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Title: Legends of Babylon and Egypt

In Relation to Hebrew Tradition

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Release Date: March 28, 2006 [EBook #2030]

Last Updated: February 4, 2013

Language: English

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Legends of Babylon and Egypt

In Relation to Hebrew Tradition

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First Published 1918 by Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.

THE BRITISH ACADEMY
THE SCHWEICH LECTURES 1916

Preparer's Note

This text was prepared from a 1920 edition of the book, hence the references to dates after 1916 in some places. Greek text has been transliterated within brackets “” using an Oxford English Dictionary alphabet table. Diacritical marks have been lost.

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PREFACE

In these lectures an attempt is made, not so much to restate familiar facts, as to accommodate them to new and supplementary evidence which has been published in America since the outbreak of the war. But even without the excuse of recent discovery, no apology would be needed for any comparison or contrast of Hebrew tradition with the mythological and legendary beliefs of Babylon and Egypt. Hebrew achievements in the sphere of religion and ethics are only thrown into stronger relief when studied against their contemporary background.

The bulk of our new material is furnished by some early texts, written towards the close of the third millennium B.C. They incorporate traditions which extend in unbroken outline from their own period into the remote ages of the past, and claim to trace the history of man back to his creation. They represent the early national traditions of the Sumerian people, who preceded the Semites as the ruling race in Babylonia; and incidentally they necessitate a revision of current views with regard to the cradle of Babylonian civilization. The most remarkable of the new documents is one which relates in poetical narrative an account of the Creation, of Antediluvian history, and of the Deluge. It thus exhibits a close resemblance in structure to the corresponding Hebrew traditions, a resemblance that is not shared by the Semitic-Babylonian Versions at present known. But in matter the Sumerian tradition is more primitive than any of the Semitic versions. In spite of the fact that the text appears to have been reached us in a magical setting, and to some extent in epitomized form, this early document enables us to tap the stream of tradition at a point far above any at which approach has hitherto been possible.

Though the resemblance of early Sumerian tradition to that of the Hebrews is striking, it furnishes a still closer parallel to the summaries preserved from the history of Berossus. The huge figures incorporated in the latter's chronological scheme are no longer to be treated as a product of Neo-Babylonian speculation; they reappear in their original surroundings in another of these early documents, the Sumerian Dynastic List. The sources of Berossus had inevitably been semitized by Babylon; but two of his three Antediluvian cities find their place among the five of primitive Sumerian belief, and two of his ten Antediluvian kings rejoin their Sumerian prototypes. Moreover, the recorded ages of Sumerian and Hebrew patriarchs are strangely alike. It may be added that in Egypt a new fragment of the Palermo Stele has enabled us to verify, by a very similar comparison, the accuracy of Manetho's sources for his prehistoric period, while at the same time it demonstrates the way in which possible inaccuracies in his system, deduced from independent evidence, may have arisen in remote

antiquity. It is clear that both Hebrew and Hellenistic traditions were modelled on very early lines.

Thus our new material enables us to check the age, and in some measure the accuracy, of the traditions concerning the dawn of history which the Greeks reproduced from native sources, both in Babylonia and Egypt, after the conquests of Alexander had brought the Near East within the range of their intimate acquaintance. The third body of tradition, that of the Hebrews, thought unbacked by the prestige of secular achievement, has, through incorporation in the canons of two great religious systems, acquired an authority which the others have not enjoyed. In re-examining the sources of all three accounts, so far as they are affected by the new discoveries, it will be of interest to observe how the same problems were solved in antiquity by very different races, living under widely divergent conditions, but within easy reach of one another. Their periods of contact, ascertained in history or suggested by geographical considerations, will prompt the further question to what extent each body of belief was evolved in independence of the others. The close correspondence that has long been recognized and is now confirmed between the Hebrew and the Semitic-Babylonian systems, as compared with that of Egypt, naturally falls within the scope of our enquiry.

Excavation has provided an extraordinarily full archaeological commentary to the legends of Egypt and Babylon; and when I received the invitation to deliver the Schweich Lectures for 1916, I was reminded of the terms of the Bequest and was asked to emphasize the archaeological side of the subject. Such material illustration was also calculated to bring out, in a more vivid manner than was possible with purely literary evidence, the contrasts and parallels presented by Hebrew tradition. Thanks to a special grant for photographs from the British Academy, I was enabled to illustrate by means of lantern slides many of the problems discussed in the lectures; and it was originally intended that the photographs than shown should appear as plates in this volume. But in view of the continued and increasing shortage of paper, it was afterwards felt to be only right that all illustrations should be omitted. This very necessary decision has involved a recasting of certain sections of the lectures as delivered, which in its turn has rendered possible a fuller treatment of the new literary evidence. To the consequent shifting of interest is also due a transposition of names in the title. On their literary side, and in virtue of the intimacy of their relation to Hebrew tradition, the legends of Babylon must be given precedence over those of Egypt.

For the delay in the appearance of the volume I must plead the pressure of other work, on subjects far removed from archaeological study and affording little time and few facilities for a continuance of archaeological and textual research. It is hoped that the insertion of references throughout, and the more detailed discussion of problems suggested by our new literary material, may incline the reader to add his indulgence to that already extended to me by the British Academy.

L. W. King.

LECTURE I—EGYPT, BABYLON, AND PALESTINE, AND SOME TRADITIONAL ORIGINS OF CIVILIZATION

At the present moment most of us have little time or thought to spare for subjects not connected directly or indirectly with the war. We have put aside our own interests and studies; and after the war we shall all have a certain amount of leeway to make up in acquainting ourselves with what has been going on in countries not yet involved in the great struggle. Meanwhile the most we can do is to glance for a moment at any discovery of exceptional interest that may come to light.

The main object of these lectures will be to examine certain Hebrew traditions in the light of new evidence which has been published in America since the outbreak of the war. The evidence is furnished by some literary texts, inscribed on tablets from Nippur, one of the oldest and most sacred cities of Babylonia. They are written in Sumerian, the language spoken by the non-Semitic people whom the Semitic Babylonians conquered and displaced; and they include a very primitive version of the Deluge story and Creation myth, and some texts which throw new light on the age of Babylonian civilization and on the area within which it had its rise. In them we have recovered some of the material from which Berossus derived his dynasty of Antediluvian kings, and we are thus enabled to test the accuracy of the Greek tradition by that of the Sumerians themselves. So far then as Babylonia is concerned, these documents will necessitate a re-examination of more than one problem.

The myths and legends of ancient Egypt are also to some extent involved. The trend of much recent anthropological research has been in the direction of seeking a single place of origin for similar beliefs and practices, at least among races which were bound to one another by political or commercial ties. And we shall have occasion to test, by means of our new data, a recent theory of Egyptian influence. The Nile Valley was, of course, one of the great centres from which civilization radiated throughout the ancient East; and, even when direct contact is unproved, Egyptian literature may furnish instructive parallels and contrasts in any study of Western Asiatic mythology. Moreover, by a strange coincidence, there has also been published in Egypt since the beginning of the year a record referring to the reigns of predynastic rulers in the Nile Valley. This, like some of the Nippur texts, take us back to

that dim period before the dawn of actual history, and, though the information it affords is not detailed like theirs, it provides fresh confirmation of the general accuracy of Manetho's sources, and suggests some interesting points for comparison.

But the people with whose traditions we are ultimately concerned are the Hebrews. In the first series of Schweich Lectures, delivered in the year 1908, the late Canon Driver showed how the literature of Assyria and Babylon had thrown light upon Hebrew traditions concerning the origin and early history of the world. The majority of the cuneiform documents, on which he based his comparison, date from a period no earlier than the seventh century B.C., and yet it was clear that the texts themselves, in some form or other, must have descended from a remote antiquity. He concluded his brief reference to the Creation and Deluge Tablets with these words: "The Babylonian narratives are both polytheistic, while the corresponding biblical narratives (Gen. i and vi-xi) are made the vehicle of a pure and exalted monotheism; but in spite of this fundamental difference, and also variations in detail, the resemblances are such as to leave no doubt that the Hebrew cosmogony and the Hebrew story of the Deluge are both derived ultimately from the same original as the Babylonian narratives, only transformed by the magic touch of Israel's religion, and infused by it with a new spirit."¹ Among the recently published documents from Nippur we have at last recovered one at least of those primitive originals from which the Babylonian accounts were derived, while others prove the existence of variant stories of the world's origin and early history which have not survived in the later cuneiform texts. In some of these early Sumerian records we may trace a faint but remarkable parallel with the BHebrew traditions of man's history between his Creation and the Flood. It will be our task, then, to examine the relations which the Hebrew narratives bear both to the early Sumerian and to the later Babylonian Versions, and to ascertain how far the new discoveries support or modify current views with regard to the contents of those early chapters of Genesis.

I need not remind you that Genesis is the book of Hebrew origins, and that its contents mark it off to some extent from the other books of the Hebrew Bible. The object of the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua is to describe in their origin the fundamental institutions of the national faith and to trace from the earliest times the course of events which led to the Hebrew settlement in Palestine. Of this national history the Book of Genesis forms the introductory section. Four centuries of complete silence lie between its close and the beginning of Exodus, where we enter on the history of a nation as contrasted with that of a family.² While Exodus and the succeeding books contain national traditions, Genesis is largely made up of individual biography. Chapters xii-l are concerned with the immediate ancestors of the Hebrew race, beginning with Abram's migration into Canaan and closing with Joseph's death in Egypt. But the aim of the book is not confined to recounting the ancestry of Israel. It seeks also to show her relation to other peoples in the world, and probing still deeper into the past it describes how the earth itself was prepared for man's habitation. Thus the patriarchal biographies are preceded, in chapters i-xi, by an account of the original of the world, the beginnings of civilization, and the distribution of the various races of mankind. It is, of course, with certain parts of this first group of chapters that such

¹Driver, *Modern Research as illustrating the Bible* (The Schweich Lectures, 1908), p. 23.

²Cf., E.g., Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (1912), p. ii f.; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 10th ed. (1916), pp. 1 ff.; Ryle, *The Book of Genesis* (1914), pp. x ff.

striking parallels have long been recognized in the cuneiform texts.

In approaching this particular body of Hebrew traditions, the necessity for some caution will be apparent. It is not as though we were dealing with the reported beliefs of a Malayan or Central Australian tribe. In such a case there would be no difficulty in applying a purely objective criticism, without regard to ulterior consequences. But here our own feelings are involved, having their roots deep in early associations. The ground too is well trodden; and, had there been no new material to discuss, I think I should have preferred a less contentious theme. The new material is my justification for the choice of subject, and also the fact that, whatever views we may hold, it will be necessary for us to assimilate it to them. I shall have no hesitation in giving you my own reading of the evidence; but at the same time it will be possible to indicate solutions which will probably appeal to those who view the subject from more conservative standpoints. That side of the discussion may well be postponed until after the examination of the new evidence in detail. And first of all it will be advisable to clear up some general aspects of the problem, and to define the limits within which our criticism may be applied.

It must be admitted that both Egypt and Babylon bear a bad name in Hebrew tradition. Both are synonymous with captivity, the symbols of suffering endured at the beginning and at the close of the national life. And during the struggle against Assyrian aggression, the disappointment at the failure of expected help is reflected in prophecies of the period. These great crises in Hebrew history have tended to obscure in the national memory the part which both Babylon and Egypt may have played in moulding the civilization of the smaller nations with whom they came in contact. To such influence the races of Syria were, by geographical position, peculiarly subject. The country has often been compared to a bridge between the two great continents of Asia and Africa, flanked by the sea on one side and the desert on the other, a narrow causeway of highland and coastal plain connecting the valleys of the Nile and the Euphrates.³ For, except on the frontier of Egypt, desert and sea do not meet. Farther north the Arabian plateau is separated from the Mediterranean by a double mountain chain, which runs south from the Taurus at varying elevations, and encloses in its lower course the remarkable depression of the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the 'Arabah. The Judæan hills and the mountains of Moab are merely the southward prolongation of the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, and their neighbourhood to the sea endows this narrow tract of habitable country with its moisture and fertility. It thus formed the natural channel of intercourse between the two earliest centres of civilization, and was later the battle-ground of their opposing empires.

The great trunk-roads of through communication run north and south, across the eastern plateaus of the Haurân and Moab, and along the coastal plains. The old highway from Egypt, which left the Delta at Pelusium, at first follows the coast, then trends eastward across the plain of Esdraelon, which breaks the coastal range, and passing under Hermon runs northward through Damascus and reaches the Euphrates at its most westerly point. Other through tracks in Palestine ran then as they do to-day, by Beesheba and Hebron, or

³See G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 5 ff., 45 ff., and Myres, *Dawn of History*, pp. 137 ff.; and cf. Hogarth, *The Nearer East*, pp. 65 ff., and Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, t. IX, pp. 685 ff.

along the 'Arabah and west of the Dead Sea, or through Edom and east of Jordan by the present Jahh route to Damascus. But the great highway from Egypt, the most westerly of the trunk-roads through Palestine, was that mainly followed, with some variant sections, by both caravans and armies, and was known by the Hebrews in its southern course as the "Way of the Philistines" and farther north as the "Way of the East."

The plain of Esraelon, where the road first trends eastward, has been the battle-ground for most invaders of Palestine from the north, and though Egyptian armies often fought in the southern coastal plain, they too have battled there when they held the southern country. Megiddo, which commands the main pass into the plain through the low Samaritan hills to the southeast of Carmel, was the site of Thothmes III's famous battle against a Syrian confederation, and it inspired the writer of the Apocalypse with his vision of an Armageddon of the future. But invading armies always followed the beaten track of caravans, and movements represented by the great campaigns were reflected in the daily passage of international commerce.

With so much through traffic continually passing within her borders, it may be matter for surprise that far more striking evidence of its cultural effect should not have been revealed by archaeological research in Palestine. Here again the explanation is mainly of a geographical character. For though the plains and plateaus could be crossed by the trunk-roads, the rest of the country is so broken up by mountain and valley that it presented few facilities either to foreign penetration or to external control. The physical barriers to local intercourse, reinforced by striking differences in soil, altitude, and climate, while they precluded Syria herself from attaining national unity, always tended to protect her separate provinces, or "kingdoms," from the full effects of foreign aggression. One city-state could be traversed, devastated, or annexed, without in the least degree affecting neighbouring areas. It is true that the population of Syria has always been predominantly Semitic, for she was on the fringe of the great breeding-ground of the Semitic race and her landward boundary was open to the Arabian nomad. Indeed, in the whole course of her history the only race that bade fair at one time to oust the Semite in Syria was the Greek. But the Greeks remained within the cities which they founded or rebuilt, and, as Robertson Smith pointed out, the death-rate in Eastern cities habitually exceeds the birth-rate; the urban population must be reinforced from the country if it is to be maintained, so that the type of population is ultimately determined by the blood of the peasantry.⁴ Hence after the Arab conquest the Greek elements in Syria and Palestine tended rapidly to disappear. The Moslem invasion was only the last of a series of similar great inroads, which have followed on another since the dawn of history, and during all that time absorption was continually taking place from desert tribes that ranged the Syrian border. As we have seen, the country of his adoption was such as to encourage the Semitic nomad's particularism, which was inherent in his tribal organization. Thus the predominance of a single racial element in the population of Palestine and Syria did little to break down or overstep the natural barriers and lines of cleavage.

These facts suffice to show why the influence of both Egypt and Babylon upon the various peoples and kingdoms of Palestine was only intensified at certain periods, when ambition for extended empire dictated the reduction of her provinces in detail. But in the long

⁴See Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 12 f.; and cf. Smith, *Hist. Geogr.*, p. 10 f.

intervals, during which there was no attempt to enforce political control, regular relations were maintained along the lines of trade and barter. And in any estimate of the possible effect of foreign influence upon Hebrew thought, it is important to realize that some of the channels through which in later periods it may have acted had been flowing since the dawn of history, and even perhaps in prehistoric times. It is probable that Syria formed one of the links by which we may explain the Babylonian elements that are attested in prehistoric Egyptian culture.⁵ But another possible line of advance may have been by way of Arabia and across the Red Sea into Upper Egypt.

The latter line of contact is suggested by an interesting piece of evidence that has recently been obtained. A prehistoric flint knife, with a handle carved from the tooth of a hippopotamus, has been purchased lately by the Louvre,⁶ and is said to have been found at Gebel el'Arak near Nage' Hamâdi, which lies on the Nile not far below Koptos, where an ancient caravan-track leads by Wâdi Hammâmât to the Red Sea. On one side of the handle is a battle-scene including some remarkable representations of ancient boats. All the warriors are nude with the exception of a loin girdle, but, while one set of combatants have shaven heads or short hair, the others have abundant locks falling in a thick mass upon the shoulder. On the other face of the handle is carved a hunting scene, two hunters with dogs and desert animals being arranged around a central boss. But in the upper field is a very remarkable group, consisting of a personage struggling with two lions arranged symmetrically. The rest of the composition is not very unlike other examples of prehistoric Egyptian carving in low relief, but here attitude, figure, and clothing are quite un-Egyptian. The hero wears a sort of turban on his abundant hair, and a full and rounded beard descends upon his breast. A long garment clothes him from the waist and falls below the knees, his muscular calves ending in the claws of a bird of prey. There is nothing like this in prehistoric Egyptian art.

Perhaps Monsieur Bénédict is pressing his theme too far when he compares the close-cropped warriors on the handle with the shaven Sumerians and Elamites upon steles from Telloh and Susa, for their loin-girdles are African and quite foreign to the Euphrates Valley. And his suggestion that two of the boats, flat-bottomed and with high curved ends, seem only to have navigated the Tigris and Euphrates,⁷ will hardly command acceptance. But there is no doubt that the heroic personage upon the other face is represented in the familiar attitude of the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh struggling with lions, which formed so favourite a subject upon early Sumerian and Babylonian seals. His garment is Sumerian or Semitic rather than Egyptian, and the mixture of human and bird elements in the figure, though not precisely paralleled at this early period, is not out of harmony with Mesopotamian or Sumerian tradition. His beard, too is quite different from that of the Libyan desert tribes which the early Egyptian kings adopted. Though the treatment of the lions is suggestive of proto-Elamite rather than of early Babylonian is suggestive of proto-Elamite rather than of early Babylonian models, the design itself is unmistakably of Mesopotamian origin. This

⁵Cf. *Sumer and Akkad*, pp. 322 ff.; and for a full discussion of the points of resemblance between the early Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations, see Sayce, *The Archaeology of the Cuneiform Inscriptions*, chap. iv, pp. 101 ff.

⁶See Bénédict, "Le couteau de Gebel al-'Arak", in *Foundation Eugène Piot, Mon. et. Mém.*, XXII. i. (1916).

⁷Op. cit., p. 32.

discovery intensifies the significance of other early parallels that have been noted between the civilizations of the Euphrates and the Nile, but its evidence, so far as it goes, does not point to Syria as the medium of prehistoric intercourse. Yet then, as later, there can have been no physical barrier to the use of the river-route from Mesopotamia into Syria and of the tracks thence southward along the land-bridge to the Nile's delta.

In the early historic periods we have definite evidence that the eastern coast of the Levant exercised a strong fascination upon the rules of both Egypt and Babylonia. It may be admitted that Syria had little to give in comparison to what she could borrow, but her local trade in wine and oil must have benefited by an increase in the through traffic which followed the working of copper in Cyprus and Sinai and of silver in the Taurus. Moreover, in the cedar forests of Lebanon and the north she possessed a product which was highly valued both in Egypt and the treeless plains of Babylonia. The cedars procured by Sneferu from Lebanon at the close of the IIIrd Dynasty were doubtless floated as rafts down the coast, and we may see in them evidence of a regular traffic in timber. It has long been known that the early Babylonian king Sharru-kin, or Sargon of Akkad, had pressed up the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, and we now have information that he too was fired by a desire for precious wood and metal. One of the recently published Nippur inscriptions contains copies of a number of his texts, collected by an ancient scribe from his statues at Nippur, and from these we gather additional details of his campaigns. We learn that after his complete subjugation of Southern Babylonia he turned his attention to the west, and that Enlil gave him the lands "from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea", i.e. from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Fortunately this rather vague phrase, which survived in later tradition, is restated in greater detail in one of the contemporary versions which records that Enlil "gave him the upper land, Mari, Iarmuti, and Ibla, as far as the Cedar Forest and the Silver Mountains".⁸

Mari was a city on the middle Euphrates, but the name may here signify the district of Mari which lay in the upper course of Sargon's march. Now we know that the later Sumerian monarch Gudea obtained his cedar beams from the Amanus range, which he names *Amanum* and describes as the "cedar mountains".⁹ Doubtless he felled his trees on the eastern slopes of the mountain. But we may infer from his texts that Sargon actually reached the coast, and his "Cedar Forest" may have lain farther to the south, perhaps as far south as the Lebanon. The "Silver Mountains" can only be identified with the Taurus, where silver mines were worked in antiquity. The reference to Iarmuti is interesting, for it is clearly the same place as Iarimuta or Iarimmuta, of which we find mention in the Tell el-Amarna letters. From the references to this district in the letters of Rib-Adda, governor of Byblos, we may infer that it was a level district on the coast, capable of producing a considerable quantity of grain for export, and that it was under Egyptian control at the time of Amenophis IV. Hitherto its position has been conjecturally placed in the Nile Delta, but from Sargon's reference we must probably seek it on the North Syrian or possibly the Cilician coast. Perhaps, as Dr. Poebel suggests, it was the plain of Antioch, along the lower course and at the mouth of the Orontes.

⁸See Poebel, *Historical Texts* (Univ. of Penns. Mus. Publ., Bab. Sect., Vol. IV, No. 1, 1914), pp. 177 f., 222 ff.

⁹Thureau-Dangin, *Les inscriptions de Sumer de d'Akkad*, p. 108 f., Statue B, col. v. 1. 28; Germ. ed., p. 68 f.

But his further suggestion that the term is used by Sargon for the whole stretch of country between the sea and the Euphrates is hardly probable. For the geographical references need not be treated as exhaustive, but as confined to the more important districts through which the expedition passed. The district of Ibla which is also mentioned by Narâm-Sin and Gudea, lay probably to the north of Iarmuti, perhaps on the southern slopes of Taurus. It, too, we may regard as a district of restricted extent rather than as a general geographical term for the extreme north of Syria.

It is significant that Sargon does not allude to any battle when describing this expedition, nor does he claim to have devastated the western countries.¹⁰ Indeed, most of these early expeditions to the west appear to have been inspired by motives of commercial enterprise rather than of conquest. But increase of wealth was naturally followed by political expansion, and Egypt's dream of an Asiatic empire was realized by Pharaohs of the XVIIIth Dynasty. The fact that Babylonian should then have been adopted as the medium of official intercourse in Syria points to the closeness of the commercial ties which had already united the Euphrates Valley with the west. Egyptian control had passed from Canaan at the time of the Hebrew settlement, which was indeed a comparatively late episode in the early history of Syria. Whether or not we identify the Khabiri with the Hebrews, the character of the latter's incursion is strikingly illustrated by some of the Tell el-Amarna letters. We see a nomad folk pressing in upon settled peoples and gaining a foothold here and there.¹¹

The great change from desert life consists in the adoption of agriculture, and when once that was made by the Hebrews any further advance in economic development was dictated by their new surroundings. The same process had been going on, as we have seen, in Syria since the dawn of history, the Semitic nomad passing gradually through the stages of agricultural and village life into that of the city. The country favoured the retention of tribal exclusiveness, but ultimate survival could only be purchased at the cost of some amalgamation with their new neighbours. Below the surface of Hebrew history these two tendencies may be traced in varying action and reaction. Some sections of the race engaged readily in the social and commercial life of Canaanite civilization with its rich inheritance from the past. Others, especially in the highlands of Judah and the south, at first succeeded in keeping themselves remote from foreign influence. During the later periods of the national life the country was again subjected, and in an intensified degree, to those forces of political aggression from Mesopotamia and Egypt which we have already noted as operating in Canaan. But throughout the settled Hebrew community as a whole the spark of desert fire was not extinguished, and by kindling the zeal of the Prophets it eventually affected nearly all the white races of mankind.

¹⁰In some versions of his new records Sargon states that "5,400 men daily eat bread before him" (see Poebel, *op. cit.*, p. 178); though the figure may be intended to convey an idea of the size of Sargon's court, we may perhaps see in it a not inaccurate estimate of the total strength of his armed forces.

¹¹See especially Professor Burney's forthcoming commentary on Judges (*passim*), and his forthcoming Schweich Lectures (now delivered, in 1917).