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978-1-108-07901-3 - The Chaldean Account of Genesis: Containing the Description of the Creation, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Desruction of Sodom, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod

George Smith

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE GENESIS LEGENDS.

Cosmogony of Berosus.—Discovery of Cuneiform Inscriptions.—Historical texts.—Babylonian origin of Assyrian literature.—Mythological tablets.—Discovery of Deluge texts.—Mutilated condition of tablets.—Lecture on Deluge tablets.—“Daily Telegraph” offer.—Expedition to Assyria.—Fragments of Creation tablets.—Solar Myth.—Second journey to Assyria.—Tower of Babel.—Clay records.—List of texts.—Legend of Oannes.—List of early legends and their authors.

IT has long been known from the fragments of the Chaldean historian, Berosus, preserved in the works of various later writers, that the Babylonians were acquainted with traditions referring to the Creation, the period before the Flood, the Deluge, and other matters of which we read in the book of Genesis.

Berosus, however, who recorded these events, is stated by Eusebius and Tatian to have been a contemporary of Alexander the Great, and to have lived into the reign of Antiochus Soter. His date lies, therefore, between B.C. 330 and 260. As this was

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three hundred years after the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, the great antiquity of these traditions could not be proved with certainty, much less their independence of the accounts which we have in Genesis.

On the discovery and decipherment of the cuneiform inscriptions, Oriental scholars hoped that copies of the Babylonian histories and traditions would one day be found, and that earlier and more satisfactory evidence as to these primitive histories than had previously been accessible, would thus be gained.

In the mound of Kouyunjik, opposite the town of Mosul, Mr. Layard discovered part of the Royal Assyrian library, and further collections, also forming part of this library, have been subsequently found by Mr. H. Rassam, Mr. Loftus, and Mr. George Smith. Sir Henry Rawlinson, who made the preliminary examination of Mr. Layard's treasures, and was the first to recognize their value, estimated the number of fragments brought from this Library at over twenty thousand.

The attention of decipherers was in the first instance drawn to the later historical inscriptions, particularly to those of the Assyrian kings contemporary with the Hebrew monarchy; and in this department of research a very large number of texts of great importance rewarded the toil of Assyrian scholars. Inscriptions of Tiglath Pileser, Shalmaneser, Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, and numerous other ancient sovereigns, bearing directly on the Bible, and throwing new light upon

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parts of ancient history previously obscure, for a long time occupied almost exclusively the attention of students, and overshadowed any work in other divisions of Assyrian literature.

Although it was known that Assyria borrowed its civilization and written characters from Babylonia, yet, as the Assyrian nation was throughout the greater part of its independent existence hostile to the southern and older kingdom, it could not be guessed beforehand that the peculiar national traditions of Babylonia would have been transported to Assyria.

Under these circumstances, for some years after the cuneiform inscriptions were first deciphered, nothing was looked for or discovered bearing upon the events described in Genesis; but, as new texts were brought into notice, it became evident that the Assyrians borrowed their literature largely from Babylonian sources, and it appeared likely that search among the fragments of Assyrian inscriptions would yield traces at least of some of these ancient Babylonian legends.

Attention was early drawn to this fact by Sir Henry Rawlinson, who pointed out several coincidences between the geography of Babylonia and the account of Eden in Genesis, and suggested the great probability that the accounts in Genesis had a Babylonian origin.

While preparing the fourth volume of Cuneiform Inscriptions for the trustees of the British Museum, Mr. George Smith noticed references to the Creation

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in a tablet numbered K 63 in the Museum collection, as well as allusions in other tablets to similar legends; he therefore searched through a series of tablets he had previously classed as "Mythological," in order to find, if possible, some of these legends. This series of mythological tablets was one of six into which he had divided the Museum collection of cuneiform inscriptions for convenience of working. By placing all the tablets and fragments of the same class together, he had been able to complete several texts, to find easily any subject required, and to get, whenever it was needed, a general idea of the contents of the collection.

The mythological division contained all the tablets which related to Assyrian mythology, and all the legends in which the gods took a leading part, together with prayers and similar subjects.

A steady search among these fragments soon brought to light half of a curious tablet which had evidently contained originally six columns of text; two of these (the third and fourth) were still nearly perfect; two others (the second and fifth) were imperfect, about half being lost, while the remaining columns (the first and sixth) were entirely gone. A statement in the third column that "the ship" had rested on the mountain of Nizir, followed by an account of the sending forth of a dove, and its finding no resting-place and returning, convinced Mr. Smith that he had discovered a portion at least of the Chaldean account of the Deluge. He then proceeded to read through the document, and found it was in the form of a

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speech from the hero of the Deluge to a person whose name might be transcribed as Izdubar. The same name had already been read on the fragment of another tablet numbered K 231, which turned out to belong to the same series of tablets as the newly-found account of the Deluge. Mr. Smith was thus encouraged to make a search for other portions of the series.

The search was a long and heavy work, for there were thousands of fragments to be examined, and these were so small, and contained so little of the text, that it was extremely difficult to ascertain their meaning. The search, however, proved successful. A fragment of another copy of the Deluge was found containing a second account of the sending forth of the birds. Several other portions of the same tablet were gradually collected and fitted one after another into their places until the greater part of the second column was filled up. Portions of a third copy were next discovered, which, when joined together, completed a considerable part of the first and sixth columns. Mr. Smith now translated the text he had so laboriously pieced together, and published his discovery to the world at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, December 3rd, 1872. By this time he had made out that the series of Izdubar legends, as we may term them, contained twelve tablets or books. Of this series the tablet describing the Deluge was the eleventh and K 231 the sixth.

The interest excited by Mr. Smith's discovery was naturally very great. Immediately after the meeting

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of the Society of Biblical Archæology, Mr. E. Arnold, in the name of the proprietors of the "Daily Telegraph," asked the fortunate discoverer to reopen, at their cost, the excavations in Assyria in the hope of finding the missing portions of the story of the Deluge. The trustees of the British Museum granted Mr. Smith leave of absence for the purpose, and he accordingly started for the ruins of Nineveh, and there engaged in researches, the history of which is related in his work entitled "Assyrian Discoveries." Hardly had he begun his excavations on the site of the palace of Assur-bani-pal at Kouyunjik, when he came across a new fragment of the Chaldean account of the Deluge belonging to the first column of the tablet, containing the command to build and fill the ark, and nearly filling up the most considerable blank in the story. Some other fragments, found afterwards, still further completed this tablet, which was already the most perfect one in the Izdubar series. The trench in which the fragment in question was discovered must have passed very near the part of the Library in which the Assyrians kept a series of inscriptions relating to the early history of the world. The same trench soon afterwards yielded a fragment of the sixth tablet, describing the destruction of the bull of Istar by Izdubar and Heabani, an incident often depicted on early Babylonian gems. The next discovery was a fragment which referred to the creation of the world; it formed the upper corner of a tablet, and gave a fragmentary account of the creation of animals. Two

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other portions of this legend were found further on in the trench, one of which contained a mutilated account of the war between the gods and evil spirits.

In the following year Mr. Smith was again in Assyria, in charge of an expedition sent out by the trustees of the British Museum, and succeeded in bringing home fresh fragments relating to the early traditions and legends of Babylonia. Among these is the fragment which seems to describe the building of the Tower of Babel. Then followed the disastrous expedition of 1875-6, in the course of which Mr. Smith fell a victim to over-fatigue and his zeal for Assyrian research. The subsequent explorations of Mr. Hormuzd Rassam, though rich in other results, have added very little to our knowledge of the old Babylonian legends; and it seems probable that the missing portions of the tablets which contained them have irretrievably perished. We must wait for further light upon the subject until the cities and libraries of Babylonia have been excavated. After all, the early Babylonian legends, of which copies were made for the Assyrian Library at Kouyunjik, were but a selected few; the Assyrians took little interest in that part of Babylonian literature which had no connection with their own history or beliefs, and we have reason to congratulate ourselves that among the traditions they borrowed from their older and more civilized neighbours were so many which bear upon the earlier chapters of Genesis.

The fragmentary condition of the legends we

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possess, however, is much to be lamented. The chief difficulties with which the Assyrian scholar has to contend, when dealing with them, are due to the mutilated state of the tablets. If the inscriptions were perfect, their translation would be a comparatively easy matter. As it is, so skilled a decipherer as Mr. Smith himself was deceived by the defective character of the text into imagining that a hymn addressed to the Creator was the Babylonian version of the Fall of Man.

The fragmentary and scattered character of these legends is explained by the nature of the material of which the tablets are composed, and the changes undergone by them since they were written. They consist of fine clay and were inscribed with cuneiform characters while in a soft state; they were then baked in a furnace until hard, and afterwards transferred to the library. The library seems to have been in an upper storey of the palace, and after the destruction of Nineveh, the fall of the building in which it was placed naturally caused the tablets contained in it to be broken to pieces. Many of them were cracked and scorched by the heat of the burning ruins. Subsequently the ruins were turned over in search of treasure, and the tablets still further broken; while, to complete their destruction, the rain, soaking through the ground every spring, saturates them with water containing chemicals, and these chemicals form crystals in every available crack. The growth of the crystals further splits

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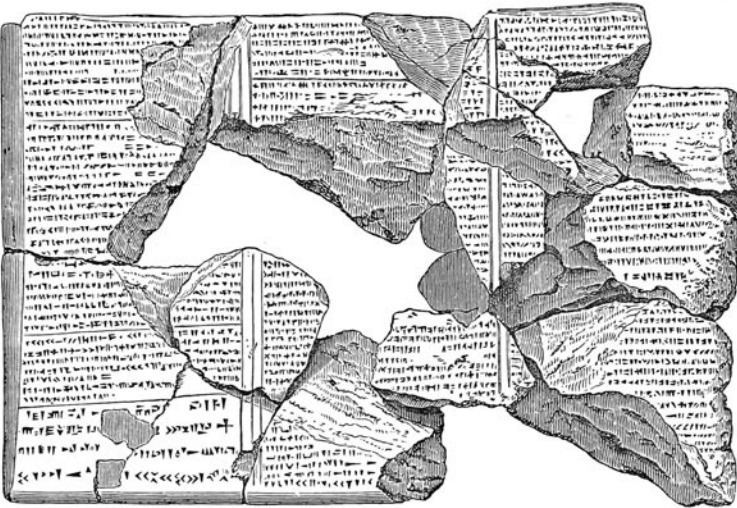
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the tablets, some of them being literally shivered to pieces.

Some idea of the mutilated condition of the Assyrian tablets, and of the work required by the restoration of a single text, will be gained from the engrav-



REVERSE OF INSCRIBED TERRA COTTA TABLET CONTAINING THE ACCOUNT OF THE DELUGE, SHOWING THE VARIOUS FRAGMENTS OF WHICH IT WAS COMPOSED AT THE TIME OF MR. SMITH'S TRANSLATION.

ing above, which exhibits the appearance of one of the Deluge tablets at the time Mr. Smith published his translation of it. In this tablet there are no less than sixteen fragments.

The clay records of the Assyrians are by these means so broken up, that a single text is in some cases divided into over one hundred fragments; and it is only by collecting and joining these together that the old texts can be restored. Many of the

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fragmentary tablets which have been more than twenty years in the British Museum have been added to considerably by the fragments recently brought to England by Mr. Smith and Mr. Rassam; and yet there probably remain from ten to twenty thousand fragments still buried in the ruins, without the recovery of which it is impossible to complete these valuable Assyrian inscriptions.

It is, nevertheless, out of these imperfect materials that we have at present to piece together our knowledge of the early legends of Babylonia and Assyria. Most, if not all, of them, are, it must be remembered, of Chaldean or Babylonian origin, the Assyrians having either slavishly copied Babylonian originals or simply put into a new form the story they had borrowed from their southern neighbours. Such as they are, however, they are presented to the reader as faithfully translated as our existing knowledge of the Assyrian language allows; it is for him to draw his inferences and make his comparisons. The greater number of them, as we shall see, mount back to a date earlier than the second millennium before the Christian era, and even where the actual text belongs to a later period, the legend which it embodies claims a similar antiquity. We may classify them in the following order:—

1. An account of the Creation of the world in six days, parallel to that in the first chapter of Genesis, and probably in its present form not older than the 7th century B.C.