

## Bible Review

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### Mad to See the Monuments

How ancient Assyria saved Victorian Bible scholarship

By Steven W. Holloway

In August of 1847, the British Museum mounted the first major display of Assyrian antiquities in England. For a year, the public had pored over sketches from Austen Henry Layard's Mesopotamian excavations in the *Illustrated London News*. Now, it was possible to inspect the impassive, chiseled faces of the Assyrian kings during a comfortable excursion to the London museum. Victorian visitors could sate their curiosity at the knees—literally—of colossal human-headed bulls torn from the great palaces of Nimrud and Nineveh.

The exhibition was a phenomenal success. Samuel Birch, a British Museum officer and later the first president of the Society of Biblical Archaeology (no relation of the Biblical Archaeology Society, the American publisher of this magazine), wrote Layard in 1849: "All the world is mad to see the monuments—and the cry is 'the bulls—the bulls.'"

It was not simply the novelty of the sculptures that attracted the crowds, but the triumphant recognition—as the curious wedge-shaped cuneiform inscriptions came to be deciphered—that these were the very Assyrian kings thundered against by the prophets of the Old Testament: Shalmaneser, Tiglath-pileser, Sargon, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon were all represented in stone. One monument—a black basalt obelisk bearing scenes of tribute to Shalmaneser III—included a portrait of the biblical king Jehu. The Black Obelisk provided the modern world with its first visual witness, outside the Bible, to an Israelite king. England thus acquired a powerful weapon in the battle against "higher criticism," the school of biblical scholarship created in Germany that, in

the 18th and 19th century, was questioning the historicity of more and more of the Bible.

Archibald Henry Sayce, a distinguished Oxford Bible scholar and a critic of higher criticism, noted the growing interest in this German school in the opening lines of his 1893 work, *The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments*:



*British Museum*

*Two colossal human-headed lions guard the entrance to the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II's (883–859 B.C.E.) shrine to the warlike deity Ninurta, in Nimrud (biblical Calah), in modern Iraq. The statues were excavated by the intrepid British explorer Austen Henry Layard, who worked in Mesopotamia from 1845 to 1851. British artist Frederick Cooper, who accompanied Layard, captured the discovery in watercolor.*

*Layard shipped several statues back to the British Museum, which sponsored his excavations, including a similar 10-foot-tall, 3-ton bull statue (see photo of bull statue; note the hooves) from a palace of Ashurnasirpal II. The British public was stunned, not so much by the beauty of the sculptures (the museum's Elgin marbles from Athens set the standard for artistic merit), but by their antiquity, their scale and, most importantly, their potential to corroborate biblical history. Layard's discoveries arrived just in time to assist conservative British theologians in a debate with their more radical German counterparts, who were questioning more and more of the history recorded in the Bible.*

What do we mean by the "higher criticism" of the Old Testament? It is a phrase which has passed from books of a forbiddingly scientific nature, to the popular literature of a railway bookstall and the articles of a monthly review. We hear it over the dinner-table; it is used not only in the lecture-room, but in the drawing-room as well. Like several other modern importations from Germany, it has been found to supply a want, and has accordingly made its way into the current language of England.

Sayce went on to define higher criticism:

By the higher criticism is meant a critical inquiry into the nature, origin, and date of the documents [the biblical texts] with which we are dealing, as well as into the historical value and credibility of the statements which they contain. The two lines of inquiry depend a good deal one upon the other. The degree of credibility we may assign to a particular narrative will largely depend upon the length of time which has elapsed between the period when it was written and the period when the event it records actually took place, and consequently upon the date of the document in which it is found.<sup>1</sup>

The Enlightenment in the 18th century had witnessed a shift in attitudes toward religious authority that compelled biblical specialists to challenge many touchstones of their faith. Higher criticism, as Sayce noted, subjected the Bible to the same kind of scientific inquiry, rational analysis and empiricism that was then being applied to the rest of nature. Miracle stories, the concept of divine inspiration, and the identification of Moses as author of the Pentateuch all came under rational investigation and, according to the higher critics, fell short.



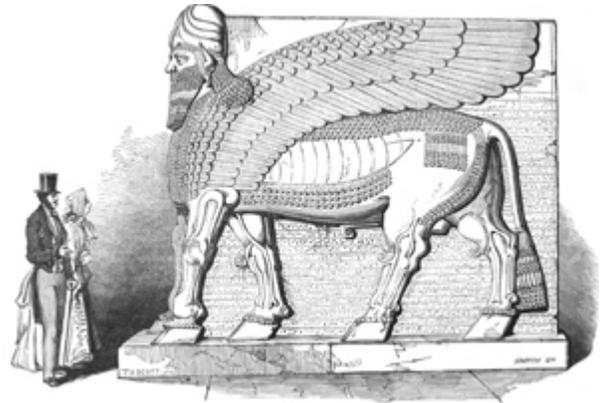
England did have its deists, active between 1690 and 1750, who rejected as superstitious numerous stock elements of biblical belief such as miracle stories. (Deists accept religious elements that can be explained through reason.) However, the number of publishing deists in the British Isles was few, and their ideas did not penetrate deeply into the social milieu. The intellectual currents that would culminate in German higher criticism, on the other hand, originated in the extensive university system with its tradition of textual and philological rigor. The German higher criticism thus achieved broad public visibility and gained many adherents.

*British Museum  
Mesopotamian bull statue (compare with watercolor depicting Ashurnasirpal II's shrine).*

Higher criticism was part of a much larger current of Enlightenment exploration among German Protestant theologians. Between 1740 and 1790, the leading proponents within the field of biblical studies were Johann Salomo Semler and Johann David Michaelis, both of whom belonged to the school of thought known as Neology, meaning "new speech" or "new science"—a rubric coined to indicate the adherents' tendency to adopt nontraditional and rationalistic views in theology. Between the 1790s and 1840s, German Rationalism developed in response to the writings of the philosopher Immanuel Kant and dominated the field of biblical studies. Protestant theologians all, the Neologists tended to accept miracle stories of the New Testament as validating the authority of Christ, whereas the later Rationalists laid greater emphasis on morality and sought naturalistic (rational) explanations for events like the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus.

Both German Neologists and Rationalists attributed the Pentateuch to the work of multiple authors and editors, and they were keen to identify the sources either used by these authors or created in the course of their editorial work (redaction). The critics relied on the same kinds of evidence used by modern biblical scholars engaged in source criticism: narrative discontinuities, repetitions, chronological inconsistencies and the use of different names for the Israelite God. Again, both Neologists and Rationalists

illuminated the Bible through comparison with classical sources, Patristics (writings of the church fathers) and travelers' tales, which included reports and illustrations of Oriental ruins. The palace of Xerxes at Persepolis, for example, was linked to the Old Testament narratives about Persian kings and palaces in the books of Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah.



*Illustrated London News*

***"The countenance is noble and benevolent in expression," reads the news story accompanying this sketch of a proper Victorian gentleman and his lady gazing in awe at a great stone bull in the British Museum. Published on October 26, 1850, the sketch was one of many relating to Layard's dig to appear in the Illustrated London News, a popular news magazine of the day and one of the first British periodicals to include engravings of the Assyrian finds.***

***The news story continues with a clinical description of the statue: "The features are of true Persian type: he wears an egg-shaped cap, with three horns, and a cord round the base of it...The elaborately sculptured wings extend over the back of the animal to the very verge of the slab. All the flat surface of the slab is covered in cuneiform inscription; there being 22 lines between the forelegs, 21 lines in the middle, 19 lines between the hind legs and 47 lines between the tail and the edge of the slab..." Although the Victorian newspaper could not have known it, the inscription included a standard description of the king's titles, ancestry and achievements.***

Today, when scholars discuss the multiple authors whose work has been woven together in the Bible, they often credit the groundbreaking research in the mid- to late 19th century of Julius Wellhausen and Karl Graf, whose documentary hypothesis identified four source texts (the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomistic and Priestly sources) woven together in the Pentateuch.<sup>1</sup> But in truth, some of the credit should go instead to the German Rationalists and Neologists working decades before Wellhausen.

In 1780 Johann Gottfried Eichhorn posited two sources for [Genesis 1–11](#)—an Elohim source and a Jehovah source (Jehovah being a misvocalization for the sacred name YHWH made common in Reformation-era Bible translations)—based on the two names used for God throughout these chapters.<sup>2</sup> Eichhorn also separated the history found in Samuel and Kings from that in Chronicles and dated the latter to the post-Exilic period (post 539 B.C.E.) based on the late linguistic forms found in the text and the book's elaborate demonology and angelology, in which he detected Persian influence.

Literary differences in prophetic literature were also identified as the work of different writers brought together by later editors. In 1780, Johann Benjamin Koppe claimed that [Isaiah 40–66](#) was written during the Babylonian Exile, a position widely espoused by

late Victorian and 20th-century scholarship (although today this dating is increasingly challenged).<sup>3</sup>

In the early 19th century, Wilhelm M.L. de Wette argued that much of the material in Genesis-Numbers was unhistorical (anachronistic). The comprehensive legal system, sacrificial cult and priesthood associated with Moses were actually products of the Exilic period that had been retrojected into the Mosaic era. He found that Chronicles was too late to include reliable information about Israelite religion during the time of the monarchy. De Wette, like the church father Jerome centuries earlier, identified Deuteronomy as the book discovered when the late-seventh-century king Josiah was making repairs to the Temple (according to [2 Kings 22](#)). Thus de Wette concluded that Deuteronomy, which institutes the written law and establishes a central sanctuary in Jerusalem, reflected events and cultic regulations from the late monarchic period.<sup>4</sup>

Deuteronomy was further identified as the beginning of a literary process that was to conclude with the formal priestly religion enshrined in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Thus, Wellhausen's Deuteronomistic and Priestly sources were foreshadowed, in chronological order, without being named as such. By the early 19th century, adherents of the German higher critical approaches believed that writings that had once been attributed to Moses were actually the work of several authors and editors dating no earlier than the Israelite monarchy.

Word of this radical German biblical criticism reached England in the late 18th century. But it did not receive a prominent airing until the 1820s, when the Anglican divine Edward B. Pusey excoriated the German scholar Michaelis (as well as Eichhorn and de Wette) for his "perverted applications of mere civil, often of modern, principles, unfounded theories and low views."<sup>5</sup>

British shock over this treatment of Holy Writ had far less to do with the redating of biblical texts, however, than with the willingness to question and reject traditional dogmas of church belief. If the world we inhabit is devoid of miracles, a credo of the Enlightenment, then Moses did not part the Red Sea by supernatural intervention. Once skepticism in the literal historical reading of the Bible took root in the academy, the training ground for tomorrow's clergy, where would it end?<sup>6</sup>

Moderate British churchmen struggled to promote a counter-educational program that appealed to reason without offending conventional piety. Popular commentaries were generated for lay consumption, and the young were taught in Sunday schools to resist the allure of skepticism.

Nevertheless, German higher criticism continued to gain ground, and the offended British intelligentsia cast about for ways to protect the traditional dogmas of inspiration and scriptural infallibility.

Enter the monuments.

In the 1840s, Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894) had succeeded in coaxing a pittance from the British Museum trustees to excavate Nimrud (biblical Calah) and other sites in central and southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). By 1847 Layard had uncovered the remains of Assyrian palaces and temples at Nimrud and Nineveh, and he began to ship the finds to London. Back in England, he prepared a travelogue complete with sketches and watercolors of the vistas he had encountered in the exotic Orient. The shrewd London publisher John Murray, scenting a best-seller marketable to both the finest London salons and the middle-class railway patron, commissioned master engravers to turn Layard's artwork into "scientifically" formal illustrations of Assyrian palace reliefs, floor plans, engaging landscapes and action scenes of local tribesmen laboring at the excavation face or struggling like pack animals to drag enormous sculptures to the Tigris River. *Nineveh and Its Remains* mesmerized the public,<sup>7</sup> becoming England's archaeology bestseller of the mid-19th century.<sup>8</sup>



*British Museum*

***The man behind the monuments. Dressed in the traditional garb of Iran's fierce Bakhtiari tribe, with whom he lived for a year, Austen Henry Layard was posted at the British Embassy in Istanbul when artist Amedeo Preziosi, a Maltese nobleman, completed this watercolor portrait in April 1843.***

***Born in Paris (to British parents) in 1817, and raised in Switzerland and Italy, Layard studied law before he set out as a young man in 1839 to work in Ceylon. Distracted by the antiquities he saw as he traveled through the Near East, Layard never reached India. Instead, he became a British diplomatic agent in Istanbul. At the embassy in 1842, Layard briefed the British ambassador Stratford Canning on border conditions between Persia and Turkey; the ambassador was so impressed with the young adventurer that he agreed to sponsor Layard's first excavations at ancient Nimrud (biblical Calah) in 1845; the British government would later provide financial support. In 1849, with the museum's assistance, Layard also excavated Nineveh. By 1850, at age 33, his career as an excavator had ended. He died in 1894.***

The British public's breathless enthusiasm for the monuments from Bible lands had radical origins in the English soil.<sup>9</sup> In the 17th and 18th centuries, antiquarians surveyed, sketched and wove theories about the prehistoric relics that dot the English landscape, occasionally linking them with a mythical Christian past. By the late 18th century, the English Gothic Revival movement began to record the nation's historical fabric in precision drawings and engravings, gratifying nationalistic pride in Britain's own material legacy, a legacy easily extended to the Bible. British travelogues of Middle

Eastern countries multiplied in the early 19th century, whetting readers' passions to "inhabit," imaginatively or literally, the Bible lands of the Orient. If the average family could not book passage for a protracted visit to Palestine (Thomas Cook's famous Holy Land Tours began only in 1869), it could at least afford an oversized Bible lavishly illustrated with factual and detailed drawings of regional livery, flora and fauna, architecture, and other items "scientifically" representative of local color.



*British Museum*

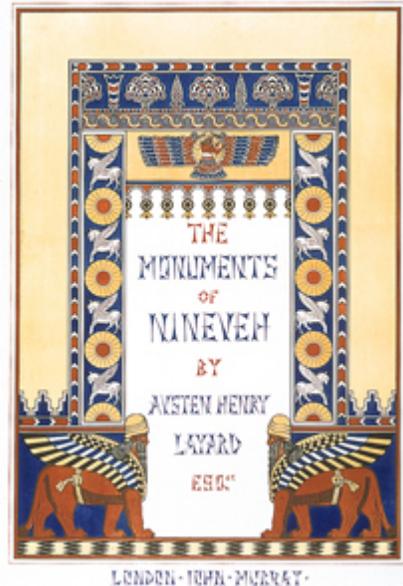
***Nimrud-on-the-Tigris. King Ashurnasirpal's spectacular capital provides the backdrop for shepherds relaxing on the riverbank and boaters drifting by. The dreamy cityscape, which combines Assyrian, Persian, Greco-Roman and purely imaginary architectural details, includes a stepped ziggurat (at left) and palace buildings (at right). The watercolor was published in 1849 in Layard's Monuments of Nineveh—a more elaborately illustrated, more expensive and much larger (elephant folio) follow-up to his popular book, The Remains of Nineveh (compare with photo of Monuments of Nineveh).***

***The careful documentation of Layard's findings in these heavily illustrated books, along with the British Museum's exhibition, endowed his "biblical finds" with an air of scientific respectability.***

The fabulous 19th-century market for heavily illustrated Protestant Bibles in England and especially America bespoke a growing conviction that the Bible was trustworthy as a travel guide to the ancient (and modern) oriental world. Reading the Bible in isolation no longer satisfied: Information about the Holy Land and surrounding Bible lands became the necessary picklock to open hidden doors to scriptural truth. One advertiser wrote:

It is indispensable that the [Bible] reader, as far as possible, separate himself from the ordinary associations, and put himself, by a kind of mental transmigration, into the very circumstance of the writers. He must set himself down in the midst of oriental scenery...In a word, he must surround himself with, and transfuse himself into, all the forms, habitudes, and usages of oriental life. In this way only can he catch the sources of their imagery, or enter into full communion with the genius of the sacred penmen.<sup>10</sup>

Layard's book and the British Museum exhibits of Assyrian antiquities pandered, directly or indirectly, to these same needs, with notable exceptions. Visitors to the exhibits saw more than artifacts torn from their original locales. They witnessed and participated directly in the modern construction of the past through empirical methods and scientific narration. Was biblical prophecy true? Come to the British Museum and gaze on the face of Sennacherib, or observe the siege of Lachish captured in contemporary palace sculptures, extracted from Nineveh, whose spectacular downfall so entranced the prophet Nahum. Is the British Empire superior to the French? Of course it is: The finest Assyrian ruins outside the Ottoman Empire fill the crowded halls of the British Museum in London, not the Louvre in Paris! And British evangelicals now possessed a sort of forensic proof of the existence of Assyrian kings mentioned in the Bible, and even biblical events themselves—public proof visible to any museum-goer or reader of an illustrated periodical, not just dry theories locked away in the Ivory Tower.<sup>b</sup>

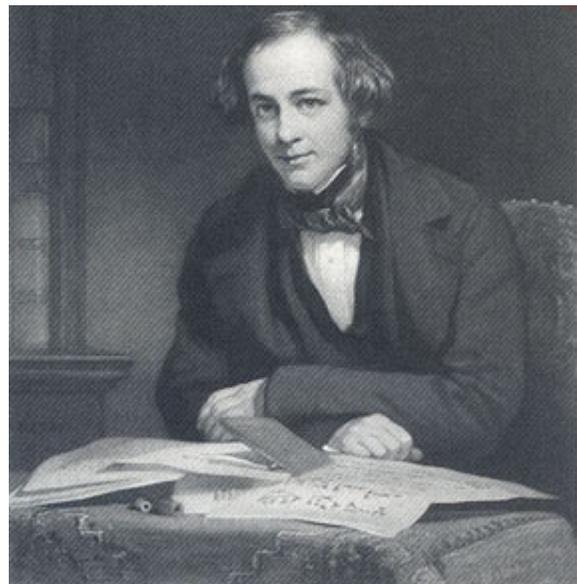


*British Museum  
Austen Henry Layard's  
Monuments of Nineveh  
(compare with watercolor  
depicting Nimrud's capital).*

Two Oxford dons—Sayce and George Rawlinson—promoted the monuments movement vigorously.

*British Museum*

***The brothers Rawlinson. Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810–1895; shown here) was a major with the British East India Company stationed in Baghdad when Layard began sending him inscriptions in Akkadian (the language, in cuneiform script, used by the Babylonians and Assyrians) from Nimrud and Nineveh. As Henry deciphered the tablets and monumental inscriptions, he provided his younger brother George (1812–1902; see photo of George Rawlinson), the Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, with translations.***



George Rawlinson (1812–1902), Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford University, had the uncanny good fortune to be the brother of Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, the celebrated English decipherer of Akkadian (Assyro-Babylonian) cuneiform.<sup>11</sup> In 1843, Henry Rawlinson was appointed Political Agent in Turkish Arabia, with headquarters in Baghdad. This gave him oversight of the British excavations in Mesopotamia in the 1840s and 1850s, and significant influence over Samuel Birch and other officers of the British Museum. Henry Rawlinson used his position to exercise a near monopoly over the bulk of the cuneiform texts coming out of Mesopotamia. Henry was eager to interpret the Assyrian inscriptions in terms of the received portrait of the Bible, and he provided his brother George with translations, historical syntheses and other late-breaking news of the ancient Near East.

In 1859 George Rawlinson was invited to deliver Oxford's prestigious annual Bampton Lectures. Rawlinson told his audience that in his lectures, he would meet that latest phase of modern unbelief, which profess[es] a reverence for the name and person of Christ, and a real regard for the Scriptures as embodiments of what is purest and holiest in religious feeling...by denying the historical character of the Biblical narrative. German Neology (as it is called) has of late years taken chiefly this line of attack.<sup>12</sup>

Moving through the Bible chronologically, George used copious illustrations from the monuments to demonstrate the literal truth of the Scriptures.

The decipherment of Assyrian inscriptions bearing the names of the antediluvian Mesopotamian cities Babylon, Uruk, Akkad, Nineveh and Calah, mentioned in [Genesis 10](#), bears out the historicity of the biblical account, Rawlinson claimed. German dismissal of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as anachronistic on the basis of the lateness of the invention of writing rests on false grounds, since both Egyptian and Mesopotamian inscriptions can be dated to the mid-third millennium B.C.E.



*Trinity College Archive, Oxford University*  
**George Rawlinson (1812–1902, compare with photo of Henry Creswicke Rawlinson). The Rawlinson family coat of arms appears at top left in this portrait of George. George used his brother's findings in his efforts to demonstrate the literal truth of the Bible. For George, the Black Obelisk (compare with photo of black obelisk), a 7-foot-tall, black stone monolith discovered by Layard at Nimrud in 1846 and now in the British Museum, suggested the veracity of the Old Testament's account of the divided monarchy of Israel.**



The empires ascribed to David and Solomon find their closest parallel in the great Mesopotamian empires, whose records indicate that they “were in all cases composed of a number of separate kingdoms, each under its own native king.” For Rawlinson, this confirmed the description of the political situation in [1 Kings 4:21](#): “Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the borders of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.” The layout and ornamentation of Solomon’s Temple is corroborated by examples of Phoenician craftsmanship recovered from Assyria, plus numerous architectural details of native temples and palaces in Mesopotamia and Iran. “The height of the Persepolitan columns [from Xerxes’s Hall of One Hundred Columns at Persepolis], which is forty-five feet, almost exactly equals the ‘thirty cubits’ of Solomon’s house,” Rawlinson noted.

*British Museum*

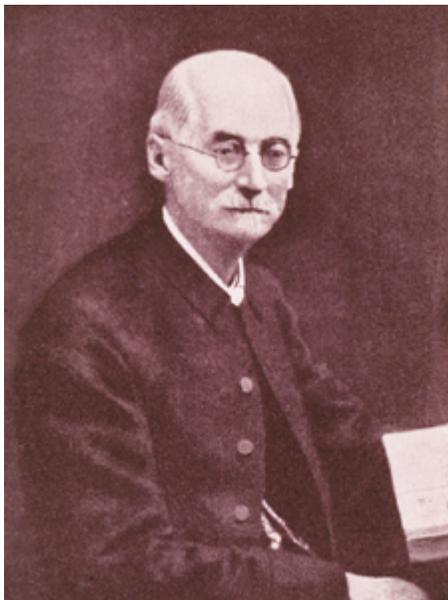
***Dating to 841 B.C.E., this monument commemorates the military campaigns of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser (859–825 B.C.E.), whose royal seat was Nimrud. Each side bears images of tribute to the king. The second tier down on the side shown here depicts an Israelite king (or his emissary) kneeling before the Assyrian leader. The inscription identifies the figure as “Yaw, son of Omri.” Omri ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel in the early ninth century B.C.E. Yaw is often identified as King Jehu of Israel (c. 841–818 B.C.E.) and sometimes as King Joram of Israel (c. 850–841 B.C.E.), a grandson of Omri. For George Rawlinson (compare with portrait of George Rawlinson), the identification of the later king as a “son of Omri” indicated the accuracy of the description in [1 Kings 16](#) of Omri as head of a dynasty.***

Rawlinson used several Assyrian inscriptions as illustrations of the Divided Monarchy. The famous Black Obelisk depicts Jehu of Israel ([2 Kings 9](#)) and labels the Kingdom of Israel as *Bit Humri*, or House (Dynasty) of Omri, thus identifying the history of the nation with Omri, whose dynasty is established in [1 Kings 16](#). “Monuments” of all the biblical Assyrian kings (except Pul, [2 Kings 15:19/1 Chronicles 5:26](#); and Osnappar, [Ezra 4:10](#)) have been discovered, “and these in some cases are sufficiently full to exhibit a close agreement with the sacred narrative, while throughout they harmonize with the tenor of that narrative, only in one or two cases so differing from the Hebrew text as to cause any difficulty.” For Rawlinson, the scientific basis of his attack on German higher criticism (and irreligion, as he saw it) served as its seal of authenticity.

The enterprising publisher John Murray, who had mass-marketed Layard’s Assyriological discoveries, did the same with George Rawlinson’s findings. Much of what Rawlinson said in his lecture had already appeared in his edition of the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek historian Herodotus, published by Murray. Now Murray encouraged Rawlinson to incorporate this same material in a sweeping history of the ancient world: *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World; or, the History, Geography, and*

*Antiquities of Chaldaea, Assyria, Babylonia, Media, and Persia, Collected and Illustrated from Ancient and Modern Sources.* (This was reproduced in *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, which added the Parthian and Sassanian empires to the list.)<sup>13</sup> The *Monarchies* volumes were lavishly adorned with hundreds of attractive engravings based on palace reliefs, sculpture in the round, small artifacts and panoramic sketches. Through these books, which remained in print for almost 50 years, Rawlinson's counterassault on German higher criticism gained a wide audience and spawned many imitators.

It is Rawlinson's younger colleague, Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933), however, who became best known for his use of biblical archaeology against the corrosive influence of German higher criticism. A Church of England curate and professor of comparative philology and Assyriology at Oxford, Sayce was a leading Semiticist and Middle Eastern historian in Victorian England.<sup>14</sup> Like Rawlinson, Sayce sought to stem the encroachment of German-based higher criticism through a blizzard of semi-popular works on Old Testament themes, including *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments* (1883), *The Life and Times of Isaiah as Illustrated by Contemporary Monuments* (1889), *The Races of the Old Testament* (1891), *The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments* (1893), *Patriarchal Palestine* (1895) and *Early Israel and the Surrounding Nations* (1899).<sup>15</sup> Unlike George Rawlinson, who was Akkadian-illiterate and thus forced to rely solely on his brother Henry's readings of the monuments, Sayce provided his own translations based upon years of close readings of the texts.



*British Museum*

***An Oxford Don and a curate in the Church of England, Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) helped prepare the Old Testament books for the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. He also excavated at Meroë, the capital of ancient Ethiopia; served as president of England's Society of Biblical Archaeology for more than 20 years; and defended the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in his book *The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments* (1894).***

***Sayce was among the first scholars to identify the biblical king Pul, mentioned in the Book of Kings, as Tiglath-pileser III, the Assyrian king who greatly expanded his empire's borders during his reign from 745 to 727 B.C.E. (See photo of Tiglath-pileser relief.)***

In *The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments*, Sayce not only glossed gross similarities between the Bible and ancient Near Eastern texts, he also made numerous, shrewd observations. He noted, for instance, that the biblical spelling *Tiglath-pileser* ([2 Kings 15:29](#)) for the royal Assyrian name *Tukulti-apal-esharra* (ruled 745–727 B.C.E.) differs from the original Akkadian spelling, but is identical to the spelling in Aramaic

inscriptions produced by a contemporaneous vassal of the Assyrian king. This indicated that the biblical author had access to records from the mid-eighth century B.C.E. Similarly, the discovery of an Aramaic economic text at Nineveh bears out the historicity of the Israelite palace officials' plea, in [2 Kings 18](#), that an Assyrian official, called the Rabshakeh, address them in Aramaic. When the Rabshakeh threatens that Sennacherib will destroy Jerusalem, the Israelite officials say, "Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people." The passage in Kings, Sayce suggested, reflects the biblical author's knowledge that Aramaic was "the commercial language of the civilised East, the medium of intercourse among the educated classes of the Assyrian empire."



*British Museum*

***The relief shows Tiglath-pileser riding in triumph in his chariot. The king wears a royal turban and fringed robe and holds a lotus blossom in his left hand. Dating to about 730 B.C.E., the relief was discovered by Layard in secondary use in Esarhaddon's palace at Nimrud.***

***Both Assyrian records and the Bible describe Tiglath-pileser's incursions in the West. According to [2 Kings 15:29](#), for example, "In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead and Galilee." A few verses earlier, we read, however, that "King Pul of Assyria came against the land; Menahem [king of Israel] gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, so that he might help him confirm his hold on the royal power...So the king of Assyria turned back, and did not stay there in the land" ([2 Kings 15:19-20](#)).***

Sayce did not deny the possibility that the biblical sources contained factual errors. Like other proponents of the monuments movement, he admitted that the internal regnal chronology of Kings was incoherent and that Neo-Assyrian inscriptions could be used to correct the historical shortcomings of the biblical authors.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, for Sayce, the monuments provided evidence of the essential "good faith of the compiler of the Book of Kings" and the basic trustworthiness of the biblical documents.<sup>17</sup>

The work of Sayce, George Rawlinson and Layard was mirrored and augmented by the influential Society of Biblical Archaeology founded in London in December 1870. Its members were enjoined, in the words of its first president, Samuel Birch, "to collect from the fast-perishing monuments of the Semitic and cognate races illustrations of

their history and peculiarities; to investigate and systematize the antiquities of the ancient and mighty empires and primeval peoples, whose records are centered around the venerable pages of the Bible."<sup>18</sup>

Between 1873 and 1878, the society published *Records of the Past: Being English Translations of the Ancient Monuments of Egypt and Western Asia*, in 12 slender volumes, the ancestor of all such anthologies of Bible-related texts in translation. Included were translations of annals and display texts from the Neo-Assyrian palaces, votive inscriptions, administrative and economic texts, myths and epics, eponym canons (name lists compiled for the dating of years), exorcisms, astrological reports, prayers and omens (lists of ominous natural events and their interpretation). A revised edition produced by Sayce between 1888 and 1892 added the newly discovered cuneiform correspondence of the 14th-century B.C.E. pharaohs Amenhotep and Akhenaten from Tell el-Amarna, Egypt; the ninth-century B.C.E. Moabite Stone, with its reference to a Moabite rebellion against Israel; and the Siloam Tunnel inscription, documenting the completion, in the late eighth century B.C.E., of Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem.

From this point forward, any inhabitant of the British Isles could own a copy of the monuments and park it in the parlor next to the family Bible for ready reference.

The defense against attacks on the historical, chronological and linguistic accuracy of the Bible by the mounting popularity of German-based higher criticism set a premium on visual and experiential confirmation of the truthfulness of the Bible, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. But this yearning for a religious certitude sealed by the monuments concealed a host of anxieties that could never be dispelled by the "assured results" of biblical archaeology. Even George Rawlinson was forced to confess that there were points where the monuments failed his apologetic purpose. Most of his arguments against the source-critical atomization of the higher critics had used specious apples-and-oranges examples based on ancient Near Eastern "parallels." For example, he argued that the Pentateuch is Mosaic in authorship. His evidence: Non-Hebrew texts were certainly composed in the putative Mosaic era as shown by cuneiform tablets and Egyptian hieroglyphics; Mesopotamian geography mentioned in the Bible can be verified by contemporary Mesopotamian sources; select elements of patriarchal culture are paralleled in the history of other Bronze Age civilizations. Ergo, concluded Rawlinson, the Pentateuch is not a monarchic or Exilic compilation, but is staunchly Mosaic in dating and composition. In their reliance on "parallelomania," Rawlinson and his successors succumbed to the temptation to oversimplify both the biblical texts and the archaeological evidence, distorting both in the illusory quest to anchor religious confessionality in museum exhibits and the leading academic hypotheses of the moment.

Paradox: By entering into the debate with German higher critics, the English theologians allowed that there was something to debate. In arguing, they were forced to employ the same kind of rational argumentation used by their opponents.

In the end, devotees of higher criticism pitted one set of rational arguments against the counter-rational arguments generated from ancient Near Eastern antiquities and their relation to biblical texts. Result: noisy stalemate. Reason provided no anodyne for a crisis in biblical faith, the spoken and implicit goal of the monuments movement.

The incorporation of the monuments into English confessional Bible religion (whether dissenter, Catholic, Church of England or Jewish) not only bolstered traditional assumptions about the timeless truths of biblical history but also accelerated the shift in worldview toward what we today call modernism and secularization.

Higher criticism used rational arguments geared to promote Christian faith (remember, all the major German higher critics were confessing Protestant theologians) by establishing textual sources and burning off the dross of perceived mythologies and supernaturalisms embedded in the Bible, stumbling blocks to Christian faith for the modern Enlightened mind. Biblical archaeologists and their followers assumed that a correspondence between the narrative history of the Bible and ancient Near Eastern artifacts exists, and that one sheds light on the other. This presumption of truth by scientifically generated "facts," a form of forensic evidence, also rests on rationalistic arguments, and is equally welcome to Enlightenment-bred sensibilities regarding the nature of trustworthy knowledge based on reason, coherence and logic.

The future history of higher criticism and biblical archaeology bears out these observations. By the middle of the 20th century, major players like William F. Albright and G. Ernest Wright, spokesmen for the American biblical theology movement and the most celebrated biblical archaeologists of their day, accepted variants of the basic documentary hypothesis (JEDP) and acceded to the dating of the Pentateuch's final redaction in the Exilic period. They modified elements of German higher criticism, yet all the while making extensive use of the theories in their reconstructions of Israel's past. The lion's share of their disciples followed suit. On the other hand, contemporary German scholars of the stature of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth made sustained, skillful use of biblical archaeology in their profoundly influential reconstructions of Israelite history.

Today, biblical archaeologists and biblical critics in most western countries inhabit the same institutions of higher learning, whether colleges, universities or theological seminaries. Often, they are collegially employed within the same department and, not infrequently, are one and the same person. The "monuments" and devotees of biblical higher criticism, for the moment, maintain a quarrelsome but committed partnership.

Endnotes:

1. Archibald Henry Sayce, *The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments*, 5th edition (London: SPCK, 1895).

2. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung ins Alte Testament*, 2nd rev. and enlarged edition (Leipzig: Bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1787), p. 349ff.

3. Johann Benjamin Koppe, D. *Robert Lowth's Lord Bishops zu London: Jesaias neu übersetzt nebst einer Einleitung und critischen philologischen und erläuternden Anmerkungen* (Leipzig: Bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1779–1781), vol. 3, p. 206.

4. Wilhelm M.L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Halle: Schimmelpfennig, 1806–1807).

5. Edward B. Pusey, *Historical Enquiry into the Probable Causes of the Rationalist Character Lately Predominant in the Theology of Germany* (1828). Cited in John W. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 167.

6. Despite the influential nature of these views, the reader should not come away with the notion that the German theological academy was entirely dominated by the works of the Neologists and Rationalists. Many conservative Protestant biblical scholars, particularly confessing Lutherans, took grave exception to these ideas, writing powerful attacks against the authors and, in some instances, securing the dismissals of their adversaries from German institutions of higher learning.

7. Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil-Worshippers; and an Inquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians* (London: John Murray, 1849).

8. Frederick N. Bohrer, s.v. "Austen Henry Layard," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), vol. 3, p. 338.

9. On the social ramifications of the recovery of ancient Assyria in the 20th century, see Bohrer, "A New Antiquity: The English Reception of Assyria" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Chicago, 1989); Mogens Trolle Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land 1840–1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Steven W. Holloway, "Biblical Assyria and Other Anxieties in the British Empire," *Journal of Religion & Society* (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2001/2001-12.html>); and Holloway, *Asûsûur Is King! Asûsûur Is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East Series, vol. 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, forthcoming) appendix one, and the bibliography cited therein.

10. Nineteenth-century advertisement used by the American-based Brattleboro Typographic Company, quoted in Paul G. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: a History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 64.

11. On the life of this obscure figure, see Ronald Bayne, "Rawlinson, George (1812–1902)," in *Dictionary of National Biography, Twentieth Century, January 1901–December 1911*, supplement, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), vol. 3, pp. 165–167. George Rawlinson's works include *The Kings of Israel and Judah, Men of the Bible* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1889); *A Manual of Ancient History, from the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire, Comprising the History of Chaldaea, Assyria, Media, Babylonia, Lydia, Phoenicia, Syria, Judaea, Egypt, Carthage, Persia, Greece, Macedonia, Parthia, and Rome* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878); *The Historical Evidences of the Truth of the Scripture Records Stated Anew, with Special Reference to the Doubts and Discoveries of Modern Times: In Eight Lectures Delivered in the Oxford University Pulpit, in the Year 1859, on the Bampton Foundation* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1868); "Early Oriental History [review of F. Lenormant, *Manuel d'histoire ancienne de l'Orient jusqu'aux guerres médiques*]," *The Contemporary Review* 14 (April–July 1870), pp. 80–100; "Assyria," in *Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible; Comprising Its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and National History*, ed. Horatio B. Hackett and Ezra Abbot (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), vol. 1, pp. 185–191; *The Origin of Nations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881); *The Religions of the Ancient World, Including Egypt, Phoenicia, Assyria and Babylonia, Etruria, Persia, Greece, India, Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883); *A Memoir of Major-General Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1898); and *The History of Herodotus* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1859).

12. The lectures were published as Rawlinson, *Historical Evidences*. Subsequent quotations are from this volume.

13. George Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World; or, the History, Geography, and Antiquities of Chaldaea, Assyria, Babylonia, Media, and Persia, Collected and Illustrated from Ancient and Modern Sources*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1862–1867, rev. ed. 1871, repr. 1873, 1879, 1881, 1900); subsequently reproduced in *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World* (London: John Murray, 1876, 1884, 1885, 1890, 1900).

14. See E.A. Wallis Budge, *Rise and Progress of Assyriology* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1925; repr. New York: AMS, 1975), pp. 185–188; Stephen H. Langdon, "Archibald Henry Sayce," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 8 (1932–1933), pp. 341–342; Langdon, "Archibald Henry Sayce as Assyriologist," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1933), pp. 499–503; Battiscomb George Gunn, "Sayce, Archibald Henry (1845–1933)," in *The Dictionary of National Biography: 1931–1940*, ed. L.G.W. Legg (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), , pp. 786a–788b.

15. See B.Z. MacHaffie, "'Monumental Facts and Higher Critical Fancies': Archaeology and the Popularization of Old Testament Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Church History* 50 (1981), pp. 323–328.

16. Sayce wrote, for example: "The cuneiform annals of Tiglath-pileser have swept away all these ingenious schemes [of synchronization]. The Biblical chronology must be rejected, and the synchronisms established by the compiler must be regarded as based on an erroneous calculation of dates" (*Higher Criticism*, p. 406).

17. For a concrete example of the dilemma posed by the monuments to a traditional reading of the Bible, see Steven W. Holloway, "The Quest for Sargon, Pul, and Tiglath-Pileser in the 19th Century," in *Syro-Mesopotamia and the Bible*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, UK: [JSOT](#) Press, forthcoming).

18. Cited in Robert William Rogers, *A History of Babylonia and Assyria* (New York: Eaton Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1900), p. 245.