Introduction

IMPERIALISM AND THE "DISOVERY OF THE ORIENT"

Interpretation of the Bible has continued, without interruption, for more than two millennia, yet our understanding of its origins and teachings has dramatically expanded in recent times thanks to remarkable discoveries. Over the past century, methods of archeological research have reached impressive levels of sophistication, and excavation teams working at scores of sites throughout the Middle East continue to unearth all kinds of evidence for the communities that produced the Bible – their ways of life, their mechanisms for coping with crises, and the historical events that shaped their destinies.

Western interest in Eastern antiquity originally had very little to do with the Bible and a lot to do with imperial politics. In 1798, a French general named Napoleon Bonaparte and his "Army of the Orient" set sail for Egypt. With the goal of annexing the country and establishing a French presence in the region, Napoleon brought with him 167 scientists and scholars of all sorts and stripes. They mapped and sketched all they saw. They also collected and deported many objects back to Europe, and these artifacts of ancient empires had strategic, symbolic significance for Napoleon when he, in 1804, donned the mantle of "Emperor of the French."

The most important object deported from Egypt was an otherwise unremarkable stele inscribed with a decree from Ptolemy V in 196 BCE; today we know it as the "Rosetta Stone." The imperial powers of Europe fought over rights to this text because it held a key that unlocked ancient

secrets: The inscription is rendered not only in Greek, but also in Demotic script and Egyptian hieroglyphs, and therefore scholars could use this "trilingual" to decipher the language of the dynasties that had ruled Egypt for millennia. Thanks to the Rosetta Stone, and the painstaking efforts of philologists, we can read the many writings that line the walls of Egyptian temples and palaces, as well as the precious caches of ancient papyri preserved by the arid North African climate.

Napoleon's voyages throughout the Middle East ignited Europe's imagination for years to come. Among the many colorful personalities of the following generation was an ambitious Englishman named Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894). Born in Paris, Layard grew up in Italy and began his travels in West Asia by the age of twenty-two. His original intention was to travel overland to Sri Lanka, but he eventually ended up in Mosul near the ancient site of Kuyunjik. Others had already been excavating at this site before his arrival, and as their finds were beginning to attract public attention, Layard was eager to stake a claim and make a name for himself. Beginning in 1845, he dug at both this site and nearby Nimrud, and within just two years, he managed to make astonishing progress. Not least he was able to identity Kuyunjik as the city of Nineveh, the capital of the formidable Assyrian Empire that conquered the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE.

When Layard returned to England a couple years later, he promptly published a two-volume, highly romanticized, account of his voyages and discoveries (*Nineveh and Its Remains*, 1848–1849), which made him a household name. As one of the finest exemplars of English travel literature, the work begins:

> A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldea. With these names are linked great nations and great cities dimly shadowed forth in history; mighty ruins, in the midst of deserts, defying, by their very desolation and lack of definite form, the description of the traveler; the remnants of mighty races still roving over the land; the fulfilling and fulfillment of prophecies; the plains to which the Jew and the Gentile alike look as the cradle of their race. After a journey in Syria, the thoughts naturally turn eastward; and without treading on the remains of Nineveh and Babylon our pilgrimage is incomplete.

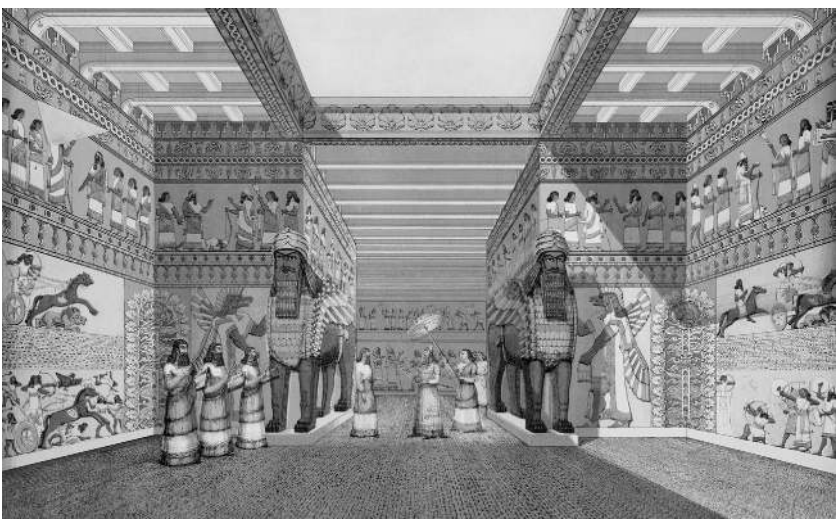

Figure 0.1 Artist's impression of a hall in an Assyrian palace from *The Monuments of Nineveh by Sir Austen Henry Layard*, 1853.

With a pronounced penchant for self-promotion, and thanks to his own superb sketches of the finds that he published in a spectacular folio volume (*The Monuments of Nineveh – From Drawings Made on the Spot*, 1849), Layard was able to return to the region as an attaché of the British embassy. His excavations at Nineveh during this second excursion laid bare the remains of monumental palaces whose gates were guarded by massive sphinxes and whose walls were lined with stunning reliefs featuring a wide spectrum of scenes (Figure 0.1). Some depict lion hunting, others portray siege and deportation, but all celebrate the might of the great Assyrian Empire.

Layard shipped off the most impressive reliefs and statues to London. The British Museum displayed these exiled artifacts not only for the personal enjoyment of the thousands who visited the exhibits each week, but also for the political message they communicated to France and other colonialist competitors: Queen Victoria and the British Empire had discovered, and now possessed, the remains of what her historians billed as "the world's first empire." The sensational tidings took England by storm, and many eagerly awaited the daily reports, along with the drawings of the phenomenal finds, that appeared in newspapers (Figure 0.2).


184 THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS. [Feb. 28, 1852.

RECEPTION OF NINEVEH SCULPTURES AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

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PARIS FASHIONS FOR MARCH.

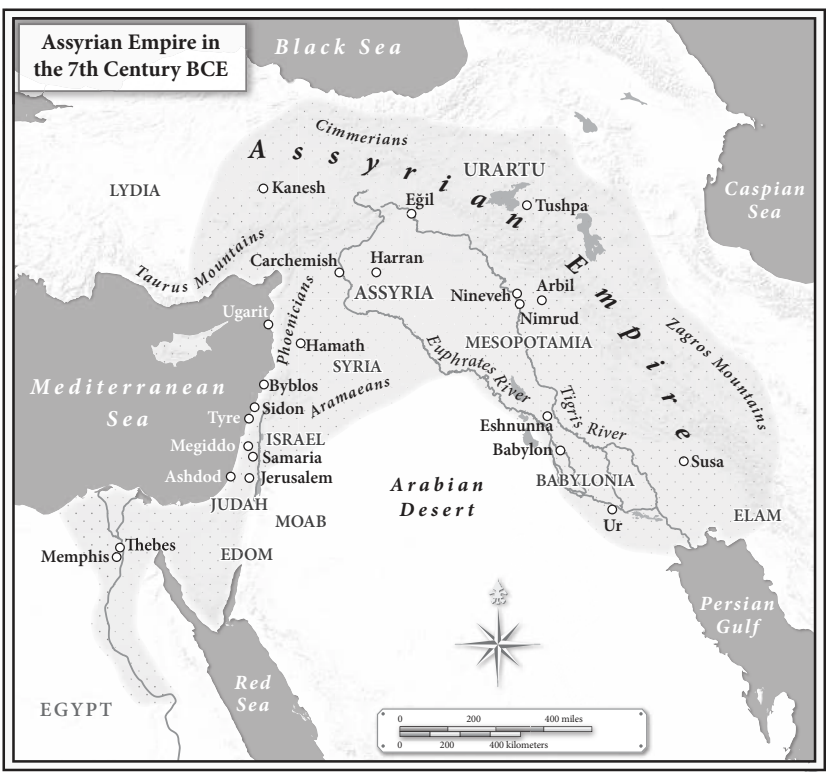
Figure 0.2 Engraving from *Illustrated London News*, Feb. 28, 1852, showing a recent arrival from ancient Nineveh at the British Museum.

IMPERIAL ARCHIVES

In the long run, what turned out to be much more important than these magnificent monuments were piles of clay tablets that Layard's supervisor, Toma Shishman, unearthed in 1849. While Layard was away on business for a few days, Shishman and his crew continued excavating the palace of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) – the same ruler who besieged Jerusalem in a dramatic episode that figures prominently in the biblical narrative. As they proceeded through subterraneous passageways, they entered chambers whose floors were covered, over a foot-deep, with clay tablets, which bore neatly inscribed cuneiform writing.[1]

Layard's expedition had landed in what was once the state archive of the Assyrian Empire (Map 0.1). Although they had no doubt of the discovery's significance, little could they imagine just how important it was.

[1] Cuneiform refers to the "wedge-shaped" scripts in which many ancient West Asian texts were written. See Chapter 4 for more on their complexity and their relationship to Egyptian "hieroglyphs."



Map 0.1 The Assyrian Empire, *c.*700 BCE.
Map created by Gerry Krieg (kriegmapping.com).

Eager to capitalize on his fame, Layard returned to England soon thereafter to pursue a career as a politician. However, his lifelong friend – an oft-forgotten Assyrian-Christian named Hormuzd Rassam, who grew up just across the river in Mosul – would continue to excavate at Nineveh. Several years later, Rassam and his team found another archive, this one from Sennacherib's grandson Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE).

Both archives came to be known as "The Royal Library of Ashurbanipal." Their 30,000 volumes, which are still being studied today, bear testimony to the erudition that Assyrian kings fostered by collecting both ancient writings and brilliant scholars to copy and study them. These collections have thoroughly reshaped our understanding of the world's oldest civilizations. Not only do they provide historical evidence for influential kingdoms that existed for millennia before Sennacherib

and Ashurbanipal, but they also bear witness to a long tradition of innovative research in astronomy, medicine, and mathematics.[2]

This ancient "library" was not open to the public. Only a select few from the court were granted access, and they were required to swear allegiance to the throne. Closely related to its limited access is the cause of its destruction and rediscovery. As invading armies razed the capital to the ground in 612 BCE, they torched the palaces, and the blazing heat from the fires fossilized the clay tablets, baking them hard as bricks. Had it not been for these conflagrations, the texts would have disintegrated in the rubble long ago, and we would never have been able to recover them in modern times.

PARALLELS AND PARTICULARITY

Over the course of the nineteenth century, archeologists continued to discover other archives, while philologists decoded the demanding Assyrian and Babylonian languages in which their texts were written. As they began to make sense of their contents, they noticed many striking parallels to biblical writings.

The most famous of these discoveries was made in 1872 by a young man named George Smith. Born to a working-class family in Victorian England, Smith had a limited education and worked as an engraver. However, the finds from Nineveh were in the headlines when he was a teenager, and they captivated his imagination. Every spare moment he would spend reading and learning in the British Museum, and within just a few years, he became an expert – a truly incredible feat considering the complexity of the languages. Unsurprisingly, he caught the attention of a leading Assyriologist and eventually landed a position in the museum as a senior assistant.

While working through tablets that Rassam had found in the Ashurbanipal Library, Smith started noticing astonishing points of

[2] According to modern myth, many of the most important works from antiquity were lost when the Library of Alexandria was destroyed in a tragic conflagration. However, the library suffered from centuries of decline and any fires that the library endured were minimal. In contrast to that myth, the historic destruction of the Ashurbanipal Library had a real and profound impact on the future, with its extraordinary erudition lost to posterity.

overlap between one text and the biblical flood story. The parallels were indeed so stunning that in his excitement, he reportedly ran around the room, shouting in delight and shedding his clothes. A couple weeks later he brought his findings before the Society of Biblical Archaeology in the presence of the British prime minister.

The text turned out to be part of the now well-known Epic of Gilgamesh, which in its eleventh tablet tells of a cosmic flood that bears an uncanny resemblance to the biblical deluge in Genesis. The public interest in Smith's discovery was immense, and soon thereafter he left for Nineveh with funding from the *Daily Telegraph*. His mission was impossible: to find other parts of the flood story. Astoundingly, however, he succeeded. Within the shortest time, he managed to unearth not only more (and older) fragments of the flood story, but also ancient texts with remarkable parallels to biblical writings.

In his *Assyrian Discoveries* from 1875, Smith summarized his sensational success with surprising sobriety:

> The light already thrown by the Assyrian inscriptions on Biblical history forms one of the most interesting features in cuneiform inquiry, and there can be no question that further researches will settle many of the questions still in doubt, and give us new information in this field, of an important character.[3]

Soon thereafter Smith published *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1876), a book that invites its readers to compare, side-by-side, biblical and Babylonian texts. It was this work that, more than any other from the burgeoning field of "Assyriology," rocked the world of Christians and Jews.[4]

In 1902 the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch (whose brother had translated Smith's book into German) gave a lecture in the presence of the German emperor Willhelm II, arguing that the Jewish religion, and the Old Testament upon which it is founded, derives from Babylonian roots. A year later he lectured again, causing a stir with his claim that Babylonian-Assyrian civilization was culturally, morally, and religiously

[3] Smith, *Assyrian Discoveries*, pp. 448–449.

[4] It was also this work that, some 125 years later, caught my attention as a teenager, who, similar to Smith, was working full time and studying at a city college; in fact, it prompted me to change my major from medicine to history and, casting caution to the wind, embark on a career in the humanities.

superior to Judaism and the Old Testament. Delitzsch maintained that both are little more than a pathetic pastiche of Babylonian-Assyrian ideas, and later he made a plea for expunging the Old Testament from Christian liturgy and theology.

Today Assyriologists continue to mine the Ashurbanipal Library and other archives for precious data pertaining to ancient Near Eastern empires and the populations they conquered. Questions about the influence of these cultures on the Bible's formation – and by extension, about the uniqueness of its thought and theology – continue to play a central role in research. Strangely, however, the most obvious facets of the Bible's distinctiveness have yet to be seriously appreciated:

1. Why did no one attempt to rescue precious works from the Ashurbanipal Library when enemies stormed the city in 612 BCE?
2. Why did we have to wait thousands of years for Layard, Rassam, and others to discover the fossilized literary remains of the formidable empire that conquered Israel and destroyed much of Judah?
3. Why, during all those years, have biblical writings enjoyed an ongoing reception among diverse communities of readers?

We might assume that the Bible's preservation is simply a result of Christianity's ascendancy. However, Christianity began as a sect that emerged from a new interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. Were power the determining factor, we would have difficulty explaining why such a tiny population as the Jews, despite facing persistent Christian persecution, have survived for millennia, along with their myriad tomes of texts that interpret the Bible.

The question I am posing here is not about Christian triumph or Jewish survival, but about the biblical writings themselves. Had they not been handed down from generation to generation for 2,500 years, and had modern archeologists discovered them in their excavations of ancient sites, they would still be distinctive.

The texts we recovered from ancient West Asia and North Africa are, with few exceptions, palace and temple productions. While the biblical corpus contains many parallels to these excavated texts, what distinguishes it is how they have been reframed and reformulated to address the concerns of a new kind of political community.

Indeed, biblical writings represent one of the earliest and most elaborate projects of peoplehood. Working after the defeat of their kingdoms, their authors expanded inherited traditions with wider, and often competing, perspectives as they sought to consolidate what may be properly called a *nation*.

The question then is: Why? Why do we have a Bible. And why did it originate among a marginal population rather than at the center of ancient civilizations?

Many books on the Bible seek to answer the other "Four Ws" that guide the work of historians – the *Who*, the *What*, the *When*, and the *Where*? Thus, one of the best-selling works of all time in biblical studies addresses the question *Who Wrote the Bible?* Other works, whether they are written for popular or academic audiences, focus on the Bible's historicity, the moral dilemmas and ethical issues it poses for modern readers, the literary qualities of its various genres, the lives and afterlives of individual figures from its narratives, or particular themes and teachings (very often of a theological nature).

These are all undeniably important subjects, and they deserve serious attention. Yet after we have addressed the *Who*, the *What*, the *When*, and the *Where*, we are still left with the *Why*. This is perhaps the most intriguing problem, and it is certainly the most difficult one.

THE BIRTH OF RELIGION

"Why, beginning from approximately the same starting point, did Israelite history end at a very different place from, say, their Moabite neighbors?" These are the words of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), one of the most incisive and influential biblical scholars to have ever lived. He is also one of the few to have appreciated the significance of the *why*-question.

Wellhausen thought the question, or "riddle," was ultimately unanswerable; nevertheless, he deemed it possible to describe, "in spirit and in truth," a series of transitions "from paganism to rational worship." The German scholar began by demonstrating that ancient Israel was essentially the same as its neighbors, in both its political constitution and its religious practices. What created the conditions for the Bible and

its distinctive perspectives was the rise of a new superpower: the Assyrians.

Before this empire arrived on the scene, ancient Palestine had witnessed a host of petty kingdoms fighting and making peace with one another, but otherwise paying no heed to anything beyond their horizon. Yet now Assyria's unprecedented military might and global ambitions forced these kingdoms to come to terms with the alarming prospect that their days were numbered:

> [The Assyrians] destroyed peoples as if they were nests, and as one gathers eggs, they collected the treasures of the world. No flapping of the wings, no opening of the beak or chirping helped. They crushed the national individualities of antiquity, they tore down the fences in which these nations nourished their customs and beliefs. They commenced the work which was carried on by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, and completed by the Romans. They introduced into the history of nations a new factor, that of the world empire or, more generally, the world.[5]

Why then did Israel survive? Wellhausen assigned credit first and foremost to prophets such as Amos and Hosea. These prescient and original thinkers responded to the imperial onslaught by declaring that Yhwh had determined to make an end of his people, and that Assyria was the divine instrument of judgment.[6] By separating Yhwh from the nation, and by allowing Yhwh to "triumph over Israel through Assyria," they allowed the nation to be destroyed and rescued religion. The foreign empire had purged Israel of their national identity and created "an unpolitical and artificial construct" called Judaism:

> Through its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the nation became essentially a religious community held together by the cult. The precondition for this religious community was foreign control, which forced Jews from the political sphere into the spiritual.[7]

[5] Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, p. 114. All translations of Wellhausen's writings are my own. For a fuller discussion of these passages, see Wright, *War, Memory, and National Identity*, pp. 1–10 and 248–250.

[6] Yhwh is the name of the national deity in the Bible; it is pronounced "Yahweh" but usually translated in English Bible versions as "LORD" or "Jehovah."

[7] Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, p. 22.