

## Foreword

### Delitzsch and the Babel–Bible Controversy

The controversy over the relationship between Babylon and Israel was initiated by lectures delivered in January and February 1902, January 1903, and October 1904 by Professor Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922). The major reactions to these lectures were due in large part to Delitzsch's delivering the first two lectures at the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (German Oriental Society), with Kaiser Wilhelm II, the emperor's wife, and members of the royal court in attendance. He gave the third lecture at literary societies in Barmen and Köln. The controversy became so widespread that it even garnered its own name: in German "Der Babel-Bibel Streit," and in English "the Babel–Bible Controversy."<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Delitzsch was the son of the Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890). The elder Delitzsch was well known for the series of commentaries he coauthored

1. See the third section of the bibliography on the Babel-Bible Controversy below, 70–72.

with C. F. Keil;<sup>2</sup> and while conservative, he was not a fundamentalist. The younger Delitzsch made his reputation as a prominent Assyriologist and Sumerologist, trained by the eminent Eberhard Schrader at the University of Berlin. At the time of his lectures, he was Professor of Assyriology at the University of Berlin and curator of the Western Asiatic collection of the Royal Museum (1899–1919).

The controversy stirred up by Delitzsch's lectures was due in part to the sensational manner in which he framed his conclusions. Rather than simply reporting on the advances in Assyriology, the new documents excavated, and the light they shed on the ancient Near East, he put forth his position that the comparisons between the Babylonian documents and the Old Testament demonstrated that Israel had substantially obtained its literature from Babylon. And regarding many of his comparisons, he argued that the Babylonian forms were superior and the Israelite forms pale imitations. He employed his knowledge of the ancient Near East to characterize the Old Testament as inferior, naive, derivative. Years later Delitzsch developed these views even further in his book *Die grosse Täuschung* (*The Great Deception*). As Shavit and Eran summarize:

Not only did Delitzsch take to extremes the view that parallels between the culture of Babylonia and the Bible attested to the fact that a large part of the biblical world was borrowed from Babylonia, nor was he content to describe Babylonia one spiritual level higher than that of ancient Israel, presenting the Babylonian culture as a model of law, ethics

2. Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 25 vols.

and justice. Thus he turned “sinful Babylon,” the city that, in the world of Christianity, symbolized vainglory, sin and evil, into the ancient source of Christian values and Western civilization—all via its influence on Greek culture and Christianity. Babylonia, now enjoying a renaissance, was depicted as a developed, advanced culture worthy of admiration for its estimable qualities, a culture that influenced the entire region in whose center it dwelled, and even beyond that, a culture whose literature—and not the Bible—represented the values of humanistic-universal ethics.<sup>3</sup>

Gunkel acknowledged Delitzsch’s talent and reputation in the field of Assyriology. Delitzsch was a respected Semitist, well versed in ancient Near Eastern documents and languages. He was correct in making comparisons between Babylon and Israel in terms of both general cultural issues as well as religion, especially given Babylon’s centuries of influence throughout the ancient Near East and the Judeans’ exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. But despite these acknowledgments, Gunkel felt compelled to publish this small volume to expose what he considered Delitzsch’s polemical attitude and serious flaws of method and logic. Gunkel’s critique includes the following key points:

- Delitzsch unfortunately treated the comparisons between Babylon and Israel in a cavalier manner, often with polemical interests.
- He misinterpreted numerous biblical passages—at times not taking genre into account (such as the

3. Shavit and Eran, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn*, 212.

folktale), and at others simply misrepresenting the Hebrew text.

- He interpreted relationships between ancient texts solely in scribal terms, failing to take centuries of oral tradition into account.
- He demonstrated no awareness of the methods of the history of religion (*Religionsgeschichte*); Gunkel was a renowned leader in “the History of Religion School” (*die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*).
- His understanding of modern theology, especially with regard to the issue of revelation, was superficial, naïve, and uninformed by the current theological discussion.

But the controversy was also fueled by other considerations as well. Because the first two lectures were held at meetings of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, with the kaiser and members of his court in attendance, they received much more newspaper coverage than they would if they had been simply university lectures. As Gunkel points out, the newspapers also stoked the controversy because of its potential for scandal and controversy. But Gunkel also observes that the general ignorance of the public about ancient Near Eastern and biblical issues made them easy targets for the newspapers’ headlines.

## A Comparative Approach in the Twenty-first Century

Where do things stand after a century of research in Assyriology and the Old Testament? The need for and interest in com-

paring Mesopotamian documents with the Old Testament has not abated, but it has been made more complex due to a number of factors. First, we have far more materials with which to work. Numerous copies and recensions of ancient documents, such as the *Gilgamesh Epic*, have been excavated. Whole libraries have been unearthed from ancient Mesopotamia and Syria—at Mari, Nuzi, Ebla, and Alalakh, for example—that were not available to Delitzsch or Gunkel. This body of documents is expanded when one considers inscriptions, ostraca, and papyri. We also have access to more linguistic reference works, such as *The Assyrian Dictionary*, originally organized by Ignace Gelb at the University of Chicago.

Another new factor is that we have access to numerous documents from ancient Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) on the Syrian coast, discovered in 1928. Most of these documents are in Ugaritic, a Northwest Semitic language closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic. They provide material that is often much closer in terms of language, cultural references, and deities mentioned in the Old Testament. And as a port city, Ugarit was a genuine cultural crossroads, with documents not only in Ugaritic, but Akkadian, Sumerian, Egyptian, Hurrian, Hittite, and Cypro-Minoan as well.<sup>4</sup>

The comparative method itself has come a long way. Rather than speaking of relationships between documents from Babylon as “sources” of Old Testament materials, it is far better to speak of “parallels.” That is, parallel lines may be close or far apart. But to say that two things are parallel is

4. See, for example, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*; Fisher, editor, *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vols. 1–2; Rummel, editor, *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vol. 3; Brooke et al., editors, *Ugarit and the Bible*; Miller, “Aspects of Religion at Ugarit”; and Smith, *The Origins of Monotheism*.

often helpful even if we cannot trace the exact way in which they are related. Parallels may be observed at a variety of levels: linguistic (e.g., phonemes, phrases, formulas), cultural (e.g., marriage practices, governmental structures), or literary (e.g., plot, character, theme, motif), for instance. And each of those types of parallels manifests numerous subtypes.<sup>5</sup>

But comparisons are not the only relevant issues with regard to reading both the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern documents. As Hallo points out, contrasts are also important to account for. He thus suggests a “contextual method” rather than a “comparative method.” The context is both “horizontal” and “vertical”:

The “context” of a given text may be regarded as its horizontal dimension—the geographical, historical, religious, political and literary setting in which it was created and disseminated. The contextual approach tries to reconstruct and evaluate this setting, whether for a biblical text or one from the rest of the ancient Near East. Given the frequently very different settings of biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, however, it is useful to recognize such contrasts as well as comparisons or, if one prefers, to operate with negative as well as positive comparison . . .

But even where (positive) comparison is asserted, it is useful to raise questions of category and

5. See, for example, Evans et al., editors, *Essays on the Comparative Method*; Hallo et al., editors, *More Essays on the Comparative Method*; Younger et al., editors, *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*; Paden, “Comparison in the Study of Religion”; Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*; and Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*.

genre so that, as nearly as possible, like is compared with like . . .

But a text is not only the product of its contemporary context, its horizontal locus, as it were, in time and space. It also has its place on a vertical axis between the earlier texts that helped inspire it and the later texts that reacted to it. We can describe this feature of its interconnectedness as its vertical or, in line with current usage, its intertextual dimension.<sup>6</sup>

One of the things we have learned by having more documents; more knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages, culture, and history; and more sophisticated tools with which to work is that some things that initially may have appeared to have a one-to-one correspondence (or something close to it) were actually common throughout the ancient Near East, or at least in multiple cultures. And historically, practices that were current in one era may have gone out of style for hundreds of years and then come back into practice again.

## Why a New Edition?

Someone identified only as “E.S.B” produced the original translation of the present work. One might ask: “Why a revised translation and new edition?” I undertook revising the English edition because I find Gunkel’s writing of enduring interest. His incisive mind, his broad-ranging knowledge of ancient literatures, and his attentiveness to the oral as well as the scribal in the history of tradition make him a genuine

6. Hallo, “Introduction,” xxv–xxvi; and Hallo, “Compare and Contrast.”

“great” in Old Testament studies. Because of my interest in him, I edited a volume of his essays as part of the series Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies, *Water for a Thirsty Land: Israelite Literature and Religion* (2001). And in recent years translations have finally appeared of *Genesis* (1977), *The Folktale in the Old Testament* (1987), *Introduction to the Psalms* (1998), and *Creation and Chaos* (2006).

Furthermore, the original translation was deficient in a number of respects,<sup>7</sup> especially:

- Phrases and sentences from the German original were inadvertently omitted altogether.
- The English syntax was sometimes allowed to mirror the German syntax, resulting in torturous or confusing sentences.
- The meanings of some German idioms were seriously misconstrued.
- The translator inserted his or her own views directly into the text so that it was not always immediately clear which comments were Gunkel’s and which were those of the translator.

And finally, this volume makes Gunkel’s critique available again. We reprinted Delitzsch’s lectures in our Ancient Near East: Classic Studies series, and it seemed appropriate that we would make one of the most sustained critiques of those lectures available as well.

The reader should note that I have edited Gunkel’s text in a number of ways:

7. This was pointed out by Carus in “Gunkel versus Delitzsch,” 226–27. I will leave it to the reader to decide if I have done a better job.

- While the original German and first English editions both employed transliteration, I have added the Hebrew in parentheses.
- I have added numerous footnotes, preceded by [Ed.] to identify them as editorial. Notes added by the original translator are preceded by [E.S.B.].
- I have constructed a bibliography with three sections:
  - » works Gunkel originally cited—both German and English editions are supplied whenever available;
  - » works I cite in the Foreword and additional notes; and
  - » works related to the Babel–Bible controversy.
- I have added three indexes:
  - » ancient documents;
  - » ancient personal names, divine names, and place names; and
  - » modern authors.
- I have broken Gunkel's work into chapters and provided each with a title as well as adding a few headings.
- I have broken up long sentences and paragraphs.
- I have brought extensive content from Gunkel's notes into the body of the text, where it seemed to make better sense.

- I have used bullet lists in a few places where Gunkel originally had lists in paragraph form.

The original translator did us the favor of providing citations to Delitzsch's lectures both in their German original and in their English translation. The citation in the notes of "II:36–37 [207–8]," for example, refers to volume 2, pages 36–37 in the German, and pages 207–8 in the English translation. I have not preceded each with "Delitzsch."

### *Caveat lector*

The one caveat I wish to make to the reader is that in several places Gunkel makes condescending or otherwise critical comments about modern Judaism that simply cannot be glossed over. I have made a few comments in the notes, but I did not feel it was necessary to flag every instance. This is an unfortunate aspect of Gunkel's attitude, and Susannah Heschel and others have documented what role this played in the church and biblical scholarship leading up to World War II.<sup>8</sup> It would also be unfair to think that only Germans have articulated such anti-Judaism. May it be a reminder to all of us that bigotry against those different from ourselves should not be countenanced.

8. Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*; Ericksen and Heschel, editors, *Betrayal*; Arnold and Weisberg, "A Centennial Review."