

Help in Biblical Interpretation

The third reason for the Christian's interest in archaeology is in some ways more important than either of the two that have been mentioned thus far. The important thing about the Bible is not the particular sounds of its words, but the meanings which they convey. Most Americans read the Bible in an English translation which has little similarity of sound to the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek words which were originally written. Although its vital teachings are spiritual, they are given in human words, and against a background of material things. Anything that enables the Christian to understand these words better, or to have a clearer understanding of their background, is of tremendous importance. Since he does not accept the Bible upon a basis of human evidence, but because of the authority of his Lord, both general and special corroboration are comparatively incidental in their interest for him. It is often thrilling to see how new evidence fits in with the statements of the Scripture, and such material may be helpful in removing the difficulties of sincere inquirers, but for the Christian anything that gives him a clearer understanding of the Bible's message is of far greater importance.

As yet, the archaeological material which is outstanding in this regard is probably less in quantity than that which comes under the first two heads, and it is for this reason that we have given it the third place in our outline. Nevertheless, there are a great many points at which the historical statements and the teachings of the Bible are made far easier to understand in view of new light upon the meaning of the words or upon the nature of the cultural background.

As a vivid illustration of this, we may note how important it is for the study of certain Old Testament prophetic books to understand the nature of the Assyrian and Babylonian menace. One cannot fully understand the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah without a realization of this terrific

and brutal force which was bringing such tremendous fear to the nations of the west.

Some idea of this situation may be gained from the following typical passage from the annals of Ashur-nasir-pal II, an Assyrian king who reigned from 883-859 B.C.:

"I took the city, and 800 of their fighting men I put to the sword, and cut off their heads. Multitudes I captured alive, and the rest of them I burned with fire, and carried off their heavy spoil. I formed a pillar of the living and of heads over against his city gate and 700 men I impaled on stakes over against their city gate. The city I destroyed, I devastated, and I turned it into a mound and ruin heap. Their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire."¹⁹

After reading a few such statements it is easy to understand what the prophets became so excited about, and their allusions become much clearer.

Naturally certain points already mentioned under specific corroboration could well have been considered here. For instance, the statement that Daniel would be made the third ruler in the kingdom was not at all clear to us before the discovery of the fact that Belshazzar was the second ruler. Similarly, at many points where the Biblical statements are more clearly understood by explanation from archaeological discoveries, these discoveries serve as special corroboration of the accuracy of the Biblical narrative.

We have already referred to the fact that I Kings 9:26-28 states that Solomon built a navy of ships at Ezion-geber on the shore of the Red Sea. Until recently it was very hard to see why Solomon would care to build a fleet of ships so far away from Jerusalem. A long and difficult journey was necessary through the desert overland from Jerusalem to the northern end of the eastern branch of the Red Sea. Professor Nelson Glueck tells us that it took him thirteen

¹⁹D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, (Chicago: 1926), Vol. I, p. 156.