

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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PART TWO OLD TESTAMENT ARCHAEOLOGY

CHAPTER THREE DISCOVERING THE LOST CIVILIZATION OF ASSYRIA

FOR MANY CENTURIES the dust of ages succeeded in burying the civilization of ancient Assyria. Previous to the year 1800, men could only guess as to the identity of certain mounds located in Assyrian territory. But the first half of the nineteenth century saw French and British excavators digging in these mounds, and some very important discoveries were made before fifty years of the century had rolled by. 1

FINDING THE PALACE OF KING SARGON

Pioneer Assyrian excavations. A representative of the East India Company, C. J. Rich, examined some of the Assyrian mounds early in the century and was able to send to the British Museum a collection of Assyrian tablets and cylinders. He published the account of his discoveries in 1836. This caused the French government to become interested in Assyria as a field of archaeological research. 2

Thus in the year 1842 France sent Pao Emilio Botta to the field to search for antiquities. He started to work at the mound of *Nebi Yunus*, which means "Hill of the Prophet Jonah," called this because the natives believed it to be the place where Jonah was buried. But the natives objected to his working there, so he moved to the mound of *Kuyunjik*. But he did not find much to encourage him there, so when an Arab from *Khorsabad* (to the north) brought him two bricks containing cuneiform inscriptions, he decided to transfer his activity to this mound. It was in 1843 he began his work there. 3

Finding a magnificent old palace. Soon after Botta started work at *Khorsabad*, his men came upon two parallel walls covered with remains of large bas-reliefs and cuneiform inscriptions. They uncovered colossal winged and human-headed bulls. Many of these finds were transported to the Louvre at Paris, which became the pioneer museum of Assyrian antiquity for Europe.

Botta had actually uncovered a part of the great palace of King Sargon, the Assyrian monarch who captured Samaria.4

Before this discovery, critics of the Old Testament had questioned the existence of an Assyrian king by the name of Sargon, because no such a king was known outside the Bible. Isaiah mentions the name of such a king (Isaiah 20:1). We now know that Assyria had three different kings by that name.

Completely uncovering and restoring the old palace. These discoveries of Botta produced a sensation in France and focused the attention of the world on the archaeological work being done in the Mesopotamian Valley. In 1851 France sent Victor Place to continue the work which Botta had begun there. The rest of Sargon's palace was unearthed. A reconstruction of the old king's magnificent palace was now possible. This royal building was erected on a terrace about 45 feet high, made of bricks cased with large stones. 5

Most of the walls of the chambers, halls, and corridors of the palace were lined with sculptured bas-reliefs containing representations of Assyrian gods, kings, battles, sieges, and religious ceremonies. Many cuneiform inscriptions were on the walls. A picture of Assyrian life in many phases was to be seen, and the world was surprised to learn how far the Assyrian civilization had advanced. 6

DISCOVERING PALACES OF THREE MORE ASSYRIAN KINGS

A young Englishman by the name of Austen Henry Layard became interested in Assyrian archaeology and began his work at the mound of *Nimrud* in the year 1845. Very soon bas-reliefs and slabs carved with inscriptions began to appear. The work was discontinued for a while; when it was begun again, the excavators unearthed a colossal human-headed bull such as Botta had found at *Khorsabad*. This mound proved to be the old city of *Calah* referred to in Genesis 10:11.

The structure he uncovered was the palace of the Assyrian king, Ashur-nasir-pal, who lived almost half a century after the death of Solomon. Next to this building he located two other buildings which were identified as the palaces of two other Assyrian kings: King Shalmaneser, who was a contemporary of King Ahab and King Jehu of Israel; and King Esarhaddon, who was a contemporary of King Manasseh of Judah. 7

SEARCH FOR THE SITE OF OLD NINEVEH

Early excavators disappointed in not finding Nineveh. Two hundred years after the old capital of Assyria fell, Xenophon and his army of Greeks passed by the ruins of the city of Nineveh without mentioning it by name. For centuries nobody knew exactly where the old site was located. 8

When the French excavator Botta first discovered the palace of King Sargon, he actually thought he had found the palace of King Sennacherib at Nineveh, but the inscriptions settled the identity of the mound, and he was disappointed in his search for Nineveh.

Also when the English excavator Layard was digging in the mound of *Nimrud*, he thought he had discovered ancient Nineveh, but rather it proved to be the city of *Calah*. 9

Layard discovers Nineveh at *Kuyunjik*. Layard secured the right to dig at the mound of *Kuyunjik*, and he and his successor Rassam both did considerable work at that mound. Both Botta and Place had been working in one section of this site, but the most sensational discoveries were made by Layard and Rassam. In 1847 Layard's first work here brought the discovery of the Palace of Sennacherib, and thus it was settled once for all that this was the site of ancient Nineveh. 10

Description of Sennacherib's palace. After two years spent on a trip back to England, Layard renewed work in excavating the palace of Sennacherib in ancient Nineveh, and he later made this description of that marvelous structure:

In this magnificent edifice I had opened no less than 71 halls, chambers, and passages, whose walls almost without exception had been paneled with slabs of sculptured alabaster, recording the wars, the triumphs, and the great deeds of the Assyrian king. By a rough calculation, about 9880 feet or nearly two miles of bas-reliefs, with 27 portals, formed by colossal winged bulls and lion-sphinxes, were uncovered in that part alone of the building explored during my researches. 11

King Sennacherib's building material. In one inscription found on one of the walls of the palace, the king tells of his construction work:

Sennacherib, King of the universe, King of Assyria: white limestone, which at the command of the god was discovered in the land of Baladai, for the construction of my palace, the people of enemy towns and the men of remote mountain [districts], the conquest of my hands, with iron picks and pickaxes quarried, and I turned it into mighty protecting bull-colossi for the gates of my palace. 12

UNEARTHING A GREAT ASSYRIAN LIBRARY

The thrilling discovery. One of the most important of all Layard's many discoveries at Nineveh was made when he came upon two chambers, and after removing the dirt and rubbish, he saw the rooms piled a foot or more high with cuneiform tablets made of baked clay. Many were broken, but some were whole. What he had found was part of the famous library of King Ashurbanipal, the last of the Assyrian monarchs. The other half of the library was found in another section of *Kuyunjik* by the excavator Rassam. 13

Importance of the discovery. Literally thousands of these tablets and fragments of tablets were shipped to the British Museum. After being read by scholars, they made available to the world an immense amount of knowledge of the life of these ancient Assyrians. The old king who collected this library could boast of having one of the greatest libraries of all time. His books or tablets dealt with such subjects as: "letters, business contracts, sales records, loans, dictionaries, law-records, prayers, oracles, books of astrology, history, geography, and literature." 14

Concerning the collector of the library. Assyrian King Ashurbanipal, the man who collected this famous library, reigned from 669 to 633 B.C. In Ezra 4:10 he is called “**the great and noble Asnappar.**”

He also colonized Samaria. It is of interest to note that this king treated King Necho of Egypt in exactly the same way King Manasseh was treated by his predecessor, King Esarhaddon, indicating that it was not an incredible thing for a king to be taken captive and then to be forgiven. We owe much to this king who, although cruel in war, devoted a great deal of his time to the peacetime task of collecting books to comprise his great library. But for his work our knowledge of Assyria would be meager. 15

THE ROMANCE OF THE FLOOD TABLETS

The story of a boy who made good. There is a romantic story connected with the classification and interpretation of the Flood Tablets in the British Museum. It centers about the life of George Smith, who as a boy was self-educated. He read with great interest the books that told about the excavator's discoveries in Assyria and Babylonia, and when he had spare time, he would be found studying in the British Museum. Because of his zeal for knowledge he was finally made a museum assistant, and his task became that of putting in order the tablets that came from Assyria. He was able to learn how to decipher the cuneiform writings contained on the tablets. In the year 1872 he first read one of the tablets that contained the Assyrian story of the Flood. News of this discovery created a sensation. 16

The significance of the Deluge Tablets. The Assyrians had handed down to them from an ancient time the story of a great flood of water. Of course there are differences, as one would expect, between the Assyrian story and the Bible account of the event; on the other hand, the agreements between the two records are so striking that a common origin for the two accounts of a great event becomes inescapable. In both accounts there is warning of a coming deluge, the building of a ship, the taking of relatives on board, and also animals of all sorts, the landing of the ship on a mountain, the sending out of birds, and the offering of a sacrifice after the Flood was over. 17

ASSYRIAN RECORDS AND THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

An Assyrian obelisk that pictures King Jehu. When the workmen of the excavator Layard were about ready to quit digging at *Nimrud*, they decided to press on a little longer, and they came upon a four-sided pillar of black marble, 6 ½ feet tall, tapering toward the top. There were five bas-reliefs around the sides with written records on either side of these. It was discovered in 1845, although it was not deciphered until five years later. 18

This monument, usually called the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, gives a representation in relief of the victories and accomplishments of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser during the first thirty years of his reign. The records of writing are of value in giving information about periods of time wherein the Bible is silent.

In the second row on one of the sides is the picture of King Jehu, of Israel, kneeling before the Assyrian king with the caption:

The tribute of Jehu son of Omri, silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, scepters for the hand of the king, javelins I received from him. 19

The account of King Tiglathpileser about the captivity of Israel. Tiglathpileser III was one of the greatest kings of Assyria. He reigned from 744 to 727 B.C. He was the one who inaugurated the policy of deportation of conquered people on a wholesale scale. His idea was to bring the conquered peoples as close as possible to his capital where they could be watched. In the inscriptions archaeologists have found of this king, mention is made of King Menahem, King Pekah, and King Hoshea of Israel; King Ahaz of Judah; and King Rezin of Damascus. 20

The Scriptures have this to say about what Tiglath-pileser did in the land of Israel: **“In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglathpileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abelbethmaachah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and carried them captive to Assyria”** (II Kings 15:29).

An Assyrian tablet, coming from the mound of *Nimrud*, gives the account of Tiglath-pileser as to what took place:

The cities of . . . which are on the border of Bit-Humria (House of Omri Izrael) . . . the wide land of Naphtali, in its entirety, I brought within the border of Assyria . . . The land of Bit-Humria . . . all of its people, together with their goods I carried off to Assyria. Pakaha their king they deposed and I placed Ausi [Hoshea] over them as king. 21

Excavators have helped to clear up the meaning of a Scripture reference to this Assyrian king. The verse is I Chronicles 5:26: **“And the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, and the spirit of Tilgathpilneser king of Assyria, and he carried them away.”**

In the past some Bible teachers have inferred that two different kings of Assyria are referred to in the verse. But the verse says **“he [singular] carried them away.”** But the word **“and”** has the meaning of *“even,”* which is a possible translation in the Hebrew, because this Assyrian king is now known to have had both of these names. The inscriptions of King Tilgathpilneser III indicate that when he received the land of Babylonia as part of his domain, he was crowned as king of Babylonia and took the name Pul (Pulu) so as to give them the idea they had their own king. 22

The record of King Sargon concerning the capture of Samaria. The Bible says that it was King Shalmaneser who began the siege of Samaria. II Kings 18:9 says: **“And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, that Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria, and besieged it.”** The next verse adds: **“And at the end of three years they took it.”**

According to the Assyrian records it would seem that some time during the period of the siege that Sargon became king succeeding Shalmaneser and that it was Sargon who actually captured the city. Sargon had his capital first at Ashur, then it was moved to *Calah*, then to Nineveh, and finally to *Khorsabad* which he called Sargonsburg.

There he built his magnificent palace and on its walls he inscribed the accounts of his exploits.
23

Here is the Assyrian account of the capture of Samaria by Sargon, and the deportation of Israel:

At the beginning of my rule, in my first year of reign . . . Samerinai [the people of Samaria] of Shamash who causes me to attain victory . . . 27,290 people, who lived therein I carried away; 50 chariots for my royal equipment, I selected from among them . . . The city I rebuilt, I made it greater than it was before; people of the lands my hand had conquered, I settled therein. My official I placed over them as governor. 24

In the twentieth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet makes what might be called a symbolic prediction of the victory of Assyria's King Sargon over the city of Ashdod and also over Egypt and Ethiopia. 25

The annals of Sargon describe his siege of Ashdod as follows:

Azuru, King of Ashdod, plotted in his heart to withhold tribute and sent [messages] of hostility to the kings round about him. Because of the evil he had done, I put an end to his rule over the people of his land and set up Ahimitu, his full brother, as king over them . . . Ashdod, Gimtu [Gath] . . . I besieged, I captured. 26

Sennacherib's story of his warfare with King Hezekiah. King Sennacherib reigned over Assyria from 704 to 681 B.C. When he came to the throne he made Nineveh his capital city, and it became the wonder city of the world with its magnificent palace. He engaged in many cruel wars.

The Biblical account of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem, as given in II Kings 18:13—19:37, can now be supplemented by the record coming from Nineveh in describing what he did in the land of Judah. Of course, some allowance must be made for the Assyrian king's boasting, and it must be remembered that ancient kings never recorded disasters or defeats. But the agreements with the Bible account are very striking indeed. Here is a part of the record of Sennacherib taken from his annals:

As for Hezekiah the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke, 46 of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small cities in their neighborhood, which were without number— by escalade and by bringing up siege engines, by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breaches, I besieged and took. 200,150 people great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle, and sheep without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil.

Himself, like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. Earthworks I threw up against him—the one coming out of his city gate I turned back to his misery. 27

The account goes on to list the tribute that King Hezekiah gave to Sennacherib.

Among other things it mentions 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver.²⁸ In II Kings 18:14 the amount of tribute is given as 30 talents of gold and 300 talents of silver. The difference between 800 and 300 talents of silver is accounted for by the difference in weight of the Babylonian light talent and the Palestinian heavy talent. ²⁹

Furthermore, on the walls of the king's palace in Nineveh is pictured the storming of the city of Lachish in Judah. An embankment of earth was thrown up, battering rams were operated, expert slingers were seen at work, and certain soldiers were seen undermining the city walls. ³⁰

When all of the account given by Sennacherib concerning this campaign is considered, together with the picture of the attack on Lachish, the agreements with the Scripture story of what happened are striking. They may be listed under five heads as follows:

- (1) Both agree that Sennacherib laid siege to Lachish.
- (2) Both agree that Hezekiah withstood his efforts to capture Jerusalem.
- (3) Both agree that Hezekiah sent a handsome tribute to try to purchase Sennacherib's favor.
- (4) Both agree that Judah had leaned upon Egypt for support.
- (5) Both agree that for some reason Sennacherib had to stop short of complete victory over Hezekiah. ³¹

Records of King Esarhaddon concerning the death of Sennacherib and the captivity of Manasseh. Esarhaddon reigned over Assyria from 680 to 669 B.C. Isaiah 37:38 (cf. II Kings 19:37) tells of this king's accession to the throne after the assassination of his father, Sennacherib, by Esarhaddon's brothers.

Prisms of Esarhaddon, giving historical facts about his reign, tell of this plot by his brothers, of the murder of Sennacherib, but of the failure of the assassins to succeed to the throne. Esarhaddon became king as his father desired that he should. ³²

Esarhaddon is mentioned in Ezra 4:2 as being the colonizer of Samaria. It is also believed that it was he who put King Manasseh of Judah in chains and carried him to Babylon. Second Chronicles 33:11-13 tells the story of how this king of Assyria took Manasseh as captive to Babylon. After Manasseh prayed to God and humbled himself, God restored him to his kingdom.

At first thought some might question the Bible story because it says Manasseh was taken to Babylon, whereas Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Furthermore, Esarhaddon's father, Sennacherib, had cruelly destroyed the city of Babylon and left it in ruins. But archaeology furnishes what would otherwise be a missing link in the story. It records the fact that Esarhaddon rebuilt Babylon. In his records he says that he rebuilt it, and that he made it a magnificent city. Perhaps his interest in doing this stemmed from the fact that both his wife and his mother were women of Babylon. ³³

King Esarhaddon mentions King Manasseh and this experience of his in one of his inscriptions. He says:

I summoned the kings of the Hittite-land [Syria] and [those] across the sea,—Ba’lu, King of Tyre, Manasseh, King of Judah, Kaushgabri, King of Edom, Musurri, King of Moab, etc. . . . I gave them their orders. 34

AN ASSYRIAN PICTURE HELPS EXPLAIN AN OLD TESTAMENT WORD

In II Kings 7:2 an officer of the king is referred to as being “**a lord on whose hand the king leaned.**” Verses 17 and 19 mention the same man. There has been in the past much question as to what was the nature of this officer’s task. The word in the Hebrew means literally “*the third.*” Some have argued that the man was a third ranking officer. But now pictures on Assyrian monuments have explained this Hebrew word. There an Assyrian war chariot is represented as having three men in its crew: the driver, the man who did the fighting, and the third man who grasped the two straps that were attached to the back of the chariot and thus made a living back for the vehicle. Standing at the back of the chariot, he would prevent the driver or fighter from being thrown from the chariot as it traveled over bumpy ground. To be “the third man” in the king’s chariot was a responsible position, and such a man would be assigned to important tasks when the king was at home and not away fighting. This man was then in very truth “**the third man on whose hand the king leaned.**” 35

ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS AND TWO OLD SEALS

Excavations at Tepe Gawra. In the year 1927 Professor E. A. Speiser made an archaeological survey of the southeastern part of the old territory of Assyria. He was struck with the height of the mound of *Tepe Gawra*, four miles northeast from *Khorsabad*, realizing that the mound must have been occupied over a very long period. In the same year he did some preliminary excavating there, and then in 1930-1932 he was in charge of an expedition financed by the American School of Oriental Research at Baghdad, the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, and Dropsie College. 36

Ancient civilizations and an old seal. When Speiser reached the eighth stratum from the top of the mound at *Tepe Gawra*, he found a very remarkable prehistoric city of the Stone Age with houses and a temple built of stone. The houses were with windows and niches. The town had its streets and a market place.

In this stratum a seal was found which showed a man, a woman, and a serpent. The suggestion immediately comes to mind that this may refer to the fall of Adam and Eve, and the story of Genesis 3.

Lower strata were also reached in the excavations. Stratum XIII revealed a very ancient civilization, and the beauty of the pottery and the high type of architectural remains indicate that it is wrong to say that all the men of the old Stone Age were uncivilized. 37

Another old seal. Another so-called “Temptation Seal” has come out of Assyrian territory. This seal was found at Nineveh and is at present in the British Museum. In the middle of the seal is pictured a fruit-bearing tree, on the right side is a man and on the left a woman. A serpent is seen behind the woman. The woman is in the act of picking some fruit. Again, the story that this seal pictures recalls the fall of man in Genesis 3. 38

1. Herman Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands During the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 7-12.
2. Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, pp. 35, 36.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 36; Hilprecht, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-76.
4. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37; Hilprecht, *ibid.*, pp. 76-80.
5. Hilprecht, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-85.
6. Seton Lloyd, *Foundations in the Dust*, pp. 106-107.
7. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 38.
8. Hilprecht, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
9. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 38.
10. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-135.
11. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, Vol. I, p. 589; Lloyd, *Foundations in the Dust*, p. 139.
12. Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927) Vol. II, p. 178.
13. Hilprecht, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
14. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
15. George L. Robinson, *The Bearing of Archaeology on the Old Testament*, p. 104.
16. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-46.
18. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, S. L. Caiger, *Bible and Spade*, pp. 140-146.
19. Caiger, *Bible and Spade* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 141.
20. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
21. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), Vol. I, pp. 292-293.
22. Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, pp. 196-197; A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria*, p. 181; Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?*, p. 102.
23. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pp. 174, 175.
24. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), Vol. II, p. 2.
25. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 97, 98.
26. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), Vol. II, pp. 13, 14.
27. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 120.
28. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 121.
29. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 100, esp. footnote 92.
30. Ira M. Price, *The Monuments and the Old Testament*, ed. of 1925, Figure 86, opp. p. 312.
31. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 102; Price, *op. cit.*, p. 325, See also Finegan, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-179.
32. Luckenbill, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 200f.
33. W. H. Boulton, *Archaeology Explains*, pp. 64, 65; see also Caiger, *Bible and Spade*, p. 164.
34. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), Vol. II, pp. 265, 266.

35. Boulton, *op. cit.*, pp. 50, 51.

36. George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, pp. 44, 45.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

38. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 115; Free, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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