“Babylon in Paris: Alfred Loisy as Assyriologist.”

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Babylon in Paris: Alfred Loisy as Assyriologist

Alfred Loisy is well known by scholars of the Roman Catholic Modernist controversy for his work in theology and biblical studies, which ended with his excommunication in 1908. His later work in the history of religions is also well known. What is less recognized by scholars is his early work in Assyriology, and in particular the religious texts and traditions of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians. Yet his Assyriological work laid the foundation for his biblical studies and later work in the history of religions. This article situates Loisy’s Assyriological work in the context of the early history of the discipline of Assyriology.

Introduction

Alfred Loisy (1857–1940) is best known as the foremost Roman Catholic modernist.1 The controversy over modernism within the Catholic Church surrounded the use of various modern trends within philosophy and especially historical biblical criticism among Catholic theologians and Bible scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century.2 The official response of the Catholic Church’s magisterium came during the pontificate of Pius X (pope from 1903 to 1914). Since so many of the issues in


the modernist controversy involved Catholic scholars’ appropriation of modern historical biblical criticism and the questioning of traditional assumptions concerning biblical authorship and composition, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, at that time an official organ of the church’s magisterium, came out with a number of official pronouncements, including that the Pentateuch originated with Moses. On 3 July 1907, in its decree, *Lamentabili Sane Exitu*, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition proscribed sixty-five propositions it defined as modernist. Then, on 9 August of the same year, Pius X solemnly condemned modernism as the “synthesis of all heresies” in his papal encyclical, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. On 18 November of that year, Pius formally declared that anyone who refused to submit to the condemnations and proscriptions of *Lamentabili* and *Pascendi* would be excommunicated. Less than four months later, on 7 March 1908, Pius X solemnly excommunicated Loisy.

The history of Loisy’s excommunication is well known to scholars of Roman Catholic modernism. A number of his publications just prior to his excommunication dealt with the development of Christian doctrines, a developmental process he found operative already in the New Testament. After his excommunication, Loisy turned to study the origins of Christianity within the broader discourse of the History of Religions. Most Loisy scholars thus focus on his theological works and emphasise his developmental approach to the history of Christianity and of Christian doctrines. What remains virtually unknown to Loisy scholars and scholars of Roman Catholic modernism is Loisy’s earlier work in Assyriology, which provided the foundation for his work in biblical studies. Thus, in this article, I discuss Loisy as Assyriologist. Even though Loisy’s work in Assyriology was not among the most significant of his time, it paved the way for his use of a comparative method that would typify his later studies. I use “Assyriology” here to designate the study of ancient Mesopotamia, although occasionally I will use the more recent term “Sumerology” to refer to the study specifically of ancient Sumer.

I begin this article by situating the discipline of Assyriology in nineteenth-century France within the context of the history of the discipline itself. I turn next to Loisy’s Assyriological studies and his interest in pursuing research in the then relatively new academic field. Finally, I examine some of Loisy’s publications in Assyriology. Loisy’s Assyriological context has been neglected in Loisy scholarship, and thus, this article is an attempt at filling in this lacuna. Loisy’s forays in Assyriology added a certain depth to his biblical studies by

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