

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

# The Old Testament in the light of the Literature of Assyria and Babylonia.

BY THEO. G. PINCHES, BRITISH MUSEUM.

## INTRODUCTORY.

THE resurrection of the literature of ancient Babylonia and Assyria has thrown a light on the Old Testament narrative and on the history of the ancient East as valuable and instructive as it was, at the time, unexpected. Instead of comparative barrenness and uncertainty, the student meets with a fulness of detail and a precision of knowledge such as is but little short of marvellous, when we consider how completely this ancient literature had been lost, and what acuteness and devotion were needed to recover the key to its closed storehouse. It is difficult to estimate how many volumes would be required now to tell all that is known, and to publish all that has been found, connected with this science of Assyriology, a few decades ago practically non-existent.

The Babylonians were a mixed race, partly Semitic and partly Akkadian (supposed Turanian). It is thought that the original home of the Akkadians was in the mountainous region east of Babylonia, and that they descended to the plains, and, by some means, friendly or otherwise, settled among the Semites who dwelt in Mesopotamia. These Akkadians brought with them their system of writing, at that time practically hieroglyphic. This script was developed, in Babylonia, to purely conventional forms, bearing ultimately little or no resemblance to the objects they were originally intended to represent. This change arose partly from the fact that clay, a substance not suitable for drawing on with a *stilus*, was the principal writing material used, and caused the substitution of wedges for lines of equal thickness, in consequence of their being impressed with the corner of a square stick, and partly from the change from vertical to horizontal writing (read from left to right), in which the characters, being turned sideways, lost, in most cases, their identity as pictures.

Assyria, which seems to have been for a long time colonised from Babylonia, probably declared herself independent about the eighteenth century

B.C. The two countries, after this period, were frequently at war with each other. Although the Assyrians, their native language being Babylonian, took the wedge-writing with them, they were probably not over well-supplied with literary material, and for this reason, when they invaded Babylonia, they took care (at least, in later times) to bring back with them such inscribed tablets as they could get hold of, which were duly copied and placed in the Assyrian royal libraries. These literary spoliations seem to have taken place more especially in the reigns of Sargon the Later and Assurbanipal (722-705 B.C. and 668-626 B.C.). With the exception, therefore, of the Assyrian historical inscriptions, contracts, letters, and reports, all, or nearly all, the texts found in Assyria are of Babylonian origin, and were composed and produced in Babylonia.

The inscriptions found in Assyria and Babylonia consist of legends (such as those of the Creation, the Flood (Gilgames), the hero Etanna, etc. etc.); fables (such as those of the fox, the horse and the ox, etc.); hymns (bilingual and sometimes alliterative), penitential psalms (often bilingual), incantations (also often bilingual), proverbs, phrase-tablets in Akkadian and Assyrian, syllabaries in three and in four columns, bilingual lists, bilingual and Semitic glossaries, omen tablets, astrological reports, astronomical observations, contracts, lawsuits, trade documents, lists of kings with the lengths of their reigns, etc.

It is the bilingual lists and syllabaries which form the basis of our knowledge of the Assyro-Babylonian language and literature. The former class are, as their name indicates, lists of words in two languages. They are sometimes arranged according to their meanings, sometimes according to their roots, sometimes apparently arbitrarily. The Akkadian column, as containing the language to be explained, is on the left, the Semitic-Babylonian (or Assyrian) on the right. The latter class (the syllabaries) give the pronunciation or pronunciations of the characters, the characters themselves, and the names or meanings of the characters, or both.

The following will give an idea of what a bilingual list is like :—

šig	en -	šu,	“weak.”
si	e - ni -	šu,	“to be weak.”
mu-un-na-ab-si-ga	u-tan-ni-ša-an-ni,	<sup>1</sup>	“he made me weak.”

In this extract, the Akkadian root *sig*, also abbreviated to *si*, is shown to express the idea of “weakness,” and may be used either as an adjective or a verb. The third example shows it with the verbal prefixes *munnab*, and the vocalic lengthening *a* (*munnabsiga*, “me he weakened,” corresponding with the Assyrian *utānnišanni*, third pers. sing. aor. of the secondary form of Piel). *Ēnšu*, *énēšu* (= *enišu*), and *utānnišanni* are probably from the root שָׁנַע, in Heb., “to fine” (weaken by exacting a recompense). It probably has nothing to do with the Arab. أُنِشَ. The Akk. words are often accompanied by glosses giving the pronunciation of the characters in doubtful cases.

The following are examples of syllabaries :—

† u | ‹ | gi - gu - ru - u.<sup>2</sup>

† shows the beginning of a fresh line, *u* is the pronunciation of the character, *gigurū* its name, apparently given to it because it has also the values of *gi* and *gur*.

† † | ‹ | ‹ | † | † | † | † | † | †<sup>3</sup>  
 ab ar - hu.

†, as we learn from this, has, when pronounced *ab*, the meaning of *arhu*, probably a kind of ox, cf. Arab. أَرْح.

† Ba - ad | † | pi - tu - u, “to open.”  
 † Uš | † | da - a - mu,<sup>4</sup> “blood.”

This informs us that the character †, with the pronunciation of *bad*, is rendered in Assyro-Babylonian by *pitū* or *petū*, “to open,” the Heb. פָּתַח, Arab. فَتَحَ (with the smooth guttural, ح), and, with the pronunciation of *uš*, by *dāmu*, “blood,” the Heb. דָּם.

<sup>1</sup> *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (generally abbreviated *W. A. I.*), vol. ii. pl. 48, lines 19-21 *gh*.

<sup>2</sup> Syllabary S<sup>a</sup>, Col. iv., l. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Syllabary S<sup>b</sup>, line 254. <sup>4</sup> Syllabary S<sup>b</sup>, lines 222, 223.

† Šu-u | † | maš-te-nu-u | kiš- [ša-tu<sup>m</sup>],<sup>5</sup>  
 “The universe.”

This extract shows that the Akkadian pronunciation of †, when rendered by the Assyro-Babylonian *kiššatu* “the universe,” is *šu*, and that its name is *maštenū*.

There are also many other classes of explanatory lists besides the above, all of them of immense value, not only for the interpretation of Assyrian, but also for Semitic and Akkadian philology, shedding light on the dialects of the latter language, and also on Kassite and (indirectly) Elamite or Susian.

All the tablets from Babylonia (except documents of a private nature) are, as a rule, furnished with colophons, from which we learn that the standard works were, in Babylonia, written by or for private individuals, and presented to the temples. The following is one from a Babylonian hymn to the setting sun :—

*Ana Nabî bēli-šu, Nabû-balaṭ-su-iḫbi, âbil Ê-sagilâa, ana balaṭ napšūti-šu, Nabû-ēpiš-âḫi, âbil Ê-sagilâa, ušēštir-ma ina Ê-zida ukîn.*<sup>6</sup>

“Nabû-balaṭ-su-iḫbi, son of Ê-sagilâa, has caused Nabû-ēpiš-âḫi, son of Ê-sagilâa, to write (this tablet) for the god Nebo, his lord, and has placed it in Ê-zida.”

Ê-zida, now known as the Birs-Nimroud (explained by the natives of the place as being for Burj-Nimroud, برج نمرود, “the Tower of Nimrod”),<sup>7</sup> and regarded by many scholars as the Tower of Babel, was one of those *Zikkurâtî* (temple-towers or observatories), so common in Babylonia and Assyria. The principal deity of this one seems to have been Nebo, the god of knowledge (Nabû, “the prophet,” or “teacher”), and it consequently contained a library of select tablets, presented by the devout.

In Assyria, however, there seems not to have been so many private libraries as in Babylonia, and the presentation of tablets to the temples by private individuals was probably not customary. As a compensation, however, for this, the kings sometimes constituted themselves the patrons of learning; established extensive libraries in their own palaces at Kouyunjik, and constantly added to them.

<sup>5</sup> Syllabary S<sup>c</sup>, l. 229.

<sup>6</sup> *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, vol. viii. p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> So I learn from Mr. Rassam.

The Assyrian tablets are, in fact, the foundation of our knowledge of the literature of this part of the ancient East, for, being done under royal supervision, they are not only well written, but, unlike the majority of those from Babylon, well baked, and therefore excellently preserved.

Like the Babylonian tablets, the Assyrian ones also had colophons. A very common one was as follows :—

*Gabri mât Aššur (D.S.<sup>1</sup>), kima labiri-šu saṭir-ma-hārim.*

“Assyrian copy,<sup>2</sup> written and reproduced<sup>3</sup> like its old one.”

This is often followed by the words (engraved after the tablet was baked) :—

*Kišitti Aššur-bani-apli, šar kiššati, šar mât Aššur (D.S.).*

“Property of Aššurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria.”

The commonest colophon, however, is probably the following :—

*Ēkal Aššur-bani-apli, šar kiššati, šar mât Aššur (D.S.), ša ana Aššur u Bēli taklu<sup>m</sup>, ša Nabû u Tašmētū<sup>m</sup>, usna rapaštu<sup>m</sup> išrukuš, ihuzzu éna namirtu<sup>m</sup>, nisik dupšarrūti, ša ina šarrāni alik mahria mimma šipru šuatu la ihuzzu, nimek Nabî, tikip santakki, mala bašmu, ina duppāni aštur, asniḳ, abrē-ma ina tāmarti šitassia kirib êkallia ukîn. Etilli-ka, nūr ilāni, Aššur. Mannu ša itabbalu ū lū šum-šu itti šumia išaṭṭaru, Aššur u Bēlu aggîš, izziš liškipu-šu-ma šum-šu, zēr-šu, ina mâti lihalkiḳu.*

“Palace of Aššurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria, who trusteth to Assur and Beltis, to whom Nebo and Tašmēt have given wide ears, (who) hath seeing eyes, the collection of the literature, which thing no one among the kings going before me had possessed—the deep wisdom of Nebo, the mass of the records as much as is prepared, I have written on tablets, brought together, explained, and have placed in my palace for my studying and reading.—Thy prince, light of the king of the gods, O Aššur!<sup>4</sup> Whoever

destroyeth or writeth his name with my name, may Aššur and Beltis angrily and fiercely overthrow him, and drive forth his name and his seed from the land.”

Not only, however, did Assurbanipal have tablets made for his own pleasure, but he also presented some to the library of the temple of Nebo at Nineveh. As the colophon attached to these texts is very interesting, I here give a translation of that also :—

Transcription :—*Ana Nabî, âplu gitmalu<sup>m</sup>, pakid kiššat šamê u iršiti<sup>m</sup>, tameḳ izzu'u, šabit gi-duppi šimâti, ūrrik ūmû, muballiṭ mîti, šakin nâru ana nêši êšâti, bêlu rabû, bêli-šu, Aššur-bani-apli, rubû migir Aššur, Bêl, Nabû, rēu zanin êsrêt ilâni rabûti, mûkin sattukki-šun, mâr Aššur-âhâ-iddina, šar kiššati, šar mât Aššur, binbin Sin-âhê-êriba, šar kiššati, šar mât Aššur, ana balaṭ napšati-šu, ârak ūmê-šu, šalam zêri-šu, kunnu išid kussî šarruti-šu, šeni suppi-šu, mahari tešliti-šu, lâ-magiri-šu ana kâtâ-šu mullê, nemeḳ Êa, kalût niširti, apkallu ša ana nâḫ libbi ilâni rabûti šaluku, ki pi duppāni gabri mât Aššur u mât Akkadî, ina duppāni aštur, asniḳ, abrē-ma ina imi-gu-lâ Ê-zida, bit Nabî, ša kirib Ninua, bêli-ia, ukîn. Ana kišidti Nabî, šar kiššat šamê u iršiti<sup>m</sup>, imi-gu-lâ šuatu ḥadiš naplis-ma ša Aššur-bani-apli, rēšu palih ilûti-ka ūmêšam šurka<sup>m</sup> takkalti, balaṭ-su kibî. Lutta'id ilût-ka rabûti.*

“For Nebo, the princely son, ruler of the universe of heaven and earth, who holdeth the tablet and keepeth the papyrus of the fates, lengthener of (one's) days, saving from death, establishing light for the people in trouble, the great lord, his lord, Aššurbanipal, the prince obedient to Aššur, Bêl, and Nêbo, the shepherd who is patron of the temples of the great gods, establisher of their ordinances, the son of Esarhaddon, king of the universe, king of Assyria, grandson of Sennacherib, king of the universe, king of Assyria, for the preservation of his life, the lengthening of his days, the peace of his seed, the establishing of the foundation of the throne of his royalty, the hearing of his prayer, the receiving of his supplication, to deliver those disobedient to him into his hand, he who is the wisdom of Ea, the guard of the treasure, the prince who hath been caused to come for the quieting of the heart of the great gods, according to the tablets, the copies of Assyria and Akkad, I have written on

<sup>1</sup> D.S. = “Determinative suffix.”

<sup>2</sup> Lit. “Copy of the land of Aššur.”

<sup>3</sup> The Akkadian group used means “made to be seen.”

<sup>4</sup> Apparently the words “I am” are to be understood here. A beautiful cylinder in the British Museum, which may possibly have belonged to Assurbanipal, has the similar invocation: “Thy prince, O light of Nebo, always going behind thee, have mercy upon me” (= “I am thy prince,” etc.).

tablets, brought together, explained, and have placed (this) in the collection of Ê-zida, the temple of Nebo, which is within Nineveh, my lord. Look joyfully upon that collection, as the property of Nebo, king of the universe of heaven and earth, and daily take care of Aššurbanipal, the servant fearing thy divinity, (and) command his preservation. Let me glorify thy great divinity."

From this we see that it was with a full consciousness of doing an important work that Assurbanipal made himself the patron of Assyrian literature, and it will be no doubt generally admitted that "the great and noble Asnapper" was one of the most enlightened princes of his time. Nebo, the Assyrian god of literature, has indeed "saved him from death." Thanks to him (and be it to his never-dying renown), the Mesopotamian idea of the creation of the world and the flood are

no longer hidden from us, and all the "treasures" extant, of which this noblest of Assyrian kings was "guard," will be ransacked to throw light on that Book which, of all others, we hold most in reverence. Assurbanipal's predecessors on the throne of Assyria—the Shalmanesers, Tiglath-pileser III., Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon—all will bring their quota of confirmation or illustration, and Babylon, and Palestine itself, will not be silent, thanks to the Egyptian scribe of Tell-al-Amarna. Every inscription that can throw any light will be laid under contribution. The task, though full of interest, is a difficult one; but the writer hopes to bring at least a little that is new, as well as much that is interesting—a compensation which he trusts may influence the reader to overlook the unavoidable shortcomings of his work.

## Requests and Replies.

May "περισσόν" in St. John x. 10 be understood as though it had the neuter article, so that the translation may read *pre-eminently* or *pre-eminence*, instead of "abundantly" or "abundance"?—American Subscriber.

Regarding the passage in John x. 10, I am inclined to think the associations in which *περισσόν* occurs, as found at all events in *the Four Gospels*, bind it down to the notion of *overplus*, *abundance*, as the primary signification. Compare *περισσεύονται ἄρτων*, "have bread enough *and to spare*" (Auth. Ver.), Luke xv. 17; and the use of *περισσεύον* in the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, as Matt. xiv. 20, etc. Also *περίσσευμα τῆς καρδίας*, in Matt. xii. 34 and Luke vi. 45, can mean only *overflow* in copiousness, not *pre-eminence* in position. The *νομή*, or pasture, in the previous context, points in the same direction, leading on to the notion of *fulness* as a crowning consideration. I have only time to adduce one other point, viz. the parallel in Xen. *Anab.* 7. 6. 31, where *ἀφθόνοις* in the balancing clause settles the sense of *περιττόν* in the antithesis, so that it must mean "to have a *superplus*," if we may so phrase it; in other words, a surplus or abundance of it.

W. D. GEDDES.

How do you distinguish between the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha?—C. T.

The Apocrypha contains those books which were not included in the Palestinian Canon, but which found a place among the sacred writings used by the Jews of the Dispersion. They were written in Greek, but it is possible that there was in some instances a Hebrew original, though of such we have at present no remains. They were reckoned as part of the Old Testament Canon by the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Council of Trent (see Westcott's *Bible in the Church*). Pseudepigrapha is a name given by the Rev. W. J. Deane and others to those other Jewish writings (in one case, that of the *Sibylline Oracles*, early Christian) which were not included even in the Secondary Canon of the Apocrypha. The term means "falsely inscribed," not in the sense of "literary forgeries; . . . but the authors, having something to say which they deemed worthy of the attention of contemporaries, put it forth under the ægis of a great name, not to deceive, but to conciliate favour." Many of them have perished, and we know only their names. But of those which survive, an account will be found in Schürer's *Jewish People in the Time of Our Lord*, in Mr. Deane's *Pseudepigrapha*, and especially in Mr. J.