

Delitzsch, Babylon, and the Bible

For the past year the German public has been in an uproar over the topic of “Babel and Bible.” How does one explain the sensation that Delitzsch’s lectures have elicited? This is a question that certainly demands consideration. In the first place, the initial lecture, which created the stir among the public, offers scarcely anything in terms of research material beyond what has already been known by all Assyriologists and students of Old Testament theology as well—something that is granted on all sides. In other words, the lecture was, and evidently claimed to be, only a fuller and more lucid review of contemporary results.

In order to explain the sensation that arose so suddenly, it is necessary to remember the conditions under which our journalists operate. The daily press lives from day to day on “events” under its own conditions. Any development that proceeds slowly easily escapes notice. But if a sudden and fortuitous occurrence brings matters to the surface, then the event

suddenly becomes “news” and remains so until something else more “newsworthy” overtakes it. And so it happened that our newspapers had taken little notice of the quiet but expanding research in Assyriology, in much the same way as they ignore academic theology in general (despite the few noteworthy exceptions lately). Whatever can be read in the daily papers on such issues (and especially on Old Testament subjects) is usually of negligible research value. And this is not excused by the fact that many educated persons, including those of the highest circles—even many university teachers (as is evident from time to time) with whom we teach daily and in adjacent rooms—that even such as these know nothing of the existence of serious academic theology, have no conceptions of the method of our work, and are ignorant of the results of that work, despite all our endeavors to popularize them.

And with this complete ignorance of research relating to religion, *dilettantism* is in full bloom as it is scarce elsewhere. Many hold opinions regarding religion without being able to join in a conversation on the least technical topic. What we experience anew each day in this regard is horrifying, really horrifying! So one can observe how even researchers, who in their own domain are quite sober and temperate, suddenly lose their balance when they discuss religion. And now research on Babylonian–Biblical topics has suddenly become “news,” as if a light-bearer from above had suddenly flooded it with a stream of light. The entire world devoured this lecture, which the highest person in our country twice had delivered before him.¹

1. [Ed.] This refers to Delitzsch's invitation to give his lectures before Kaiser Wilhelm II, emperor of Germany and king of Prussia, and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft.

But as little as the public had previously understood of these things the more it has now been astonished to see an entire buried world rise here in the light of day. Unfortunately, Delitzsch had neglected to state in the text of his lecture in completely unequivocal terms that the material compiled by him is substantially—and especially in so far as it is assured—a common possession of an entire generation of research. A segment of the public—and perhaps no small segment—has consequently misunderstood him entirely, and regards his lecture as a most remarkable scientific achievement.

At the same time, ecclesiastical circles have become violently agitated. Delitzsch has recognized the results of modern Old Testament research. For instance, he designated as a scientifically unassailable and enduring fact the assertion that the Pentateuch has been composed of very distinct literary sources. He certainly asserted a primitive Babylonian origin for some of the most familiar portions of Israel's traditions—particularly the narratives of creation, the flood, and paradise—and accordingly declared himself of the opinion that these stories are to be regarded as myths and legends, not as objective descriptions of real events. Moreover, the Sabbath is of Babylonian origin, and an analogy is to be found there for monotheism itself.

Yet with all these assertions Delitzsch did not say much more than is generally admitted among scholars, or is, at least, under discussion. In spite of that, his words affected many in the community like a thunderbolt. Many things may come into consideration to explain so unexpected a result. But the principal cause is, after all, the lamentable estrangement of the Protestant Church from Protestant research. The origin of this estrangement and the source of blame for it need not be discussed here; only the fact itself is unfortunately



Ishtar Gate of Babylon

indisputable. How few among the educated persons of the community, even among the older clergy—and not only among the *older* clergy—have a clear conception of what is actually going on currently in academic theology? It is this that makes it possible for these “Bible–Babylonian” investigations, when once they have become news, to surprise the Church and catch it quite defenseless.

Now had the Church employed a prudent and vigorous theology, it could have indicated which aspects of Delitzsch’s assertions were correct and which somewhat exaggerated. But even if many cautious words *were* spoken, nonetheless the voices of the excited participants rose much louder. The one side called out: The Bible is disposed of, once and for all. Assyriology has proved that its entire substance is Babylonian! And the other fought with the energy of desperation to recognize only a tittle of Israel’s religion as adopted from foreign sources. And between these two extremes a bewildering multitude of opinions, reflecting back the complete chaos of our

troubled age in a myriad of forms. Even the Jewish community rose up in fright at losing its reputation as the chosen people if Israel's traditions were of Babylonian origin. Personal quarrels (which perhaps were better avoided) were added to the mix. On more or less prominent sides, a deluge of articles appeared in newspapers and journals, lectures with and without illustrations, and brochures of every description. Clarifications or other publications in the newspapers repeatedly goaded the discussions anew. This resulted in a colossal confusion.

But this confusion has been further increased by Delitzsch's recently delivered second lecture. To be sure, as far as regards substance, this lecture also brought nothing special to the expert. But now the Assyriologist, irritated by his ecclesiastical opponents, proceeded into the theological realm and summarily placed in question the revelatory character of the Old Testament and the religion of Israel itself.

But on the same day this lecture was delivered, the public was astonished by another great sensation: a letter from the emperor destroyed the widespread error that Delitzsch's principal assertions were accompanied in all respects by the very highest approval. So the attention of the widest circles was drawn again to this discussion, and the flood of publications began once more. And now a third lecture is to be expected, concerning which we read here and there mysterious hints.

So the author of these lines has likewise felt it his duty not to refuse the many appeals that have come to him, and for his part to assist in helping to quiet the growing confusion. Many considerations might certainly have inclined him rather to silence than to speech, for scientific research seeks quiet and abhors sensation. And as difficult as it may be for the investigator that no one notices his painstaking work, it

is dangerous when the uproar of the day rages about him and may drown out what is best in him—the pure and judicious intention that is needful to him above everything. Let us say then, once and for all, in all honesty and truth: favor to none and malice toward none! The author may assume that many readers will be astonished or amazed by some or other of his words, although he plans in general not to go beyond what he can assume to be the general conviction of his colleagues. But he also begs the readers, if they are of a different opinion in many things, at least to *believe* that he seeks the truth with all his might, and that in expressing it to a larger circle he has no wish but to serve our beloved Protestant Church.