

The Religion of the Ancient Babylonians



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The Religion of the Ancient Babylonians

The Origin and Growth of Religion

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THE RELIGION OF THE ANCIENT BABYLONIANS.

LECTURE I. INTRODUCTORY.

It was with considerable diffidence that I accepted the invitation of the Hibbert Trustees to give a course of Lectures on the Religion of the Ancient Babylonians. The subject itself is new; the materials for treating it are still scanty and defective; and the workers in the field have been few. The religion of the Babylonians has, it is true, already attracted the attention of "the Father of Assyriology," Sir Henry Rawlinson, of the brilliant and gifted François Lenormant, of the eminent Dutch scholar Dr. Tiele, and of Dr. Fritz Hommel, one of the ablest of the younger band of Assyrian students; but no attempt has yet been made to trace its origin and history in a systematic manner. The attempt, indeed, is full of difficulty. We have to build up a fabric out of broken and half-deciphered texts, out of stray allusions and obscure references, out of monuments many of which are late and still more are of uncertain age. If, therefore, my account of Babylonian religion may

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seem to you incomplete, if I am compelled at times to break off in my story or to have recourse to conjecture, I must crave your indulgence and ask you to remember the difficulties of the task. To open up new ground is never an easy matter, more especially when the field of research is vast; and a new discovery may at any moment overthrow the theories we have formed, or give a new complexion to received facts.

I may as well confess at the outset that had I known all the difficulties I was about to meet with, I should never have had the courage to face them. It was not until I was committed beyond the power of withdrawal that I began fully to realise how great they were. Unlike those who have addressed you before in this place, I have had to work upon materials at once deficient and fragmentary. Mine has not been the pleasant labour of marshalling well-ascertained facts in order, or of selecting and arranging masses of material, the very abundance of which has alone caused embarrassment. On the contrary, I have had to make most of my bricks without straw. Here and there, indeed, parts of the subject have been lighted up in a way that left little to be desired, but elsewhere I have had to struggle on in thick darkness or at most in dim twilight. I have felt as in a forest where the moon shone at times through open spaces in the thick foliage, but served only to make the surrounding gloom still more apparent, and where I had to search in vain for a clue that would lead me from one interval of light to another.

The sources of our information about the religion of the ancient Babylonians and their kinsfolk the Assyrians are almost wholly monumental. Beyond a few stray

notices in the Old Testament, and certain statements found in classical authors which are for the most part the offspring of Greek imagination, our knowledge concerning it is derived from the long-buried records of Nineveh and Babylon. It is from the sculptures that lined the walls of the Assyrian palaces, from the inscriptions that ran across them, or from the clay tablets that were stored within the libraries of the great cities, that we must collect our materials and deduce our theories. Tradition is mute, or almost so; between the old Babylonian world and our own a deep gulf yawns, across which we have to build a bridge by the help of texts that explorers have disinterred and scholars have painfully deciphered. But the study of these texts is one of no ordinary difficulty. They are written in characters that were once pictorial, like the hieroglyphs of Egypt, and were intended to express the sounds of a language wholly different from that of the Semitic Babylonians and Assyrians, from whom most of our inscriptions come. The result of these two facts was two-fold. On the one hand, every character had more than one value when used phonetically to denote a syllable; on the other hand, every character could be employed ideographically to represent an object or idea. And just as simple ideas could thus be represented by single characters, so compound ideas could be represented by a combination of characters. In the language of the primitive inhabitants of Babylonia, the world beyond the grave was known as Aráli, and was imaged as a dark subterranean region where the spirits of the dead kept watch over hoards of unnumbered gold. But the word Aráli was not written phonetically, nor was it denoted by a single

ideograph; the old Chaldean chose rather to represent it by three separate characters which would literally mean "the house of the land of death."

When the Babylonians or Assyrians desired that what they wrote should be read easily, they adopted devices which enabled them to overcome the cumbersome obscurity of their system of writing. A historical inscription, for example, may be read with little difficulty; it is only our ignorance of the signification of particular words which is likely to cause us trouble in deciphering its meaning. But when we come to deal with a religious text, the case is altogether different. Religion has always loved to cloak itself in mystery, and a priesthood is notoriously averse from revealing in plain language the secrets of which it believes itself the possessor. To the exoteric world it speaks in parables; the people that knoweth not the law is accursed. The priesthood of Babylonia formed no exception to the general rule. As we shall see, it was a priesthood at once powerful and highly organised, the parallel of which can hardly be found in the ancient world. We need not wonder, therefore, if a considerable portion of the sacred texts which it has bequeathed to us were intentionally made difficult of interpretation; if the words of which they consisted were expressed by ideographs rather than written phonetically; if characters were used with strange and far-fetched values, and the true pronunciation of divine names was carefully hidden from the uninitiated multitude.

But these are not all the difficulties that beset us when we endeavour to penetrate into the meaning of the religious texts. I have already said that the cuneiform

system of writing was not the invention, but the heritage, of the Semitic Babylonians and Assyrians. The Semites of the historical period, those subjects of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar who were so closely allied in blood and language to the Hebrews, were not the first occupants of the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. They had been preceded by a population which in default of a better name I shall term Accadian or Proto-Chaldean throughout these Lectures, and which was in no wise related to them. The Accadians spoke an agglutinative language, a language, that is to say, which resembled in its structure the languages of the modern Finns or Turks, and their physiological features, so far as we can trace them from the few monuments of the Accadian epoch that remain, differed very markedly from those of the Semites. It was to the Accadians that the beginnings of Chaldean culture and civilisation were due. They were the teachers and masters of the Semites, not only in the matter of writing and literature, but in other elements of culture as well. This is a fact so startling, so contrary to preconceived ideas, that it was long refused credence by the leading Orientalists of Europe who had not occupied themselves with cuneiform studies. Even to-day there are scholars, and notably one who has himself achieved success in Assyrian research, who still refuse to believe that Babylonian civilisation was originally the creation of a race which has long since fallen into the rear rank of human progress. But unless the fact is admitted, it is impossible to explain the origin either of the cuneiform system of writing or of that system of theology the outlines of which I have undertaken to expound.