



The Sumerian Originals of Some Hebrew Legends

Legends of Babylon and Egypt in Relation to Hebrew Tradition (The Schweich Lectures, 1916)

by Leonard W. King

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Book Reviews

THE SUMERIAN ORIGINALS OF SOME HEBREW LEGENDS

Ever since the day, back in 1872, when George Smith discovered the first fragment of the "Chaldean account of the deluge," biblical scholars have been trying to solve the problem of the relationship between the Babylonian legends and the Hebrew traditions of the origins of civilization. Today it would be difficult to find a scholar of any standing who denies borrowing on the part of Israel. The discussion has resolved itself very largely into an inquiry as to the "when" and the "how" of this borrowing from Babylonia. This applies to the problem as handled by biblical scholars. The assyriologists, on the other hand, are more interested at the present moment in running down the sources of the Babylonian legends. This phase of the inquiry has received special attention at the hand of the author of the Schweich Lectures for 1916¹—which we have before us for review—the master assyriologist, Leonard W. King, whose untimely death in August last we mourn. The antiquity of the Babylonian civilization; the several contributions made by Sumerians and Semites to that civilization: therewith is connected the question of priority; these are the preliminary problems with which the assyriologist feels he must deal.

Assyriology, like Egyptology, showed no immunity from infantile diseases. The most persistent malady which afflicted both of these sciences in their childhood was an inflation of the chronology. We heard men glibly speak of 10,000 B.C. as the date of such-and-such an event. Then came a reaction, and, as was to be expected, the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Our historical dates are now being pushed backward again. This has been brought about by a closer study of the results of the excavations of the University of Pennsylvania at Nippur, more particularly by the publication of some texts found on the site of that ancient Babylonian "Mecca." It was these texts that led Dr. King to choose the subject he did for his lectures. Speaking of the hoary antiquity of Nippur he says:

No less than twenty-one different strata, representing separate periods of occupation, have been noted by the American excavators at various levels within the Nippur mounds, the earliest descending to virgin soil some twenty feet below the present level of the surrounding plain. The remote date of Nippur's foundation as a city and cult-centre is attested by the fact that the pavement laid by Narâm-Sin in the south-eastern temple-court lies thirty feet above virgin soil, while only thirty-six feet of superimposed *débris* represent the succeeding millennia of occupation down to Sassanian and early Arab times (p. 20).

¹ *Legends of Babylon and Egypt in Relation to Hebrew Tradition* (the Schweich Lectures, 1916). By Leonard W. King. London: Oxford University Press, 1918. Pp. ix+155. 3s.

And in reply to some popular arguments for a relatively late (compared with Egypt) date for the beginnings of the Sumerian civilization in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, King had this to say:

This [an early list of kings, published by Scheil] had helped us to fill in the gap between the famous Sargon of Akkad and the later dynasties, but it did not carry us far beyond Sargon's own time. Our archaeological evidence also comes suddenly to an end. Thus the earliest picture we have hitherto obtained of the Sumerians has been that of a race employing an advanced system of writing and possessed of a knowledge of metal. We have found, in short, abundant remains of a bronze-age culture, but no traces of preceding ages of development such as meet us on early Egyptian sites. It was a natural inference that the advent of the Sumerians in the Euphrates Valley was sudden, and that they had brought their highly developed culture with them from some region of Central or Southern Asia.

The newly published Nippur documents will cause us to modify that view. The lists of kings were themselves drawn up under the Dynasty of Nîsin in the twenty-second century B.C., and they give us traces of possibly ten and at least eight other 'kingdoms' before the earliest dynasty of the known lists. One of their novel features is that they include summaries at the end, in which it is stated how often a city or district enjoyed the privilege of being the seat of supreme authority in Babylonia. . . . The Dynasty of Ur-Engur, for example, which preceded that of Nîsin, becomes, if we like, the Third Dynasty of Ur. Another important fact which strikes us after a scrutiny of the early royal names recovered is that, while two or three are Semitic, the great majority of those borne by the earliest rulers of Kish, Erech, and Ur are as obviously Sumerian (pp. 27 f.).

The mounds of Nippur have also given us the Sumerian originals of such Babylonian poems as the Creation and Deluge narratives. These King compared very carefully with the later versions, pointing out such facts as that "the Hebrew Versions preserve an original Sumerian strand of the [Deluge] narrative that was not woven into the Gilgamesh Epic, where there is no parallel to the piety of Noah" (p. 131). If I had any criticism to offer on this part of the lectures, it would be to the effect that King was too ready to accept translations and interpretations of these difficult texts by those who were far less competent than himself to undertake such tasks. But this was due in part at least—as was the delay in the publication of the lectures—to "pressure of other work, on subjects far removed from archaeological study and affording little time and few facilities for a continuance of archaeological and textual research" (Preface, p. v). In this work for his king and country was spent the vitality which could not be regained.

Professor King has gone to the Land of No Return. He has left a name written high on the roll of assyriologists and historians, and a memory blest by all who knew him face to face as well as by those who, like the reviewer, knew him only through the kindly word of commendation and encouragement which was ever ready for all his co-workers in the field of ancient oriental research.

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