

**ASSYRIA: ITS
PRINCES, PRIESTS
AND PEOPLE. VOL. VII**

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Assyria: Its Princes, Priests and People. Vol.VII by A. H. Sayce

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A. H. SAYCE

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By-Paths of Bible Knowledge.

VII.

ASSYRIA

ITS PRINCES, PRIESTS, AND PEOPLE.

BY

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P R E F A C E.



AMONG the many wonderful achievements of the present century there is none more wonderful than the recovery and decipherment of the monuments of ancient Nineveh. For generations the great oppressing city had slept buried beneath the fragments of its own ruins, its history lost, its very site forgotten. Its name had passed into the region of myth even in the age of the classical writers of Greece and Rome; Ninus or Nineveh had become a hero-king about whom strange legends were told, and whose conquests were fabled to have extended from the Mediterranean to India. Little was known of the history of the mighty Assyrian Empire beyond what might be learnt from the Old Testament, and that little was involved in doubt and obscurity. Scholars wrote long treatises to reconcile the statements of Greek historians with those of Scripture, but they only succeeded in evolving theories which were contradicted and overthrown by the next writer. There was none so bold as to suggest that the history and life of Assyria were still lying hidden beneath the ground, ready to rise up and disclose their secrets at the touch of a magician's rod. The rod was the spade and the patient sagacity which

deciphered and interpreted what the spade had found. It might have been thought that the cuneiform or wedge-shaped inscriptions of Assyria could never be forced to reveal their mysteries. The language in which they were written was unknown, and all clue to the meaning of the multitudinous characters that composed them had long been lost. No bilingual text came to the aid of the decipherer like the Rosetta Stone, whose Greek inscription had furnished the key to the meaning of the Egyptian hieroglyphics. Nevertheless the great feat was accomplished. Step by step the signification of the cuneiform characters and the words they concealed was made out, until it is now possible to translate an ordinary Assyrian text with as much ease and certainty as a page of the Old Testament.

And the revelation that awaited the decipherer was startling in the extreme. The ruins of Nineveh yielded not only sculptures and inscriptions carved in stone, but a whole library of books. True, the books are written upon clay, and not on paper, but they are none the less real books, dealing with all the subjects of knowledge known at the time they were compiled, and presenting us with a clear and truthful reflection of Assyrian thought and belief. We can not only trace the architectural plans of the Assyrian palaces, and study the bas-reliefs in which the Assyrians have pictured themselves and the life they led; we can also penetrate to their inmost thoughts and feelings, and read their history as they have told it themselves.



It is a strange thing to examine for the first time one of the clay tablets of the old Assyrian library. Usually it has been more or less broken by the catastrophe of that terrible day when Nineveh was captured by its enemies, and the palace and library burnt and destroyed together. But whether it is a fragment or a complete tablet, it is impossible not to handle it reverently when cleaning it from the dirt with which its long sojourn in the earth has encrusted it, and spelling out its words for the first time for more than 2,000 years. When last the characters upon it were read, it was in days when Assyria was still a name of terror, and the destruction that God's prophets had predicted was still to come. When its last reader laid it aside, Judah had not as yet undergone the chastisement of the Babylonish exile, the Old Testament was an uncompleted volume, the kingdom of the Messiah a promise of the distant future. We are brought face to face, as it were, with men who were the contemporaries of Isaiah, of Hezekiah, of Ahaz; nay, of men whose names have been familiar to us since we first read the Bible by our mother's side.

Tiglath-Pileser and Sennacherib can never again be to us mere names. We possess the records which they caused to be written, and in which they told the story of their campaigns in Palestine. The records are not copies of older texts, with all the errors that human fallibility causes copyists and scribes to make. They are the original documents which were recited to the kings who ordered them to be compiled, and who may have held

them in their own hands. The gulf of centuries and forgetfulness that has divided us from Sennacherib is filled up when we read the account of his invasion of Judah, which seems to come from his own lips. Never again can the heroes of the Old Testament be to us as lay-figures, whose story is told by a voice that comes from a dark and unreal past. The voice is now become a living one, and we can realise that Isaiah and those of whom Isaiah wrote were men of flesh and blood like ourselves, with the same passions, the same needs, the same temptations.

This realisation of Old Testament history is not the only result of the recovery of Assyria upon Biblical studies. It is a very important result, but there are others besides of equal importance. One of these is the unexpected confirmation of the correctness of Holy Writ which Assyrian discovery has afforded. The later history of the Old Testament no longer stands alone. Once it was itself the sole witness for the truth of the narratives it contains. Classical history or legend dealt with other lands and other ages; there were no documents besides those contained in the Old Testament to which we could appeal in support of its statements. All is changed now. The earth has yielded up its secrets; the ancient civilisation of Assyria has stepped forth again into the light of day, and has furnished us with records, the authenticity of which none can deny, which run side by side with those of the Books of Kings, confirming, explaining, and illustrating them. It has been said that