

The Old Testament and the New Testament both deal with events which did not occur in a vacuum, but in the midst of a world of stirring life and activity. Fuller knowledge of the events and customs of their times enables us to understand their statements better, and thus eventually contributes even to our understanding of the spiritual message which is their real purpose.

Of course, caution is necessary in the interpretation of archaeological evidence. Science moves forward not only by gathering data, but also by forming hypotheses and carefully testing them to see whether they offer a true and adequate explanation of the facts. Care must be taken lest preliminary archaeological hypotheses lead us to hasty and erroneous explanations of Biblical statements.

Two developments from which great advances may be expected are the texts found at Ras Shamra in northern Syria and those found at Mari on the Euphrates. The first of these throws much light on Canaanite religion and may be helpful in securing more exact definition of rare Hebrew words and phrases. The latter, discovered by the French in their excavations shortly before the war, and now beginning to be published in full, will add greatly to our understanding of the times of the Patriarchs. Already most scholars have made almost revolutionary changes in their ideas of early chronology as a result of evidence from Mari. Yet in both these collections, the language is sometimes difficult, and the material is often fragmentary. Before it has all been sifted out and its meaning quite generally agreed upon, many tentative theories are sure to be put forward, and some of these will find a place in popular books written years after the theories have been abandoned by scholars.

#### *The Problem of Derivation*

The fourth reason why archaeology is of special interest to the Christian is because of its relation to the great

question of "derivation." An interesting incident will make clear what is meant by this term. Early in the present century Professor Friedrich Delitzsch, Professor of Assyriology at the University of Berlin, was asked to lecture at a series of meetings to raise funds for the excavations of the German Orient Society at Babylon. The lectures received special prominence because of the presence of an audience of internationally known figures. Professor Delitzsch pointed out the great contribution that excavations had made to the understanding of the meaning of Biblical terms; he showed that at many points the whole background of the Bible had become more real and vivid as the result of these discoveries; he indicated that at various specific points archaeology had demonstrated its accuracy.

He went on, however, to present what was then to the world at large a rather novel attitude toward the relation of archaeology to the Bible.<sup>22</sup> He took the position that most of the elements in the religion of ancient Israel and most of the great events described in connection with the beginning of the world or of the Jewish nation were derived from Babylonian ideas or stories. In fact, Professor Delitzsch went so far as to suggest that at many points the Babylonian religion was superior to that contained in the Old Testament.

Great excitement was aroused throughout the world by these so-called "Babel and Bible" lectures, although most of the viewpoints which he presented were already known to the scholarly world. A large literature was produced as a result of his discussion, some writers maintaining that these stories and religious beliefs were original in Israel, and others claiming that they had been taken over from Babylon, from Egypt, or from some other ancient nation.

It is readily apparent what this discussion means to the Christian. Is the Bible giving us definite facts when it

<sup>22</sup>F. Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible*, (Chicago: 1903:), 1st and 2nd lectures.