2014

“Études Assyriologie and 19th and 20th Century French Historical-Biblical Criticism.”

Jeffrey Morrow, Seton Hall University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jeffrey-morrow/26/
INTRODUCTION

The history of the discipline of Assyriology is often associated with the names of particularly impressive giants in the field from Germany, towering figures like Friedrich Delitzsch and Eberhard Schrader. Prior to German ascendency in later 19th century Assyriology, however, British and French scholars dominated the field and were, in fact, the founders of the discipline itself. In this present article, I hope to shed some light on the early history of French Assyriology. The main figures involved are Jewish and Catholic, and, as we shall see, this is important for the history of biblical scholarship, because one of the figures to whom I devote considerable space below, Alfred Loisy, was, it will be argued, one of the most important figures involved in the widespread appropriation, often uncritically, of historical biblical criticism in the mode of Julius Wellhausen, among Roman Catholic biblical scholars of the 20th century. Thus, although Loisy is not the most significant Assyriologist discussed within the history that follows, he played a prominent role because of his use of Assyriology within his broader historical-critical treatments of the OT at the end of the 19th century and at the dawn of the 20th century.

I begin this article by examining the early history of the discipline of Assyriology in 19th century France. I then turn to a discussion of Loisy’s minor role in late 19th and early 20th century Assyriology. Finally, I discuss Loisy’s importance in terms of using Assyriology to aid in his theological and political agenda of trying to get Catholic scholars to engage fully in Wellhausen-style historical criticism. My argument is that Loisy’s forays in Assyriology were part and parcel of his attempt to revolutionize and transform Roman Catholic biblical exegesis, from its traditional theological approach, to a more critical approach represented primarily by German scholars in the 19th century. This approach involved deconstructing the text of the Bible utilizing both literary hypothetical reconstructions of biblical documentary origins like Wellhausen, but also using comparative ancient Near Eastern documents in a fashion much like the work of Hermann Gunkel, both of whom, Loisy utilized in his biblical works.

FRENCH ASSYRIOLOGY IN CONTEXT

The discipline of Assyriology is rather recent, originating in the first half of the 19th century, although with earlier roots.¹ By the end of the 19th century, German scholarship dominated the field, with many of the early figures in American Assyriology, like Paul Haupt and Hermann Hilprecht, being German scholars, or else like Morris Jastrow (originally from Poland) and Francis Brown, who were trained primarily in Germany (Clay 1921: 333-36; Meade 1974: 21, 28-30, 32, 35, 117, 124; and Eichler 2006: 87-109). The Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, founded in 1898, quickly became a leading organization for the study of Assyriology and the broader ancient Near East (Renger 1979: 158-62; Mathes 1999: 191-208; and Marchand 1996: 195-97, 211-20, 2009: 166-67, 352-53). In addition, 19th century Germany is typically associated with the beginnings of modern historical-biblical criticism, source criticism, and form criticism, which began to dominate biblical scholarship across the globe, outside of some Jewish, Catholic, and evangelical scholarly circles up through World War II. From World War II until the early 1970s, the sorts of biblical scholarship that eschewed Wellhausen’s more skeptical historical-critical mode, waned as the torrent of archaeological discoveries from such places as Mari, Nuzi, Alalakh, Ebla, made the skepticism of the Scriptures less plausible and skeptics appear more irrational (Yamauchi 1994: 1-36; Hoffmeier 1996: 3-17).
When one looks deeper in the history of scholarship, however, Germany emerges as a late comer to modern historical criticism, in its source-critical and more corrosive forms. Within the history of the historical-critical method itself, it would appear that the roots of a number of scholars were in English deistic biblical criticism (Reventlow 1980; Morrow 2013c: 900, 902, 904, 911; Hahn and Wiker 2013: 3-4, 14, 221-22, 283). Scholars like Michael Legaspi and Jonathan Sheehan have underscored especially the work of the 18th century German Bible scholar and Hebrew philologist Johann David Michaelis and how he appropriated English biblical scholarship (Sheehan 2005; Legaspi 2010). The history behind this type of criticism, however, lies even earlier. Moshe Goshen-Gottstein (1983: 376) identified the 17th century, and specifically the works of figures like Isaac La Peyrère, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and Richard Simon as a sort of turning point with their more skeptical biblical-critical methods.

Writing in France, La Peyrère began to utilize extra-biblical sources from across the globe in order to understand human history and origins, and he likewise built upon early Renaissance philological methods in his quest for Pentateuchal origins (Popkin 1987; Morrow 2010a: 270-71; 2010d: 534-35; 2011a: 203-13; 2011c: 1-23; and Pietsch 2012). The English political philosopher Hobbes, perhaps building on La Peyrère’s work prior to publication while the two were in the same intellectual circles in Paris, likewise engaged in what might be viewed as nascent source criticism of the Pentateuch, casting doubt on its Mosaic authorship, and utilizing pagan sources to dismiss certain elements of the NT (Morrow 2010a: 288, 293-96, 298-99; 2010c: 270-71; 2010d: 535-36; 2011b: 33-54; and Hahn and Wiker 2013: 285-338). Spinoza took the work of La Peyrère and Hobbes, both of whom he had read, further, creating a quasi-scientific method for exegesis, attached to a robust bias against the supernatural (Popkin 1996: 383-407; Morrow 2010a: 288, 296-99; 2010b: 7-24; 2010c: 271-72; 2010d: 536-38; 2012-2013: 189-221; and Hahn and Wiker 2013: 339-93). Simon, ostensibly responding to Spinoza, took Spinoza’s work even further by piling up what he thought were problems and contradictions in Scripture in order to justify the necessity of Catholic tradition over and against his Protestant interlocutors. Ultimately, however, Simon’s was a failed attempt to bring into Catholicism Spinoza’s skeptical method, secretly packed in Simon’s Trojan Horse rebuttal of Spinoza (Morrow 2010c: 272; 2010d: 538-39; and Hahn and Wiker 2013: 395-423). German biblical scholars during the 18th century Enlightenment, and later in the 19th century, built upon the foundations laid by such earlier critics who, in contrast to their scholarly progeny, typically did not have institutional support for their work.

As with modern biblical criticism, Germany was likewise a late comer to the field of Assyriology (Meade 1974: 16; Holloway 2002a: 427-28, n. 1; Eichler 2006: 87; and Younger 2006: 208). The discovery of the trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian) Behistun inscription was an important step in the process that would lead to cuneiform’s decipherment. The discovery of cuneiform documents in Persia, in 1765, by Carsten Niebuhr (fig. 1) helped make cuneiform literature public, and was a necessary step leading to its decipherment. By the 19th century, however, the French and British became the dominant forces in the region of Mesopotamia, excavating and studying the ancient remains (Kramer 1963: 7;
The work of the English scholar Austen Henry Layard (fig. 3) was likewise important for Assyriology’s early history. In his 1847 excavations, Layard uncovered thousands of cuneiform tablets in Ashurbanipal’s ancient Assyrian library (Lyon 1896: 126-28; Kramer 1963: 15; Meade 1974: 13-14; Hess 1994: 4; Frahm 2006: 77; Bohrer 2006: 239-40, 242-44, 250; Esposito 2006: 269; and Larsen 2009: 66-81). A number of important Akkadian cuneiform texts were discovered among the finds Layard had uncovered, including fragments from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which included a flood narrative that scholars would compare to the flood account in Genesis. Rawlinson was responsible for identifying a number of these documents, but it was especially the work of George Smith that brought the *Gilgamesh Epic* to the public attention, following the publishing of his discovery.