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A. H. Sayce

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An Assyrian Grammar

Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) became interested in Middle Eastern languages and scripts while still a teenager. Old Persian and Akkadian cuneiform had recently been deciphered, and at the same time Indo-European studies had emerged as a lively field, with publications by scholars including Grimm, Bopp and Schleicher. Assyrian offered opportunities to historians of the Semitic languages similar to those provided by Avestan to Indo-Europeanists, and Sayce's grammar, published in 1872, was aimed at such an audience. Only transliteration was used, as cuneiform would be both expensive and redundant for philological purposes. In his preface, Sayce acknowledges the recent work of Oppert, Hincks, and Smith (whose translation of part of the epic tale of Gilgamesh attracted considerable publicity later that year). Sayce considers the place of Assyrian in the Semitic language family and its development over time, and reviews the archaeological evidence and scholarly literature, before presenting its phonology, morphology, syntax and prosody.

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AN

ASSYRIAN GRAMMAR,

FOR COMPARATIVE PURPOSES.

BY

A. H. SAYCE, M.A.,

FELLOW AND TUTOR OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD;
MEMBER OF THE GERMAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY,
AND OF THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL ARCHÆOLOGY.



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PREFACE.

THE distinction between the material and formal parts of a language is nowhere better illustrated than in the case of one which is being gradually recovered from its native records. A dictionary, in the true sense of the word, is impossible: we can have only a vocabulary which is being continually enlarged and corrected. But although the power of speech in producing new words is unlimited, the number of forms under which these words find expression is practically closely defined. A comparatively small number of written works will afford sufficient material for the outlines of a grammar: more extensive means of comparison serve merely for correction and greater detail. Until, however, we know all the actual forms possessed by a language at the various periods of its literary career, we cannot be said to have more than a general acquaintance even with its formative part; we can deal only with its coarser features, and these would be probably much modified by a more intimate knowledge of the niceties and finer texture of the grammar. And while this is of the highest importance for an accurate

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interpretation of the language itself, it is of still higher importance for the purposes of comparative philology.

Assyrian, it is now recognized, is of the greatest value for Semitic philology. And the time has come when it is possible to give a grammar of the language which may bear some comparison with those of Hebrew or Ethiopic. Of course our acquaintance with the new study is constantly growing; but it is growing rather upon the side of the lexicon than of the grammar. In spite of the prejudice which naturally existed in the minds of Semitic scholars against an upstart science which threatened to dwarf the old objects of study, and the results of which were at once startling and revolutionary, while the decipherers were not always distinguished by scholarship or caution, the method of interpretation has at last won its way to general acknowledgment, so that even Ewald and Renan venture to use the statements of professed Assyriologists. Indeed, rational scepticism is no longer possible for any one who will take the trouble seriously to investigate the subject. The history of the decipherment need not be told over again. No scholar now questions the decipherment of the Persian inscriptions; and when this had once been accomplished, the translation of the Assyrian transcripts with their numerous proper names, and with the aid of the immense stores of comparison which the discoveries at Nineveh and elsewhere afforded, could only be a matter of time. The language dis-

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closed was found to be Semitic in grammar and vocabulary, and the sporadic phenomena which at first offended Semitic scholars have turned out either to be errors on the part of the decipherers, or to admit of sufficient explanation. The contents of the inscriptions, again, have thoroughly verified the method of interpretation. Not only are they consistent, but the names and facts are such as are required by historical criticism. The greatest stumbling-block in the way of the sceptics has proved to be one of the most striking verifications of the method. It was urged that the existence of polyphones—that is, characters with more than one value—was sufficient to condemn the whole theory. Polyphones, however, actually exist in Japanese for the same reason that they existed in Assyrian;¹ and we find that the Assyrians, in their use of polyphones, observed certain general laws, so that the transliteration of a word (unless it be a native proper name) is very rarely doubtful. Still these polyphones were felt by the Assyrians themselves to be the weak point in their system of writing, and Assur-bani-pal accordingly caused syllabaries to be drawn up in which the several

¹ See Léon de Rosny, "Archives Paléographiques," 2^{me} Livraison, pp. 90–100. This is referred to by Mahaffy, "Prolegomena to Ancient History," p. 207, whose Fourth Essay on the History of Cuneiform Decipherment is very good, and suited to the popular understanding. The want of acquaintance with Assyrian on the part of the author, however, has led to a few mistakes, most of which I have pointed out in the *Academy*, December 15th, 1871, p. 564.

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signs have their different phonetic values attached. Now the various powers which the decipherers assigned to the same character are found assigned to it in the native syllabaries. Thus the character which by itself denotes a lion is variously used as *ur*, *liq*, *tas*; and a syllabary gives us the same sign explained *u-ri*, *li+ig*, and *ta-as*. The syllabaries also explain the origin of these polyphones. The cuneiform characters were primarily hieroglyphics (like the Chinese), and were invented by a Turanian population of Babylonia. These in their several dialects¹ assigned various names to the object denoted by the same hieroglyphic, and when the latter came to be used as a phonetic character, the various names became so many phonetic sounds. Every character, however, continued to be employed as an ideograph as well as phonetically; consequently when the Semitic Assyrians adopted the written system of their Turanian predecessors, they translated the Accadian word into their own language, and in some cases employed this (stripped of its grammatical inflexion) as a new phonetic value.

The tablets also give other evidence in favour of our system of interpretation. Some of them contain lists of Assyrian synonymes, and each synonyme is often a well-known Semitic word. Thus *bi-is-ru* (בִּישְׁר) is equated with *se-ru* (שֶׁר), and *al-pu* (אַלְפּוּ) with *su-u-ru* (שׁוּר).

¹ Berosus ap. Syncelli Chron. p. 28 :—ἐν δὲ τῇ Βαβυλωνίᾳ πολὺ πλῆθος ἀνθρώπων γενέσθαι ἀλλοεθνῶν κατοικησάντων τὴν Χαλδαίαν.

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A last and conclusive corroboration of the method is afforded by bilingual inscriptions in Phœnician and Assyrian, on private contract-tablets and duck-weights. The *maneh* of the Phœnician is *ma-na* in Assyrian; the proper names in the two legends agree, as well as the chief facts of a “sale,” and of the chattels sold, which are stated in both.¹

The following pages will show to how great an extent I am indebted to Dr. Oppert's Grammar (second edition). He possesses the great merit of having first made Assyrian available to other Semitic students by formulating the general grammatical principles of the language. And this merit will outweigh all the disadvantages of arbitrary conclusions upon insufficient evidence, which have resulted not only in minor errors, but in three radical misconceptions—of an emphatic state, of the want of a Perfect (or Permansive) and

¹ Thus *tadāni Arb'-il-khīrat*, “the giving up of A.” appears in the Phœnician legend as דנת ארב'לחר; *pan Mannuci-Arb'-il*, “in the presence of M.,” as למננארבל. Harkavy (*Révue Israélite*, 1870, p. 20) says:—“A présent, grâce au zèle infatigable et à la persévérance du petit corps d'assyriologues, cette défiance et cette réserve diminuent et disparaissent peu à peu. Le vote solennel de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, qui a décerné à notre célèbre correligionnaire M. Oppert le prix de la plus grande découverte dans le domaine de la philologie,—l'explication des légendes bilingues, araméennes et assyriennes, au Musée britannique, par Sir H. Rawlinson,—la trouvaille, à l'isthme de Suez, d'une inscription quadrilingue, malheureusement endommagée, se sont succédé coup sur coup, et ont contribué à attirer aux études cunéiformes la confiance de tous, sauf naturellement de ceux qui ferment les yeux à la lumière.”

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Passives, and in a confusion between the Present Kal and the Pael—which make his book a dangerous one for beginners. I have entered into the arena of controversy wherever I have thought it needful; but this, I hope, does not prevent me from bearing testimony to Dr. Oppert's scholarship, research, and acuteness. His grammar lacks completeness, it is true, as well as accuracy; but this is due to the progressive nature of Assyriology; and the same plea is needed for my own pages. The most defective portion of his work is the chapter on syntax, and this might have been remedied.

To Dr. Hincks my obligations are even greater. It will be seen that in most of the points of dispute between him and Dr. Oppert, independent investigation has made me follow the Irish scholar. The student of Assyrian may well deplore his loss.

I have also made considerable use of Mr. Norris's "Assyrian Dictionary" (the third volume of which is about to appear),¹ and of Mr. G. Smith's "Annals of Assur-bani-pal." Such books are greatly wanted to lighten the labour and facilitate the research of other students. I can only regret that Mr. Norris has not yet got beyond his second volume, and that Mr. Smith's promised "Annals of Sennacherib and Essarhaddon," upon the same plan as his former work, are still un-

¹ The volume has been published since the above was written. It brings the list of nouns as far as the end of N. The next volume will begin the verbs.

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published. It is with the same regret that I am obliged to finish my labours without having had the advantage of consulting the two Papers by Dr. Schrader upon the Assyrian language, which are expected by readers of the “*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*.”

Before concluding, I would express my thanks to Mr. G. Smith, for his courtesy and kindness in enabling me to consult the original texts.

The cuneiform has been throughout transliterated into Roman characters, partly because the original type would be at once expensive and cumbrous, and partly to facilitate the comparative studies of Semitic scholars who are disinclined to commit to memory the complicated Assyrian syllabary. I have avoided confusing my text with references, so far as was possible; and have only broken the rule in points where dispute might arise.

A. H. SAYCE.

QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD,

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ABBREVIATIONS USED.

W. A. I. = Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia, Vols. I., II., III.
(the fourth volume containing translations of Accadian hymns, is expected to be published before the end of the year).

S. H. A. = Smith's History of Assur-bani-pal, 1871.

[In the transcription of Æthiopic words, *shewa* is denoted by *ě* and *y*.]

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