

## DEPTHS OF TIME



We can only truly appreciate Layard's work when we place it against the background of his own intellectual and religious world, the contemporary England to whom he addressed his book. Great changes had taken place since he left the country in 1839. England in the high Victorian age now appears to most people as marked by a smug, self-righteous bourgeois respectability that was characterised by a placid acceptance of narrow moral norms and rules, but just below the tasselled surface lurked strong conflicts. Uncertainty and change was not only characteristic of social and political life; the cultural and religious debates reflected a deep convulsion in the traditional patterns. The intensity involved in these controversies was partly due to the fact that orthodox religious circles had a very solid and determined grip on the power in the country.

Religious matters were among the most widely and hotly debated subjects in the magazines and books of the time, and strong tensions existed between new ideas and the enormously well-established and strongly traditional clergy. One of the clearest examples of this strain concerns the matter of time and chronology. In 1650 Archbishop James Ussher published a thesis establishing a precise chronology for all events mentioned in the Bible, which for the scholars of the time meant the entire history of the world, from Creation to the present day. This learned calculation gained an enormous prestige and became the foundation for the common understanding of all history, and it was still being maintained in the England of the mid-nineteenth century. One of Ussher's most important conclusions was that the world was created in the year 4004 BCE, so that the entire history of the globe had to be contained within a time-frame of some 6,000 years. He could also reveal that Assyria was founded in 1770 BCE, one-hundred-and-fourteen years after the great Flood.

It is not easy to accept that intelligent, well-informed people could be satisfied with this scheme, even in 1848, and there were of course many who privately – and some publicly – questioned this orthodoxy. Most books and articles which came into contact with the problem simply avoided a head-on confrontation and skirted open argumentation. On the other hand, in order to understand the debates of the time one must realise that many of the ideas and much of the understanding which eventually caused the old paradigm to collapse were relatively new. One

cannot but be amazed when confronted with intelligent people of the twentieth century who maintain a biblical fundamentalism, claiming that every word in the Book derives directly from God and is unconditionally true; but the situation was different in the nineteenth century and the challenges to the naive literalism were just beginning to gain strength in England around 1850.

These challenges came from different directions, from various scientific disciplines and in fact primarily from Germany and France. England was a deeply conservative country where the Anglican church retained a dominant influence. Only members of the church could study at the universities of Cambridge or Oxford, and only after having signed the famous '39 Articles', a document which set out the central dogmas of the Anglican faith. University College in London was created in 1826 as a 'non-conformist' alternative to these old universities, and until that date Edinburgh University had been the only place where one could study without having to accept the dogmas of the Anglican church.

Even an apparently innocuous and peaceful field of learning such as prehistoric archaeology contained intellectual explosives. Human bones found in France and other places in deep layers together with extremely primitive flint tools and animal remains, which clearly belonged to now extinct races, needed explanation. In some caves bones were discovered sealed under thick layers of sediments, that had clearly been formed by water seeping through the soil and dripping from the cave ceiling – obviously through extremely long periods of time. Such discoveries appeared to indicate that man had existed during much longer spans of time than could be allowed by the traditional scheme of chronology. The orthodox explanation, maintained by a large number of British scholars, consisted of a combination of Bible interpretation and a lack of faith in the results and observations of the excavators. In awkward cases one could speak of types of animals which had been wiped out by the Flood, for some reason not having been saved by the Ark; and of the remains of human victims of that cataclysmic event washed up into these caves (Grayson 1983).

Geology had an even greater impact on many of the intellectuals of the time, and there are of course close connections between these disciplines. Geologists could point to more and more observations which showed that the planet had lived through a long and complex history. Seashells discovered high up in the Andes in Latin America – as seen by Darwin on his trip around the world – showed that this land had been created by enormous forces, that had raised ancient seabeds thousands of meters to become mountain peaks. Such observations could not be explained by or accommodated to Bishop Ussher's scheme, there was simply not enough time. Darwin's friend, the famous geologist Charles Lyell, had provided his famous 'actuality theory' which postulated that the geological processes which can now be observed in the world have to form the basis for our understanding of the history of the Earth, that the same geological processes and forces have been active throughout its existence. Lyell showed that the planet we see has been created by millions of years of geological activity, not on a single day by a divine act of creation, but it did not necessarily mean that human history had to be seen in the same way. It seemed possible to some to accept the literal truth of the biblical account beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve. In fact, Lyell did not accept

the discoveries of the prehistorians until 1863, when he finally, and with some hesitation, acknowledged that also mankind had a much longer history than postulated by the Bible. Darwin never succeeded in persuading him that his own theories about biological development were correct (Desmond and Moore 1992).

The essayist and art historian John Ruskin is a good example of the dilemma felt by many of the intellectuals of the time. When he had his 'unconversion' experience in Turin in 1858, which led him to discard his evangelical beliefs, this was in his own words the conclusion to 'courses of thought which had been leading me to such end through many years' (Kemp 1990: 261–2). The traditional foundation inherited from his parents gave way, and he complained of the 'flimsiness' of his own religious faith, blaming the new sciences: 'If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses' (Abrams 1986: 924). Despite such personal pain felt in England, many on the Continent felt that the British debate was characterised by an exasperating conservatism; in 1834 a French geologist wrote this devastating critique of his British colleagues:

Certain English theologians ridiculously persist in their mania of wanting to make the results of geology agree with Genesis. England is so pervaded with the spirit of sect that everyone is obliged, by force or by will, to enroll under a religious banner; in such a way that in the midst of the marvels of industry and an advanced civilization, the most elevated minds are too often mired in theological disputes that recall the middle ages, and of which continental Europe offers no more than rare examples.

(Grayson 1983: 112)

The German poet Heinrich Heine visited London in 1830 and noted with his usual acerbic wit that whereas even the most stupid Englishman could find something sensible to say about politics, nothing but stupidities came from even the most intelligent one when the talk was of religious matters (Holthof 1899: 452).

In this climate of entrenched orthodoxy it was Biology and the theory of evolution which in the end had a decisive influence on the intellectual debate, leading in the final instance to a release from the restricting dogmatism. However, it is an indication of the power of conservatism that Darwin, who in no way wished to be equated by his social peers with the rabid radical non-conformists, did not dare publish his ideas until 1859 in the book *The Origin of Species*, and then strongly prompted by the danger that he might be overtaken by a rival scholar with similar ideas (Desmond and Moore 1992). The social pressures were immense, and there was a clear tendency to regard scientific and political radicalism as two sides of the same coin. The new ideas challenged the religious orthodoxy, which in turn was seen as the foundation for the social order as a whole, so it was with a very real danger of losing social respectability and status that anyone defended new and radical scholarly theories.

By laying the foundation for a new understanding of the world, sciences like Geology, Astronomy and Biology created, or at least exacerbated, a moral and intellectual crisis. To many the basic message of the natural sciences appeared to consist in a loss for humanity of its central place in the order of the world, in fact

its purpose and dignity. With the collapse of the traditional Christian explanation of the physical world, the clear and simple framework for man's history and the explanation of his role disappeared. All this was replaced with laws of nature and abstractions, the children's tales gave way to statistics and calm treatises of description and analysis. For a poet like Tennyson these new sciences were the 'Terrible Muses' of literature, and the stars in the heavens had become

Innumerable, pitiless, passionless eyes,  
Cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand  
His nothingness into man.

(Abrams 1986, 1181; from *Maud*)

Another leading intellectual of the age, Matthew Arnold, expressed his personal situation as marked by genuine despair:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

(Arnold 1890, 321; from *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*)

Even the very foundation for Christianity, the Holy Bible itself, became the subject of scholarly research, and the discipline which developed from such studies, Higher Criticism, was by its very nature a 'dangerous' branch of scholarship whose results and theories were viewed by many with great consternation and indignant rejection. This research tradition of literary criticism, which on the basis of a detailed textual analysis reached conclusions concerning the complex, composite and often quite disconnected and incoherent nature of the biblical text, had first developed in Germany. From here it spread slowly to England where it gained real importance in the 1850s, and it reached the United States in the 1880s.

Literary analysis of this kind had been applied with great success on other, almost holy, texts like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, the most important epics from ancient Greece. The results indicated that these long poems could not have been composed by one man, but that they represented a combination of many independent traditions, which could not even stem from exactly the same time. In other words, at some point a compiler had composed a new text on the basis of several poetic tales, an epic which came to form a new, complex whole; and it was particularly exciting that it was still possible for the modern scholar to disentangle the many threads, take apart the new composite work of art into its original elements.

For classically trained scholars in England it was painful to have to accept the results of such investigations, for Homer had a status as one of the giants of world literature. He might not even have existed. These ideas had first been presented by the German scholar Friedrich August Wolf, as early as 1795, and he had recommended to his pupils that they should study precisely the Old Testament as a clear case where these literary methods could be applied with interesting results (Hoffmann 1988: 39, n. 102).

It was obvious to many in England that this German influence was dangerous, not only to those who wished to maintain the purity of the classical heritage, but also to Christianity. 'Those who believe in a great poem', wrote the classical

philologist John Stuart Blackie, 'cannot avoid thinking that the Wolfians are engaged in a perverse attempt, closely analogous to the meagre method of explaining the world without a God, in which certain incomplete intellects have in all ages found an unnatural delight' (Blackie 1866, vol. I: 245, n.; Turner 1981). In other words: if you abolish Homer, the next inevitable step is to abolish God.

Higher Criticism involved a series of drastic conclusions and reinterpretations which were very difficult to accept for the Church, not least with respect to the proper understanding of the first five books in the Old Testament, the 'Pentateuch'. These so-called 'Mosaic' books could not have been written by Moses, it was concluded, because a textual analysis showed them to be composed of several individual texts which could be taken apart from each other. This one point was enough to shake the classic theory of Verbal Inspiration which postulated the sacred nature of the text as directly inspired from God. Instead the Bible had to be regarded as an extremely complex composition which encompassed texts that represented quite separate, often mutually contradictory traditions.

The orthodox doctrine which came under attack in this way was defined in 1873 by an American Professor, Charles Hodge of the Princeton Seminary, in his influential book *Systematic Theology*; this doctrine claimed

that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore infallible, and of divine authority in all things pertaining to faith and practice, and consequently free from all error, whether of doctrines, fact or precept.

(Brown 1960: 193–4)

This was not all, however, for a number of other conclusions or observations flowed from this, for instance the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the chronology of some 6,000 years. Undoubtedly, these views were maintained by most ordinary parishioners and many clergymen, but intellectuals like Arnold saw the issue in a different light. For him the results of Higher Criticism were beyond doubt, but the only meaningful question which resulted from this realisation was:

*What then?* What follows from all this? What change is it, if true, to produce in the relations of mankind to the Christian religion? If the old theory of Scripture Inspiration is to be abandoned, what place is the Bible henceforth to hold among books? What is the new Christianity to be like? How are Governments to deal with national churches founded to maintain a very different conception of Christianity?

(Arnold 1973 [1863]: 49)

The one German work which had the most profound influence on the debate in England was concerned with the New Testament; it was a biography of Jesus written by David Friedrich Strauss and translated to English in 1846 by the famous novelist George Eliot. Strauss explains the Jesus-story as a myth, it is not a factually true historical account, but it contains a fundamental spiritual truth, which can be separated from the outer form of the myth as told in the Gospels. In the church this means in practice that it must be the task of the individual priest to make his

congregation grasp this spiritual truth. Since the hypocrisy in this attitude constantly risks being made plain, the final and only truthful solution appears to be a renunciation of his priesthood. Not surprisingly the theme of the parson who has lost his faith is a recurrent one in the novels of the time.

The following year the poet Arthur Henry Clough wrote a poem which, as can be seen from its strange title: 'Epi-strauss-ium', was directly inspired by Strauss' book:

Matthew and Mark and Luke and holy John  
Evanished all and gone!  
...  
However,  
The place of worship the meantime with light  
Is, if less richly, more sincerely bright,  
And in blue skies the Orb is manifest to sight.

The sun takes the place of God, and it is truth and sincerity which triumphs in the end (Abrams 1986: 1355).

All these ideas and scientific developments necessarily led to insecurity and confusion, and these feelings were in England combined in a sometimes bizarre fashion with the fear of being overrun by foreign influences: the French Revolution which led to the temporary breakdown of the Catholic Church and the learned German professors with their Higher Criticism merged in a weird image of the enemy. The British historian Owen Chadwick described the attitude:

It must not happen here. Then haste to educate the children, haste to build churches for the poor, haste to practice the self-sacrifice which alone could bring Christian doctrine into real life, revere tradition, guard every precious drop of the orthodox stream. The haste was a sign of inner insecurity. . . . Confident of Christian truth, they wanted to be more confident. Grateful for their treasure, they felt nervous enough to want it locked from prying hands. You will end a sceptic unless you believe all the doctrines of the ancient church. You will end a sceptic unless you become a Roman Catholic. You will end a sceptic unless you believe that the Holy Spirit penned every comma of Leviticus – the dire refrains were chanted too often to be preaching tricks.

(Chadwick 1966: 528)

A special term was invented to describe lax doctrines of inspiration and revelation: *neologies*. Liberal theologians were suspected of introducing 'Germanisms' into English thought and, as pointed out by Chadwick, 'Germanism consisted in anything from Straussian myth theories to lax attitudes towards Jonah's whale. It was at least held to include recognition of legend in the Old Testament, and willingness to torture scriptural truth into the ill-fitting jacket of idealist philosophy' (Chadwick 1966: 551). The result was a defensive attitude among those who adhered to a critical point of view, for they found it necessary to distance themselves from German philosophy, while still acknowledging their debt to the German scholars. They maintained with force that

we are by no means likely to be mystified by their philosophical speculations, nor to be carried away by an inclination to force all facts within the sweep of some preconceived comprehensive theory. If the German biblical critics have gathered together much evidence, the verdict will have to be pronounced by the sober English judgment.

(Wilson 1860: 157)

There were other forces involved in this religious crisis, however. Chadwick points out that a perhaps more fundamental cause was the widespread feeling that the Yahweh of the Old Testament was a morally unacceptable god. 'Natural science shattered assumptions about Genesis and about miracles. Criticism questioned whether all history in the Bible was true. Moral feeling found the love of God hard to reconcile with hellfire or scapegoat-atonement' (Chadwick 1966: 551). Layard's friend Charles Dickens was one of those who reacted with 'a moral revulsion against the God of Israel or the doctrine of avenging wrath, and attributed half the misery and hypocrisy of the Christian world to forcing the Old Testament into unnatural alliance with the New Testament' (Chadwick 1966: 528).

The young Layard had been deeply touched by these questions even before his departure and had been attracted to the Unitarian church, one of the many movements which helped spread biblical criticism. He now returned to an England which appeared even more bogged down in religious controversy, and his work on the discoveries from Nimrud necessarily had to become influenced by this. His excavations were potentially extremely important for the understanding of the Old Testament as an historical source. Nineveh is mentioned some twenty times in the Bible and there are more than one-hundred-and-thirty references to Assyria. Direct contemporary evidence from this ancient country might in other words throw a sharp – perhaps revealing – light on the holy text. References to events and persons already known from the Bible were to be expected, and for the one who regarded the Bible as God's word it was complicated to entertain the notion that this might be commented upon or cast into doubt by humans, especially contemporary eyewitnesses. Some certainly maintained that no such conflict could possibly arise, and that on the contrary the texts from Assyria were bound to give us a wider and deeper understanding of events known from the Bible – without in any way taking away from the veracity of the holy text. As late as 1876 the American divine J.P. Newman expressed his hopes in endearingly naive and rosy terms:

who can tell how much more remote such records may carry us into the past? The day may not be far distant when Nimrod's Biography, Noah's History of the Flood, and Adam's Autobiography, shall become standard works among the civilized nations of the earth.

(Newman 1876: 360)

Nevertheless, the dread of a clash between two textual traditions dominated the first comments, although there was another, perhaps deeper fear that the Bible might turn out to be seen as in some way 'polluted' by a too close contact with a pagan, Mesopotamian tradition. After all, the Jews were a part of the cultural

continuum of a dimly visible ancient world; characteristically, Strauss in his Jesus biography pointed out that the Bible originated in a 'spiritual condition' which belonged to the ancient Oriental world, and it was logical, and tempting, to search for close ties, also with respect to religious traditions, between the Hebrew Bible and this early world. Strauss could express such convictions at a time when as yet nothing at all was really known about ancient Mesopotamia, a fact which underscores the potential vehemence of the controversy.

In fact, as early as 1847 Layard had been given the first hint of the difficulties which could arise, for Rawlinson could inform him of the views held by members of the Anglican church on his activities at Nimrud:

They write me from England that Assyrian antiquities were exciting great interest and that the Clergy had got perfectly alarmed at the idea of there being contemporary annals whereby to test the credibility of Jewish history. A brother indeed of mine, a Fellow of Exeter College & joint Editor of the 'Oxford Magazine' protests most vehemently against the further prosecution of the enquiry. Did you ever hear such downright *rot*?<sup>89</sup>

Even before that Layard had heard from his friend Miner Kellogg who was ecstatic with respect to Nimrud's potential importance for the proper understanding of the Bible:

You can scarcely *dream* of the importance which your solitary labors may have upon the right understanding of the Historical & Prophetical parts of the Holy Word. Every image which you uncover, may add a link in that chain of interpretation which is now being unfolded in regard to the signification of those hitherto inexplicable and I may say, apparently *absurd* passages which abound in the words of the Old Testament.<sup>90</sup>

Faced with these expectations and fears, and fully aware of the violence and bitterness of the religious conflicts of his time, Layard had to step with great care in his interpretation of the significance of his discoveries, not least with respect to the matter of chronology. He was clearly no orthodox Anglican, but he also had no desire to be very provocative or to exhibit his own religious doubts.

The reliefs which had been uncovered before his eyes had of course led him to speculate about their connection with the biblical accounts of Assyria, and he had been particularly struck by some passages in Ezekiel which appeared to describe the Assyrian reliefs in detail. The historical connection was therefore obvious, but he did not feel tempted to go beyond such observations and a kind of vague religiosity. Indeed, he was mainly interested in the Bible in so far as it could throw light on his discoveries – where others placed the emphasis on the opposite direction.

As long as the texts remained unreadable it was impossible to say which historical events and personages were depicted on the reliefs anyway, which meant that no firm linkages between Assyria and the Hebrew Bible could be established. It is clear from his letter to Rawlinson, in which he wrote about throwing titbits to the knowledgeable, that he found it impossible to locate his finds in time and therefore in their relationship to Jewish history. The dating of the palaces and their builders remained an insurmountable barrier.



Even so, his readers and listeners clearly realised that his discoveries could add centuries or millennia to mankind's recorded history. An anonymous commentator noted in 1852 that Geology had shown us the 'Pre-adamite' earth inhabited with some peculiar organised beings; Astronomy had resolved the flickering lights in the night sky into a system of suns and galaxies and shown these to be incomprehensibly ancient. 'All science is thus carrying us into the past', he wrote, and pointed out that in the same way Layard's discoveries made available to modern man a world which had long since perished. Yet, the streets of these ancient cities could be walked again, the mighty palaces could be entered and examined, as could the temples where the ancient kings worshipped and the tombs where they had been laid to rest.