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978-1-108-07906-8 - Assyria: From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Nineveh

George Smith

Excerpt

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# HISTORY OF ASSYRIA.

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## CHAPTER I.

### COUNTRY AND PEOPLE.

THE extent of Assyria varied from time to time according to the power of the various monarchs, in general increasing from age to age, and reaching its greatest limit about B.C. 650. The original seat of the Assyrians when they migrated from Babylonia<sup>1</sup>, was a tract on the river Tigris between latitudes 35° and 37°, a space about 100 miles from north to south, and about seventy miles from east to west. During the best period of the empire, Assyria Proper extended from latitude 35° to 38°, and longitude 40° to 45°, embracing the country on the east of the Tigris to the Median mountains, reaching on the south to below the junction of the rivers Tigris and Zab, on the west extending to the river Khabour and on the north to the mountains of Jebel Djudi. During the seventh century B.C., the subject districts included Lydia, Cyprus, and Egypt on the west, Elam and part of Media on the east, Babylonia and part of Arabia on the south, but in these distant regions the limits of the empire were

<sup>1</sup> Genesis x. 11.

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uncertain, and the hold upon the provinces only slight.

Assyria Proper is in general flat or with undulating plains, rising only here and there into mountain ranges.

The principal rivers in Assyria, all of which have



Tigris near Nineveh.

a general tendency to run from North to South, are—the Tigris, which passes right through the country and forms the main artery of the district; this river is about 200 yards wide in Assyria, but in the spring during the flood season is very much greater.

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The Eastern Khabour, a tributary entering the Tigris on the East, in Northern Assyria; the Great or Upper Zab which joins the Tigris on the same side below Calah<sup>1</sup> or Nimroud; and the Lower or Lesser Zab, which also joins that river below Assur the old capital of Assyria, are the principal eastern streams.

On the west most of the rivers are small, there being only one of great size, the Western Khabour, formed from the junction of several streams, rising in Mount Masius and flowing southward to its junction with the Euphrates.

Over a considerable part of Assyria the soil is very fertile, and the ground is well adapted for cultivation; there is excellent clay for brickmaking and pottery, and good building stone; while the numerous streams give good positions for towns and villages.

The principal cities of Assyria are the following: Nineveh, for a long time the capital of the country, situated on the eastern bank of the Tigris opposite the modern town of Mosul; Nineveh, which is often mentioned in the Bible, was a city about eight miles round, well fortified and containing a large population.

Kalah<sup>2</sup> or Calah, a large city about twenty miles south of Nineveh, now represented by the mounds of Nimroud Reson a city laying between Calah and Nineveh<sup>3</sup>, supposed to be represented by the modern Selamiyeh.

Assur, probably the Rehobothair of Genesis<sup>4</sup>, the old capital of the country, represented by the ruins of Kalah Shergat, about sixty miles below Mosul.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis x. 11.    <sup>2</sup> Ibid.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid. x. 12.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid. x. 11.

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Arbela, modern Ervil, near the eastern mountains, a great centre of Assyrian worship.

The Assyrians who inhabited this region were a race of what we call the Semitic stock, and in character and language allied to the Jews, Syrians, and Arabs. This fact, discovered through the reading of the Assyrian inscriptions, confirms the Scripture genealogies in Genesis x. 21-31, and 1 Chronicles i. 17-23, where the Assyrians, as Shemites, are given as related to the progenitors of the Syrians (Aram), the Hebrews (Eber), and the Arabs (Joktan), all in the Bible called sons of Shem.

The Assyrians had a strength of limb and character, a vigour of mind and body, greater than the other tribes of Semitic descent, and eminently calculated to ensure their ascendancy over their weaker neighbours.

The religion of the Assyrians was derived from Babylonia, and very similar to that of the latter country. Both countries worshipped the same deities, but the Assyrians made some changes in the system to give a national character to their pantheon. The principal change made by the Assyrians was the introduction of the worship of Assur, whom they placed at the head of their religion.

Assur, the great god of the Assyrians, was the presiding deity of the city of Assur (Kalah Shergat), and when the Babylonian colonists made that city their capital, its god rose to the position of head of the pantheon. Assur was worshipped as the great god, king of the gods, and father of the gods, and as the Assyrians conceived of him as superior to the other

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deities they would not introduce him into the genealogy of the gods, but called him "The god who created



Assyrian Mythological Figure.

himself." Assur had a famous temple at the city of

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Assur called Sadi-matati or “the mountain of the world.” This temple was a great place of Assyrian worship, through the whole period of their history.

Among the other principal gods of the Assyrians were—Nebo, whose worship was imported from Borsippa near Babylon. Nebo had a consort named Urmitu; they were the divinities of writing and learning, and are sometimes said to have instructed the Assyrian king like a father and mother. Nebo had a temple at Calah, and another in conjunction with Merodach at Nineveh.

Sin, the moon god, was another deity, and he is generally associated with Shamas or Samas, the sun god. The kings, when under divine protection, are said to have the moon god on the right hand, and the sun god on the left. There was a celebrated temple of Sin at the city of Harran, and one of Shamas at Nineveh.

Merodach, generally worshipped under the name of Bel, is often a companion deity to Nebo. His wife Zirrat-banit is the Succoth Benoth whose worship was set up by the Babylonians transported to Samaria by the king of Assyria<sup>1</sup>.

Ishtar or Venus was a favourite object of worship, and had temples at Nineveh and Arbela; in time the Assyrians began to consider the deity worshipped in each of these temples as distinct from the other, and the goddess of Arbela was invested with the character of goddess of war and battle.

Nergal and Ninip, gods of hunting and war; Vul the storm god; Anu king of heaven; and Hea the lord of

<sup>1</sup> See 2 Kings xvii. 30.

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hell, together with a multitude of minor deities, helped to fill up the Assyrian pantheon.

The government of Assyria was monarchical, and the power of the king absolute. He was head of the army, supreme judge, and viceroy or high-priest of Assur; but in practice his rule was tempered by the advice of counsellors, while each department of the state was directed by competent officers, and there was a regular code of laws for the administration of the country.

The commander in chief of the army was the Tartan<sup>1</sup>, and there was also a high officer or general named the rabshakeh<sup>2</sup>. The judges were called dayan; they decided cases in the gate of the temple or palace; and there was an appeal from them to the governor or king. The governors of the various towns were called sanat or sanuti, they were required to collect and send up the taxes to the capital, and to furnish every year the required contingent for the army. The priesthood formed a privileged class; they lived on the revenues of the temples and the offerings of worshippers, while they were directly interested in war, as a portion of the spoil was dedicated to the temples<sup>3</sup>. The priests used enchantments for removing diseases and driving away evil spirits, and divination and astrology were practised before undertaking any important work.

Various feasts were appointed, but the most remarkable were the "sabbaths," which were in use in Assyria as well as among the Jews. The Assyrian months were lunar, and these were divided into four parts

<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings xviii. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See Numbers xxxi. for a similar custom.

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corresponding with the four quarters of the moon, the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days, being the sabbaths. On these sabbath days, extra work and even missions of mercy were forbidden, certain foods were not to be eaten, and the monarch himself was not to ride in his chariot. The enactments were similar in character to those of the Jewish Code.

The laws of the Assyrians were arranged and written, and in many respects resembled those of the Israelites and other Oriental nations; a father was supreme in his household, he could expel a child and cut him off from his property, and a similar power was possessed by the wife. If the son or daughter disowned his father he was sold as a slave, and if he disowned his mother he was outlawed. A husband had the power of divorcing his wife on payment of half a maneh of silver, and adultery in the woman was punished with drowning.

Slavery was in force among the Assyrians, and whole families were sometimes sold together. There was property in land which in many instances remained in the same family. The Assyrians had a system of leases, so that the land sold returned to its original owners<sup>1</sup>, and provisions were made in the leases for alternate crops, in order that the ground might not be impoverished.

The soil of Assyria was generally fertile, and abundant crops of grain were raised; fruit growing and cultivation of flowers were also attended to with success. It was customary for the husbandman to hire

<sup>1</sup> See Leviticus xxv.



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a field and give as payment one third of the produce of the ground.

The Assyrian army was composed of contingents sent up from the various provincial governors, each government furnishing about 4000 men. These troops met at the capital or at the point of departure for the annual expedition to the number of from 100,000 to 200,000 men, and were composed of swordsmen, spearmen, archers, cavalry, charioteers, &c.

The officers were called "saki," and superior officers "rab-saki" (rabshakeh), another rank of commander was called tugal, and the commander in chief "tartan."

Various trades were practised in Assyria, including weaving, which reached a high state of perfection, dyeing, manufacture of iron, copper, and bronze goods, sculpture and building, ornamental work in stone, metal, wood, &c.

There was a large carrying trade through Assyria, much of which was in the hands of Tyrian merchants<sup>1</sup>, and in consideration of the assistance of the king of Tyre, Esarhaddon granted to him a considerable portion of the coast of Palestine. This trade was carried as far as India on the East, and Spain on the West; it passed through Babylon, Nineveh, Carchemesh, and Tyre.

The arts best known from our Assyrian remains are—painting, which was much used in wall decoration; the Assyrian colours being brilliant and well-harmonized, and the effects produced good; sculpture, which was also extensively practised, and reached a

<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel xxvii.

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high state of perfection ; carving in ivory and precious stones ; embossing ; and ornamental pottery.

Among the pleasures of the people we must give to hunting the first place ; the chase of the lion, buffalo, gazelle, wild ass, hare, and other animals, formed a chief amusement of the people, and royal hunts were organized on an extensive scale. Shows and pageants were arranged for the people, and always after a successful war the spoil and ghastly trophies of the victory were paraded through the capital.

The most remarkable feature of Assyrian civilization was their literature and libraries of clay tablets, and it is to these that we owe most of our present knowledge of this great people. The principal Assyrian library was at the capital of Nineveh, and the monarch who did most for Assyrian literature was Assur-bani-pal, the Sardanapulus of the Greeks ; to whose time the majority of the tablets belong. As a specimen of Assyrian writing, and at the same time an example of the superstitions of the country, I have translated one of the tablets from Assur-bani-pal's library. This tablet is on the charms to expel evil curses and spells. It is supposed in it that a man was under a curse, and Merodach, one of the gods, seeing him, went to the god Hea his father and enquired how to cure him. Hea, the god of Wisdom, in answer related the ceremonies and incantations, for effecting his recovery, and these are recorded in the tablet for the benefit of the faithful in after times.