

Babel und Bibel und Bias

How anti-Semitism distorted Friedrich Delitzsch's scholarship

By Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg



Bible scholars don't often become famous. And they certainly don't do it overnight. But that's what Friedrich Delitzsch did, 100 years ago. Already known among scholars as a leading Semitist and historian, Delitzsch had published the standard dictionary of Akkadian (the Assyrian-Babylonian language), a grammar of Akkadian and a book on the Babylonian creation myths. But on January 13, 1902, amid the dazzling surroundings of Berlin's famed Music Academy, the 51-year-old German scholar gave a lecture on Babylonia and the Bible that was so controversial the speaker became an overnight sensation. His impressive audience included not only the German intelligentsia but also the German emperor. Kaiser Wilhelm II was so impressed with Delitzsch's lecture that he invited him to repeat it for the empress two weeks later at the royal palace.

The lecture had been hyped as a landmark event in which Delitzsch would shed new light on the Hebrew Scriptures using recent spectacular discoveries from excavations in Babylonia, including the law code of King Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.E.), which had been discovered only the previous year. Delitzsch turned the tables on his audience, however. Instead of calling his lecture "The Bible and Babylonia," he called it "Babylonia and the Bible" (in German "*Babel und Bibel*"), thereby giving preeminence to Babylonia over the Bible. His thesis was even more shocking: Babylonian religion and culture were not only older than that of the Israelites, but superior, too!

In a series of three lectures under the same title held between 1902 and 1904, Delitzsch expanded on this thesis: The Sabbath had its origins in Babylonian ethics; the Lord's sacred name (YHWH) appeared first in Babylonian texts; and Israelite monotheism was a

lesser (and later) expression of a more noble Babylonian concept. Later Delitzsch even recommended that the Old Testament be excised from the Bibles of German Christians.

Delitzsch struck a nerve that ran deep in German culture and society, as exemplified by the breadth and intensity of the controversy that followed his lectures. Many listeners were convinced by his impressive edifice of cultural and archaeological comparisons and by his creative reconstructions of the history of religion. Others recognized the lectures as eloquent and scholarly arguments, cleverly stated, but nonetheless illogical and misleading. A few charged him with anti-Semitism, which he claimed was impossible because of his scientific objectivity.

In the 20th century, Delitzsch's lectures have come under close scrutiny, and most of what he argued must, in the opinion of virtually all scholars, be discarded. But at the centennial of Delitzsch's first lecture, it is still valuable to revisit his lectures and the debate they caused in order to illustrate how biases and preconceived convictions sometimes affect the conclusions of Bible scholars. In retrospect, it is easy to identify the extreme German nationalism and anti-Semitism that informed Delitzsch's lectures.

A close reading of the *Babel und Bibel* lectures reveals a number of personal assumptions at work behind Delitzsch's scholarship, including his nationalism, which was so characteristic of Europeans at the turn of the century. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Germans felt they were falling behind in the race among European national powers. To build an empire, it was necessary to colonize other areas of the globe and thereby acquire the capital for industrialization at home. Since unification under Otto von Bismarck in 1871, Germany had been scrambling to compete with the British, French and Dutch, long since established as colonial powers in many parts of the world. One secondary consequence of colonization in the Near East was the acquisition of antiquities. Germany had a distinct disadvantage. The Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London had already amassed huge quantities of artifacts and texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt. The founding in 1898 of the German Oriental Society, which sponsored excavations in Babylon and subsidized Delitzsch's lecture series, was motivated in part by the need to compete for Egyptian and cuneiform collections.

In the opening paragraph of his first lecture, Delitzsch acknowledged the rivalry and competition for Near Eastern excavation sites and artifacts. For Delitzsch, the new participation in the excavations in Babylon was "for Germany's honor and for Germany's science," rather than for the advancement of the discipline generally. He longed for the German Oriental Society to take its "glorious place under the sun" among the other national efforts in the Near East.

Delitzsch's nationalism became an issue in his second lecture, delivered a year later, on January 12, 1903. Here we detect an ideological shift. Rather than speak of Babylon as "interpreter and illustrator" of the Hebrew Bible (as he had done in lecture one), Delitzsch attacked the Hebrew Bible as an authoritative source for modern German Christians. In a published edition of the lecture, Delitzsch denigrated the ethical value of the Hebrew prophets. He denied the revealed nature and the divine inspiration of the

Hebrew Scriptures. He bemoaned the fact that the Hebrew Bible continues to serve believers of the West as a source of morality and edification. German Christians, he stated, should come to appreciate God's revelation to German people rather than to ancient Israelites.

Instead of immersing ourselves...in the rule of God among our own people, from Germany's primitive times to the present, we continue granting a "revelation" status to those old Israelite oracles, either out of ignorance, apathy, or blindness. But this no longer stands up in the light of science, nor that of religion, nor ethics.

Twenty years later, Delitzsch would repeat this proposal even more boldly in *Die Grosse Täuschung (The Great Deception)*, his last publication before he died in 1922. Here Delitzsch suggested that the Hebrew Scriptures should no longer be valued as a book of Christian religion and should be replaced with tales of Germany's heroes of the past and their thoughts on God, eternity and immortality.

The so-called "Old Testament" is entirely dispensable for the Christian church, and thereby also for the Christian family. It would be a great deal better for us to immerse ourselves from time to time in the deep thoughts, which our German intellectual heroes have thought concerning God, eternity, and immortality.

In this way, nationalism merged with anti-Semitism. Delitzsch anticipated by only a decade or so those German Christians of the Third Reich who sought to eradicate all things Jewish.

Delitzsch's prejudices are apparent throughout. Early in the lectures, Delitzsch was especially interested in finding non-Semitic racial features in ancient Near Eastern sources. While describing the image of the wife of King Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.E.) in a Neo-Assyrian relief (see photos, above), Delitzsch noted that she was "obviously to be thought of as a princess of Aryan blood and blond hair." In later lectures, Delitzsch went even further. The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 ranks Shem, the ancestor of the Semites, as the firstborn among Noah's sons. But Delitzsch counters that the Hebrew author was blinded by "Semitic prejudices" and intentionally concealed the important role in early human history of earlier non-Semitic peoples.

This was all part of Delitzsch's attempt to prove the primacy of Indo-Aryans in world history and to describe the history of the world's early cultures as the encounter of humankind's "passive" peoples with those, like the Germans, who were more "creative" and "active." According to Delitzsch's reconstruction of early Mesopotamian history, the non-Semitic Sumerians established the religious conceptions for "the immigrant Semitic" groups that followed. Delitzsch believed that the cultural heritage of these Sumerians was superior in ethics and morality to that of the biblical Israelites.

Delitzsch assumed that the Babylonians were partly of Aryan stock. With the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., non-Semites entered the population of Israel (especially Samaria and Galilee). They introduced the ethical and

moral conceptions that resulted in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Delitzsch argued. The Good Samaritan, according to Delitzsch, was a Babylonian. From him all humankind learned the model of neighborly love, a model far superior to the ethical conceptions of ancient Israel. Delitzsch also made much of the tradition that the three magi—the first to present their homage at the cradle of Christianity—were wise men from Babylonia. Perhaps most shocking of all is his suggestion that Jesus himself was not Jewish, but Babylonian and probably in part Aryan, since the Aryan Babylonians had settled Samaria and Galilee! This suggestion became a conviction later in Delitzsch's life, when he argued that Jesus was a Jewish proselyte (convert) rather than a Jew. His Galilean origins meant Jesus was not Semitic at all, but Babylonian and at least in part Aryan.

Delitzsch was one of several anti-Semitic European scholars of his day. But more than these other scholars, Delitzsch held a position of influence and political power on an international stage. His conclusions—argued in so scholarly a fashion—fueled flames already raging in the minds of many Germans. In 1923, partly under the influence of Delitzsch, Kaiser Wilhelm argued that Jesus was not only Aryan, but in fact anti-Jewish, and that he actually opposed the message of the Hebrew Scriptures. Wilhelm tried to make the case for religious reforms under the banner “Out with Jewry and its Yahweh!”

The title of Delitzsch's last published work, *Die Grosse Täuschung (The Great Deception)*, refers to the Hebrew Scriptures. He was intent on exposing them as an untruthful historical record. In the end, Delitzsch expressed concern that the history of the Jewish people posed a threat to the future of the German people. “It is obvious,” he wrote, “that such a deliberately unpatriotic and international people represents a great and dreadful danger for all other peoples of the earth.”

Delitzsch had still another bias: In addition to nationalism and anti-Semitism, anti-Christian sentiment marred his scholarship. It may seem strange to charge anti-Christian impulses to a child of devout Lutheran parents, and to someone so closely linked to the traditional Christian culture of 19th-century Germany. But Delitzsch's antipathy toward the Hebrew Scriptures must also be recognized as an antipathy toward the Christian Old Testament, and thus as an attack on traditional Christianity, as well.

Delitzsch's hostility toward the Hebrew Bible-Old Testament was based on his ardent belief in the continual upward progression of religion. Delitzsch, like many scholars at the turn of the century, was convinced that religion was still progressing higher and higher to an ultimate good. He was convinced that his own work, and that of other enlightened scholars (supported in large measure by the power of the new German state), was contributing to this ongoing evolutionary process. Theirs was not simply a reformation or revivalist movement, but a genuine advancement beyond primitive expressions of noble worship toward a truly higher expression of religious enlightenment. Delitzsch implied that his lectures on Babylon and the Bible should be accepted as a significant step toward a reformulation of Christian faith, which eventually would free humans from the contaminating vestiges of the old Hebrew religion.

In denigrating the Hebrew Bible, Delitzsch shared the position of his contemporary, church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who took the Old Testament to be anachronistic. Harnack believed the early church's retention of the Hebrew Scriptures had been unavoidable due to the prescientific world view. But modern Christians since the Enlightenment should reject the Old Testament, because, according to Harnack, the new age of science had provided a superior, scholarly foundation for Christianity.

According to Harnack, "The rejection of the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the Great Church rightly refused to make; the retention of it in the sixteenth century was due to a fatal legacy which the Reformation was not able to overcome; but for Protestantism since the nineteenth century to continue to treasure it as a canonical document is the result of a religious and ecclesiastical paralysis."

The idea of an ever-improving progression from primitive expressions of faith to higher and more noble versions is foreign not only to early Christianity, but also to contemporaneous Judaism. Instead of encouraging progression beyond earlier formulations, both Judaism and Christianity warn of the dangers of moving beyond the original constitutional formulations of faith. "Keep this festival" (Exodus 12:14), God tells Moses and Aaron, instructing them to celebrate Passover in perpetuity. "Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19), Jesus similarly orders his disciples at the Last Supper. Both episodes call believers to remember, repeat and conform to these saving acts of history.

Christianity's relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures is indeed complex, and certainly not as easy to sever as Delitzsch would make it seem. Christians of every generation have confronted this question, sometimes with troubling results; many consider it the central question of Christian theology. Regardless of the explanation of Christianity's relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures, Christianity has always maintained that a strong bond exists, indeed must exist. From the second century until the present, the church has insisted that any form of Christianity without the Hebrew Scriptures is not genuine Christianity.

Anti-Christian sentiment, anti-Semitism, unmitigated nationalism: The theoretical and philosophical assumptions that drove this brilliant scholar seem obvious to us today. As we look back across the shadows of the early 20th century, past the conflagrations caused by two World Wars, and through the tears, shame and horror of the Holocaust, what we see—100 years later—is that Delitzsch contributed in some way to those events. His brilliance, combined with his unprecedented opportunity to address Germany's intelligentsia and leaders, put him in a position to make a difference. As a respected and revered scholar, he had an opportunity to challenge the norms of society. Instead, he added to some of their excesses.

Few of Delitzsch's contemporaries grasped how truly harmful his words were. When he was criticized as anti-Semitic, he contended that he meant no injury or insult to Judaism or to modern Jewish faith. Instead, he countered, his work was a "dispassionate, strictly objective discussion" of the factual issues. He portrayed himself as trapped between two

unfair criticisms: Some accused him of “Semitomania,” while others claimed he was anti-Semitic. The truth, he responded, lay in the middle: He neither loved nor hated Semites, but was simply seeking truth for its own sake, without any prejudice or bias.

It is easy for us today to critique Delitzsch after a century has past; his flaws are so apparent. But it is difficult for today’s scholars to recognize the racial, theoretical or theological biases we sometimes bring to our work.

As brilliant as Delitzsch was, he failed to confront his culture with a window onto truth. Instead he became a mirror of sorts, reflecting and even magnifying the prejudices and distortions of truth that sadly marred the Europe of his day. Biblical scholarship has the potential, indeed the responsibility, to serve contemporary society and culture as a window, offering a view of reality that may be new and different. Which function do today’s scholars serve? Are they mirrors or windows?

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