on sackcloth.” God then “relented and did not inflict on them the punishment he had threatened.”¹⁵

The book of Jonah seems to have captured the imagination of Christian readers, artists, and poets throughout the ages. During the Christian period, over 700 years after the fall of Nineveh and of the Assyrian empire, the story of Jonah became one of the favorites of the church fathers, its theme being the divine pardon for repentant sinners. God’s universal love and mercy extend to all men, even to the Assyrians. Jesus, a Jew well familiar with the Hebrew Bible, referred to the ancient story; he used the Assyrians of Nineveh as a model for the Jews of his day, whom he reproached for their unwillingness to repent. “The men of Nineveh,” Jesus told his listeners, “will appear in court when this generation [of Jews] is on trial, and ensure its condemnation, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and what is here is greater than Jonah.”¹⁶

Because of these New Testament references, the story of Jonah and its universalist message are referred to throughout the patristic literature. To Christians everywhere, the Assyrians of Nineveh became a model during the Lenten penance. The Roman Catholics read the third chapter of Jonah on Wednesday of the first week of Lent. In the Greek Orthodox liturgy, the entire book of Jonah is read during Lent, while Anglicans and Lutherans read portions of it. During the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, the Jews read the book of Jonah because of its emphasis on God’s forgiveness after genuine repentance.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Jonah 1:17; 3:4-10. Biblical scholars are of the opinion that the book of Jonah may have originated in the 5th century B.C., long after the fall of Nineveh. The venomous oracles of Nahum, who probably lived and preached about the time of Nineveh’s fall, depict the Assyrian capital as a harlot and relate its punishment to the sins of Assyrians. See Nahum, 3:4-7. Besides the book of Jonah, there are almost 120 references to the Assyrians, in thirteen other books of the Bible.

¹⁶ Matthew 12:40-41. See also Luke 11:29-30: “For just as Jonah was a sign for the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be a sign for the present age.” For interpretations of the Jonah story in Western art and literature, see James Linburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville, 1993).

¹⁷ See “Jonah” in Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion (1997).

The Eastern Christians, whether Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Jacobites, or Nestorians, observe a pre-Lenten fast remembering the message of Jonah and what Jesus said of the Ninevites. Locally, both Christians and Jews commemorated the event: Christians built a church where Jonah “had preached.” The Jews of Mosul had the synagogue of Obadiah which, according to tradition, “Jonah built.”¹⁸ Emhardt and Lamsa in the 1920s, and modern Assyrian writers after them, have misinterpreted the Rogation of the Ninevites as a unique fast among the Nestorians, observed as a thanksgiving “for the salvation of their forefathers,” entirely missing the theological and historical significance of the Biblical story of Jonah in both Jewish and Christian tradition.¹⁹

To recapitulate, for over 1200 years Biblical names such as Ashur, Assyrians, Chaldean, Nineveh, Sennacherib, and others, intertwined as they were with the history of ancient Israel and Judah, were well known to all who held the Bible holy. But these were *Biblical names, of peoples and persons known only because the Bible mentioned them; they were not the “remembered” names of ancestors.* That is why Fiey could write that in the works of the Eastern Christian writers we find all the gamut of references to these ancients, employing indifferently the words Syrians, Athurians, Chaldeans, and Babylonians, but they never identified with them. “I have made indices of my *Christian Assyria*,” he emphasized, “and have had to align some 50 pages of proper names of people; there is not a single writer who has an ‘Assyrian’ name.”²⁰

¹⁸ Influenced by both Jewish and Christian traditions, Muslims believe that the prophet Jonah is buried in Mosul, where a mosque is dedicated to him.

¹⁹ William C. Emhardt and George M. Lamsa, *The Oldest Christian People* (New York, 1926; reprinted by AMS Press in 1970), p. 22. According to the authors, “Abraham was Assyrian,” and Aramaic “is not only the language which Christ spoke, but the language also, we are told, which God spoke to Adam.”

²⁰ J.-M Fiey, “‘Assyriens’ ou ‘Araméens’?”, *L’Orient syrien*, 10 (1965), pp. 146-148, 156. Cf. J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 366-367 n. 12, where he writes that “The Name ‘Assyrian’ was remembered from ancient times,” citing S.P. Brock’s reference to “*The Syriac Acts of Qardag*.” For more on the *Acts*, see above.